

YIDDISH BOOK CENTER
2019 Great Jewish Books Book Club Video Conference
Warsaw Stories by H.D. Nomberg
with Daniel Kennedy
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JESSICA PARKER: Hi, everyone, it's seven o'clock Eastern, so we're going to get going now. Welcome to our final video conference of the 2019 Book Club. I'm so glad you're all joining us this evening.

I'm Jessica Parker, the coordinator for the Great Jewish Books Book Club. In just a moment, I'm going to introduce our featured guest, translator Daniel Kennedy. But first, I want to tell you about the structure for this evening. All participants will be muted to prevent excessive background noise. Daniel will start with a fifteen-minute introduction, and then we'll open it up to questions for about forty minutes. You can ask him questions by typing in the chat box. To access the chat box, hover over the bottom of your Zoom window. You should see a speech bubble with "chat" written underneath it. Click on that speech bubble to open the chat window. You'll be able to send messages privately to individuals, or to everyone. Please address your questions to everyone, not just to Daniel—it's helpful for me, and the rest of the group, to be able to see them. Daniel will be repeating the questions for our members who will be watching the video recording after the fact and won't have access to the chat box.

I will be posting the video recording to Vimeo and sharing the link with you all as soon as possible. Rest assured that no one's video, other than mine and Daniel's, will be part of the recording. So, feel free to have your webcam on if you choose to do so!

In addition, we have live captioning for this video conference. If you would like to see the closed captions, hover over the bottom of your Zoom window. You should see an icon that says "CC." To turn them on, click on that "CC" icon. To turn them off, click on that "CC" icon again. There is a 4-5 second lag time for the captions as a result of the software integration and the fact that it's being live captioned. Thank you to our captioner, Christine!

And, if you're having a technical difficulty, please send a private chat message to me at "Jessica Parker," email me at bookclub@yiddishbookcenter.org, or call me at 413-256-4900, ext. 131. I'll be muting myself, so you won't be interrupting the video conference.

So, without further ado, I would like to introduce Daniel Kennedy.

Daniel Kennedy is a literary translator based in France. He is a real trooper as it's 2:00 a.m. there currently. He is a two-time translation fellow at the Yiddish Book Center, and managing editor for translations at *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*. His second translation, *A Death: Notes of a Suicide*, by Zalman Shneour is forthcoming from Wakefield Press.

Thank you, Daniel. So excited to have you with us. Take it away.

DANIEL KENNEDY: Good evening. Okay. Thank you. Thanks, everyone, for coming and for having me.

To begin, I'm just going to give you a brief outline of the author's biography, which I think gives some context for some of the recurring preoccupations and themes in the stories that you've been reading.

So, Hersh Dovid Nomberg was born in 1876 in Mszczonów, in Poland. I'm going to be using the Yiddish name, Ashminov, for it from now on because it's much more easy to pronounce. This was a market town about thirty miles from Warsaw. He grew up in a strictly religious, Hasidic environment. His father died young. He was raised mostly by his maternal grandfather. His maternal grandfather. As a child, Nomberg contracted tuberculosis and was sent to recover in a sanatorium in Otwock, fourteen miles south of Warsaw. He survived but would suffer from chronic health problems for most of his life. He showed promise as a scholar and was sent to yeshiva in Radomsk where he excelled, gaining a reputation as a Talmudic prodigy. This was something with much prestige in the community and it helped him to get an arranged marriage to the daughter of a local merchant. So, by eighteen he was married before he had even finished yeshiva. So, this was followed by three years of room and board, courtesy of the new in-laws. He had two sons at this stage, Moyshe and Eliezer. His father-in-law rented a house and premises in the center of town and set up a food shop for him and his wife. Nomberg didn't take to this new lifestyle very well; i.e., he wasn't very good at running a business or working for a living. By all accounts he was a terrible shopkeeper and soon the store became a place where his friends would hang out and play cards all day long.

It was around this time that Nomberg abandoned his religious studies and began experimenting with forbidden literature. So Haskalah texts—the Jewish enlightenment—secular writing in modern Hebrew, mostly. This acted as a gateway drug leading on to Hebrew poetry and eventually literature in non-Jewish languages—Russian and German mostly—philosophy, Spinoza, Dostoyevsky, Schopenhauer, and all of these things. When his father-in-law found out what was happening, he was enraged, and he closed down the shop. So, Nomberg had to find a new way of making a living. He went to Warsaw to find work.

His first port of call was at the great Isaac Leybush Peretz, the most famous Yiddish writer of the time, whose poetry had left a deep impression on Nomberg. Peretz did what he always did whenever aspiring young writers came to visit him from the provinces: he praised Nomberg's poems, welcomed him into his literary circle, and advised him to try writing in Yiddish instead. But Nomberg's attempts to find a job were unsuccessful and he returned to Radomsk emptyhanded.

He began writing poems and stories in Hebrew which were soon being published in newspapers and things with his father-in-law continued to deteriorate until eventually he was forced to grant a divorce and he had to leave, leaving behind his three sons. He had three sons at this stage, a third son having been born in the meantime.

So, at the age of twenty-one years old, now an aspiring Jewish writer, Nomberg returns to the big city to seek his fortune with nothing but a bundle of Hebrew poems in his pocket. This is Warsaw in 1897. The city was in the middle of a period of intense growth with a constant flow of people arriving from the provinces in search of work. It was a city of multi-storied buildings, bustling crowded streets, and crisscrossing tram lines. It wasn't long

before Nomberg began publishing short stories, poems, translations, articles and literary criticism in both Hebrew and in Yiddish for various newspapers at quite a prolific rate. He also found a day job working as a superintendent in a residential building. And one of the perks of this was that he had a quite spacious apartment where he could live, which he shared with other young writers. An early pair of roommates, were, for example, Sholem Asch and Zalman Reizen; later on Lamed Shapiro lived there at another stage.

So, in all, Nomberg only wrote about fifty short stories in his whole career ranging from fully fleshed out narratives to short atmospheric sketches and creepy fairy tales. The stories in the collection you're reading at the moment were all written in the first decade of the 20th century and are linked not just by common setting, the city of Warsaw, but also by common themes and conflicts. They explore the tensions between the secular and the religious, between the forces of identity and assimilation, between characters who were educated and those who were uneducated, between those who were down on their luck and those who were utterly hopeless. The tone ranges from humor to horror, from the poignant to the satirical.

So, aside from short stories, Nomberg wrote extensively for the press, a domain in which he was significantly more prolific, and which proved much more lucrative. His travel writing, particularly, from North and South America, Palestine and the Soviet Union, was very popular. He had a short-lived career as a politician, but a lifelong involvement in Yiddish cultural work. He served in the Sejm—the Polish parliament—on the ticket of the *Folkspartay*, a party dedicated to safeguarding secular Jewish cultural autonomy within the new Polish republic. But much more productively, he was involved in founding, for example -- he was one of the early founders of the Union of Jewish Writers and Journalists which became the new center for Jewish literary life in the city, if not the world. He was also involved in the newly established Yiddish language secular school system and as one of the participants in the Czernowitz language conference in 1908.

In those days, unlike today, translation was also a lucrative side gig for Yiddish writers, and Nomberg was no exception. He translated quite a lot from German, and sometimes from English. He could translate a Gerhardt Hauptmann play over the course of a few afternoons, for example. He also translated at least one Shakespeare play, but, sadly, no copies of it survived, only a few footnotes.

He was always interested in the East and the “Orient.” He translated one of the popular Yiddish versions of *One Thousand and One Nights*, as well as a collection of poetry by Nobel-Prize-winning Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, which he translated from Tagore’s own English version. And he also translated a selection of poems by Hafez, the 14th century Persian poet and mystic which he adapted from the German translations of G.F. Daumer.

So, a few anecdotes about Nomberg. He was a short, thin man, known for having a disproportionately large head and piercing blue eyes. He was ever restless and full of energy, a compulsive socialite always dragging people to cafes late at night and staying out until dawn and sleeping during the day. Despite, or perhaps because of, his chronic poor health, Nomberg was obsessed by the ideas of youth and the aesthetic beauty of physical strength. When his youngest son, Yekhesl, died of tuberculosis at the age of seventeen, Nomberg felt particularly responsible. He blamed himself for not being able to afford the best doctors. And I think perhaps it's one of the reasons why after the First World War he wrote less fiction and concentrated his efforts on more lucrative journalistic work.

In his later years, Nomberg also became a passionate tango dancer. He bought a gramophone for the Yiddish Writers Union and began to organize late night dance parties there. Hang on, I want to show you...there is a caricature that I have to show you if this works. Can you see the screen? I'm just going to show you a couple of other caricatures. [Shows caricatures of writers Sholem Asch, Vaysberg, and Nomberg, from right to left.]

So, here is Nomberg dancing the tango in the Yiddish Writers Union. This is Nomberg here, dancing with a lady. And up here you see all of the other dead Yiddish writers, quite outraged. This is Peretz hanging over the cloud, being pulled back by Sholem Aleichem. And Peretz...the caption, the caption. I don't have the caption, but Peretz is basically saying, "What's going on with Yiddish literature these days?" [Laughter]

Here we see Nomberg with his three sons. This was when he went back, he went back to -- he visited back -- visited Radomsk a few years after he had already been settled in Warsaw. And before the first time he went [inaudible] his first trip to [inaudible] go with him, and that was the last time he visited Radomsk, but he kept in contact with his older sons who later visited him in Warsaw.

Okay, here we have Sholem Asch, Peretz, and Peretz's son. And down here we have Nomberg and the grand. Okay, here he is again. Here he is a little bit later with all of the guys in the Writers Union. I don't know what's happening here. And one last caricature of him which I think looks interesting.

So. Where was I? Right. There's many, many anecdotes you hear about Nomberg. He crops up in all of the biographies and memoirs of all of the major Yiddish writers of the time. So anytime you read a biography of a Yiddish writer, Nomberg is generally there as one of the characters. To his contemporaries he was fondly remembered as an entertaining character, the life and soul of the party, and as a person who helped the younger generation find their feet. But the younger generation started to see him as a strange old man, a figure who would make a fool of himself dancing with other people's wives at the parties.

Warsaw remained his home for the rest of his life but, according to his friends and a fellow writer Froyim Kaganovski, Nomberg was always running away. He never settled at any one address. He moved apartments often and preferred to stay in hotels when he could. He often chose to stay in the non-Jewish side of town. Such as when he lived in one house for -- for example, with a band of circus performers and professional wrestlers.

Whenever he did have a fixed abode, he would use it to store his obsessively collected gadgets which he brought back with from his trips abroad such as cameras, new-fangled shaving devices, and strange toothbrushes. Nomberg developed a taste for good coffee which was something you couldn't find in Warsaw at the time. There's one anecdote that, sometimes, instead of going home after a late night on the town, he'd catch a night train to Berlin and wake up there just in time for breakfast and a cup of coffee. He would then bring back his stockpiles of ground Turkish coffee from Berlin to keep at home.

Towards the end of his life, Nomberg's health deteriorated further, and he had problems walking. This never stopped him from going out. This state continued until one night in 1927—while leaving the Writers Union, he collapsed on the stairs. He was taken to a sanatorium, Otwock, where he died a few weeks or months later. Despite being considered an old man of Yiddish letters, he was only fifty-one at the time.

So, what happened to Nomberg's reputation and where is he now? At the time of his death, Nomberg was a leading figure in the Yiddish literary scene. And during the [19]10s and [19]20s, we started to see some early translations from Yiddish into other European languages. These were mostly taken, not on the account of the perceived literary merits of the works, but as something for curious readers to see and to give them an insight into what was happening in the "ghetto." The "Jewish question" was a popular topic of public discourse at the time.

In English, there was an anthology of Yiddish short stories translated by Helena Frank and published in 1912. As far as I know, this is one of the first serious attempts at introducing Yiddish writers to an English-speaking audience. Nomberg, with his name spelled wrong, was one of the twelve authors presented in this anthology.

[In] 1924, we also have a German translation of “Fliglmán,” a story which was published in one volume together with another story called “*Tsvishn berg*,” “In the Mountains.” This book didn't seem to find its audience in German as there was only one printing of it ever. Nombérg, along with pretty much everyone else at the time, was overshadowed by the stratospheric fame of Sholem Asch, Nombérg's former roommate and friend who was a widely translated literary superstar of the 1930s.

After his death, Nombérg's works continued to be read and printed in Yiddish. For example, the fourth volume of Shmuel Rozhanski's *Musterverk* series, which we have here, was dedicated to him in 1966. This was a series of books meant to represent the literary canon published in Buenos Aires and these were intended to be used in the Yiddish school systems all around the world—in Canada, Australia, Buenos Aires. So, the last generation of Yiddish speakers who were fully educated in Yiddish would have read this in school.

There are also Hebrew versions of many of Nombérg's stories, written by Nombérg himself. Sometimes the Hebrew version was a reworking of the Yiddish story and sometimes the opposite. Sometimes the Yiddish version was a reworking of the Hebrew one. And it's impossible to know which was the original. But I think it's safe to think of both of them as the original.

At any rate, Nombérg wrote a lot more fiction in Yiddish than in Hebrew and his readership in Yiddish was much more consistent and loyal. So apart from a few specialist scholars nowadays, I don't think anyone reads the Hebrew versions of these stories. Other than that, there have been a handful, really a handful, of translations in English and French appearing here and there in anthologies but never as stand-alone books.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first book-length Nombérg translation since 1924.

Okay. That's my introduction. Let's get down to some questions. Questions?

Question: Someone asked me, “Helena Frank?”

That was the name of probably one of the first major translators of Yiddish literature into English. She was an English woman but published in Philadelphia in 1916. She also published a very large collection of Peretz stories. And you can find that book -- find that book anywhere. It's in the public domain, so you can find it on the internet quite easily.

Another question: “Are the stories in this anthology representative of his fiction or were they chosen for a specific theme, style, etc.?”

Both. I would say these are the stories that were famous. He wrote in lots of different styles, quite different, varied styles. And I think these ones are both the most, his most authentic and the most famous. But I did choose them because they were similar so there's different stories which are, like, really bizarre, little, like, abstract fairytales or stuff that's just, you know, a lot more about landscape and doesn't really have any characters in it. And none of those are in this collection. There is some different stuff there.

Let's see. Lots of questions.

Question: Lori mused that she had been thinking that perhaps it was in response to these introspective characters Nombérg writes about that Zionists at the time were responding to -- with a need to go to the Yishuv, to build and to rebuild. Does that resonate? Is there a connection?

I'm not really sure. Nombérg himself was not a Zionist but he was, you know, a big supporter of the Hebrew

language. He did visit pre-state Palestine and wrote about it and was very interested in what was happening there, but it wasn't for him. He was also not a Communist, he was not a Bundist. So, he was very much, politically speaking, he was in the middle. He wasn't a big fan of ideologies, except his own. I don't know much about Hebrew literature, but I know that Brenner, the writer, was similar to Nomberg and had similar characters. Also, David Fogel had similar characters. So, this stuff is going on in Hebrew literature at the same time. And I'm not sure to what extent these were Zionist or anti-Zionist themes.

So many questions. I don't know how I'm going to -- [Laughter]. Let me see.

Question: "It seemed like, for me, every story in the anthology was a variation on the same theme. And from your interview, I gather you feel the same way. Is this typical of Nomberg or is there more of a variety in his fiction?"

There is more of a variety in his fiction, but I'd say these are definitely both the best and the longest of his stories. So, I said there's about fifty stories all together. But most of them are quite short, maybe like 1,000 words long or 2,000 words long. And these stories contain some of the longer stories.

There are other ones which I think are quite similar in theme as well, but are more varied in their settings, so they'd be set in Western Europe, for example, in Switzerland, France, or Germany. I've basically got another twelve, fifteen stories already translated, but trying to find a place to publish them.

Question: How autobiographical are the stories?

I would say they're quite autobiographical. The yeshiva student -- exactly, he's always talking about yeshiva students. All of his characters were at yeshiva. And some of his other earlier stories are set in the shtetl, so they're also very, very autobiographical. I find lots of the themes—none of the details—but I'd say most of the themes are autobiographical.

And he's also worried -- there's always wives left back at home or sons or there's family back at home. There's a disconnect between the characters in the city and their relatives at home or just trying to go home for Peysekh, for example.

So many questions. Sorry if I'm skipping these questions. There's too many of them. I can't read so quickly.

JESSICA PARKER: Daniel, you can also take your time and scroll back.

DANIEL KENNEDY: Yeah.

JESSICA PARKER: Would it be helpful if I kept track and posed them to you?

DANIEL KENNEDY: Maybe. If you pick one that you like, I'll keep reading at the same time.

JESSICA PARKER: Okay.

DANIEL KENNEDY: They're very good questions. Hang on.

JESSICA PARKER: Where did you leave off?

DANIEL KENNEDY: I'm not sure. There's one here about love triangles, strange love efforts. I'll answer this one.

Question: The love efforts are always strained, leading to suicide or mortified flights. Did he leave his wife to come to Warsaw?

He was forced to leave his wife. I've looked at different versions of the story because I didn't think -- none of them are written from his point of view. And some of them later in life he never really -- he did try and go back to his wife. But after that he was, as far as I know, terribly, terribly unsuccessful romantically. But, yeah, they are pretty strained, pretty awful.

Question: In comparison to the Yiddish writers I've read who are contemporaneous to Nomberg, there appears a lack of Jewish intertextuality and reference. This seems especially odd as he was a former yeshiva student. Do you think there was a deliberate attempt to keep that out of the text?

I'm not sure—I mean, I know what you mean but I'm not sure if that's true. Intertextuality. Yeah, his language is very simple and -- there's not a lot of times -- but a lot of the times there's -- maybe it doesn't show up in the translation always, but there's a lot of people who are referencing scripture and psalms and there's little snippets of things like this. So, the characters always have these texts in their heads. You can feel them sort of leaking out—I don't know. Everyone's always humming a Hasidic *nign*—there's always something there in the background. I think it's something that the characters themselves maybe are trying to keep out. But I don't think -- I think Nomberg can see that it's there. He's writing about people who are attempting to keep the distance from their past, but I think they're not successful, if that makes sense.

Question: Since Nomberg was part of Peretz's circle, can you comment briefly on Peretz's influence if any?

I haven't actually read a huge amount of Peretz, but I know that in their personalities, they really clashed. So, Nomberg was one of the few in their circle who would stand up to Peretz and tell him, "No," or he would disagree with him or would criticize him. And would often stand up for other writers when Peretz was being a little bit patriarchal. For example, Peretz didn't like Sholem Aleichem very much. He was jealous and he was dismissive of his humor and things like this. And Nomberg was the only one who said, like, "No, Sholem Aleichem is great, shut up." [Laughter] So, sometimes they would have arguments and Nomberg would run away and start playing snooker with the Polish people on the other side of town, but I think he always did really -- he had enormous respect for Peretz's writing.

Let's have a look at some more questions.

JESSICA PARKER: Did you answer the one:

Question: "Are the stories in this anthology representative of his fiction?"

DANIEL KENNEDY: Yeah. I think I did. I would say yes. I would say there are, but there's other stuff that he did, too, that's not in this -- that's not represented in this volume.

JESSICA PARKER: And the question: about the stories having a repetitive quality and independently felt depressive and bleak, is that typical or just a quality of this selection?

DANIEL KENNEDY: I'd say it's both. Again, I'd say it is definitely typical. Some of his other stuff is I'd say even more depressing and bleak, but in a totally different way. It's a little bit more abstract and it's a little bit more otherworldly. There's some strange sort of almost horror, science-fiction-type stories where you just have these

nameless characters in allegorical settings, almost like folktales. And some of those, I think, are more depressing and bleak than these ones. Or differently. [Laughter]

JESSICA PARKER: And did you see this question: What you can say about the way he contrasts Litvaks and Hasids?

DANIEL KENNEDY: Oh, it's interesting, because he is a Hasidic Polish Jew from, you know -- but he makes fun of himself as well and, depending on the story, sometimes the narrator might be a Litvak and sometimes the narrator might be a local from Warsaw. And it's quite funny because he even makes fun of his own accent. So, if the narrator is a Litvak, he will make fun of the Warsaw Jews, and if the narrator is from Warsaw, he'll make fun of how the Litvak pronounces things, which I find interesting. But he did spend time in Vilna and in Riga. So, he spent a number of years among the Litvaks and had a big influence on -- an early influence on Yiddish grammar, in fact. Because he was one of the -- he set up some newspapers and published books in Vilna. And he edited them, so they were writing in their Litvak Yiddish and he was editing it and crossing out -- changing the articles and changing the grammar. I think that has some of the effect of why standard Yiddish has quite a Polish Yiddish grammar, even if it has Litvak Yiddish pronunciation.

Question: Are any of Nomberg's prose and newspaper entries translated into English?

No. There is one very short, very short, sketch from Buenos Aires which is translated by, I think it's Alan Astro, in an anthology of South American writing and that's it. No. None of his other stuff has been translated yet. If you send me money, I will do it. [Laughter]

Question: Where can we read them?

You cannot. [Laughter]

Yeah, it's interesting. The tone is quite different in his travel writing. It's much more relaxed. It's much more -- cause it's him, as a character. He's not as terribly tortured as his fiction characters. So, there's more humor. Some of those little stories -- there are some stories that are kind of halfway between fiction and journalism. And I translated one of those, which you can find on the internet on *Jewish Currents*. I think that's more similar to his journalistic stuff.

Question: Can you speak more about his satirical efforts? Which stories do you think are particularly satirical?

It's interesting because -- I don't know. I don't know if I'm just reading things wrong but, for example, I think "Fliglman" is hilarious. Depending on who I speak to, people either agree with me or they have no idea what I'm talking about. But I think "Fliglman" is just laugh-out-loud funny. [Laughter]

Question: What is he satirizing?

He's satirizing his own milieu, his own sort of people, people like himself, people like his readers, people like everybody. But I think it's just -- I don't know. The ridiculousness of some of the details of that character. But, yeah, it's a bit like Kafka where people -- Kafka is said to have, you know, laughed his head off while reading his stories to his friends, and everyone in his circle thought that these were quite funny stories and most readers nowadays do not agree. [Laughter] Can't even begin to imagine what's funny about them. I think "Fliglman" is a little bit like that. Either you find it funny or you don't. It's hard to explain.

Question: Do you see the early end of his fiction mostly economic or end of a creative period?

I think it's probably a little bit of both. I think there is a large economic -- in his biography, he's definitely interested in making a living. Like I said earlier, his son died when he was -- when Nomborg was still finding his way. And he didn't have enough money to pay for doctors and things like this and after that, after World War I, Nomborg really sort of wrote a lot more newspaper stuff and a lot less fiction. And I think at the same time, maybe his creativity was drying out in that way. He always wanted to write a novel, but he never did, he never finished a novel. But he had one in mind. He had a novel in mind which was supposed to be exploring very much the assimilated Polish Jews of Warsaw after the War. A further step removed from the characters in these stories. But he never did.

Question: Yeah, Fligman, was Fligman funny because he was skewering a type many knew?

I'd say definitely, absolutely. This is like a type of person who almost certainly existed. And even if none of the -- even if some of the way that these details are phrased are funny, I don't think they're outlandish. I think there would be people like this. And especially in the Jewish Writers Union. All of the people who hung around there would have been similar, had similar ideas, similar ways of speaking, similar ways of living. I mean, I know people like this [Laughter] in Berlin and Brooklyn. There's lots of Fligmen. Still to this day.

Let's see.

Question: How do you think Nomborg fits into a Yiddish canon?

It depends on which one you're looking at. So, I think there's the Yiddish canon in Yiddish which is sort of -- has been set in stone and has just been sort of gathering dust. And there's the newer Yiddish canon, in English, for example, or there's the Yiddish canon in translation in other languages like in French or in Polish. And in Yiddish, he has a place which is sort of -- everyone knows him as being the guy who used to be famous. And most people have read maybe a couple of his stories, probably "Fligman" and a few other ones, but even in the Yiddish canon he's a little bit forgotten. So, he was very important at a certain stage and then he became -- he kind of became outmoded quite quickly after the... Well, Yiddish literature moved so quickly after the First World War, modernism became a big thing. So, the younger generation of Yiddish writers were quite different and quite innovative. And Nomborg was left behind to a certain extent. He's a minor figure even in the Yiddish canon and he's a very, very minor figure in translation so far. But I think that's unjust. I think he's got something that's different in a way to a lot of the other writers.

Question: One of the most interesting stories was "Higher Education" -- partly because it has a female protagonist. How unusual was that among his peers? Was that something notable at the time and what was the particular reception to that story?

I don't think it was particularly unusual at the time. What other writers have... I mean, maybe it was. Maybe it was slightly unusual. But it doesn't strike me -- I think most writers would have had some interesting female characters. But it was unusual for him. Nomborg had maybe only two stories, maybe three or four stories altogether, with female protagonists. I think this is an interesting story because it's also his only sort of -- well, not quite his only one. But -- yeah. I think it stands out as being an interesting character.

The reception to the story? I'm not sure what the reception was. I know that it also was -- he translated it into Hebrew as well. But this was really like a stock character at the time, like a university student at the time was -- if you said "university student," and if you said "female university student," you meant "Marxist

revolutionary.” For me, it was a big surprise, the ending. I don't know if anyone has read it. But to his audience, that wouldn't have been a surprise and you would have expected it, her to be...

JESSICA PARKER: Daniel, you cut out. You have frozen and we didn't hear the end of what you were saying. [No Audible Response] Okay. Hopefully Daniel will come back to us in a moment. Sorry, folks. Please bear with us for a second.

DANIEL KENNEDY: You know, a terrorist.

JESSICA PARKER: Are you there? Daniel? We're just going to try to troubleshoot this now for a moment. Daniel is just leaving and reentering the Zoom conference to see if that makes a difference. And, I've heard from someone else that they were having Zoom issues today. So that's good to know. Albeit clearly not helpful for all of us.

DANIEL KENNEDY: Hello?

JESSICA PARKER: Hi. Did we get you back?

DANIEL KENNEDY: I seem to be back. Sorry about that.

JESSICA PARKER: We can't see you yet, though.

DANIEL KENNEDY: Oh. Oh no.

JESSICA PARKER: There we go.

DANIEL KENNEDY: Okay.

JESSICA PARKER: You cut out, and then I heard the word “terrorist,” and then you left.

DANIEL KENNEDY: [Laughter] I was saying that the protagonist in “Higher Education,” I said was a terrorist. Okay. You can't hear me now. Hello?

JESSICA PARKER: I can hear you.

DANIEL KENNEDY: Okay. Good. So, I seemed to have lost all of the questions.

JESSICA PARKER: Okay. Yes. I will find you some.

Question: “In a Hasidic House” -- do you think his main point is to show the hypocrisy of the characters? They accuse the narrator, a Litvak, of being non-religious but the women themselves may not be behaving actually in accord with traditional halakhic norms.

DANIEL KENNEDY: I think the butt of the joke is more the Litvak in that story. I think he's like a ridiculously -- he's full of himself. He has these absurd fantasies about the girl who he doesn't know. And at the end, it turns out that she's much more -- there's much more going on for her than he thinks. I think he's the butt of that joke rather than them being. I think each of the—even the mother—the whole family, they're much more interesting than the protagonist, than the narrator in that story. But we see it from his point of view and

he's a bit of an idiot. I think that's where the tension is in that story.

JESSICA PARKER: And we have sort of a two-fold question: of how did you come to Nomberg and how did you become a Yiddish translator?

DANIEL KENNEDY: The answer to -- well, how did I come to Nomberg? It was one of the things that I read in a class. So, it was my teacher who brought it to us. We would read lots of literature and this was one of the things he brought to us. It was "Fliglmán," the story. And I thought it was great. I loved it. And it was really only when I started doing the Yiddish Book Center's Translation Fellowship that I read the other stories. So, I just knew the one story when I presented the project. And that answers the second question, too. How did I become a Yiddish translator? It was entirely aided and abetted and encouraged by the Yiddish Book Center's Translation Fellowship. So, it is their fault. It is your fault.

JESSICA PARKER: I took it as such.

DANIEL KENNEDY: I hold you entirely responsible in both the negative and the positive ways. Not you personally, but the Yiddish Book Center is entirely at fault.

In a way, it was because I wanted to do something with my Yiddish. I -- at that stage I had been learning it for ten years. You reach a stage where you have to say, "What am I supposed to do with this large amount of strange and not particularly useful knowledge?" And translating seemed like -- that's the thing people do, isn't it? That seemed like a good thing. I sort of took it from there.

JESSICA PARKER: Did you answer the question: about how autobiographical are the stories? The yeshiva student who never got his dowry?

DANIEL KENNEDY: Yeah, yeah, I think they are very autobiographical—not in terms of the details, but in terms of the way he thinks about things. And the things he thinks about. So, again, yeah -- he didn't have, like -- in that case, you know, Nomberg didn't have any -- he didn't have any bitterness towards his father-in-law, for example. He lived for three years for free. He had a good life. So, he wasn't bitter financially for these things. But, you know, all of his characters grew up in the same environment as him. They all had the same sort of life trajectory. And they all have the same concerns. And they all have the same -- you know, they all knew the same sort of people. So, I'd say in terms of thematics, atmosphere, and details, little details, they're very autobiographical. But, like I said earlier, sometimes the protagonist is from a different place, so he can see his own society from the outside, too. And they are also often from different social -- they are often in different social contexts. So, sometimes they're poor. Sometimes they're more educated. Sometimes they're more assimilated. A lot of the characters -- it's not really clear in the text, but you should understand that they're speaking in Russian a lot of the time or that they're speaking in Polish. They're not actually speaking in Yiddish, even though the stories are written in Yiddish. So, we're looking at different levels of society at the same time.

JESSICA PARKER: Question: Do you see the early end to his fiction mostly as a result of economic forces or pressures or end of a creative period?

DANIEL KENNEDY: Yeah. I answered that question.

JESSICA PARKER: Oh, sorry.

DANIEL KENNEDY: A little bit of both. A little bit of column A and a little bit of column B. It's hard to say if he ran

out of creative juices or if he -- I think writing was always difficult for him, fiction writing was always difficult for him. He was not very prolific. And a lot of his work is very short. So, I think it was something that it took a lot out of him. I also said there are Hebrew versions of the same story and very often they are almost word-for-word the same story. So, I think he worked on these, and he crafted them, and he rewrote them. I think he was a slow writer and a meticulous one.

Question: Any particularly interesting or difficult translation issues you recall?

Oh, there must have been. [Laughter] All the bits that sound really bad are the result of translation issues. [Laughter]

Question: Would you translate another Yiddish writer or stick with Nomborg?

Yes, I have to translate other Yiddish writers. As Jessica mentioned in the introduction, I translated a short novel by Zalman Shneour, which is out. You can buy that. And it's similar in a way to this. It's the same sort of -- a little bit the same atmosphere and a little bit the same context. But it's, I'd say, worse. It's like if Fligelman was not funny and if he was a terrible, terrible human being. It's much more violent. It's much more nasty. But I've also translated completely different things. The next one I'm doing is a sort of jolly, almost children's book about a wild young woman who lives in the forest. So, that's the complete opposite. The complete opposite of Nomborg.

Another question: In "Higher Education," the protagonist says "my cavalier" right after the opera. Is this a reference to the particular opera or is it just a translation?

It's just a translation of a particular Yiddish word. It's also -- I've heard this from an older woman that this was something that she heard her older relatives say, like "a cavalier" was something you would say for like a suitor, a gentleman who was paying you attention. So, this was just a normal -- the Yiddish slang of the time, something a young woman would say about a man who's paying her attention would be "a cavalier." A little bit ironic. A little bit joking.

Question: Can you tell me where the characters are supposed to be speaking Russian or Polish?

So, actually, with Russian it's hard to say because a lot of the time -- for example, if you look at "Who Is to Blame?" -- is that what it's called? -- "Ver iz shuldik?" "Who Is to Blame?" or "Who Is at Fault?", I forget how I translated it. There, the characters... it tells you specifically when they're switching. It tells you that they switch into Yiddish, which means that before that they must have been speaking -- no, not that one. No, in that one, he switches -- he's trying to speak Russian, but he can't. And it tells you when they're switching from Yiddish to Russian. But in other ones, for example, in "Roommates" -- we're supposed to understand that they're speaking Russian the whole time. It would have been clear for the audience at the time, just from the context, what sort of characters would be -- the young characters, like Fligelman, would be speaking Russian to his friend, the teacher. So, a lot of the time, they are speaking -- they are thinking in Yiddish for themselves, but they are speaking in Russian to each other.

And the only case where they're speaking in Polish would be in "Higher Education," where you have the rich people, you've got, like, Weinstein and his sister. And you can tell that they are speaking in Polish because they speak to each other in third person. So, it's, you know, I'd tried to keep that -- that's what Nomborg was doing in Yiddish. He's using the third person, like instead of -- I can't think an example. Instead of, like, "You look well," you'd say, "He looks well." But that's something that's supposed to be mirroring the polite, formal way of speaking Polish. And he uses that in his Yiddish, too.

Another question: Would you say his Yiddish was simplistic rather than literary?

No. No, I would say it's quite a good example of polished literary Yiddish prose and I think it was quite influential. It's quite simple, it's quite unadorned, it's quite easy to read. I'd suggest it as a good -- as he's a good writer to read if your Yiddish is -- if you're [an] intermediate Yiddish reader. But I would not say it's simplistic, no. I think it's quite solid. It's quite solid literary Yiddish. But then you've got other writers who are much, much more flamboyant and write in much more complex and extravagant and flashy ways. But I don't think that means that it's simplistic.

Question: Who were his non-Yiddish influences?

Dostoyevsky seems, yes, Dostoyevsky would have been an influence. In terms of prose, I would say Gogol, as well. And he would have read a lot of German literature and Russian literature. It's most of what he would have read. Everything else he read would have been in translation—probably in Russian or in German. Although, he also read English. Which is interesting because he only visited America a few times when he was old, but he had learned English to read. And he translated from English sometimes, even though I don't know to what extent he really spoke English.

Question: Did he speak Spanish?

No, I don't think so. I mean, he traveled around South America for a while. But I don't think he spoke Spanish. I don't think he spoke Spanish. He wrote in Polish as well. He wrote in Polish. He wrote -- his Hebrew was excellent. He was one of the most influential Hebrew stylists at the time and [in] Yiddish, too. And he never wrote in German or Russian. Maybe he wrote a little bit in Russian. But he dabbled in European languages.

Did I miss any questions?

Question: Go back to the question about difficult or interesting translation issues.

I'm sure I've just blocked them out. [Laughter]

JESSICA PARKER: Question: Or anything interesting about translating him, things that you noticed or came up for you as you were working through his material?

DANIEL KENNEDY: Not really, but I tried -- in the book, I tried to add little things in the notes at the back which are just for these sorts of things. I've pointed out sometimes what the original says when I think that there's an interesting difference between what I wrote and what's going on in the original, just so that anyone who wants to check can see what's happening. I tried to be a little bit transparent about some of those things.

Question: Nomberg describes Fliglman. Did he create this name?

It's interesting, it's just a normal name, in fact. It's just a normal surname. If you look on Facebook or whatever, there's lots of people with this name. So, he just gave it to him as sort of a name. And then later, because the character became famous, it became almost like a metaphor. And then people started wondering, "What does it mean?", you know, "winged-man," "flying-man," what does it mean? But I think he started just with the name. And all of the characters have names—well, in the collection there's a lot of characters whose names begin with the same letter—you've got, like, Feinstein, and Fidler, Fliglman, Finkelman, and all of these names mean something, but I'm not sure -- they are also real names. None of the names are invented. They are all just real

people's names which have some connotations and maybe the character's name is supposed to reflect something of the character. But they're also just normal names. You can just read it as -- you can read into them, if you want, but you don't have to. They don't jump out for the Yiddish reader. They don't jump out as strange names. And the name just became like -- a "Fligman" became like a stock character. So, in later generations, people would have said, like, "Ah, this is like a Fligman." So, it became like a particular -- a trope, a literary trope. It would have been recognizable. This is the first Fligman.

JESSICA PARKER: And then, maybe as the last question, Marcia is asking, "I think 'fligl' means 'flighty' in Yiddish?"

DANIEL KENNEDY: "Fligl" means "wing," it just means "wing," like the wing of a bird. So, it's a noun. So, "Fligman" literally would mean "wing-man." I mean, it's a real name. You'd have to ask history why there are people called this. But you think -- it makes you think of birds. It makes you think of bats even. I don't know. It's a wing. He's a "wingman." But not in that sense.

JESSICA PARKER: Question: Any last things to add, Daniel, before we wrap up for the evening?

DANIEL KENNEDY: It's interesting. You say your parents use the name "Fligman" [derogatorily]. That's amazing. This is just like the character became like a stock figure. Like you'd say someone -- I don't know, "He's such a Fligman." "He's such a..." -- like a character from a thing that people knew.

Yeah, like "*luftmensch*." It's quite similar to the idea -- it makes you think of that, doesn't it? Fligman. He's in the air. He's up in the clouds. He's obsessed with the moon. And there's the weird section where he's imagining he's sort of -- he's almost hallucinating geometric, glowing shapes in the air. He's very much -- which for me it makes me think of -- you know, the meme, there's people thinking and they have mathematical symbols forming in front of their face. It's like that. [Laughter] There's a lot of -- like the language in "Fligman" uses a lot of little scientific ways of putting things. He's talking about involuntary reflexes and stuff like this.

JESSICA PARKER: Well, thank you so much, Daniel. I think we'll have to leave it there for this evening.

DANIEL KENNEDY: Okay.

JESSICA PARKER: We're going to wrap up. Thank you so much, Daniel, for sharing your knowledge and expertise with us; thank you Christine for your expert captioning; and thank you to all of you for joining us. The recording of this video conference, including the captioning, will be posted online shortly, and I'll send out the link as soon as it's available. We will wrap up reading our book, *Warsaw Stories* --

DANIEL KENNEDY: I still do not have a copy of this, by the way.

JESSICA PARKER: Are you serious?

DANIEL KENNEDY: I do not.

JESSICA PARKER: Okay, well that's embarrassing. We'll have to rectify that.

DANIEL KENNEDY: It's in the mail.

JESSICA PARKER: It's in the mail. Okay. So, we'll wrap up with this book and with the 2019 Book Club on

Tuesday, December 31. Registration for the 2020 Club closes on December 20, so don't delay, sign up today at register.yiddishbookcenter.org. Please be in this touch if you have any questions or any issues with the registration. *A freylekhn khanike*, Happy Hanukkah, a bit early, thank you again for joining us and enjoy the rest of your day or night!

DANIEL KENNEDY: Thank you, everybody.

JESSICA PARKER: Thank you, Alegria! I like the waving hands.

[End of session]

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Transcript edited by Jessica Parker.

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