

SINGER: "It certainly is not my intention here to preach realism, mysticism or any other literary -ism. I do believe in literary experimentation, and that there is room for a great many schools of literature. I'm sure that there are new media and new methods still to be developed in writing. Every creative writer brings to his work, his own variation of style and topic, but I do not believe that a maximum can be attained by discarding the minimum, namely by broadening the definition of literature to such an extent that it becomes blurred, or by constricting it to a degree that it becomes a puzzle. Within the past few years, the view has been spread that talent is a term without meaning. That it represents an outgrown concept, and not a physical concept. Modernists[?] don't like to deal with things that can't be measured, weighed, photographed, or analyzed in a laboratory. Many feel that the concept of talent belongs in the realm of power psychology. According to the classic definition, talent is a quality with which a person is born. Those who believe that character and personality are molded entirely by environment, have no patience for the old-fashioned concept of talent. But neither [inaudible] nor others of his kind, will ever be able to cancel the role of heredity in that. The most important manifestation of talents are, an innate and never relenting urge to brood about the so-called eternal questions, has refusal to accept human and animal suffering, individualism is the very air of the talented person -- no. Individualism is the very air the talented person breathes. He's never a collectivist. He may be loved by many, but he's not a leader of the masses. No matter how deeply he is rooted in his environment, he will never be truly a part of it. He will always be the exception. He belongs and does not belong to the society in which he lives. The true talent wrangles not so much with social orders, as with gut. The talented person is often a pessimist or even a fatalist, but he cannot be an atheist for the simple reason that by his very nature, he must wrestle with the higher powers. He may revile gut, but he cannot ignore it. This is the reason why no dictator or social evolutionary, has ever succeeded in harnessing talent for his purposes. I do not envy the true artists of the future. He may even face more difficulties than did Dostoyevsky, Edgar Allan Poe, and Van Gogh. He may be forced to fight against triteness, which will appear in the trappings of originality. He may have to do battle with cruelty, which will preach humanity. In a plan's economy, he may even be altogether restrained from self-expression. Nevertheless, I believe that true art cannot vanish. The talent that is genuine, is endowed with a force that no one can destroy. Within the past century, philosophy has become so analytical, and so critical, and so overly self-conscious, that it almost has committed suicide. I do not think that art will meet with the same fate. I believe that art, expressed the written word, from the [inaudible] edifices of astounding beauty and harmony. Upon the rulers of banal [inaudible], shallow psychology, false sociology, and empty formalism, there will rise a [inaudible] character. It will reveal those whims and surprises that are found nowhere else, except in the human personality, its struggle, and growth. As it entertains, art keeps some searching for the eternal truths, in its own fashion. It stills tries to penetrate the essence of being, to solve the riddle of time and change. To find an answer to suffering. To reveal love in the very abyss of cruelty and injustice. The true artist has never made peace with death and oblivion. He knows that we are fragmented God's unending book. A moment in eternity. Our hopes are closely connected with all the stars, all the galaxies, of the cosmos. If the universe is an accident, so are we. If the universe makes sense, so do we. This is the message board of religion and of art."

[Music]

VOICE: "Brockport Writers Forum, in a continuing series of discussions with the leading literary figures presents, The Writing of Isaac Bashevis Singer, a novelist and short storyist, who has been acknowledged as the greatest living Yiddish writer, with more than 20 collections of published works, many translated

into a number of foreign languages. Isaac Bashevis Singer, is a fellow of the Jewish Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences, and a member of the American Institute of Arts and Sciences. Discussing Mr. Singer's works are Stan Sanvel Rubin, poet, coeditor of "Working from Silence," and a member of the Brockport English Department, and the host for today's writers' forum, Peter Marchant."

MARCHANT: "Mr. Isaac Singer, it's a great honor and a privilege to welcome you here to Brockport, first because of your literary reputation, and because of your distinction. I know that you have an honorary PhD twice-over, from the Hebrew Union College and Colgate. And I know that you are a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and that you're a writer of the greatest distinction. But really because of the impact that you have had on Brockport here, the students, the faculty, myself, my wife, my child, and I for one, and I'm sure Stan Rubin, my colleague, will concur, have been much moved and excited by your stories and your lecture. But in your lecture, you seem to deny the very impact that it's had because you say that, "The writer is really an entertainer." You say that, "He cannot push the wheels of history forward, or detain them," as if he really has very little political influence."

SINGER: "I would say that have very political influence does not mean that he's not important. Political influence is only a part of many influences which are important. I don't believe really that a writer can create a revolution or a counter-revolution as the subject critics believe. They are afraid of the writer and they also are eager that the writer should help them. I don't believe he can help much, neither do I believe that he can do much damage. This is as far as politics are concerned. But when it comes to other things, he is of the highest importance. Although, I call him an entertainer, he entertains, not only low spirits, he also entertains high spirits. And to entertain a high spirit, you have to be a lot and to think a lot and to feel a lot and to be a man of importance. In other words, I don't take away really the writer's importance by saying that politically, he's not of the highest importance. Let's leave something to the politicians. In politics, they are the important ones. And let them stay that way."

MARCHANT: "Well what do you mean when you talk of bad writing? You talk of the writer as entertainer first. And you say that, "A bad writer is a bad writer." How do you define it?"

SINGER: "I define this way. A good writer, entertains good people. Or I would say intellectual people. People of high spirit. And a bad writer entertains so called bad people. It means low people. People of little intellect. In other words, the pulp writer to me is still a writer. The only thing is, he works for a lower kind of audience. When we say about a writer that is a great writer, what we mean by this is that he can entertain the best people of his generation. And if you entertain well the best people of your generation, and for some reason, you also entertain the best people of all the other generations. If you are the best today, you will be in a way, the best tomorrow and the day after tomorrow."

RUBIN: "In your lecture, "Old Truths and New Cliches," you also talk in this way, and you speak of art as escape. As escape."

SINGER: "Well, the word "escape" has become almost a bad word on our time. But I don't think there's something bad about this word. We all want to escape one way or another, from the great tragedies of life. And I would say that higher people needed more escape than lower people. And men like Shakespeare needed more escape than perhaps some uneducated person in his household. So, we need escape. We need for a moment to forget. I don't think that killing time is such a terrible thing, because

we all need to kill time. The fact there's so much drugs nowadays, show us how great and how really huge the desire is and the need for some people to kill time to forget themselves for a while. But for a higher person, to forget himself, is very difficult. He must have very good pills. I don't say -- when I call the writer an entertainer, I don't mean by this that's he's only an entertainer. As I said in this speech, he's more than an entertainer. While he entertains, he's also searching for eternal truths. But I don't want the critics to forget that he is an entertainer first of all. That if he does not entertain, all the other qualities are also lost. In other words, if he's a boring writer, he may be deep or profound or think that he's profound, or symbolic, or shymbolic [phonetic], if he does not entertain you, he's nothing as far as writing is concerned."

MARCHANT: "The story of yours that I like best, and that means most to me, is "The Slaughterer." And I really wanted you to read it, one or other of your lectures, and you said, "No. Not everybody feels the way you do, and it's better maybe to read something that's entertaining." And it's true that "The Slaughterer" is a harsh story. And the end of it is bleak and uncompromising and difficult. Do you still think that this is entertainment?"

SINGER: "Yes, because we entertain not only by comedy, but also by tragedy. There's no question about it. If people wouldn't have been entertained by tragedy, tragedies would not have existed. The fact that people went to see Hamlet, shows that we are entertained, also by the tragic. Even simple people are entertained by the tragic. There is this saying of this Yiddish woman, "I enjoyed terribly the play. I cried all the time." It seems that there is some enjoyment also in crying. I would say that if a writer has a story to tell, no matter if -- it's not important so much if it is comedy or tragedy. If you like to hear a good story, and we are not all eager for the happy ending as the people in Hollywood think. There's no tragedy if there is a tragic ending. This story -- I mean, I read it after all the [inaudible]. I didn't want to read it yesterday because I felt that I wanted a shorter story. But I don't think that a tragic story is not entertaining."

MARCHANT: "That's because there are elements of the tragic, the pathetic, in "The Beard.""

SINGER: "Well, thank you very much for all your kindness, for all the good words you said about me. But this is how I feel."

MARCHANT: "Are you -- I'm sure that you've always tried, because you're an artist and you're very professional to write your best. Are you conscious of having written badly? Of having failed? Do you think of some of your work?"

SINGER: "Well, we all fail. And as a matter of fact, if I would have the time and the power, I would rewrite everything I have written. And I think this is true about every genuine writer. We are never 100% satisfied. But from the other side, if a writer would sit all his life and rewrite one story, he might have [inaudible] in this story. There is a time when the writer feels that he has reached more or less the limit of this particular work, and he goes over to another one. Perfection is important, but perfection should not become a mania. If it becomes a mania, it is the very opposite of perfection. Especially one cannot be perfect in a long novel. We sometimes can reach perfection in a short story, because they can make a plan and adjust for it according to the plan. But in a long novel, after you have written the first chapter, you're not any more the boss of this novel. It has already a life of its own. So, because of this, in a way, writing, especially the writing of novels, is connected with certain compromises. But you have to do for the very essence of the work we are doing."

MARCHANT: "Is that what happened with the "The Family Moskat?" That you had a plan carefully worked out and you abandoned it?"

SINGER: "I wouldn't say that abandoned it, but in the process of work, the plan has changed. As life itself changes. Let's say a young man makes up his mind, "I'm going to school. I'm going to do this and then to do that." And then he falls in love and all his plans do change to a degree. But a plan is just the same very necessary. I don't believe that a writer should sit down to write anything without a plan. Just to write what they call a "slice of life." It's good to have a plan, but one has also to be conscious of the fact that the plan is going to be changed in the process of work."

RUBIN: "How do you keep finding new things to write about?"

SINGER: "Well, this is -- it's very hard to answer. I would say that everything which happens to me, or which I read sometimes in the newspaper, or people talk to me, there is always, from everything is to me a potential topic."

MARCHANT: "You mentioned that you have a story bubbling on the stove right now. When did you get the idea? What is the idea? And what are you going to do with it?"

SINGER: "I cannot tell you exactly when I got the idea. I got it only a few days ago. The idea is, I want to write a story about hell. About [inaudible]. And the story will be like this. Since it's known that I [inaudible] to the Jewish tradition, the wicked in hell are not tortured in the Sabbath. They have a rest. So, I want to write a story how the wicked sit there in the Sabbath, among the coals, among the ashes, and they think about it, how to improve the situation in hell. They think that maybe good literature would do it. Maybe sociology. Maybe some psychoanalysis. And they keep on pondering about it, until the Sabbath is finished, and then hell begins again. In a way, it is kind of a symbol, about this happening in this world. We keep on always having ideas and your top [inaudible] and how to improve things, and then the deeds, the facts, the events, come back and destroy all our ideas."

RUBIN: "So, are you saying we shouldn't have any faith in progress?"

SINGER: "No, we should have faith in progress, but we should not be too much disappointed if things don't go according to our plans."

MARCHANT: "When did you get the idea for this story?"

SINGER: "As I told you, only a few days ago. I just -- so, I will tell you what made me think about it. I read Solzhenitsyn's interview or his speech which he was supposed to make, and he said that if we get good literature, this will do away with all lies. And he spoke so as if good literature would create paradise in this world. So, I would say that this -- these sentences, which I thought were kind of childish and naive, made me think about it. Naturally, if a man lives in Russia for so many years and there's always constricted -- I mean they never let them write the way he wants to do, he may feel that if they would let him, he would have paradise. But we, living in a world of freedom, and we have the freedom to write as we want, and we do write as we want, and we see that still, life is full of tragedies and full of misfortunes, understand that good literature would not do away with all the miseries of human life."

RUBIN: "And if that's so, what makes a man like Solzhenitsyn continue to write? You know, what makes a writer suffer for his art?"

SINGER: "Well, we would all continue to write no matter how terrible the situation would be. Once you have this desire, this passion, you will go on doing it. But not every writer has this illusion that his writing is going to redeem the world. As a matter of fact, one has to be very naive nowadays to have this illusion, and I don't even think it would help a lot. It is a lot better for a writer to know his path, his role, in life than to have super illusions which burst like soap bubbles."

MARCHANT: "I have the feeling that you're already to write this story. You're full of enthusiasm about it. You're enjoying the idea. You can't wait till you get writing it. When, under what conditions, do you find yourself ready to write a story?"

SINGER: "Yes, I said a few days ago at a lecture, and I said it to other audiences that I need three conditions to write a story. The first condition is, I must have a yarn [assumed spelling] or a plot, call it as you like. In other words, I don't believe that one can sit down and write a story without having any plan, as I said before. This is the first condition. The second condition is, I must have a passion to write this particular story. Sometimes I have a yarn [assumed spelling], but I don't have the passion. So, if I don't have the passion, this means that the story will not succeed. But then there is a third condition, which I consider the most important condition, and this is, I must have the conviction, or at least the illusion, that I am the only person who can write this particular story. If I think that some other writer might have been able to write it, I wouldn't write it. In other words, it has to be my story. If I have these three conditions, I will sit down and write, and I will not worry if it has a positive message, or a negative message, or no message whatsoever. Let the critics, the professors, or the readers find out what the message is, if there is any. For me, these three conditions are enough to write a story."

MARCHANT: "By yarn, I take it you mean essentially the plot. A good story, which will entertain, no matter what else you might put into it."

SINGER: "Not only entertain. A story where the reader will not know at the beginning what the end will be. There should be some suspense. If there's no suspense, there's no story. In other words, I would say that all the good stories, all the good novels of all the best writers, always had an element of suspense in them. When you read the story of Joseph in the Bible, if you read it for the first time, you want to know what will happen. And even if you read it the tenth time, you are still -- there are still some suspense left. But a writer who writes so, that you don't -- you are not eager to know what will happen later, where you know already at the very beginning, everything, I would say that he really has no story, although he imagines so. Because of this, I don't think much about all this symbolism because a good story has a symbol anyhow, but if you heap one symbol on the other, and there's only symbolism, it's worth nothing. As a matter of fact, one symbol I would say neutralizes the author so that too many are almost like nothing."

MARCHANT: "Well, the second condition of passion, is that involuntary for you?"

SINGER: "Naturally. You cannot say I want to have a passion. A passion you must have -- either you have it or you don't have it. You cannot order yourself to have a passion for something."

MARCHANT: "Is there a degree of mystery in the source of the passion for you? That you have a good yarn, but you're not ready to write it?"

SINGER: "Well, there is a -- yes, there is a mystery about it, but if you analyze it, you may find the reason. Also, why there is a lack of passion. Sometimes I find myself -- let's say I have a yarn and I think,

"This is going to be a good story." And then, but for some reason, I have no desire to write the story. So, I don't investigate why the reason for the passion, because not every passion has a reason. But once in a while, I get an idea why I really didn't have a passion, because it wasn't my story or some other reason. There always is -- I would say that there is a reason even behind the passions, but we don't have to know them. It's not necessary to know them."

MARCHANT: "And the third condition—"

SINGER: "In other words, if you are in love with a woman, you don't have really to analyze why you love her. If you love her, this is enough."

MARCHANT: "The third condition, that you are the only writer that can write this, you said yesterday when we were talking, that you've limited yourself to writing about Poland, Polish Jews, and Polish Jewish immigrants. And you said that you can't even write about Russian Jewish immigrants. You can only write about Polish Jewish immigrants. And you said that you had limited yourself, but that it had done you no harm. Could you explain that?"

SINGER: "Well, I explain it. I think that a writer should write about the things and about the people he knows best. And I know best the Polish people, the Polish Jewish people. Also, some Polish non-Jewish people. And even when it comes to Poland, I know best the Jewish people of a certain part of the country. In other words, I will write about Warsaw, but you have -- you will never find a story of mine which takes place in Vilna. Although, Vilna is also Poland, because I know only my region. And I would say that many writers constricted themselves to only to their neighborhood to their corner of the land, and they lost nothing by it because if you write about half a million people or hundred thousand or 150, you have enough to write about. It's only bad writers who would go, let's say to Spain, for four weeks and come back with a novel about Spain. I hope it did not do me any damage. As a matter of fact, it would do me a lot of damage if I would try to write about people whom I don't know best. I leave to the writers who know the Russian Jews best. Let them write about them."

RUBIN: "From the first -- from your first novel to your most recent novel, your work does carry -- cover quite a range, just in terms of writing about Polish Jewish folklore, or writing about the fate of immigrants in America. What do you see as the overall concerns that you're passionate?"

SINGER: "Well, I will say I wrote about people in the 20th Century, in the 19th Century, and the 17th Century. I don't think that I've ever written about anybody in the 18th Century or -- I have a feeling, I don't know why, I got a feeling about the 17th Century, which I don't have about the 18th, because the 18th is a century of rationalism. And I'm not too hot about rationalism. I like mysticism better. The 20th Century I know because I lived in it. It is true I covered quite a number of events and -- but I would say, I still want to do more. This passion is in me. I never lose this passion to find more and more topics and more ways of expressing the people whom I know or whom I think I know."

RUBIN: "Is there some similarity in your eyes in the passion, in your early work, as opposed to what you're doing now? I mean is it the same passion?"

SINGER: "I would say that the passion is the same. Yes, there's no question about it. The creative passion is something which a person is almost born, and it continues all his life. While it takes different kind of forms, but the passion itself, is the same. I had the same passion even before I learned how to write. I was sitting in the heyda where I was learning how to read and I boasted to the children, that I'm

writing a book. I remember it like today. And they said, "You're writing a book, but you don't know how to write?" I said, "I do know. I do and I only play that I don't know." I said all kinds of nonsense. But I remember that the desire was already there in me."

RUBIN: "Would you like to say something about your earliest writing? How you first--?"

SINGER: "Yes, my first -- I began -- when I was about 12-years old, I read a translation, a Yiddish translation of Sherlock -- a book of Sherlock Holmes. And I became very hot about it and I began to imitate Conan Doyle and write about a detective. You know, how he's following a criminal. After a while, I felt that it's not -- I cannot do it. But I tried. And I would say that for a number of years, whenever I read a book and I liked it, I immediately tried to imitate the author. It took its own time until I realized that imitation is the very opposite of creativity."

SINGER: "You were speaking yesterday about your first experience of being encouraged at your writing, at getting a first response. How important is the response of a reader?"

SINGER: "Well, it is important. For a young writer, if he -- even today, I'm already an old writer, but still, if I hear good words, they always encourage me. I'm always grateful. It does a lot to the writer. However, I know that there were writers who were discouraged all their lives, had this misfortune, and they kept on doing great things. In other words, it's important, it's good, but a real writer will write even if he is discouraged. We know for example how such an artist like Van Gogh was discouraged all his life. And then folk that was discouraged and others. In my case, I was both encouraged and discouraged. I took it all like a man."

RUBIN: "What do you think is the audience today for Yiddish literature?"

SINGER: "Well, the audience is very small and it -- to my chagrin, I must say that it will become smaller. But just the same, I don't think that Yiddish will be forgotten. I once said that the Jewish people suffer from all kinds of sicknesses, but amnesia is not one of them. They never forget. I also said once that a hundred years from now, there will be in the world at least 100 billion people, and every one of them will need a topic for a PhD. And you can't imagine what they will do to Yiddish in this time. They will bring out every book, good or bad, every manuscript they can find, and write dissertations about it. So, there's no danger that Yiddish will be really forgotten."

RUBIN: "I know you were recently in Israel. Do you feel that modern Hebrew literature is picking up some of the cultural purposes?"

SINGER: "No, I will tell you. Modern Hebrew literature, does not do in the direction of the Yiddish, because they try to be very much secular writers. You know this. They try to -- they are creative there a secular kind of life. And because of this, they write a lot about war and about the similarity between Yiddish literature and the Hebrew is smaller today than it was 50 years ago, because 50 years ago, they brought the Yiddish and the Hebrew writers who wrote about the Jewish life in the old country, it was only a difference of language. But today, it's a difference of point of view altogether. Here, we are -- we Yiddish writers are still old-fashioned people. We write about religion and about prayer, while they are very modern and try to be very modern. Super modern. Because of this, there is quite a distance between us. There is not a distance between the [inaudible] let's say, and [inaudible], or parents, but there's a great distance between a modern Hebrew writer and a Yiddish writer. Also, the Yiddish writers as a rule are older than the Hebrew writers. We are all old people, while they are young. They were

brought up already in the last 30 years, and they have a different point of view altogether, although they use the ancient Hebrew language.”

MARCHANT: “You talk in English to us, and you talk in English to your wife, but you say that you dream in Yiddish, and you always write in Yiddish first, and then you do your own translation. Is this always so?”

SINGER: “Yes, it is always so, because I have the conviction that I know Yiddish better than English. And there's no reason why I shouldn't write in the language which I know best. Just as I won't write about the people I know best, I feel that I should write in the language which I know best. After I have written it in Yiddish, I translate it myself, sometimes together with a collaborator, into English. But I want to tell you that I'm doing lately all my editing in English already, because I have lived in the United States even longer than in Poland, and the people of this country and the language of this country have become a part of me. I have already deep roots in the United States. It took me a long time, at least 35 years, but I'm happy to say that I have already roots here. And I consider English, I would say not only my second language, but my second original language. It has become a part of me.”

MARCHANT: “So, the lecture, “Old Truths and New Cliches,” you thought it out in Yiddish first, and then you wrote it in English.”

SINGER: “No, I began to write it, the Yiddish, I wrote notes. And then I wrote it in English. When it comes to writing an essay or a review, I can do it even in English, but I always need an editor because I'm never sure of my English.”

MARCHANT: “Well, that's interests me because as I read that lecture, it seems to me like beautiful, formal English, and impeccable. But it seems to me that what you're saying, there is an organic connection between the people you write about, who are the people you know best, who are Polish Jews who speak Yiddish. In fact, to be more particular, Warsaw Jews who speak Yiddish, or Polish Jews –

SINGER: “From a certain kind of -- yes.”

MARCHANT: “And the language is the language of those people about whom you write?”

SINGER: “Exactly, exactly. When I write, let's say dialogue, so they sense my hero speaking Yiddish, why should I write about them in English? I let them speak in Yiddish. But then when it comes to editing and to really to find style and to really convert, I do a lot of work in English.”

RUBIN: “Dialogue seems to come very easily to you.”

SINGER: “It is true. Dialogue comes easily to me because I see -- I hear my hero speak.”

RUBIN: “You say that the writer has to be very careful to avoid cliches, and generalizations. Does that get harder with each book, or is it harder today when there are more books published?”

SINGER: “No. It becomes harder -- I wouldn't say it becomes -- it's harder to me, but generally, it becomes harder because so many things have been already said that whenever you say something, there's always the danger that you are repeating somewhat. The only remedy against this is to tell a story, because a story is never the same. Even if it looks the same, there is some individuality in it. In other words, if you express ideas, there's a great danger or almost a great [inaudible] danger, that

you're expressing something which has already been expressed. But if you tell a story, what happened -- which happened to your life which you know exactly, there are all the chances are that this is a unique story. It never happened to someone else, and if it happened, it didn't happen the way it happened to you."

RUBIN: "You believe that people will never lose their ability to be interested in gossip. In one another's—"

SINGER: "I don't call it gossip. I think storytelling is a great necessity, because we have been given the gift of language. And there is a great desire -- to me, the desire to talk is almost as great as the desire for sex. And in some cases, it's even stronger. I have known women for whom the desire to talk was a lot stronger than the desire to copulate. It's a real passion. And the writer talks in his own way, with a pen. But it's all talk. And don't call it gossip. Gossip is only when we malign people, but if you tell stories, we're not gossiping. We are expressing really the very essence of life."

MARCHANT: "Yesterday, John Abbotton [phonetic], our chairman, said that when he first read you, he had no idea whom you were. He got very excited and he found that here was somebody who was writing like the Great Russians. And he told you that, and you seemed to be very pleased."

SINGER: "Oh, I was delighted to hear it."

MARCHANT: "Have you been influenced by the Great Russians?"

SINGER: "Well, a writer once asked me, how was I influenced by the Russians? And I said, when I read Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and Gogol, I said to myself, "What they did for their people, in their language, I would like to do for my people in my language." So far, I was influenced. Naturally, I admire highly Tolstoy and Gogol, and I admire their construction. Whatever influence there was, I'm not ready to deny it because we are influenced by everything. As far as I'm concerned, when I sit here and I talk to you, I'm influenced by the very fact that I'm sitting here. One day, you may become a hero of my story, or I may become a hero of your story. We are influenced by everything. And it's not -- it's bad to be an imitator, but it's not bad to be influenced, because influence is the very essence of living."

RUBIN: "If I can shift the ground just a bit? In your most recent novel, "Enemies: A Love Story," just published this year, there's a moment where Hermann goes to the -- your central character, goes to the Bronx Zoo. And you say, "Hermann often compared the zoo to a concentration camp," and compares -- then he goes into a comparison of the fate of the Jews in America. That is, you stay isolated and bored, to the fate of the animals in the zoo. What has been the fate of the Jews in America?"

SINGER: "I didn't say about the Jews of America. I would say the Jews in exile all over. Because many Jewish people somehow, still have this feeling that they belong to the land of Israel. It is in us, the very fact that after 2,000 years of exile, we decided to go back means that we never made peace with this idea that we have been driven out of this country forever. And naturally, especially such Jews who spoke Yiddish, they went over to another language. They lived in one way of life. Fear in exile, not -- it's not the fault of the American government. We are treated very well here. And we are grateful, and we love this country. But just the same, many of us feel that somehow, we are strangers everywhere. But when I go to Israel, I convince myself that I'm a stranger even in Israel. That being a stranger is almost the very feeling of every human being. We are nowhere at home. This is the truth altogether. But with the Jews, I would say there are a number of Jews who feel more at home in Israel than any other place."

MARCHANT: "But this is not true of you?"

SINGER: "Huh?"

SINGER: "It's not true of you?"

SINGER: "Yes, I feel at home in Israel, but I also feel -- feel very much at home in New York, you know? I've lived here 37 years. And I learned more or less the language. I know the people. The truth is so, that when I'm here, I miss Israel. When I go to Israel, I immediately begin to miss New York. Strange as it seems to you."

RUBIN: "The characters in your novels seem to have a greater relationship sometimes to a sense of history, or historical force than they do to any particular conception of God."

SINGER: "For the Jews, the history of God is almost -- they're almost identical because our history is, if you would ask me, "What is the history of the Jews?" I would say the history is the belief that God will redeem them. In other words, their history is a religious kind of history. And naturally, we did business and we suffered, but religion was behind it. And when the Jews leave their religion, they are uprooted. Their roots are already cut to a very high degree. In my case, I am a religious man. I still believe in God and I still pray to God. I once said that whenever I am in trouble, I pray. And since I'm always in trouble, I pray all the time. Just the same, I'm not a man of dogma. I don't attend the synagogue all the time and I don't do everything, which is written in the [foreign name], but I could not live without this feeling that there is a God in heaven, and there is providence, and there is someone whom you can address in a time of distress."

RUBIN: "Do you think it's possible for a Jewish writer to be an American writer, without being a Jewish writer? In other words, do you think it's necessary for any Jewish writer to come to terms with Jewish history?"

SINGER: "I don't think it's necessary, but I wouldn't call them a Jewish writer. I would call them an American writer who is a Jew. I would not call, let's say, Edna -- what was her name? Edna... a Jewish writer who wrote—"

MARCHANT: "Ferber."

SINGER: "Edna Ferber. I would not call her a Jewish writer, but I would call her an American writer who happened to be a Jew. But a man like Ludwig Lewisohn, was already a Jewish writer. So, it depends on the person."

RUBIN: "You know, I'm thinking of a character like the fate of Israel in "The Manor.""

SINGER: "Yes."

RUBIN: "And he's starts out being very positivistic and wanting to become as intellectual and European as possible, and by the end of the second novel, he's -- his fate is in Israel. He's been one of those converted."

SINGER: "Not the Israel, actually. His fate is in Jewishness. He goes to visit Palestine which as it was called then. He goes not -- and really like a Zionist but he ends like a real Jew. And since he's a real Jew, he's connected to Israel just the same as we all are."

MARCHANT: "But though you've limited yourself to really a very small group of people, in all your stories that I've read, I have the feeling not that you are writing about Jews, so much as people who happen to be Jewish."

SINGER: "Exactly."

MARCHANT: "Just the people, and then—"

SINGER: "Exactly. I don't -- when I tell a story, this is not a story about a person who is Jewish or -- his Jewishness is a part of his life. And since I know Jews best, I write about Jews. If I would know the French best, I would write about the French. But in this life, I'm not going to know the French best, so I write about Jewish people. In other words, if a writer wants to be universal, he should know very well his heroes. He should know them totally and write about them, and then he becomes universal."

MARCHANT: "So, you don't really move from the generalization to the particular. You move from the specific people that you have known."

SINGER: "Yes."

MARCHANT: "And a specific predicament."

SINGER: "Yes."

MARCHANT: "And you move from there, outwards, towards such universal truth as you can contemplate."

SINGER: "Because just as different as people are, they also have much in common. So, if you really describe a human being well, you describe humanity. If you describe well a Jew, you describe at the same time, the whole of humanity. If you describe well a Russian, you do the same thing. In other words, let's say take a writer like Gogol. He only wrote about the Ukrainian people, but still, he's a universal writer. We all study Gogol. We admire him. Because in his Ukrainians, since they are genuine, we recognize our self. And this is true also about [foreign name] and about all real writers. If a writer sits down to write a universal novel, it will be -- it won't be universal. It will be only a bad novel."

MARCHANT: "So, I believe, but then, if a writer begins with a very specific, his friends and relatives and enemies and particular people he's known, and he doesn't have a very strong faith maybe, of a very specific sort, how does he avoid triviality and banality? How do you contemplate the eternal truth by studying your relatives and friends and enemies?"

SINGER: "I will tell you. Originality is not something which you can plan. You can plan a novel, but you cannot plan originality. As a matter of fact, if you sit down to write a story, and you say to yourself, "I'm going to write an original story," there are good chances that it won't be a story. It won't be original. I would say that an original man writes original stories, writes original books. If a man is a banal man, he may try his best, the banality will be there. I never try to be original at all. I try to tell a story which I think is my story. If it's my story, I hope it's going to be original just the same. In other words, it's nothing -- it is the great tragedy of modern literature that writers sit down with the idea to be original. They give their novels the most bizarre names and they think that by this, they become original. Tolstoy did not try to be original. He begins *Anna Karenina* almost with a banal kind of statement. But since he was an

original man, the whole production is original. But people who try very hard, and make all kinds of tricks to be original, the banality looks behind them because they are banal people.”

MARCHANT: “Must a writer to be good, have some sort of faith? Must he believe in a moral order?”

SINGER: “I wouldn't say that he must, but if -- I would say that if he does not believe in God, if he believes that that the universe is an accident and we are an accident and there's no really -- no morality and no duties, that such a writer will not succeed really to become what you called before, universal. Some of the great writers of all times, were religious people, even though they were against the dogma, even though they were excommunicated by the people of their faith. But religion was in them. There's much of religion in Dostoevsky and in Tolstoy, although the church excommunicated Tolstoy. You find even a religious passion in a man like Shakespeare, although less than in Tolstoy. I would say that there isn't such a thing as a real artist, without a feeling that he is only a small part of something greater. If he is the very essence of being, he's a small man. It's the small who think only about themselves. A great man knows that he's a small -- a very, very small part of something very great and unknown. It's only this which gives to a person the real creative passion.”

RUBIN: “In speaking of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and this stature of writer, how many such writers can we have among us today? There's so much published today.”

SINGER: “Well, naturally, we cannot demand that every writer should be a Tolstoy or a Dostoevsky. It wouldn't even be good. I just mention them because these are the people whom we can take as a model, as an example. Time does -- takes care of mediocracy. After a while, it is forgotten. It also takes care of pretentious mediocracy. You know, the writer who is mediocre but he tries to make people believe that he's great by trying to be highly original [inaudible] some crazy things. And to be highly symbolic, playing a game. But time is like a bomb. It cleans up all this, and this is the wonderful thing about time.”

MARCHANT: “But there is a place for the innovator, and the experimenter. There's a place for the Joyce and the Kafka.”

SINGER: “I said yesterday to the audience, I admire both Joyce and Kafka, but it's good that there was only one Joyce and one Kafka, in this generation. If you would have an army of Joyces, an army of Kafkas, they will destroy literature, because these are unique kind of writers. They experimented and they achieved, but if one tries to become a second Kafka, he's already nothing, while if a man tries to imitate Tolstoy, he can still be -- he won't become a Tolstoy but he may be a writer. But an imitator of Kafka and of Joyce, becomes nothing. Because these are the kind of writers who are -- who should remain just single in their generation. The truth is that Kafka did not believe that he succeeded completely. This is the reason he asked Brod to destroy his works. The same thing is true about Joyce. They were not completely happy with what they have done, but they are to us examples of people who dared to experiment. But many Joyces and many Kafkas would create really a nightmare.”

RUBIN: “And you're fundamentally optimistic about the future of art, in spite of the difficulties—”

SINGER: “To a degree.”

RUBIN: “Are you as optimistic about, to the same degree, about the future of man? And will there be readers for these talents?”

SINGER: "I'm not optimistic completely and neither am I pessimistic. Since I don't know the purpose of our being here, I don't know why we are here, I don't really if things are bad or good. They may look bad to us, but the Almighty may be very satisfied. It may be that everything happens according to plan. We don't know. Since I believe in God and I believe in a higher order, I believe that nothing really happens without his will and his order. So, I may be pessimistic. I may say that we will never be happy. I don't believe in utopias. I don't believe that socialism will redeem humanity or any other -ism. At the same time, I feel that we may -- that there is sense in our being here, that we are not just an accident. And this is a way, my kind of optimism."

MARCHANT: "Is it enough for a writer to be searching for a moral order, even if he never finds it?"

SINGER: "Well, we never find anything. No philosopher has ever found anything. Oh, I would say that serving God means actually searching for God. The only thing is that I don't believe that a writer can be an immoral man, or an unmoral man. Naturally, great writers have done also evil things. I mean, they -- we're only human. But the moral fire burned in every writer. If a writer will tell me that human life is not dear to him, that killing a human being does not shock him, and that he believes in lying and in betraying, I would say this man is not a writer. He's not an artist. To me, he's not even a man. He's only a caricature of a man."

RUBIN: "Do you think -- is there too much writing and publishing of all kinds today? Are there too many novelists? Are there too many critics?"

SINGER: "Well, there's too many, too much of everything, but this is freedom. This is capitalism. You know, we produce a lot and we try. Naturally, we could live -- if there would be only Coca-Cola, we could live -- we don't need Pepsi Cola. But since there is Pepsi Cola, and other colas, there is variety. The same thing is with writing. We don't need so many writers, but who are we to tell a writer, "Don't write," or to tell a publisher, "Don't publish"? It's -- We are writing for our existence and for our production."

MARCHANT: "From the response of the audiences to your stories you're reading aloud, I see that your audiences love for you to read stories to them. They love to listen. And this -- you seem to enjoy reading to them as much as they enjoy listening."

SINGER: "It is true. When I read a story to people, and they enjoy it, it's for me a great joy because here I am direct with my readers, and I can see their reaction. And especially, it's for me a kind of surprise since English is not really my language. Still, I read to them in English, and they understand me. I'm surprised that they can understand my accent. So, I like to lecture and to read stories. I like to meet people because every human being to me is a treasure of individuality."

RUBIN: "We're nearly at the end of this time, is there something you would say to the young writers or young students who will be watching this tape?"

SINGER: "I would say to the young writers and young students, be yourself. Don't try to imitate anybody. Tell the story which you know best, in the language which you know best, and try your best. Don't think about authors and about recipes of critics while you sit down to write. Have a story to tell. Be convinced that it's your story, and tell it. If you have the talent, you will succeed. If you don't succeed, it's too bad. You may succeed in a different field."

MARCHANT: “Mr. Singer, thank you very much. I've thoroughly enjoyed talking with you, and you've given me lots of ideas. Your enthusiasm and vitality are contagious. And Stan, thank you very much for joining with me.”

RUBIN: “It's been a pleasure.”

SINGER: “It was a great pleasure talking to both of you.”

[Music]