

Introduction

Of all the Yiddish stories I heard and read during my childhood in Vilna, those by I. L. Peretz remain the most luminous and vivid in my mind and my heart.

My mother read them to me when I was young—too young, no doubt, to appreciate all the layers and meanings in each story. Because she loved them, my mother read them to herself as well as to me, which was a wonderful way of sharing this great and lasting experience.

As a child I understood and perceived stories such as “The Poor Boy” and “Revealed: Or the Story of the Goat Who Couldn’t Say No,” “Peace at Home” and “Bontche Schweig” differently from the way I do now. But does it matter?

What I remember and what made me cry was the portrayal of the orphan boy who needed a place to sleep and a plate of soup to eat. I recall giving away my lunch to beggars on the street on my way to school in Vilna because of the nameless poor boy in Peretz’s story. I still think of that story when I give to street beggars, but now I also think of the adult narrator’s dilemma.

Knowledge of Hassidic thought and manner of praying was not in my grasp when I first read or heard the story of the goat who couldn't say no. I have since discovered that in this deeply religious allegory, the goat and Reb Nachumka are one and the same—and when Reb Nachumka tells of the goat's good deeds, he is really speaking of himself. But as a child I knew instinctively, for I remember it well, that people gave up something important and precious for something of no value at all. And I still reflect on it.

Chaim and Hannah, who had peace in their poor home, were my first literary example of what equality of the sexes was all about. It was about love and tenderness and caring, such as Hannah had for Chaim and he for her and which he was not going to give up, not even in heaven, nor expect her to relinquish on this earth or above. Modern feminist ideas are not so far removed from Peretz's vision of some hundred years ago.

Bontche "went" with me to a small village in a desolate, terrifying Siberia to which we were deported during the war and where we lived for nearly six years. Because my dream of paradise then was having all the white bread and sugar I could eat, Bontche's request of the Heavenly Court made perfect sense. And strangely enough, it still does, and not just for me! Since he was nine and first heard the story of Bontche Schweig, my son says each time he has a warm roll with butter, "You know, Bontche had the right idea!" Maybe he did.

Sarah Bath Tuvim, Schmerrel the woodcutter, the rabbi of Nemirov, Toyve and Sarah are my oldest living friends since almost none of my childhood friends from Vilna survived the Second World War. They live in the pages of Peretz's stories, still as vibrant and as real as they were when I first met them. The stories are a bridge in my life, a bridge that crosses ages, and times, and places on earth.

Walking that bridge has been an adventurous and enriching experience.

However, translating Peretz is a formidable task. His writing is so poetic, so alliterative, and so idiomatic that putting it into understandable, readable English is nearly impossible without making some cuts and taking some liberties with the words, phrases, and expressions he used.

Yiddish, the language in which he wrote the stories in this collection, cannot be translated literally. There are words and expressions that can only be approximated in another language, not translated word for word.

As Isaac Bashevis Singer once put it, Yiddish has vitamins other languages don't. Perhaps these vitamins have helped Yiddish survive despite all odds and against all pronouncements that it was a dead language. In fact, at present a new growth and revival are flourishing, with more and more people studying Yiddish in schools, universities, and synagogue classes.

But for those who do not read Yiddish, here is a selection of my favorite stories from the hundreds written by Peretz during his long and illustrious literary career. Five of the stories had appeared in *Case Against the Wind*, a collection I translated a number of years ago but that is now out of print. In selecting stories for *The Seven Good Years* I could not exclude them because I treasure and love them as much as the others.

I hope this group of stories will be a happy, and perhaps at times a sad, introduction to a world of long ago which is valid and beautiful and true for all time.