Elegy for a Yiddish Scholar: Joseph Sherman, *z"l*, 1944-2009

A scholar is like a book written in a dead language. It is not every one that can read it. —William Hazlitt

Time ravages some people. It burnishes others. When my friend, Joseph Sherman, died in March, people asked how old he was.

"Sixty-five," I said.

"Really?" they'd reply, one after another. "He must have been older than that."

It's a natural question when someone dies, and I think it's a way people have of taking measure of how much grief they're supposed to feel, pro-rating according to whether someone had his fair share of years. But it was a question that came up frequently when Joseph was alive, too. Once, in Zimbabwe, where I was writing a profile of a rabbi that Joseph had commissioned for *Jewish Affairs*, a South African quarterly journal he edited, a woman we both knew even got upset with me over it.

"Are you really telling me that he and I are the same age?"

"If you're forty-six," I said.

"Do he and I look the same age to you?" she demanded. From the angle of my mid-twenties, people of a certain life stage looked similar enough, but I had enough sense, call it wisdom beyond my years, to slay truth for the cause of peace.

"No, you look younger," I said.

Chronological age was the wrong measure for Joseph anyway. It just wasn't a good gauge of his vitality. He was, I suspect, born old, and he kept it up over a lifetime. As long as I knew him, and apparently long before that, he had back and hearing problems. I never asked him why. I never thought to because they were, to me, just part of who he was. He walked slowly and his hearing aid was visible. You couldn't talk to him on the phone because the device he needed never seemed to work. He also cultivated a certain look—bowties, scarves, cravats, and vests, plus a full beard that brought to mind an era when photographers still shot in sepia.

Most of all, perhaps the impression of age was due to his field of interest: Yiddish.

Joseph's best-known work is his translation of I.B. Singer's *Shadows on the Hudson*, the Yiddish luminary's fourth (and last) posthumous novel. He credited Singer, whom he'd met in Miami in 1983 after writing his doctoral dissertation on Singer's novels, with having given Yiddish literature a voice "to speak to readers born after the language itself was murdered."

For his part, Joseph had contributed his share to the rescue effort through translations, critical essays and reviews, and scholarship that disinterred buried stories, events and reputations. His translations re-attached audiences to dislocated Yiddish literary communities in South Africa at the end of the 19th century and the first five decades of the 20th, in immigrant America, and in Stalin's Soviet Union.

Joseph Sherman's first published book, *From a Land Far Off*, a selection of South African Yiddish writers, shone light on the periphery of the Jewish world where Lithuanian-Yiddish had come in contact with Afrikaans. Like much of his work, the anthology's introduction made sense of nuanced differences, such as the relationships between Jews and Afrikaners, and between Jews and blacks, and the biographical sketches of the authors added essential context.

While teaching and writing scholarly articles, he began editing *Jewish Affairs*, which he transformed from a bland organ of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, the community's governing body, to a legitimate journal with a network of international contributors. After *Shadows on the Hudson*, he translated the Russian-Yiddish writer David Bergelson's *Descent* in 1999. Other short story translations by Bergelson, Singer, I.M. Weissenberg, Ayzike-Meir Dik, and Lamed Shapiro appeared in magazines including *Pakn Treger* and the *New Yorker*.

Joseph's relationship to *Midstream's* editor Leo Haber was one of mutual admiration. (I had introduced the two of them via correspondence, and Leo had shown Joseph around on Joseph's first visit to New York.) Between 2001 and 2008, Joseph translated seven Yiddish short stories, among them three by David Bergelson, and write literary essays analyzing all seven for *Midstream*. He'd lobbied for an annual issue devoted in part to Yiddish, and editor Haber enthusiastically complied.

As a writer, Joseph's pellucid elegance showcased a tal-

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ent for drawing together threads of detail and elucidating nuances and the ways that numerous things, even contradictory ones, can be true at once. He had a knack for finding intriguing topics, such as his book about the myth of the Jewish pope (*The Jewish Pope, Myth, Diaspora and Yiddish Literature*; Oxford: Boulevard, 2004); the "kaffircateries," the mostly immigrant Jewish-run kitchens that served blacks, and the complicated position of Jews in racialist South Africa; and Singer's mixed relationships with his Yiddish peers and how his penchant for calculated self-promotion and image management helped, as much as his superabundant talent, to rise above equally talented fellow writers.

In recent years, having emigrated from South Africa to England, where he was happily ensconced as a lecturer at Oxford University, he'd become prolific, writing, translating, and editing or co-editing five books and completing most of three more due out in 2009 and 2010, including *From Pogrom to Purge: Soviet-Yiddish Writing, 1917-1947* (Five Leaves; London); a collection of essays on the Yiddish poet Peretz Markish (forthcoming, Mancy Publishing); and a new translation of Bergelson's first novel, *After All is Said and Done* (forthcoming; Yale University Press).

With all the output, acknowledgements flowed in.

"Apropos of academic swings and roundabouts," he emailed me, announcing news that he'd received the 2007 Judaica Reference Award for *Writers in Yiddish: Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 333*, "the forwarded message below reached me a short while ago, to my utter amazement. Will tell you why when we meet."

I figured I'd get the "skinny" on some intrigue within the world of Yiddish academia. Sadly, that last meeting wasn't to be.

We first met in Johannesburg in 1990 not long after I arrived there with my South African wife after two years in Israel, where I had worked as an assistant and did some archival work at Tel Aviv University. Unsure of how to break into the writing game, I flirted with the idea of academia and stopped by the University of the Witwatersrand (pronounced "vitz-vahters-rand"), known locally as Wits ("vitz"), to have a look around. The chairman of the English department was a Waspish fellow, coiffed and buttoned-down, his shelves heavy with Ezra Pound. Having indirectly identified myself as a Jew, I was promptly directed to the department's most identifiable Jew.

Joseph, then associate professor of English, had just taken over *Jewish Affairs*, and he asked me to contribute a review essay of a tawdry romantic novel that would have been laughably bad had its author not decided to obscenely employ the Holocaust as a literary device in her story. I roasted it on both sides, and Joseph ate it up. He invited me to a seat on the editorial board, then began publishing short stories, essays, and interviews that I had written. He couldn't pay me, but every time we spoke, I learned something valuable that I could apply to work I was getting elsewhere, and many interviews, including with emergent ANC (African National Congress) figures, gave me valuable access. He was certain that I would succeed at writing, and he did not encourage the academic pursuit.

"What do you need it for?" he'd say. He hated intrigue and politics in the university.

Eventually we began meeting at a Greek café on periodic Fridays, dilating for hours over lunch and rounds of coffee.

In conversation he was a virtuoso. He hadn't only acquired vast knowledge but had mastered it: Dickens, Shakespeare, Dr. Johnson, Elizabethan theater, the plays of Tennessee Williams, Chekhov's short stories, the novels of Gogol and Bulgakov. It was as if he'd committed the works to memory, quick with a verbatim quote the way some people can find a joke for any occasion. He had a distinctive voice, deep and rich, and he loved to tell stories, whether they were about great literary figures or people he knew. He absolutely adored delicious nuggets of gossip, though the targets had to be deserving and the criticism had to be fair. When I remarked on someone's vanity, he said, "Well, no one is without vanities." He could not abide smugness. The point of a good skewering, after all, was to pull someone down off their high horse, not to look down on them from on top of one.

Joseph loved cigarettes—a favorite story was Lamed Shapiro's short story *Smoke*—and sometimes by mid-day his mustache had been darkened by nasal exhalations. When I would volunteer an opinion, or turn my head to avoid an oncoming nimbus, he'd sally a quote to the effect that Americans were crazy, off to the gym and killing themselves with exercise, overweight anyway, and somehow believing death was optional.

He got great joy from a finely wrought, exquisite detail. He had an eye for them as a reader and an ear for them in conversation, and he brought to the table an awful lot of material himself. Yet humor that was too robust, crude, or obvious, was lost on him. He considered Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* a great novel but didn't think it was funny at all.

"I don't think they like me here," he said once at the café.

"Why?"

"Yes," he said. He had a way of drawing out certain words for emphasis and giving them new meaning. "Well, I don't tip."

"You don't tip?"

"No! What in heaven's name for?"

He wanted to talk about a piece I'd written on I.B. Singer's little-known sister, the writer Deborah Kreitman. "Barely publishable," he intoned. "A C-minus." He wondered if I'd lost interest halfway through and suggested

other approaches. He was a teacher first, nurturing despite his directness, and a critic second.

"I suppose you're right," he said later. "I'm terribly cheap."

The check came, and he bought lunch, and when I reached into my pocket for a tip, he said, "No, no. You're right." Then, and thereafter, he left a tip.

He pronounced my novel "excellent," a judgment that, considering the source, made my spirits soar despite publishers' rejections, which often centered on whether the characters were sympathetic enough. Joseph rejected the criticism.

"I think one of the strengths of a really good modern book is that it *should* be ambivalent towards the characters—why must we take sides?" he wrote. "Goodies and baddies are for old-time Ronald Reagan B-grade movies. Read some of Chekhov's short stories again in case you think that all 19th century people had good/bad Manichean attitudes towards fiction....[The] worries," he added, "seem to be based, however unconsciously, on an American conventional demand that there be some *optimistic* 'message' in everything. Bunk. Least of all about Jews and Jewish identity [and] existence into the future. The whole matter is so ambivalent that it would be a lie to write other."

It was vintage Joseph: not merely personally encouraging, but drawing on wider themes, that resonated well beyond the immediate topic, like the echo of a tolled bell.

"I've now read your story," he wrote in another message. "I myself have problems with it. The opening, which is genuinely ironic and witty, quickly fades away into a grim and somber description of dysfunctional families, which makes depressing reading...Also, it reads too personally for my taste—'too much information', if you take my meaning—almost like a confession that you're trying to get out of your own system, and come to terms with, not something written with the kind of objectivity the first purpose of which is to engage a disinterested reader."

This last I include because it was not only instructive to me as a writer but because it hinted at details about Joseph, who rarely if ever spoke about himself. His biography could sometimes be inferred in the shadows of the illuminating insights he made in reference to other things. (This is further expressed in his having achieved renown in translation, the shadow side of creative expression, and indeed, there is even some irony in the title of the particular Singer novel, *Shadows*, that established his reputation as a translator. I'll also note here that Joseph regarded parentheses as a stylistic flaw.)

What facts I know came from other people, including his beloved wife of twenty-five years, Karen-Anne, also an English teacher and a woman who shared many of his qualities.

Born in 1944 in Johannesburg, Joseph's family conditions were such that he could not just appreciate Dickens but relate to his 19th century London world. Poverty made for a hard childhood with limited opportunities other than what came to him because of his precocious abilities. Joseph was admitted to a private school, but there were no pure scholarships as such. After graduating from Wits, he spent ten years teaching in a Johannesburg school working for low wages. It was a kind of indenture. In his thirties, he went back to his high school alma mater, King David Victory Park, to teach, and eventually rose to assistant principal.

He'd refer to Victory Park, an affluent and almost exclusively Jewish suburb, as "the ghetto," and he saw there rich, spoiled children in a community of people who seemed to perceive value only in what could be measured by money. "Philistines," he'd sneer. "Positively Philistines." I sensed lingering resentment toward people who hadn't had to defer their ambitions and yet failed to appreciate the advantages money conferred.

Still, Victory Park was just one more item on Joseph's list of ambivalent topics. Despite his misgivings, it had also given him entrée to a warmer, gentler family life, and some of those Victory Park families were great friends—as long as I knew him, he had a wide circle of admirers and close friends—who had offered him the affection he never received at home. Moreover, it was where, after an academic career that until then was spent on the English canon, he was guided and encouraged to direct his energies to Yiddish. His uncle, J.M. Sherman, had been a leading figure in the South African Yiddish literary world. At 43, Joseph brought out the South African Yiddish anthology. By then he was at Wits, where he stayed as a full professor until 2002.

He was a surprise choice to translate *Shadows on the Hudson*. How was this South African scholar who knew Lithuanian-based South African Yiddish to render the street slang of Polish immigrant survivor-Jews in post-Holocaust New York? The process of producing the 548-page opus, which had appeared as a seriel in the *Forverts* (the *Forward*, New York's most prominent daily Yiddish newspaper) from January 1957 to January 1958 and which Singer had chosen not to have published in English, was not a smooth one. The editors at Farrar, Strauss & Giroux had strong views but no Yiddish or meaningful background in Jewish history or the context of Singer's story, and the exchanges, which Joseph sent me, were at times snippy, even hurtful, with notes from Joseph frequently having to explain why changes and edits they were inserting weren't quite right.

Even so, *Shadows on the Hudson* won high praise, and more opportunities followed. Given that he was facing mandatory retirement and that he was increasingly bleak about South Africa's crime problem, he leapt at a fellowship that became available at Oxford University. He and Karen found a lovely townhouse on the outskirts of the university town, which he described

(along with Paris) as "Paradise" with a capital 'P'. When I visited him in 2003, we sat on his deck just above a small garden planted with flowers.

When he wrote of ambivalence, it was an emotional and intellectual state he knew well and was even paradoxically comfortable with—though his often spluttering rants chronicling, say, the social politics of the extant Yiddish literary world, or his distaste for Nadine Gordimer's writing, or his prolonged discombobulated wince that churned up from deep in his *kishkes* that Russell Crowe and Gladiator had won an Oscar, might have suggested otherwise.

In an exchange of emails about an upcoming Seder, he wrote, "The under-the-surface tensions will always be there—*is* there, in every family, not only Jewish ones, and *why* everyone *wants* these annual experiences in tension to be repeated over and over again is quite another question."

He repeated the message another year, but with a somewhat altered message: "Perhaps one of the things that put so many families off being Jewish may be the tension of family meals, not to mention families in general. Whatever makes Jewish festivals and being Jewish sweet for children—and thus the future—must be the highest good."

In the course of searching for a position after Wits, he'd asked what I knew about the University of Indiana.

"I don't know how many Jews there are," I said.

"I've had enough of Jews," he replied. "It would be a refreshing change." To twist a line from Yogi Berra, he was 50% joking and 90% serious.

Yet, he was thoroughly Jewish, steeped in Jewish learning, and though his highly amusing complaints would, from another source, have been connect-the-dots antisemitism, at no time could anyone have said he was anything but a deeply committed Jew. There are critics who are ignorant, and there are critics who, in the tradition of the best prophets, rail on at what they know and love best.

On Israel, he was still more deeply ambivalent—though here his concern was not mainly over Israel-Palestine issues. On that, he was only slightly less appalled by the right, which insisted that Israel could do no wrong, than by the left, which was a reserve of Jewish self-hatred and people who employed the language of democracy and human rights to unjustly demonize Israel. Joseph's passionate complaints, however, had more to do with Israel's position on Yiddish, starting with the founders who had denigrated the language through discriminatory policies and whose literary establishment belittled Yiddish writers while failing to see that many of those writers were more worthy of respect than the Hebrew writers who had been exalted.

"However much it was argued at the time that nation-building justified the insistence of Ben-Gurion and his disciples on the supremacy of Hebrew and the elimination of the 'jargon of the galut,'" he wrote in *Midstream* (July/August 2004), "it remains a shocking legacy of its early years that Israel's government persecuted Yiddish in a way it never did to any other language that new immigrants brought with them."

In spite of these feelings, which remained active and volcanic for as long as I knew him, when he visited his longtime friends in Haifa, he couldn't resist its charms, and raved over its beauty and vibrancy.

The last time I saw Joseph was in April 2007 in New York's Washington Square. We both had conferences, and we met for dinner at a chic and popular place called Blue Hill. I spotted him down the road with an umbrella and a cane, and when I called him from behind he didn't hear me. In the restaurant he was radiant.

"I like the beard!" he said. "It looks good. A Jewish man should wear a beard."

We talked about my work. He was happy to hear I'd been put up in a fancy hotel and believed it was my due. He asked how much money I was earning and estimated that it was about what I would have made had I continued in academia. The days of drinking coffee in Johannesburg were long gone. We had not just moved on to New York but up to cocktails. I'd never seen him drink anything but a glass of wine before, but he enjoyed a sweet-looking cocktail while I worked on a bourbon. When the waitress asked if we'd have another round, I reflexively said no, but he said, "Why not? We never see each other. It's a celebration."

I told him about the time I had pancreatitus. It was terribly painful, and when I arrived in the hospital, they admitted me while repeatedly questioning how much alcohol I usually drank. I had never heard of the condition. It was apparently common among alcoholics, but mine was caused by a gallstone that blocked a duct.

Ironically, the condition is what felled Joseph last December while he was in Heidelberg, Germany, as a guest lecturer. As in my case, his was unrelated to alcohol. One day he was walking in the medieval stone alleys, and the next he was in an intensive care unit fighting for his life.

Eighty percent of his pancreas was necrotic. There were signs of hope, and he recovered well enough to be moved from Heidelberg back to Oxford. In fifteen weeks, he'd lost more than sixty pounds. A tube that had been put into his windpipe made his voice thin and reedy, and he was too weak to read, though Karen would sit and read emails that kept coming.

He was learning to walk again when an infection overwhelmed him, and he died on a cold, wet day in March with Karen by his side.

That people thought Joseph was older had other dimensions. For one thing, he was someone who kept getting better, whom you appreciated more as you got older yourself. But I think there was another dimension, too. He was engaged in his times, but in another sense, he was, like a *tzaddik*, outside of it.

Being humble, and profane, he would respond to the notion by waving the back of his hand at me, as if he was brushing crumbs off a tablecloth, and pronounce, "Yes, yes, very good, and bull---, of course, absolute rubbish." If I insisted, he would say, "bull---, bull---," in a more audible voice. He would nod with a raised brow listening to my explanation, that a *tzaddik*'s righteousness came from deep learning but also from his ability to elevate the people he knew.

He would commend me on being shrewd, the word he often used to flatter me. "All right, if that is the device you want to use to tell the story," he'd say. I imagine he might also have cautioned me against reporting imagined conversations, and the boundaries of poetic license when writing nonfiction.

Joseph left much too soon. At sixty-five he was just getting warmed up, with years of productive work still ahead of him. It is a personal loss for all who knew and loved him, but perhaps an even greater one for the Jewish and Yiddish world.

Joseph once wrote of his friend David Fram, "To know him was to learn and to love." I wondered if he knew this was true of him, too.

At the end of our evening in Washington Square, I wondered aloud, as I always did with him, where the time had gone, and wished there was more. In his presence you felt expanded, and were very sorry to look at your watch and realize it was time to say goodbye. That was how I felt when I received the bad news in March, once again, only this time hollowed out, diminished, disbelieving that this time, there would be no more. •

DRYDOCK

MARGE PIERCY

How new can a year be?
We carry into the first night
loads of broken promises
protruding sharp as icepicks,
the weight of all we should
not have done bending
our spines almost double.

Our minds are wrapped
around what we failed to
do, bandages on emptiness.
Such a pile of dirty paper
such trash we inflict on
the world we swore to
repair, still unredeemed.

Can we forgive ourselves?
let alone those who injured
slandered, plotted against
us? So we wobble into
this testing season moving
like old wooden sailboats
on wind that is our breath.

So we put ourselves
into drydock to be scraped
clean of barnacles, worms
that eat through planks.
Thus we haul ourselves
up to greet the new moon
praying to be renewed.