

BIOGRAPHY

Der Nister, which means “the hidden one,” was the pen name of Pinhas Kahanovitch (1884–1950). He grew up in the Ukrainian city of Berdichev, a center of Russian finance and Jewish mysticism and the basis for the city of N. in *The Family Mashber*. His early short stories were allegorical, kabbalistic tales, resembling the paintings of his good friend Marc Chagall. In the early years of the Soviet Union he moved with his family to Berlin and Hamburg, but in 1926 Der Nister decided, like many modernists, to return to Russia. Unfortunately, his symbolic and mystical style soon fell far out of favor. He had a difficult life, scraping by as a technical writer until he found the fusion of realism and magic that would let him get *The Family Mashber* past the authorities. Volume One was published in the Soviet Union in 1939, and Volumes One and Two came out in Yiddish in the U.S. in 1948. He was arrested by the Soviet secret police in 1949 and sent to the Gulag, where he died in 1950.

THE FAMILY MASHBER

by Der Nister

Introduction by David Malouf

Translated from the Yiddish by Leonard Wolf

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“The restoration to the light of this extraordinary novel is an act of literary and cultural redemption. More than that, the restitution of this Yiddish masterwork—as life-saturated as the other great Russian novels—is an augmentation of world literature.” —Cynthia Ozick

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The Family Mashber is a sweeping, realistic novel about the downfall of a successful businessman, Moshe Mashber. The author, Der Nister, brings the entire world of nineteenth-century Eastern Europe spectacularly to life: Polish nobles, Russian imperial officials, and above all the tightly-knit but deeply divided Jewish community, with its businessmen, moneylenders, rabbis, outcasts, mystics, pimps, laborers, housewives, and holy fools. There are family crises (“mashber” is Hebrew for “crisis”) and family celebrations, weddings and funerals, economic collapse and the coming of spring. Even when the book was written, and more so now, *The Family Mashber* captures every nook and cranny of a vanished world.

At the center of the book are Moshe and his family—a little smug, perhaps, but deserving a far better fate than the one circumstance and society have in store for them. Moshe also has two brothers: first Luzi, a much-admired, almost worshipped, pinnacle of the Jewish community, who arrives in town again near the start of the book. Luzi is a religious seeker who travels the land and brings comfort and honor wherever he goes, but perhaps his unmarried, unmoored life of wandering also has a darker side of denial and escapism. Then there is Alter, the most promising brother of all as a young man, but “touched” by some sort of sickness or divine affliction. He is kept mostly out of sight, writing letters to God and to his brothers, an otherworldly counterpoint to the rest of the story. Finally, with a strange connection to all three brothers, is the remarkable trickster Sruli Gol: an outcast, beggar, and drunk who is secretly rich and somehow knows everything that happens and is about to happen.

Throughout the novel dances the confiding, contradictory, cajoling, insinuating, and hypnotic voice of Der Nister’s narrator, a living presence on the pages of the book. It is endlessly inquisitive, consistently skeptical, vagrant and solitary, but at the same time a collective, almost divine point of view, a chorus blending the city’s many different voices together. It makes *The Family Mashber* not only a realist masterpiece but a mystical act of recovery and reclamation: the reconstitution of the broken vessel that is central to Jewish faith and community spirit.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The Family Mashber* can be read in many different contexts: as a Russian novel (Dostoevsky, Tolstoy), a Jewish novel (Saul Bellow, Sholem Aleichem), a family novel (*The Corrections*, *Buddenbrooks*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*), a big modernist novel (*Ulysses*, *The Man Without Qualities*, *The U.S.A. Trilogy*). What kind of book did you have in mind when you started reading *The Family Mashber*? Did Der Nister’s novel change your sense of what that genre could do?
2. There is a marketplace at the very center of the city of N., and the book opens with a long description of buying, selling, scheming, and other business. Later, various characters argue that business is wrong, to explain Moshe’s downfall (for example, Moshe himself on p. 513); do you think Der Nister believes what these characters say, or that he put those positions into the book to placate the Soviet authorities? Do you believe it your-

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Life and Fate

Vasily Grossman
(translated from the Russian and
with an introduction by Robert
Chandler)

Riders in the Chariot

Patrick White
(introduction by David Malouf)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Martin Buber,
The Legend of the Baal-Shem

John Dos Passos,
The 42nd Parallel

Fyodor Dostoevsky,
The Brothers Karamazov

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*

Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks*

*The Shtetl: A Creative Anthology
of Jewish Life in Eastern Europe*,
ed. Joachim Neugroschel

Isaac Bashevis Singer,
The Family Moskat

self? Is it basically a religious argument, like Luzi's, or a social argument, like Yossele's (page 569)? What about Sruli Gol's "prophecies" against the rich (page 138)—are they Marxist or mystical?

3. When a locomotive suddenly appears on p. 71, it's a shock: suddenly the timeless, folkloric world of the Jewish city is located at a specific moment in history (the 1870s, according to p. 229). Why do you think *Der Nister* does that at this particular moment in the book, when Moshe is choosing a gravesite? What about the image of the cawing young crow in "the sun-filled, expansive morning" which makes Moshe turn around and see the train?
4. "Here's what one child remembers," at the start of the family chronicle, foreshadows the exceptionally sensitive Mayerl, who the narrator says "will be our theme" and who takes over the narrative at the end of the book, "slowly and solemnly and with an epic, biblical tone" (page 60, 131, 683). Do you think the narrator's voice in the book as a whole is like Mayerl's? What do you think would have become of Mayerl if *Der Nister* had been able to finish his trilogy?
5. When Alter is introduced, the narrator apologizes, because "it may be that this is not the place for him, and it may be that generally speaking there ought not to be a place here for someone like him who does not—who cannot—take an active part in the narrative, and we might simply have passed him over or mentioned him only occasionally here and there. But we have not done that" (page 127). Why not? What role does Alter play in the story? What do you think of his marriage to Gnessye, and his near-disappearance from the book afterwards?
6. Right after the first scene with all three brothers (page 132), we meet Sruli Gol, and the chapter that brings the four main characters together—with Alter's seizure, Sruli Gol's arrival, and the defining conflict of the family between Moshe and Luzi—is one of the pinnacles of the book's narrative construction (V, "The Quarrel Between the Brothers," 147-185). How does *Der Nister* put that chapter together? What new information do we learn, and how does he show us what lies underneath what we knew already?
7. Sruli Gol is perhaps the book's most remarkable character. Is he plausible, or is he not supposed to be plausible? How do his different sides fit together? Do you think of him as a person, or more like a force or spirit in the book? Is he basically good?
8. What do you think of the female characters in the book? Are they minor characters, or do Gitl and Gnessye and Malke-Rive and Esther-Rokhl, the "Leather Saint," feel like fully realized, deeply imagined women? In the world of N. that *Der Nister* describes, what other kind of female characters would have been possible?
9. Sruli has a dybbuk or ghost double (page 216); someone is "speaking through" Gitl when the mob invades her house (page 505); and Luzi prays about trading places with his fellow creatures, because "every person must regard himself as a sharer with everyone else" (page 419). Perhaps surprisingly, it is the apparently solid Moshe who is most often doubled with someone else: he is like Saul (page 339), he trades places with Alter (page 311, 331-32, 374), Sruli wears Moshe's head "on his shoulders" (page 411), Moshe spins face-to-face with Luzi as they dance together (page 473), and someone seems to have "been substituted for him" upon his return (page 631). Why do you think *Der Nister* made imagery of doubling and blurred identity so central to the book?
10. Why would *Der Nister*, writing in the 1930s and 1940s, choose to make the final violence come at the hands of a Jewish mob, not an anti-Semitic one (page 607 ff.)? In general, what do you think of *Der Nister*'s use of stereotypes that would typically be called "anti-Semitic," such as all the cheating and thieving?
11. The book ends with a description of Luzi wandering from village to village, and in a way nothing seems to have changed in him. Which characters change and which do not in the course of the novel?
12. There is rebirth imagery at the end of the book, with the coming of spring (e.g., page 646), but also a long and lingering description of burials (e.g., page 662); historically, we know what came next for Jewish communities like N.'s, but characters such as Luzi also look forward to religious renewal and redemption and something like the creation of Israel (pages 269-74, 431-32). Does the book feel ultimately optimistic or pessimistic to you? Does it grieve or affirm?