

both a London and a country home, even though the living in Sussex—Bloomsbury by the Sea—was often somewhat primitive. Leonard was the great custodian of Virginia's talent, and there is little doubt that without him she would have done less, and might well have killed herself before 1941. Theirs was a happy marriage, but contrary to Tolstoy's remark about happy families being all alike, it was of a different sort than most. Leonard emerges as a driving and highly sexed, and hence frustrated, man, while Virginia appears as frigid toward him, perhaps because of the early molestations by her stepbrother George Duckworth (the 10-year-old Rose's experience with an exhibitionist in *The Pargiters* may well reflect this) or because her great passion was reserved for Vita Sackville-West.

Leonard set out to marry Virginia—he and Lytton Strachey discussed the possibility while Lytton still was regretting his own impulsive proposal to her—and the authors point out that Virginia and Leonard, despite the fact that Leonard had been a close friend of her brother's at Cambridge, had probably only seen one another four times before he returned from Ceylon and very shortly thereafter proposed. According to the authors, the relationship mitigated Leonard's own insecurity, which was well protected by his arrogance, his inability ever to apologize, his "carapace." This interpretation may be a little too clever, for it is hard to believe that Leonard was a genuinely insecure man.

The authors characterize Virginia as immature in her intense need to be loved without feeling an obligation to return that love. It is not an unusual paradox for individuals to believe in the great importance of love but to be unable to practice it in their own lives. Nonetheless, there was a grandness in the Woolfs' lives—the artistic achievement—and there was enjoyment: Virginia's humor and her malicious sense of fun. There was also gauntness and high thinking, captured particularly well in the picture of two great elms—called "Leonard" and "Virginia"—at Monk's House in Sussex: during the winter they were without leaves, their branches touching one another. After Virginia's death, her ashes were placed at the foot of her tree, which two years later blew down in a storm.

The authors conclude that it was a happy marriage for both although, "It could have been happier than it was;

not if Leonard had married someone else, but if Virginia had been other than she was." Leonard lived on for 28 more years, into a comparatively serene and happy old age; in 1966, he told a meeting of the Apostles of the euphoria he felt after 70. Politically active, and an interesting writer, he tried to make England a better place in which to live. He was a man on his own, but also a custodian of genius. For the rest of his life, Leonard preserved a note he wrote immediately after Virginia's death which reveals his character—its strength and his hardness upon himself—and the depth of feeling of which he was capable: "I know that V. will not come across the garden from the lodge, and yet I look in that direction for her. I know that she is drowned and yet I listen for her to come in at the door. I know that it is the last page and yet I turn it over. There is no limit to one's own stupidity and selfishness." □

A YOUNG MAN IN SEARCH OF LOVE, by Isaac Bashevis Singer, with drawings and paintings by Raphael Soyer. Doubleday, 177 pp., \$12.95.

His own mensch

WILLIAM NOVAK

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER IS known and loved all over the world for his depictions of the Jews of Eastern Europe, a community obliterated by the Holocaust. But for all that he appears to be the most tradition-minded of contemporary novelists, Singer's greatest struggle as an artist, as he describes it in this latest volume of memoirs, was to break free of the now vanished tradition his works serve to perpetuate.

Born in 1904 into a deeply traditional Jewish family in Poland, Singer, as a boy coming of age in Warsaw, found himself caught between two worlds. On

WILLIAM NOVAK was, until recently, executive editor of Moment. He is currently writing a book on the personal uses of marijuana, to be published next year by Knopf.

the one side stood his parents—the community's rabbi and his wife—who represented the continuation of the old culture, and the rigors of study and religious ritual. On the other stood Joshua, Singer's older brother, who became a famous writer long before Isaac, and who represented the realm of literature, worldliness, and freedom. Isaac Singer's struggle was to be able to follow in his brother's path without completely abandoning the traditions of his parents.

For a Jewish *yeshivah* student even to contemplate writing stories required a major change of worldview; while books were to be found everywhere in the Singer household, books inevitably meant *s'forim*—holy books, religious texts, and commentaries. Singer once told an interviewer that the first worldly book he ever read was a collection of Sherlock Holmes stories translated into Yiddish. As a boy of twelve, Singer spent a whole day pretending to be the famous detective, walking all over Warsaw in pursuit of a man whom the would-be Holmes had concluded was definitely suspicious.

The Sherlock Holmes anecdote has literary implications as well; the boy who read these tales would become a writer interested almost exclusively in character, plot, and adventure, with little patience for prolonged discussions of philosophy or politics. This was an early and conscious decision on Singer's part; as the Yiddish translator of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, he resolved to write *his* books very differently. These "novels of ideas," he decided, "were for critics, not readers. They bored me, but I was afraid to say so since all so-called aesthetes had seized upon them as if they were treasures."

Unfortunately, as Singer describes it in this book, the Yiddish literary environment in Warsaw and beyond offered few attractive models for the young writer. The Yiddish novelists of the day limited themselves to sentimental stories with parochial themes. But while Singer rejected this tradition, as well as the religious world of his parents, he had no real desire to escape the confines of Polish Jewry. Instead, he concentrated on the more dramatic episodes of Jewish history—forced conversions, false messiahs, excommunications, and the like—and, on the contemporary and often overlooked Jewish underworld with its cast of pimps, prostitutes, preachers, freaks, and charlatans.

Such a break, however, was no easy matter, for even the most liberated Yiddish writers and their readers remained inherently conservative when it came to the subject matter. Singer submitted one of his first efforts to a literary magazine whose editor insisted that the story was too negative, too pessimistic, and virtually anti-Semitic. "If such a thing were translated into Polish and a genteel read it," the editor complained, "he might conclude that all Jews were depraved." Then, as now, it was generally accepted that the role of the Jewish writer, whatever his personal commitment, was to serve as a kind of publicist for the rest of the community; in our own time, Philip Roth and others have been victims of a similar prejudice.

BY HIS EARLY TWENTIES, Singer was living on his own in Warsaw, working as a proof-reader for a Yiddish magazine, and writing stories on his own time and in his own way. *A Young Man in Search of Love*, as its title would suggest, is not only about the literary career of the young writer, but also his personal life—although the two cannot really be separated. Despite his great shyness, he finds himself involved with Gina, a mistress twice his age, and attracting the attention of a bevy of young women.

As his readers know, Singer has always revealed a great fondness for ladies, and he apparently cut quite a romantic figure in the Warsaw of the 1920s. He writes that as a young man, he fantasized about writing a novel in which the hero was simultaneously in love with several women—a project which was realized almost half a century later, in 1972, with the publication of *Enemies, A Love Story*. In fact, the connection between Singer's life and his art is so strong that it makes little sense to treat *A Young Man in Search of Love* as something separate from his fiction. It is, after all, full of the same elements that have made his novels and stories so popular: a deep concern with tradition and history, and a fascination with unusual characters who seem to wear both their passions and their philosophies of life on their sleeve.

In these pages, Singer describes some of the people and vignettes from his early life, leaving little doubt about the source of most of his later work. There is the relationship with the pathetic and maternal Gina, jealous and dramatic in her love; and, on another level, his relationship with Joshua, who was made Warsaw correspondent for

the New York Yiddish daily, *The Forward*, earning the handsome sum of fifty dollars a week. But most of all, the book is about the struggle of the young man, who used to be known only as "Singer's brother," to establish his own identity, both personally and professionally. Part of that process, which has left an indelible mark on Singer's writing, was his decision to "reappraise all values." Was Shakespeare really a genius? Were the Yiddish writers really as great as their followers wanted them to be? Would Palestine really solve the Jewish Problem?

This reappraisal of values is part of Singer's overall and deep pessimism about the human condition, which, hand in hand with his healthy comic gifts, makes him so fascinating a writer. He is, of course, hardly the only writer of our time to pose hard questions, but he stands out, among other reasons, for refusing to find easy answers in the ideological systems of his day. As a young man, Singer was part of a Jewish community which was seething with arguments and polemics (once the gates of enlightenment had been thrown open, the ghetto would never be the same), as Zionists, Yiddishists, the Orthodox, the Hasidim, the assimilationists, and the revolutionaries all pressed forward with their own solutions.

Singer adamantly resisted all of these systems; he became a loner and a pessimist in the face of all those around him who saw a better tomorrow through Zionism, socialism, or revolution. Such people Singer found hypocritical; he decided to become a vegetarian and a teller of tales, avoiding literary struggles and opportunities for literary power, while at the same time resisting the appeals of bohemian life. Everything was a struggle and a paradox; for instance, he loved women, but couldn't get married. "I lusted after women," he writes, "yet at the same time I saw their faults, chief of which was that they were amazingly like me—just as lecherous, deceitful, egotistical, and eager for adventure."

It was his eroticism, as much as anything else, that fueled his literary ambitions. Yet Singer has always shied away from explicit sexual writing, preferring instead to acknowledge a more general—and spiritually based—erotic impulse at work in the world, and to fuse, wherever he could, a particular expression of desire into the general pattern of the cosmos. "Our love commenced when we were still amoebas,"

he tells Gina at one point. "We were fish in the sea, birds in the air, moles in the ground. We kneaded clay into bricks in Egypt. We stood at Mount Sinai together."

This is a fascinating and moving story, told in a handsomely produced book. The illustrations by Raphael Soyer are outstanding and appropriate, both a complement and a compliment to the text. *A Young Man in Search of Love* should delight readers of Isaac Bashevis Singer, as well as anybody who might want to understand the early development of a major writer—as told by the author. □

THE PUNISHED PEOPLES,
by Aleksandr M. Nekrich.
W. W. Norton, 238 pp., \$10.95.

Blocking the memory hole

ROBERT CONQUEST

ALEKSANDR NEKRICH IS A historian. He is also a central figure in a major Soviet scandal, and thus himself a living lesson in the great issues of truth and falsification. Thinking minds of every type eventually get into trouble in the Soviet Union. Dr. Nekrich's confrontation with the authorities is particularly interesting and illustrative since, as a professional historian, he had the impertinence to turn his hand to modern themes. Now, the single area which the Soviet rulers least like to have researched and written about is, of course, the record of their own regime.

In Moscow in 1965, Nekrich published his book, *June 22, 1941*, an account of the start of the German invasion. From his investigation it was clear that Stalin and his closest subordinates had made enormous political and military miscalculations, had refused to listen to evidence showing this, and—when the invasion actually took place—had fallen into something like panic. The book was condemned, re-

ROBERT CONQUEST is the author of *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* and *Kolyma: The Arctic Death Camps*.
