NOT FOR MYSELF ALONE

Celebrating Jewish-American Writers

October 21, 2001 - April 21, 2002

From the Leonard L. Milberg '53 Collection of Jewish-American Writers

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
And if I am for myself alone, what am I?
And if not now, when?
(Pirkei Avot, 1:14)
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INTRODUCTION

The Leonard L. Milberg '53 Collection of Jewish-American Writers in honor of Harold T. Shapiro was built by a committee of scholars over a two-year period, beginning in 1993. The collection consists of poetry, fiction, drama, and essays produced over almost two centuries by American writers who also happen to be Jewish. While the experience as an ethnic and religious minority often informs their writing, there is also a drive toward assimilation and secularization that makes it difficult to find one consistent definition of just who the Jewish-American writer is.

This assembly of books from every corner of American Jewish life presents a rich array of inexplicable relationships and wonderful inconsistencies. What makes the collection especially interesting, however, is the way in which it uncovers the story of the incursion of Jewish writers into the American mainstream around the middle of the twentieth century. The roughly chronological organization of the material selected for this display offers a unique opportunity to observe a long pattern of vacillation between the desire to fit into the American myth and a competing desire to maintain and proclaim difference. Visitors are invited to explore the exhibition and draw their own conclusions from the multiplicity of texts and images. It is hoped that they will come to appreciate the rich contribution that Jewish-American writers have made to the national culture and society.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, approximately 150,000 Jews arrived in America. Many of them from German-speaking areas. Unlike the earlier Sephardic immigrants, those who settled in the port cities along the Atlantic, this wave of immigrants followed the general pattern of the period and headed for the frontier, eventually establishing a chain of Jewish communities that stretched to the Pacific.

As they established their families and their small businesses, Jews began to join together to form congregations, community institutions, and fraternal organizations. Though newly arrived immigrants had neither the time nor the money to devote to developing literary talent, in time the literary production provided means by which the scattered Jewish communities united. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Jewish periodicals such as the Occident, the American Israelite, and the Jewish Messenger published poetry and novels by American Jews. The poetry of Reina Moise and Emma Lazarus and the fiction of Nathan Mayer and Isaac Mayer Wise projected a sense of Jewish peoplehood, as newspaper editors stressed both the adoption of American ideals and the preservation of Judaism.

The nineteenth century witnessed not only the first pieces of literary work from American Jews but also, and perhaps more important, the emergence of institutions and audiences able to foster literary production. Along with the national Jewish magazines, the founding of the Jewish Publication Society and the proliferation of local literary societies encouraged literary production. The growing number of congregations and their increasingly prominent rabbis - Isaac Leeser and Isaac Mayer Wise, among them - led to both the demand for and the promotion of Bible translations, sermon publications, and American Jewish prayer books.

Jewish writers, such as Rebecca Gratz and Reina Moise, also developed textbooks and hymnbooks for the equivalent of Jewish Sunday schools and for synagogues.

THE LOWER EAST SIDE

"The Jewish East Side of New York began northeast from the tip of Manhattan, a mile and a half from the point where the immigrants landed. By the turn of the century it extended northward from Henry Street to Tenth Street and eastward from the Bowery almost to the East River. Within these teeming blocks, some of them the most crowded in the world, 150,000 Jews lived on the threshold of American life. Every year thousands more arrived, while other thousands poured out from the great Ghetto to the colonies it had spawned in Brooklyn, Harlem, and the Bronx."

"There was never in the history of American immigration anything quite like the old East Side. The Jewish East Side was not as colorful as the adjacent Italian Quarter around Mulberry Street, not as exotic or cohesive as San Francisco's Chinatown before the earthquake, not as prosperous as the German sections of Milwaukee and St. Louis, not as poor and squalid as the Irish North End of Boston. But it was a half-century earlier. Nevertheless, it had the qualities of each of those neighborhoods, and exhibited a peculiar energy uniquely its own. Here abilities that had been pent up for centuries within the tradition-bound villages of Eastern Europe were suddenly set free. Here the largest, most diversified, and most authentic Yiddish-speaking community in America confronted trials and opportunities on a scale that only New York could present."
THE DAILY FORWARD

Founded in New York in 1897, Der Forverts (the Daily Forward) was, in the words of its founding editor, Abraham Cahan, "a socialist paper for the whole Yiddish-speaking people." Cahan was a passionate promoter of Yiddish culture and literature, as well as an ardent socialist who stressed the international nature of Jewish concerns. As a delegate at the 1891 Congress of the Second International, he raised the "Jewish question" and was subsequently dubbed "the apostle of the Jews" by Friedrich Engels. The Forward's circulation peaked at 200,000 during World War I, and for decades thereafter the daily measured the complex evolution of American Jewish identity. The issue on display adjacent to the Milberg Gallery was obtained from the Judaica Division of the New York Public Library and is dated October 21, 1901 — precisely one hundred years before the opening of this exhibition.

YIDDISH THEATER

Yiddish theater began to flourish on New York's Lower East Side in the 1890s, just as the influx of Jewish immigrants was reaching peak. With its origins in the traditional Purimspie (a play performed on the festival of Purim) and well-known figures from Eastern European Jewish culture such as the bashi-bazouk (clown) and magid (preacher), Yiddish theater offered new immigrants a vibrant and colorful respite from the grind of daily life. Loose adaptations of Shakespeare were billed as farbyshit an Torah (translated and improved), and American matinee idols such as Jacob Adler and Boris Tomashvsky rose to stardom. Jacob Gordin's Jewish Queen Lear adapted Shakespeare's plot to a Jewish milieu. Standard repertoires also included Abraham Goldfaden's operettas and the popular melodramas known as stund.

YIDDISH POETRY

Shoemakers, house painters, and laborers by day; readers of Baudelaire, Hofmannsthal, Pushkin, Rilke, and Rilke by night, American Yiddish poets wrote in a wide variety of styles, addressing the rich and varied community of modern Jewish life. Their poems appeared in widely circulated daily like Der Forverts and in avant-garde literary journals like Shrifn that sustained small readerships and even smaller press runs. However, both the poets and their poems were far less isolated from mainstream reading audiences than the American Imagists, and their work often vigorously addressed political and social issues of the day. This more overtly engaged work of the so-called Sweatshop School of early American Yiddish poets, represented in the exhibition by Morris Rosenfeld, was rejected by later groups of Yiddish poets known as Di Yunge (the Younger Generation) and the Inzikhistn (Introspectivists), who in turn were seen by their peers in Warsaw, Vilna, and Berlin as arch poetic innovators.

YIDDISH FICTION

Yiddish fiction in America spans the entire gamut of genres, themes, and styles: exquisitely simple Hasidic folktales; richly imagined historical dramas; romantic depictions of Eastern European shtetl life; impressionistic vignettes of the American urban experience; dark, often brutal psychological realism; nostalgic memoir. Both a mirror of new forms of life in di golde medicine (the golden land) and a reminder of the world left behind, Yiddish novels often appeared initially in serialized form for the mass reading audiences of daily newspapers. American Yiddish fiction's most beloved practitioners, Isaac Bashevis Singer, known simply as 'Bashyevs' by his public, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978.
EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY WRITERS I: ANTI, FRANK, LEWISOF, H. ROTH, YEZERSKA

With the exception of Waldo Frank, who was born to a German Jewish family in New Jersey, all of these writers came to the United States in early childhood, usually in the wake of persecution in Eastern Europe. Their families flocked to the rapidly expanding ghettos in American cities, most prominently New York's Lower East Side, along with the more than two million other East European Jews who emigrated to the United States between 1880 and the mid-1920s. They wrote of the complicated, painful, and sometimes exhilarating experience of entry into a culture they regarded with ambivalence. America was both the promised land, where streets might be paved with riches and freedom from oppression readily found, and the land of disappointment, to be cursed with the common phrase, a klopa on Columbus, a land where they encountered poverty overcrowding, demeaning working conditions, and sometimes overwhelming challenges to their religious traditions, practices, and beliefs.

For this generation of immigrants, who wrote their novels, short stories, critical essays, and memoirs in English, Yiddish nonetheless remained enduringly important. Mary Antin, Henry Roth, and Anzia Yezierska peppered their fiction with Yiddish—and sometimes Hebrew—words and phrases and employed an inflected English to capture the cadences and vernacular energy of Yiddish speech. Given the strangeness of the world they evoked, their successes were uncanny. Sam Goldwyn bought Yezierska to Hollywood to write a screenplay for the silent film version of her collection of stories, Hungry Hearts (1921), and offered her a contract, which she turned down to return to New York. Antin's autobiography, The Promised Land (1912), was a best-seller, the first by a Jewish author about Jewish life. Like Abraham Cahan before her, Antin tried to educate the American public about the lives of East European immigrants (she added a glossary to her text for just this purpose). A far less ingratiating and far more sophisticated writer, Henry Roth published Call It Sleep in 1934 to the praise of critics and the indifference of the general reading public. This brilliant novel, a painful rendering of boyhood and coming of age through the eyes of a child influenced by Freudian thought and modernist fiction, drew the attention of later critics like Irving Howe, Leslie Fiedler, and Alfred Kazin and was reprinted and given a second life in 1960.

EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY WRITERS II: B. HECTH, KAUFMAN, ODETS, PARKER, PERELMAN, WEST

Unlike the immigrant writers of their own generation, these American-born playwrights, novelists, humorists, and screenwriters eschewed overt representation of Jewish life. Although the Yiddish theater and vaudeville nourished the Broadway stage (and especially the musical) and European Jewish immigrants in large part created Hollywood, the Jewishness of characters and subject matter was often masked or minimized in plays, musicals, and movies of the 1930s and 1940s. Working with the Group Theatre in the wake of the Depression, Clifford Odets, one of the most celebrated American playwrights of the 1930s, focused on working-class life generally inspired by radical politics. S. L. Perelman wrote scripts for the Marx Brothers' movies, betraying a mad comic sensibility that was implicitly though hardly ever explicitly tied to the Jewish experience, its skepticism and sense of the absurd. In 1944 Ben Hecht remarked on "the almost complete disappearance of the Jew from American fiction, stage and movies," referring to the Anglicized names of Jewish characters in plays and screenplays by George S. Kaufman, Hecht, and OdeTs. Among the sparkling wits associated with the Broadway theater, the Algonquin Round Table, and the New Yorker magazine, Kaufman, Dorothy Parker, Moss Hart, S. N. Behrman, and George Jean Nathan helped to create a lasting image of the urbane, worldly, and supremely articulate—though by no means overtly Jewish—metropolitan writer.
THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY'S OLDER GENERATION OF FICTION WRITERS

The important and influential Jewish writers and literary critics of the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the popular Jewish stars of vaudeville, music hall, and burlesque of the early twentieth century paved the way for the novelists who achieved extraordinary success and even celebrity in the years after World War II — what many consider to be the Golden Age of Jewish fiction writing in America. Between 1950 and 1960 Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth all published works of fiction that received the National Book Award, and the careers of Bellow and Roth have been marked by extraordinary longevity and sustained prominence in the world of American letters. Born between the two world wars, most of them to immigrant parents, these novelists brought Jewish characters, preoccupations, humor, and linguistic styles into the consciousness of American readers. According to the critic Irving Howe, Jewish writers brought to fiction "turnings of voice, feats of irony and tempos of delivery that helped create a new American style. . . . a grating mixture of the sardonic and the sentimental, a mish-mash of gutter wisdom and graduate school learning." Indeed, Howe argues the one major innovation in American fiction since the days of Hemingway and Faulkner has been "the yoking of street, raunch and high cultural mandarin which we associate with American Jewish writers." These writers chronicled the aftermath of World War II and the incorporation into American society of another generation of European immigrants, although they sometimes did so obliquely, without overt discussion of the horrors of the Holocaust. They also registered individual ethical dilemmas created by national traumas like McCarthyism and the Vietnam War. They mined the psychological drama of American Jewish family life, exploring sexual rebellion against parents, sexual obsession and liberation, the creation of a new kind of Jewish masculinity.
times – to Orthodoxy, to the Holocaust, to exile from Europe, and to the mysticism associated with writers like Isaac Bashevis Singer and Cynthia Ozick. "I have found," writes Rebecca Goldstein, author of The Mind-Body Problem (1985) and Mazel (1996), "that my Jewish dreams, at least sometimes, take me backward in time, into a past in which the texture of Jewishness was more richly felt." Although Judaism itself is central to the work of Max Appel, Melvin Jules Baldet, Nathan Englander, and Allegra Goodman, a decidedly secular vision dominates the fiction of others, like Paul Auster. Those who review the past, however, do not imitate earlier writers but rather question and reinterpret history, belief, social custom, and literary forms, re-creating an older Jewish world through fantasy, longing, and even whimsy.

**The Late Twentieth Century's Older Generation of Theater/Film Writers: Hellman, Miller, Schulberg, N. Simon**

In the hands of these playwrights and screenwriters, the middle-class Jew became a universal type. While their novelist peers continued to write openly about identifiable Jewish characters and situations, those writing for the stage – and then screen – appealed to what was undoubtedly a wider and more diverse audience by representing the Jew as an everyman and the Jewish family as typically American. They came, for the most part, from solidly middle-class backgrounds, prosperous enough if precariously so, to make the struggle for material success and its soul-destroying possibilities a focus of their plays. Arthur Miller's Willy Loman stands as the quintessential example of the Jewish playwright's ability to create an American archetype out of the experience of the diaspora Jew.

Miller came out of the same artistic world that Clifford Odets helped to create: the Federal Theatre Project in Manhattan, with its strong left-wing leanings and politically conscious theater. And like Odets, Miller, as well as Lillian Hellman and Budd Schulberg, was deeply affected by McCarthyism and the havoc it wreaked on the worlds of Hollywood and the theater. All were called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1950s. Odets and Schulberg earned names and renounced their past political involvements; Miller and Hellman refused to cooperate with the committee. Miller's *The Crucible* (1953) represents the hysteria of anti-Communist paranoia, while Schulberg incorporated certain aspects of his own experience into the screenplay of *On the Waterfront* (1954) and Hellman wrote at length in her self-dramatizing memoirs, especially *Scoundrel Time* (1976), about her refusal to cooperate.

**The Late Twentieth Century's Younger Generation of Theater/Film Writers: Allen, Kushner, Mamet, Wasserstein**

The Jewish-American love affair with comedy and the stage has persisted into the twenty-first century. In the plays, movies, and stories of Woody Allen – who, like Neil Simon, began his career as a comedy writer for television – we can detect the inheritance of Grocio, Marx, and S. J. Perelman. But contemporary playwrights and filmmakers also share the manic, neurotic sensibility of a Philip Roth and the continuing concern with ethical and social questions manifested in the works of their theatrical precursors, Miller and Hellman. In something of a backward glance to this generation, Tony Kushner makes the trauma of McCarthyism central to *Angels in America* (1993) and merges the persecution of suspected Communists in the 1950s with contemporary racism and homophobia in the era of AIDS. Indeed, gender, sexuality, and all manner of relations between...
the sexes dominate the comedy and drama of these writers. While Woody Allen anatomizes the anxieties of a nervous masculinity and David Mamet examines masculine aggression and resentment, Wendy Wasserstein brings a feminist consciousness to bear on the lives and careers of women from the 1960s to the present. The return to the subject of religion, a theme of some contemporary novelists, is detectable here as well, especially in the recent work of David Mamet, but all of these writers create distinctly Jewish characters with utter casualness and an apparent lack of self-consciousness.

**Twentieth-Century Essayists**

The group of cultural, literary, and social critics that came to be called the New York intellectuals originally gathered around a series of journals. The first of these was the *Menorah Journal* established in 1915, followed by the *Partisan Review* (1934), *Commentary* (1949), and *Dissent* (1953).

These journals offered young Jewish intellectuals and writers a forum for expressing their political views and literary ambitions during an era when the academic and literary establishments were, if not closed to Jews, then certainly only minimally hospitable. One of their number, Lionel Trilling, was the first Jew appointed to a permanent position in the Columbia University English Department, in 1939. Trilling wrote for the *Menorah Journal* in the 1920s; attracted by the charismatic leadership of its de facto editor, Elliot Cohen, and then moved on to *Partisan Review*; a journal that had no institutional Jewish ties but was, rather, founded by Philip Rahv and William Phillips as an organ of the pro-Communist John Reed Club. Rahv and Phillips soon broke with the John Reed Club, and the journal ultimately took on a liberal, anti-Stalinist cast. *Partisan Review* proved crucial in enabling Jewish writers and critics to enter and to shape the mainstream of American literary life.

*Commentary*, launched by the American Jewish Committee and edited by Elliot Cohen, extended the profound influence that Jewish intellectuals exercised on cultural and academic life through the 1960s. Norman Podhoretz, one of Lionel Trilling's protégés as a student at Columbia, took over its editorship in 1960 and oversaw its transformation from a champion of the non-Communist left to a mouthpiece for neo-conservatism.

*Dissent*, co-founded and edited for forty years by Irving Howe, retained the democratic socialist leanings of its founders. Critics like Trilling, Alfred Kazin, Irving Howe, and Leslie Fiedler, who were initially left-leaning, attracted to socialism, and influenced by Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis, helped to create a kind of cultural criticism that merged art and politics and sought to analyze literature in the context of social and intellectual history. They were particularly influential as champions of modernism and interpreters of American literature.

In a postwar era that saw a fuller integration of ethnic and religious minorities into the American scene, these critics introduced an awareness of European culture and lettres into discussions of literature and literary criticism. The Kentucky-born, non-Jewish writer Elizabeth Hardwick, explaining to an interviewer in 1979 why, as a young woman, she had aspired to be a New York Jewish intellectual, identified as their defining characteristic a tradition of "intellectual skepticism: and also a certain deracination...and their openness to European culture...[and] the questioning of the arrangements of society called radicalism."
Schwartz received the Bollingen Prize for the collection Suzanne Knowledge. Anthony Hecht's The Hard Hours won the Pulitzer Prize in 1968. Recognition of other sorts came too. In 1957 copies of Allen Ginsberg's Howl were confiscated and its publisher was put on trial for obscenity; but even that notably fostered interest in poetry.

In the last decades of the century, Jewish poets staked claims across the wide landscape of American poetry. Poets as different as Denise Levertov and Philip Levine, Alicia Ostriker and Robert Pinsky have shown that widely varying experiences of Jewish identity can nurture an equally wide variety of poetic styles. Several of these contemporary poets are represented in this exhibit, but the true richness of the Jewish contribution to recent American poetry was demonstrated when the Leonard L. Milberg Collection of Contemporary American Poetry was assembled in the 1990s. Of the more than 150 poets included in that collection, more than a third are of Jewish heritage.

Endnotes


4 Rebecca Goldstein, "Against Logic," Tikkun November/December 1997 43.

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