

# ESTHER SINGER KREITMAN:

## The trammeled talent of Isaac Bashevis Singer's neglected sister.

In 1938, Faber & Faber, the prestigious British publishers, brought out an anthology entitled *Jewish Short Stories*. Its editor later called the anthology "something of a disguised family affair." Four of the writers were intimately related, though you would never know it from their altered names: I.J. Singer, Isaac Bashevis, Esther Kreitman and Martin Lea.

What we have here are three siblings and a nephew/son. Martin Lea is the *nom de plume* of the editor, Morris Kreitman; he is also the son of author Esther Kreitman who is, in turn, the sister of authors I.J. and Isaac Bashevis (who dropped the family name, Singer, for his English-language debut).

Even when she was alive, Esther Kreitman's novels, short stories and translations received far less attention than the work of her famous brothers. In death, she's been wholly forgotten. Yet she clearly has the same deep, haunting literary storyteller's gifts as her siblings. Why do so few of us even know her name? Why is her work either lost or out-of-print? Why are people surprised to find out that the Singer brothers had a literary sister whose fiction appeared in English as well as Yiddish?

Hinde Esther Singer was born on March 31, 1881, the daughter of Bathsheva and Pinchos Mendel Singer. Bathsheva was an intellectual, but both Bathsheva's father and her husband disapproved of erudite women. Bathsheva's greatest failing, said her father, was that she had been born a woman. Both I.B. and I. J. Singer characterize Pinchos and Bathsheva's marriage as a grave mismatch.

That they should then have a daughter who, like Bathsheva, turned out to crave an intellectual life was a tragedy to both parents. There was no place in the *shtetl*

for a scholarly woman. Pinchos Mendel was determined not to repeat his father-in-law's mistake of educating a daughter. As the child grew, Bathsheva became jealous of Hinde's ambition, which filled Bathsheva with despair about her own unarticulated life. From the start, both husband and wife were determined to keep their daughter ignorant.

Indeed, Hinde Esther wasn't only neglected; it seems she was ill-treated. At birth she was handed over to a wet nurse who lived "in a wretched hut." She was "placed in a cot under a table," says her son, Morris Kreitman (now known as Maurice Carr). "She was never touched, let alone fondled by her mother. Not until the age of three, when [she had become] blinded by cobwebs from under the table, was the child at last taken home, where she but partially recovered her sight, doomed to remain physically and psychically sick the rest of her life."

Hinde Esther remained scorned by her parents through the remainder of her life, her role in the family, says Carr, that of "household drudge." Still, despite their most zealous efforts, she turned out to be, as Isaac Bashevis Singer later remarked, a "chassid in skirts" — perceived by the family as irrelevantly bookish and clever, too smart for a girl's own good.

Her tragically strangled intellectual life made a lifelong impression on her brother, younger by thirteen years, Isaac Bashevis. His famous story, *Yentl the Yeshiva Boy* (which became Barbra Streisand's movie *Yentl*) — about a girl who disguises herself as a boy so that she might receive an education — was inspired by Hinde Esther's life. Indeed, much of I.B.'s fiction — for example, *Satan in Goray* and *The*

*Manor* — takes Esther's story even further, transmuting it into Singer's own obsession with transsexuality. In *Satan in Goray*, a woman's body is possessed by a dybbuk, so that she is simultaneously both man and woman.

"When my sister asked Mother what she should be when she grew up," I.J. Singer wrote in his memoirs, "Mother answered her question with another: 'What *can* a girl be?'" For girls from religious homes during these years, there was only one answer: to bring "happiness into the home by ministering to her husband and bearing him children." Bathsheva, wanting to spare her daughter her own frustrations and unattainable dreams, believed that it was "better to be content as a dairy cow than to be a lost spirit."

In [Hinde] Esther Kreitman's semi-autobiographical novel, *Deborah*, a female character asks her father, "What am I going to be one day?" He replies, "What are *you* going to be one day? Nothing, of course."

What little we know from Hinde Esther's point of view must be culled from her fiction. In *Deborah*, Kreitman describes the protagonist's spirit of revenge and determination:

Almost every night, in bed, she firmly resolved to give up her duties of keeping house and to become a student instead. Ever since childhood she had longed to receive an education, to cease being the nonentity of the family. She would learn things, gain understanding . . . she, Deborah — the girl who, as her father had once said, was to be a mere nobody when she grew up — would be a person of real consequence. She would make her own life.

In true life, Kreitman's resolve to "be a person of real consequence" and to "make her own life" was more crippled and crippling than Deborah's steely bedtime resolutions. Kreitman's life turned out to be full of conflict, sacrifice and anguish. Unable to shuck convention completely, and not "the kind of girl who could be



married off easily [because she had] acquired some modern ideas, and read Yiddish newspapers and books, and longed for a romance, not an arranged marriage” (as Isaac Bashevis wrote), she eventually consented to an arranged match with a hapless diamond cutter from Antwerp named Avraham Kreitman. But she began, and remained, unhappy about the union.

“You’re sending me away because you hate me!” I. B. once wrote, describing Esther’s anger at her mother. Still, when Bathsheva — perhaps remembering her own unhappy marriage — offered to call off the wedding, Esther cried, “No. I’d rather go into exile. I’ll disappear. You won’t know what happened to my remains.” She entered her marriage, wrote I.B. Singer, like “a corpse . . . [but] in full possession of her senses.” One moment she looked upon her marriage as an escape, the next as an exile.

In the autobiographical memoir, *In My Father’s Court*, Isaac Bashevis Singer mentions a particularly lavish gift that Hinde Esther received from her future father-in-law. A golden chain. Deborah, too, in the eponymous novel, is given such a necklace. She shivers at “the touch of the cold metal and the thought that the most vicious of dogs might safely be tied up with a chain such as this.” Somehow, however, I.B. fails to really empathize with his sister, or to recognize that he and his brother had the privilege of being the liberated, culturally emancipated male versions of the stifled Bathsheva and Hinde Esther. The Singer brothers were able to break the great chain of tradition that choked the life out of their sister.

At the young age of twenty, Hinde Esther had already written, according to I.J., an impressive collection of short stories. But, Maurice Carr reports, “the thought of seeing them in print never entered her mind.” Esther had shown the stories only to I.J., and then to their mother — who read them without comment.

“At Bathsheva’s behest,” says Carr, “on the train journey to the unhappy wedding in Berlin — lest the Czarist frontier officials suspect the Yiddish writings to be Socialist, seditious — Hinde Esther tore up the exercise books and threw the shreds out of the window.” Esther was trying, by sheer will and singular dramatized gesture, to accept her destiny as wife rather than writer.



Courtesy of Maurice Carr

Still, as time passed, Esther seemed unable to conquer her desire to write. Several times she left London (where the Kreitmans had settled) and her marriage, returning to Warsaw with the intention of embarking on a literary career. But, conflicted, she always ended up in London again. In 1929 she set out once more, leaving son and husband, with the stated purpose, says Carr, of living in Warsaw for good and “of mending her hitherto wasted life.”

For ten months, she lived the life of a writer, translating Dickens’ *Christmas Carol* and Shaw’s *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* into Yiddish to earn money. But something about this experience was very negative, and, despite her plans, she retreated to England once again. “Whatever her experiences out there, she, the inveterate storyteller, for once did not confide in me,” says Carr.

Soon, Kreitman’s dichotomy — being a writer in Warsaw versus being a wife and mother in London — seemed to ease up. Staying in England, she began to publish short stories in the Yiddish dailies and literary journals of Warsaw, Paris, Antwerp, London, New York, Buenos Aires and Toronto.

In 1936, her first novel — *Der Shaidim Tantz* (literally The Devils’ Dance, translated with the whitewashed title of *Deborah*) — was published in Poland. The English translation received enthusiastic reviews, though no one, of course, thought to comment on the meaning of Kreitman’s being the first female novelist to sing the praises of the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment).

Next, she was included in *Jewish Short Stories*. Her novel, *Brillianten*, about life among the Jewish diamond merchants of Antwerp, appeared in 1944 and again Kreitman garnered favorable notices. The distinguished critic Melech Ravitch mentioned its “rich descriptions” and “massive background of the outlandish Jewish way of life.” The review sounds terribly familiar — it could, indeed, be written in relation to any of the literary Singers’ work. Kreitman’s voice is distinctly Singeresque.

Interestingly, Kreitman, says her son, “never sought to make capital of her belonging to the Singer family; she kept herself to herself with the name Kreitman, which she had come by through her enforced and loveless marriage.” Not only did she lack a room of her own, but a name of her own.

By the time her third book came out, a collection of short stories entitled *Yichus*, Kreitman was used to the encouraging reviews and literary gatherings. Still, success failed to make her happy. She kept the reviews pasted in a book, but they seemed to make for only superficial pleasure.

Nothing, it seems, could erase Esther’s early, deep ostracisms — starting with three years of life under a “foster-family’s” table — which scarred her with her own *shaidim tantz* (devils’ dance) for the rest of her life: troublingly confused loyalties, fury, grief, contradictory desires, jealousy towards her brothers, and, ultimately, the essential loneliness and cost of female creativity, intellect, and ambition.

Kreitman died in 1954, and, contrary to Jewish law, asked that she be cremated. She said that she dreaded what the *shaidim* that persecuted her in life might do to her body in the grave. She wanted to confound them after all, and have some victory, some peace.

Hinde Esther Kreitman is a forgotten literary foremother, her works largely lost, ignored and out-of-print. Isaac Bashevis Singer dedicated *The Seance* to her memory, but the proofreaders (*shaidim’s* apprentices) were careless, and her name appeared as Minde Esther.

May she rest in peace.

— adapted from an article by Clive Sinclair

Clive Sinclair is a novelist and former literary editor of *The London Jewish Chronicle*. His most recent novel is *Cosmetic Effects* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1990).