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The Family as a Mirror of Society –
The Crisis of the Family in Isaac Bashevis
Singer’s *Di familye Mushkat* (1950)

Rodzina jako zwierciadło społeczeństwa –
kryzys rodziny w powieści *Di familye Mushkat*
Isaaca Bashevisa Singera (1950)

Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje powieść Isaaca Bashevisa Singera *Di familye Mushkat* (1950) w kontekście gatunku powieści rodzinnej jako literackiego przedstawienia rozpadu struktur rodzinnych i społecznych w polsko-żydowskim środowisku pierwszej połowy XX wieku. Wychodząc od literackiego modelu powieści rodzinnej o strukturze genealogicznej, która cyklicznie przedstawia rozkwit, doj-

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rzałość i upadek rodziny, pokazano, w jaki sposób Singer na przykładzie trzech pokoleń inscenizuje rozpad więzi religijnych, społecznych i kulturowych w obszarze napięcia między tradycją a nowoczesnością. W centrum uwagi znajduje się postać Oyzer-Heshla, którego kryzys duchowy i egzystencjalny – naznaczony filozofią Spinozy, niepokojem seksualnym i odejściem od wiary – jest paradygmatyczny dla dezorientacji całego pokolenia. Powieść kreśli wielogłosową panoramę ideologiczną – od ortodoksyjnego judaizmu przez syjonizm po ateizm – i odrzuca jednoznaczne rozwiązanie światopoglądowe. Podczas gdy postacie syjonistyczne wydają się nadal zdolne do działania, ostatecznie tylko w powrocie do religii sugerowana jest możliwa droga wyjścia. *Di familye Mushkat* jest zatem nie tylko kroniką wewnętrznego rozkładu rodziny, ale także literackim requiem dla zaginionego judaizmu wschodnioeuropejskiego.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina, model powieści rodzinnej, kryzys duchowy, judaizm wschodnioeuropejski

Abstract

This paper examines Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Di familye Mushkat" (1950) within the context of the family novel as a literary genre and presents it as a portrayal of the disintegration of familial and societal structures in the Polish-Jewish milieu of the early 20th century. Drawing on the scholarly model of the genealogically structured family novel—which follows a cyclical trajectory of flourishing, maturity, and decline—it shows how Singer depicts the breakdown of religious, social, and cultural bonds across three generations, thereby also highlighting the tensions between tradition and modernity. At the center of the novel is Oyzer Heshl, whose spiritual and existential crisis—shaped by Spinoza's philosophy, sexual restlessness, and a departure from faith—serves as a paradigm for the disorientation of an entire generation. The novel presents a polyphonic cultural and ideological panorama ranging from Orthodox Judaism through Zionism to atheism and deliberately avoids offering a singular ideological resolution. While the Zionist characters appear to retain agency, only a return to religious tradition is implicitly suggested as a possible path forward. "Di familye Mushkat" thus functions not only as a chronicle of a family's internal collapse but also as a literary requiem for the vanished world of Eastern European Jewry.

Keywords: family, family novel model, spiritual crisis, Eastern European Judaism

Introduction: The Peculiarities of the Family Novel

The family novel is characterized by a strong historical and political dimension that unfolds across multiple generations. A defining feature of the genre is its close interconnection between private family destinies and broader societal and global developments. Within this framework, the family often serves as a mirror—or microcosm—of larger world events.

When understood in this way, the portrayal of family offers an opportunity to extrapolate insights into the societal macrocosm and contemporary developments. At the same time, the structure of the family is linked to a diffuse promise of happiness, grounded in the idea of potentially infinite genealogical continuity.² For the author, the fictional family also becomes a canvas upon which personal and collective fate can be inscribed.³

Thus, the family novel offers writers a compelling literary framework for reflecting on processes of societal transformation and their impact on the family as a microcosmic community. As individual fate becomes intertwined with collective change, the family emerges as a literary prism through which broader social dynamics can be explored.

The Family Novel in Yiddish Literature

In contrast to the Western European literary tradition, Yiddish literature displays a particular affinity for the family novel. During the 1930s and 1940s, this genre gained considerable popularity⁴ and emerged

² H. Lutosch, *Ende der Familie – Ende der Geschichte. Zum Familienroman bei Thomas Mann, Gabriel García Márquez und Michel Houellebecq*, Bielefeld 2007, p. 10 and p. 194.

³ M. Kula, *Autoportret rodziny X. Fragment żydowskiej Warszawy lat międzywojennych*, Warsaw 2007, p. 7.

⁴ M. Krutikov 'Turning My Soul Inside Out': Text and Context of *The Family Mashber*, in: *Uncovering the Hidden. The Works and Life of Der Nister*, eds. Gennady

as a distinctive and recognized subgenre within Yiddish prose.⁵ Alongside the Bildungsroman, the family novel became one of the most widely embraced genres.⁶

For Yiddish—and likewise Hebrew—writers of the 20th century, the family novel offered a particularly apt literary medium for exploring profound historical transformations within Jewish family and social life.⁷ This narrative form facilitated not only representations of socio-cultural upheaval but also reflections on collective identity and continuity. A key reason for the genre's central prominence in Yiddish literature lies in the outstanding role of the family within Jewish tradition: as a core social institution, it plays a pivotal function in preserving religious, cultural, and communal continuity. By contrast, Western European literature attributes far less centrality to the family novel. The Yiddish scholar Sol Gittleman articulates this emphasis on family in times of existential crisis:

Yiddishkeit, more than anything else, has come to mean *mishpoche*, the idea of “family”, of kinship, of being a part. At a time when the Jewish identity seemed to be challenged by all the forces of modernity during the past century, it was only natural that the writers who spoke to the world of the Jewish masses should focus on the threat to the family. Later, when the center of the Yiddish-speaking world had shifted to America, the preoccupation with family identity, with the threat of assimilation, remained just as strong; [...] But the modern age was tearing at the fabric of Jewish life. Socialism, Zionism, even more virulent anti-Semitism finally

Estraikh, Kerstin Hoge, Mikhail Krutikov, *Studies in Yiddish*, vol. 12, London 2014, pp. 111–144, here p. 129.

⁵ P.E. Hyman, *Introduction: Perspectives on the Evolving Jewish Family*, in: *The Jewish Family. Myths and Reality*, eds. Steven M. Cohen, Paula E. Hyman, New York 1986, pp. 3–13, here p. 10.

⁶ D. Miron, *Prose: Yiddish Prose*, “YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe”, 12 October 2010, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Prose/Yiddish_Prose [accessed: 18.03.2025].

⁷ M. Magentsa-Shaked., *Singer and the Family Saga Novel in Jewish Literature*, “Proof texts” 1989 n.9, pp. 27–42, here p. 28.

broke through and penetrated the experience of the people. Out of the turmoil, Yiddish literature emerged as the vehicle for communication, and it focused on the theme which was central to Jewish identity: the *mishpoche*, the family, caught up in a time of change.⁸

The Decline of the Family

Around 1900, the family novel—focused on the disintegration of family structures—became increasingly common.⁹ These works often adopt a multi-generational structure that mirrors a vegetative cycle of bloom, maturity, and decay.¹⁰ The family's breakdown is thus not portrayed merely as a personal tragedy but serves as a cipher for broader societal transformation and decline. In the rupture of familial bonds, the collapse of larger social orders is symbolically manifested.¹¹

Because of this focus on decline, the genre was frequently chosen by Yiddish authors. Israeli literary scholar Malka Magentsa-Shaked identifies the sense of catastrophe as a central impetus for the creation of family novels.¹² Particularly in the period between the two world wars, a growing sense of existential threat found expression in these novels through the motif of familial disintegration.¹³

⁸ S. Gittleman, *From Shtetl to Suburbia. The Family in Jewish Literary Imagination*, Boston 1978, pp. 2–4.

⁹ W. Erhart, *Familienmänner. Über den literarischen Ursprung moderner Männlichkeit*, München 2001, p. 113.

¹⁰ T. Macho, *Die wahre Heldin ist die Zeit*, "Literaturen", 2007 vol. 10, pp. 12–17, here p. 14.

¹¹ S.A. Slotnick., *The Family Moskat and the tradition of the Yiddish family saga*, in *Recovering the canon. Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Miller D. N., (Studies in Judaism in modern times vol. 8), Leiden 1986, pp. 24–38, here p. 25.

¹² Magentsa-Shaked, *Singer and the Family Saga Novel in Jewish Literature*, p. 28.

¹³ W.M. Glicksman., *In the Mirror of Literature. The Economic Life of the Jews in Poland as Reflected in Yiddish Literature (1914–1939)*, New York 1966, p. 217.

A key element in portraying the decline of the family is the basic narrative structure of the family novel. These stories often begin with the figure of the patriarch, who—thanks to favorable historical, social, or economic conditions—actively builds a family empire.¹⁴

Within the story, he holds a central, almost mythical role: as the so-called founding ancestor, he begins the family line, much like figures in medieval or early modern genealogies. This starting point shapes both the family's social position and its internal dynamics. The patriarch represents an original force whose influence continues through the following generations – both structuring and prefiguring the disintegration process that sets in later.¹⁵

Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Di familye Mushkat*

The Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer portrays three generations of the Polish-Jewish Mushkat family in his novel *Di familye Mushkat* (1950, English: *The Family Moskat*) up until the beginning of World War II. In this family saga, as in other novels of the time, he highlights the difficult position in which the family system found itself during the interwar period.

Isaac Bashevis Singer was born in 1904 in Leoncin near Warsaw and spent his childhood in Warsaw, where he received a traditional education. In 1917, he moved with his mother and younger brother Israel Joshua to Bilgoraj. He lived and worked in Warsaw until his emigration to the United States in 1935. His literary debut was published in 1925 in *Oyf der elter in Literarishe bleter*. In the United States, his stories and

¹⁴ V. Chilese., *Die Macht der Familie. Ökonomische Diskurse in Familienromanen*, in: *Deutsche Familienromane. Literarische Genealogien und internationaler Kontext*, eds. Matteo Galli, Simone Costagli, München 2010, pp. 121–130, here p. 124.

¹⁵ K. Heck, B. Jahn, *Einleitung: Genealogie in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit. Leistungen und Aporien einer Denkform*, in: *Genealogie als Denkform in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, eds. Heck K., Jahn B., Tübingen 2000, pp. 1–9, here p. 3.

serialized novels were regularly featured in the New York Yiddish daily newspaper *Forward*, where *Di familye Mushkat* was also published as a serialized novel in 1950.¹⁶

Although Singer had already been in the United States for some time, he set the plot of *Di familye Mushkat* in pre-war Poland. The novel's action takes place in Warsaw and the surrounding areas, with Singer providing detailed descriptions of streets and squares. Thus, the setting and time of the novel are not placed in Singer's present-day America, but in the Jewish world of Poland before World War II.¹⁷

In his novel, Bashevis Singer paints a panorama of Jewish mindsets and ideologies in the first half of the 20th century. He achieves this primarily through a diversity of characters. The range includes devout Hasidim, assimilated converts, as well as Zionists and Communists.

The depiction of various religious and political movements can be traced to the author's own personal journey. In his search for his own path and his desire to distinguish himself from his surroundings, he not only rejected the way of life of his orthodox parents but also the mindset of his brother Israel Joshua, who at the time was involved in the revolutionary circles surrounding the artist group *Di Khalyastre*. Thus, although Bashevis Singer was drawn to some of the movements of his time, such as pacifism, vegetarianism, and Spinozism, he was one of the few Yiddish intellectuals of his era who did not adhere to any political ideology and was critical of both socialism and nationalism.¹⁸

Even in his later novels, such as *The Manor* (1967), Bashevis Singer presents a panorama of the intellectual and political directions of Polish

¹⁶ N. Cohen, L. Prager, *Isaac Bashevis Singer*, in: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds. Berenbaum M, Skolnik F, Detroit 2007, Second Edition, vol. 18, pp. 634–636, here p. 634 f.

¹⁷ D. Pertsch., *Isaac B. Singers Geschichten über die ausgelöschte Welt des polnischen Judentums*, Hamburg 2003, p. 24.

¹⁸ R.R. Wisse, *Singer's Paradoxical Progress*, "Studies in American Jewish Literature", 1981 vol. 2:1, pp. 148–159, here p. 151.

Jews before the Second World War, without aligning with any specific way of life.¹⁹

The representatives of the three generations in *Di familye Mushkat* are, in accordance with the genre of the family novel, depicted as figures of their generation both within the family dimension and the historical one, thus becoming embodiments of specific worldviews.²⁰ *Di familye Mushkat* reveals notable contrasts not only between the generations but also within each generation itself.

Meshulam Mushkat represents the first generation of the Mushkat family and is, in a sense, its center; he embodies the figure of the patriarch of the family described earlier. Under his leadership, the Mushkat empire has been built, and thus he feels entitled to determine the lives of his children, as well as his grandchildren. The essayist and literary critic Moyshe Gros-Tsimerman aptly described him as „אַבִּי אַבְרוֹת פֿון די מוֹשקאַטס“²¹ [The Patriarch of the Mushkats]. When he dies, the sense of unity within the family is lost.²² Meshulam Mushkat is like the tradition that holds life together.

The protagonist, Oyzer-Heshl, is in search of happiness. This pursuit drives him away from the Judaism of his family and, through Spinoza, to a rejection of the world and a loss of faith in humanity. Oyzer-Heshl comes from a very orthodox family. His grandfather is the esteemed Rabbi Dan Katsenelenboygn, the Rabbi of Kleyn-Tereshpol, and he is raised in an orthodox manner. When he arrives in Warsaw, he is dressed according to orthodox customs: he wears sidelocks, a yarmulke, and a caftan. However, even in his first days in the capital, he forgets to pray

¹⁹ R. Pragier, *Żydzi czy Polacy*, Oficyna Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1992, p. 19.

²⁰ A. Assmann, *Generationsidentitäten und Vorurteilsstrukturen in der neuen deutschen Erinnerungsliteratur*, Wien 2006, p. 28.

²¹ M. Gros-Tsimerman, *Bashevis*, “Di goldene keyt”, 1967 vol. 60, pp. 190–194, here p. 192.

²² M.F. Schulz, *The Family Chronicle as Paradigm of History. The Brothers Ashkenazi and The Family Moskat*, in *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Allentuck M., Carbondale 1969, pp. 77–92., here p. 83.

and put on his tefillin. Initially, this seems to him like a significant departure from faith, but later, neglecting the commandments becomes normal. After a life full of indulgences, mostly of a sexual nature, he returns to his Jewish roots. When he asks himself how he could have forgotten, he admits that he wanted to shed the yoke of religion.²³ However, he soon realizes that shedding religious life only led him to apparent freedom. Without the religion in which he grew up, Oyzer-Heshl is outwardly freer, but he is constantly searching, dissatisfied with his life and unfulfilled in every sense. He strives for something without knowing exactly what. Even when he achieves the goals he once set for himself, he falls into dissatisfaction. Thus, the life he so longed for with Hadase Mushkat soon becomes a torment, and he flees into a new affair. The only constant in his life is dissatisfaction. This leads to a rejection of the world and indifference toward life. He is also incapable of love. He is constantly searching for love and happiness, but no sooner does he achieve them than he grows weary of them and destroys his own happiness, as well as that of others. He acts entirely selfishly. His feelings are placed above those of others: above the fate of his once-beloved second wife, his two children, and his family. While he feels connected to them, in situations where he does not place his own freedom above that of his loved ones, he acts solely out of a sense of duty. It is this sense of duty that binds him to his family and prevents him, in the darkest hour of the family—during the Nazi bombardment of Warsaw—from fleeing to Russia with his lover Barbara Fishelson, leaving his sister and her family behind in misery. Ultimately, however, it is more indifference to his own life than a sense of duty that prevents him from fleeing eastward.

This leads to a loss of faith in humanity and in the meaning of human life. Yet, although his Spinozist worldview brings him no happiness and his Jewish upbringing has deeply marked him, he does not return to the faith of his fathers:

²³ I.B. Singer, *Di mishpokhe Moshkat*, Tel Aviv 1977, p. 749.

„עוּזֶר-הַעֶשֶׁל [הָאֵט] נִישְׁט גַעוואָלֶט גֵיין אין קיין מִקוּם-קִדוּשׁ. אויב מ'לֵעבֶט, ווי אַן אַפִיקוֹרס, מוז מען שטאַרבן אַן אַפִיקוֹרס. מ'בֵעט זיך נישט איבער מיטן רבונו של עולם ביי דער טיר פֿון גיהנום...“²⁴

[Oyzer-Heshl did not want to enter a house of prayer. If one lives as a heretic, one must also die as a heretic. One does not reconcile with God at the gates of hell...]

Moments later, he is reading Spinoza's *Ethics*—but now the book seems obscure to him, and he can no longer grasp the core of Spinoza's philosophy.²⁵ Only shortly before, he had still declared:

„צנאַג ניא רע זיא סאָד, אָי? אַזאַניפּש סאָד זיא,“²⁶

[Is this Spinoza? Yes, this is fully him.]

Spinoza's *Ethica, ordine geometrico demonstrata* (1677) has accompanied him since his youth. He already carries the book in his pocket when he leaves the shtetl for Warsaw. He arrives with the intention of discovering divine truths and tries to live according to Spinozist principles. However, he fails at this from the very beginning.

Spinoza's philosophy enjoyed significant reception in the Yiddish-speaking world, both before and during the interwar period. New editions of his writings appeared, along with studies on his life and thought—among them Jacob Shatzky's *Spinoza un zayn svive* (1927, *Spinoza and His Circle*) and William Nathanson's *Shpinoza un Bergson: a paralel* (1923, *Spinoza and Bergson: A Parallel*). On the occasion of Spinoza's 300th birthday in 1932, a collected volume titled *Spinoza-bukh* was published, featuring a wide range of contributions on his work.²⁷ Discussions of Spinoza also appeared in contemporary periodicals—both in Yiddish newspapers such as *Unzer Ekspres* and *Literarische Bleter*, and in Polish-language Jewish journals such as *Miesięcznik Żydowski* and

²⁴ I.B. Singer, *Di mishpokhe Moshkat*, p. 757.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 749.

²⁷ *Naye bikher*, “Literarische bleter”, 27 Jan. 1933 n. 5, p. 77.

Trybuna Akademicka. Melekh Ravitsh, alongside Bashevis Singer, also explored Spinoza's philosophy in his writings.

In the final chapter, the two worldviews that have profoundly shaped Oyzer-Heshl—Judaism and Spinoza's philosophy—come together. In particular, the pantheistic outlook derived from Spinoza's identification of God with nature (*Deus sive Natura*) is described in striking terms:

„איז דא א גאט? יא, ס'איז דא. ער איז אלץ: די ערד, דער הימל, דער מיל-
כוועג, דאס געוויין פֿון א קינד, די נאצישע באַמבע, איינשטיינס טעאָריע,
היטלערס, מײן קאַמף.“²⁸

[Is there a God? Yes, there is. He is everything: the Earth, the sky, the Milky Way, the crying of a child, the Nazi bomb, Einstein's theory, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*].

The examples Oyzer-Heshl chooses can be interpreted through Spinoza's concept of “substance”—a self-sustaining, active, and all-embracing principle which Spinoza identifies with God. The entities mentioned here appear as modes of this one infinite and active substance. The Spinozist idea of a philosophy beyond good and evil is also hinted at by the final, negatively charged examples.

Spinoza and Judaism—these two traditions shape Oyzer-Heshl's life and define the man he becomes by the end of the novel. He cannot return to the Jewish faith, but neither can he break with it. In a fit of rage against God, he wants to throw the Tanakh to the ground—but something inside him resists. He lifts the holy book to his lips and kisses it.²⁹ The depth of his religious conditioning is also evident in the way biblical verses repeatedly come to his mind.

To the figure of Oyzer-Heshl, Singer contrasts the character of Simon Bendel. Through Bendel, he offers the reader a counter-model. In this figure, Bashevis Singer presents the ideal image of the “New Hebrew” as envisioned by Zionism. The Zionist movement propagated a muscular,

²⁸ I.B. Singer, *Di mishpokhe Moshkat*, p. 749.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 758.

masculine figure—full of strength and energy—who was meant to cultivate the new land. In contrast stood the weak, pale Diaspora Jews from the shtetl. Bendel, in both appearance and action, embodies the type of the “New Hebrew.” He is well-built and strong; his actions are energetic and purposeful. He achieves his goal and emigrates with his wife to Palestine to take part in building the land.

Oyzer-Heshl, by contrast, is physically weak and indecisive in his actions. He is repeatedly distracted from his goals and ultimately fails to achieve what he originally aimed for. While Simon Bendel pursues his goal with determination, Oyzer-Heshl continuously loses sight of his. He is a man of intellect, but he appears almost stereotypically cerebral—especially in comparison to Bendel, who may be less intellectual but is active and pragmatic.

Through his characters, Bashevis Singer portrays the challenges faced by the younger generation at the beginning of the 20th century, caught between tradition and assimilation. These characters are also contrasted with representatives of the older generation. According to Bashevis Singer, the transformation within the young Jewish generation occurred rapidly:

Young yeshiva students who had not yet shed their slitted gaberdines and little caps, and who were still steeped in the legacy of generations, suddenly decided that waiting for the Messiah was not for them; [...] Organizations, clubs, and libraries sprouted like mushrooms after the rain.³⁰

The character of Oyzer-Heshl is shaped by his search for happiness, his inner struggle with tradition, and his freely expressed sexuality. Like many of the male protagonists in Singer’s work, he is deeply interested in women—one woman is not enough for him. Oyzer-Heshl, like several

³⁰ I.B. Singer, *Concerning Yiddish Literature in Poland*, “Proof texts”, 1995 vol. 15, pp. 113–127, here pp. 113–114.

other characters in Singer's oeuvre, desecrates a sacred holiday by sleeping with another man's wife on Yom Kippur.³¹

Bashevis Singer addresses the connection between sexuality and sanctity in his memoir *Mayn tatns bezdn-shtub* (1956, *My Father's Court*):

„אין מיינע דערציילונגען איז אויך איין טריט פון בית-דין-שטוב ביז נאָקע-
טקייט און פון נאָקעטקייט צו דער בית-דין-שטוב. איך בין געבליבן אינטע-
רעסירט מיט לייב-און-לעבן אין די ביידע פאָזן פון מענטשלעכקייט.³²“

[In my stories, it is also just one step from the rabbinical courtroom to nakedness and from nakedness back to the rabbinical courtroom. I remained deeply interested—body and soul—in both stages of humanity.]

Sexuality plays a prominent role not only in Singer's literary work—Polish author Agata Tuszyńska has called him a “writer of passions”³³—but also in his personal life. Perhaps this parallel is part of the connection he saw between himself and Oyzer-Heshl. Singer himself spoke of a resemblance between himself and Oyzer-Heshl.³⁴ Singer was known for having many affairs and for making sexist remarks, even well into old age, particularly in his interactions with his translators.

Singer presents a completely different life path through the figure of Menasse David. He is a pious Jew, a Hasid, who firmly believes in the imminent coming of the Messiah and therefore places little value on worldly matters. Like Oyzer-Heshl, Menasse David does not resist when Warsaw is bombed. But his non-resistance is fundamentally different. What separates the two is belief in the Messiah. While Menasse David lives entirely in expectation of the Messiah's arrival, the idea of the Messiah plays no role at all in Oyzer-Heshl's life.

³¹ A. Tuszyńska, *Lost Landscapes. In Search of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Jews of Poland*, New York 1998, pp. 145 and 148.

³² I.B. Singer, *Mayn tatns bezdn-shtub*, p. 288.

³³ A. Tuszyńska, *Lost Landscapes*, p. 150.

³⁴ I.B. Singer, *Ich bin ein Leser*, München 1988, p. 77.

In other words: Menasse David is firmly convinced of the coming redemption.³⁵ His faith gives him stability but also alienates him from the real world. He places his fate entirely in God's hands—a position that is harshly criticized by his wife Dina:

וואָס [...] די באַמבעס פֿאַלן איבערן קאָפּ. אַ גאַנצן טאָג... טררר... טררר
שטייטו ביי דער טיר? מנשה-דודל, הער דיך אויף שאַקלען. ער איז שוין
אין גאַנצן חסר-דעה...³⁶

[The bombs are falling over our heads. All day long... trrr... trrr...
[...] Why are you standing by the door? Menasse-David, stop
rocking! He has completely lost his mind!]

Bashevis Singer here addresses the accusation of the lack of Jewish resistance against the Nazis. The Jews were reproached for allowing themselves to be led to slaughter like sheep. Without resisting and with a naive belief in salvation, they made it all too easy for their Nazi murderers. Oyzer-Heshl's wife accuses her husband of the same behavior. In his blind trust in God and the coming of the Messiah, he closes his eyes to reality and the impending death. While she sees the German attack as God's punishment, she accuses Menasse David not only of being disconnected from the world but, above all, of acting irresponsibly toward his family, who, in times of war, barely have what is necessary to survive.³⁷

Despite everything, Menasse David completely trusts in God. According to him, a person must thank God for evil just as much as for good. It seems as though, in his intense focus on God, he is oblivious to the misery around him.

Menasse David's behavior also resembles Bashevis Singer's commentary on his own father in his memoir *Mayn tatns bezdn-shtub*. He criticizes the religious circles who, despite the upheavals in the world,

³⁵ I.B. Singer, *Di mishpokhe Moshkat*, p. 746.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 746.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 747.

focused solely on religious study. Singer comments on his father's religious studies during a time of upheaval as follows:

„ ער לערנט, הא? ווי לאנג וועט מען דאס אזוי לערנען? א וועלט קערט זיך איבער און זיי האלטן אלץ ביי דער ביצה שנולדה ביום טוב.“³⁸

[— He's learning, huh? How long will they keep learning this way? The world is turning upside down and they're still focused on the egg that was laid on the holiday.]

The character of Menasse David also strongly resembles the description of the Singer brothers' father in the autobiography *Fun a velt vos iz nishto mer* by Israel Joshua Singer. In this work, the father is criticized for not taking responsibility and, while waiting for the Messiah, being entirely dependent on God.³⁹

None of the characters in *Di familye Mushkat* are able to recognize the intensity of the impending danger. Only the Zionist characters truly recognize the threat of antisemitism and the necessity of leaving Europe. However, the novel should not be seen as Zionist per se; Still, the Zionist movement is portrayed more positively in comparison to socialism and communism.⁴⁰

In spite of this critique of religion, ultimately, Bashevis Singer presents no secular intellectual movement as the solution in his family novel. In contrast to secular movements, only a return to religion is paradoxically depicted as the true salvation.

³⁸ I.B. Singer., *Mayn tatns bezdn-shtub*, p. 286.

³⁹ J.C. Landis J. C., *The Brothers Singer: Faith and Doubt*, in *Blood Brothers. Siblings as Writers*, ed. Kiel N., New York 1983, pp. 365–382, here pp. 369–370.

⁴⁰ E. Alexander, *The Resonance of Dust. Essays on Holocaust Literature and Jewish Fate*, Columbus 1979, p. 160.

Conclusion

In *Di familye Mushkat*, Bashevis Singer creates an epic panorama of the social and spiritual decay of a family, encapsulating in the genre of the family novel the downfall of East European Jewry. Isaac Bashevis Singer's novel *Di familye Mushkat* presents the disintegration of familial structures as a reflection of social and spiritual crises in the Polish-Jewish context of the first half of the 20th century. The family's dissolution becomes a cipher for spiritual, societal, and religious decay in an era of profound upheaval. Through the polyphony of his characters, Isaac Bashevis Singer succeeds in depicting a comprehensive picture of the inner turmoil of a generation trapped between tradition and modernity, between faith and doubt, and between passivity and activism.

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