

Joseph Sherman: Scholar in Yiddish Studies and in English Literature, Teacher and
Thespian, Conversationalist

Joseph Sherman was a man who loved literature and who devoted his life to it. His great passion was for Yiddish. From early on he developed an abiding interest in the value of Yiddish literature, in its fate as a minority language always under pressure from multiple dominant cultures often hostile to it, and in the importance, at least in translation, of preserving its great treasures. But his interests always extended, sometimes surprisingly, beyond this special chosen domain. He was moreover an extraordinarily gifted and witty lecturer, teacher and conversationalist. His often dramatic flair and brilliant sense of humour made an unforgettable impact on many generations of students, colleagues and personal friends.

Joseph Sherman was born in South Africa on 15 March 1944 and grew up in indigent and difficult circumstances about which he never uttered a word of complaint. He was educated at King David School in Johannesburg and at the University of the Witwatersrand, from which he received an MA, for his study of the plays of Christopher Marlowe, and a PhD, for his work on the novels of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Although he later lost what proved to be a youthful enthusiasm for the work of T S Eliot, he remained a lifelong admirer of the plays of Anton Chekhov and the works of Charles Dickens – in his younger years offering, with great success, performed readings of extracts from the author's novels. Himself an actor of considerable skill and power, in the first two decades of his professional life, as an adjudicator in amateur repertory theatre, and as himself a director of plays, amongst others by Lorca, Chekhov and T S Eliot, he played an active role in the advancement of theatre for young people.

A born educator, at both secondary and tertiary level, he began his professional life as a Senior Teacher of English at King Edward VII High School Johannesburg in 1966, leaving it in 1975 to take up a position as Vice Principal of Kind David High School in Victory Park where he worked until 1979. His reputation as a teacher was truly legendary as legions of ex students continue to testify. In 1980 he joined the English Department of

the University of the Witwatersrand becoming eventually in 1996, Associate Professor. The catholicity of his taste is reflected in the appearance of *Contrasts in Drama* (1975), a collection of twentieth-century one act plays, a monograph on *Hamlet* (1980), *Waters Out of the Well: Essays in Jewish Studies* (1988), his edition of *Oudtshoorn: Jerusalem of Africa* by Leible Feldman (1989) and another monograph, *Reading Poetry* (1991). In 2002 he was appointed Woolf Corob Fellow in Yiddish Studies at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University of Oxford, and in 2005, University Research Lecturer at the University of Oxford.

From A Land Far Off: A Selection of South African Yiddish Stories in English Translation published in 1987 importantly shows that, as Dan Jacobson puts it in his foreword to the volume, 'a distinctly South African genre of stories in the Yiddish language...began to emerge at a very early stage of the period of mass migration from Eastern Europe' and provided a wealth of information for later historical and sociological studies of the period. Joseph Sherman's own introduction to the volume anticipates many of his later concerns, the steady vulnerability and evisceration of Yiddish in the face of contingency and local conditions, its supercession in Israel in favour of Hebrew, the impact of Russian socialism as well as the practices of communism upon Yiddish writers, the riches of the language itself, the need to preserve at least in translation something of its peculiar vitalities and richness.

In 1983 Joseph Sherman made a trip to Miami to interview Isaac Bashevis Singer. His particular gifts as a translator subsequently bore important fruit with the publication in 1998 of his translation of Singer's *Shadows on the Hudson*, hailed as a significant event in Singer studies and as a dark masterpiece. His translation of David Bergelson's *Descent* appeared in 1999 and in December 2002 the Modern Language Association of America awarded him the Fenia and Yaakov Leviant Memorial Prize for Yiddish Translation.

His continuing and profound engagement with the Yiddish language is evident in *The Jewish Pope: Myth, Diaspora and Yiddish Literature* published in 2003. In it he examines the treatment of the Jewish Pope myth in five stories, four of them Yiddish and one English, published between 1602 and 1958. He explores ways in which the myth is used as means to establish a counter-identity against dominant cultures. The book focuses

on the effects of endemic European anti-Semitism on Jewish self-evaluation and self-recognition. But in the course of his analysis Sherman hones in too, inevitably on the matter of the use of Yiddish itself. He asseverates that with regard to 'Diaspora Jews' abiding dread of assimilation and its oblitative consequences for continued Jewish existence, it is the fact that this fear was most effectively expressed through the medium of Yiddish, the pre-eminent discourse of a subaltern people' (165) that is most significant. The 'uncertain, underdetermined nature of the Yiddish language...best articulates the still, small voice of Jewish resignation and Jewish hope.' (166) *The Jewish Pope* received high praise as 'truly insightful, meticulously researched, and masterfully argued,' hailed as 'an important contribution to Jewish literary and cultural studies'.

Joseph Sherman's collection of essays *David Bergelson: From Modernism to Socialist Realism* which he edited together with Gennady Estraiikh, published in 2007 was, again, hailed as a groundbreaking contribution, this time redressing impressions of Bergelson as a writer completely under the sway of dominant communist ideology. Sherman's introductory biography in the volume, which he himself described as a labour of love, reveals the rich complexity of Bergelson's writing the difficulty of his Yiddish notwithstanding.

Throughout his career Joseph Sherman's skills as a lecturer were frequently courted. He was invited to lecture repeatedly within Britain and the United States. He was also invited to lecture in Germany, Sweden, Belgium, Holland, Lithuania, Israel and Australia. In conversation he was an often unforgettably witty raconteur. A rich vein of principled wit and quickness informed his observations: never slow to state his opinions he did so often with a breathtaking sharpness of tongue. But this was allied, paradoxically, to a mischievous warmth and compassion. A fine sensitivity, and a good man, he lived a life of dedication and courage, often in the face of adversity, never without humour, and always in the company of his beloved wife. His was an ongoing meditation on the human struggle for decent survival, in the writers he always loved, in the complexities of Jewish culture, in the Yiddish language and the significance of its literature.

5 March 1944 – 20 March 2009.