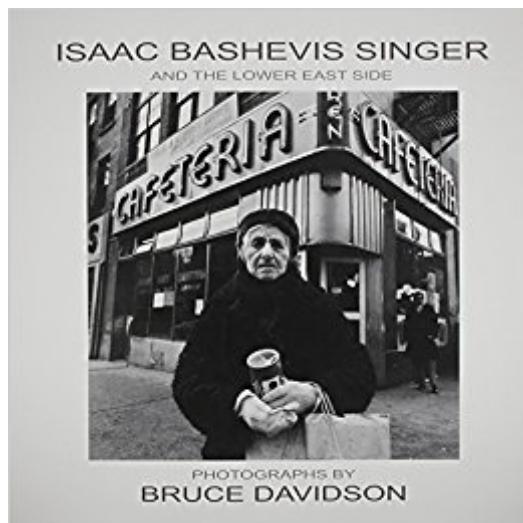


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# Isaac Bashevis Singer And The Lower East Side



## Synopsis

Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Polish-born Yiddish writer and Nobel laureate, and New York documentary photographer Bruce Davidson collaborated on a surreal feature film made in 1973, entitled Isaac Bashevis Singer's Nightmare and Mrs. Pupko's Beard. This film was at once a documentary about Singer's New York and a dramatization of one of his short stories. The film grew out of their friendship, as residents of the same building on the upper West Side of Manhattan, and their common interest in New York City street life. During and after production, Davidson made numerous portraits of Singer and also returned to the Lower East Side for a documentary series of photographs. A selection of more than forty of the stunning images made between 1957 and 1990 is available here for the first time in Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Lower East Side: Photographs by Bruce Davidson. The book also includes portraits of Singer, stills from the film, the black and white portfolio known as The Garden Cafeteria, and selections from the Lower East Side series. The Garden Cafeteria was a collaboration depicting denizens of the East Broadway restaurant frequented by Singer during his trips to The Jewish Daily Forward. The portfolio has never been published nor exhibited in its entirety until this volume. Included is an introduction by Singer himself on Davidson's images, an in-depth interview with Davidson about his art, aesthetic and political views, and his Jewishness, and a reflective, contextual essay by Ilan Stavans on the relevance of this collaboration between the writer and the photographer. Through Davidson's lens we see Singer's literary world of Holocaust survivors and immigrants from Eastern Europe—a displaced culture in its twilight. This book is a co-publication and appears in conjunction with an exhibition organized and presented by the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College, on the occasion of the centennial celebration nationwide of Singer's birth in 2004.

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## Customer Reviews

Photographs by Bruce Davidson, With contributions by Isaac Bashevis Singer, Ilan Stavans, Jill Meredith, and Gabriele Werffeli

Bruce Davidson worked as a freelance photographer for Life Magazine and joined Magnum Photos in 1958. As a documentary photographer, he produced two photo essays, "Brooklyn Gang" and the "Freedom Rides." He photographed the Civil Rights Movement, including a rally in Harlem, Ku Klux Klan cross burnings, and the marches in Birmingham and Selma, Alabama. In 1966 he won the first photography grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to document East 100th Street in Harlem; this work was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art. His most recent project is *Subway*, a book and exhibition of New York City culture. Ilan Stavans is the Lewis-Sebring Professor in Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College. He is the author, of *On Borrowed Words*, *Spanglish*, and *The Shocken Book of Modern Sephardic Literature*. His work has been translated into a dozen languages. Stavans is also editor of the three-volume set *Isaac Bashevis Singer: Collected Stories* published by the Library of America.

Davidson is one of the most well-known photographers working today. He made his reputation in good part during the Civil Rights Movement as one of its principal photographers. He also is well-known for his photographs of the life and characters of New York City. In this album he presents photos he made of the great Nobel Prize Winning author I.B. Singer. He also photographs other lower East Side characters with many pictures taken in the Garden City Cafe. Davidson has a unique style in which he photographs face to face. He seems to want to bring out the character of the person. He catches people in moments of melancholy and also surprise. What he gives us here is a documentary record of a certain period and place in American- Jewish life, the lower East Side world most of whose Yiddish Old World characters are now gone. His special affection for and relation with his old neighbor and friend Singer give an even more special quality to the work.

Davidson has collected varied photographs taken in the course of his relationship with the noted author Singer based on their mutual fascination with New York City street life. Some of the photos are stills from their surrealistic film on one of Singer's short stories. Others are from the portfolio "The Garden Cafeteria," a rough-hewn eatery in Manhattan's Lower East Side popular with local Jews. Most of the characters and scenes in the photos could be from Singer's short stories noted for their comical, often somewhat grotesque or fantastical, depictions of Old World Jewry in the modern day. For Singer enthusiasts especially, there are several photos of him, and also a short story titled "The Beard." The story is somewhat about Singer himself, beginning, "That a Yiddish writer should become rich, and in his old age to boot, seemed unbelievable."

Davidson is a renowned photographer who had a solo show of his work at the MOMA in 1963. In 1972, he worked with IB Singer, and was introduced by him to the Garden Cafeteria of the Lower East Side. The reminiscences of Davidson are touching, and some of his photographs of Singer are quite piercing. The most memorable, in my estimation, is the one of Singer laughing, with his gappy Polish teeth showing through his wide mouthed smile. Although other photos of the Lower East side are included, I don't think many people would associate IB Singer with this neighborhood, since he frequently stated that he often delivered his work to the Forward late at night, and certainly he didn't hang out with other writers there.

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