Waylaid by Demons
The strange, real-life world of I. B. Singer

A Scholar, a Writer and the Frog-Rebbe
An interview with novelist Allen Hoffman
features

16 Waylaid by Demons
While researching the life of Isaac Bashevis Singer, biographer Janet Hadda finds herself drawn into bizarre, real-life episodes from Bashevis's fiction.

24 A Shtetl, 1931
Rediscovered photographs of an American's journey to the shtetl his mother left behind. Introduction by Vicki Levins Gabriner.
by Joseph Levins

36 Men of Faith
In his novel Small Worlds, Allen Hoffman transforms contemporary Jewish fiction by reifying the secular with the theological. David Roskies talks with Hoffman about myth, history, and the frog-rebbe of Krimsk.

fiction

8 Uncle Shloime's Coal Dust
By William D. Kaufman

42 The Lovebirds
By Zalman Shneour, translated by Golda Werman
In English and Yiddish.

book reviews

50 Last Stop, Loneliness
Ben Katchor's Julius Knipl comic strip takes readers on a grand tour of the end of the line. Reviewed by Kio Stark.

52 The Drapes of Roth
After a sixty-year silence, the enigmatic Henry Roth resurfaced with a formidable six-volume novel, Mercy of A Rude Stream, the latest volume of which is From Bondage. Diane Simon peels back the literary curtain to examine a Jewish American writer battling his private demons.

departments

2 Just Between Us
4 A Bintel Brief: Red Margy; True Love, Yiddish Style
8 Field Notes: Sex, Torah and Revolution; Chicago Jews
60 Words Like Arrows by Shirley Kumove
62 Zamlers' Vinkl
63 Donor Lists
74 Let's Learn Yiddish by Itzik Gottesman
76 Portrait: Anzia Yezierska, by Kenneth Turan
IN JULY OF 1936, RIGHT AFTER MY FATHER’S death, my mother handed me a batch of black-and-white photographs. I had seen them before, but never paid them much attention. They were taken in 1931 by my father, Joseph Levins, when he visited Brok, Poland and the surrounding towns and cities. Brok was the shtetl of his mother, Khaya (Ida) Friedman Levinsky.

My father, the first American-born sibling of five surviving sons and two daughters, was a foreign language teacher in New York City. An older brother had changed Levinsky to Levins, and my father followed suit, in an attempt to assimilate. So why did he go to Poland? And why, growing up, did I never hear of his trip?

I will probably never know the names or exact relationship to me of any of the people in the photographs. My father didn’t label them, and I know of only two family stories about my father’s journey: an incidence of anti-Semitism, and a moment of recognition. “Du bist Khaya’s a zun,” someone said to him when he arrived in Brok, “You are Khaya’s son.” At twenty-six, my father was almost the same age as his mother had been when she emigrated to the United States.

I have pored over these images, alone and with others, with and without a magnifying glass, trying to find where faces repeat, imagining the family and friendship networks that link these people to each other and to me. I have enlarged the pictures and hung them on my walls, caught by the gazes of children and adults staring into the camera. I have shown the photographs to people familiar with East European life, and asked who was Polish, who was Jewish. I have sought Jewish Brok-ers around the world.

My father had the eye of a documentarian. He didn’t shoot only family pictures; he also posed or captured his subjects, Jews and non-Jews, in the rituals of their daily activities: women at the river washing clothes; a Polish soldier standing guard; a woman drawing water from the well. His camera preserved a society in transition, reflected by people's clothing: An old woman wearing a shaytl [the sort of wig traditionally worn by married women] sits with two younger women behind her, their necks and arms uncovered; a patriarch in a family portrait, long-bearded, head covered, sits in front of a young, bareheaded man in a modern suit.

The photographs drew me like a magnet. I wanted to stand on the soil where my grandparents had been born and my ancestors had lived for perhaps hundreds of years. In 1995 I traveled to Eastern Europe with my partner and her son to visit all our grandparents’ shtetleh.

Brok was and still is a small town, surrounded by forests, at the intersection of the Bug and Brok Rivers. It had once been a city, seat of the Bishop of Plotsk, where residents produced much of the matzoh used in both Warsaw and Lodz. But by the 20th century, despite the development of the two rivers as a resort area, Brok was in decline. On September 8, 1939, when the Nazis invaded Brok, its population numbered 3,000, a third to a half of whom were Jewish. They had maintained three prayer and study houses, a central synagogue built of wood, and several Zionist, Bundist and Communist organizations.

Now, of course, no Jews live in Brok. As we drove into town, our Polish guide got out of the car to ask an old Polish woman if she recognized the faces or buildings in any of the copies of my father’s photographs I carried with me. “All the Jewish homes around the market place were burned by the Nazis,” the old woman explained, “and the Jews rounded up and shot.” Did she recognize this photograph that had a wall in it, the guide asked? “Oh yes,” she replied, “it’s the wall around the church. I’m going there now. Follow me.”

And there it was.

These photographs are the snapshots of a traveler, of a son bringing back family pictures to his mother. And like all photographs of pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe, they tell not only of a single family, but of a whole world.

Vicki Levins Gabriner is a civil rights investigator living in Brookline, Massachusetts.