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## I. J. Schwartz in Lexington

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Joseph R. Jones

For Louis Birch

Unlikely as it may appear, a volume of poetry once described as the "first important work of Yiddish literature in America"<sup>1</sup> was written in Lexington between 1918 and 1922. The author of this gathering of narrative poems, issued in New York in 1925 with the title *Kentucky*, was an immigrant named Israel Jacob Schwartz, who came to Lexington to open a millinery shop, which he operated until the beginning of the Great Depression. When he arrived in Lexington in 1918, he was already a distinguished figure in Yiddish literary circles, a member of an influential group of poets who had, a decade earlier, set out to sing America's praises under the inspiration of Walt Whitman,<sup>2</sup> and he deserves recognition among the lesser-known authors who have contributed to the rich and varied literature about Kentucky. The awarding of the 1978 Nobel Prize to another Yiddish-American author, Isaac Singer, called the world's attention to the part America has played in fostering this literature without a country. This year, 1981, is the tenth anniversary of Schwartz's death and seems an appropriate time to remember both his contributions to Yiddish literature and Lexington's place in the elaboration of his most original writings.

Schwartz was born in the Lithuanian town of Patrašiunai, in the province of Kovno,<sup>3</sup> in 1885, second son of an Orthodox rabbi. Educated at home, at a yeshiva, and—after he came to America in 1906—at a high school in New York, Schwartz had both the traditional Jewish religious learning of his backgrounds and the modern learning of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> He was familiar with Russian and Polish literature, and within a few years of his arrival in America, had learned English well enough to publish Yiddish translations of parts of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1911), Whitman's "Salut au monde" (1912), and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar* (1918). Schwartz's intellectual companions in New York were a youthful group of immigrants like himself who were determined to give Yiddish literature a respectable place



among progressive European literatures. They published three anthologies of their works with the title *Jugend* (Youth), 1907-08, including a manifesto of their program, and critics soon applied the name "youngsters" (Di Yunge) to the group.<sup>5</sup> By the end of World War I, and at the age of thirty-three, Schwartz was an established poet and translator. He was living in a city that had a huge Yiddish-speaking population, a press, theater, and religious and educational institutions that kept the immigrant culture alive within the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture of America, as it had coexisted with Polish and Russian in the Old World. Leaving New York for Lexington meant that he was leaving the Yiddish intellectual community to become a shopkeeper in a town of forty-six thousand people where few spoke his native tongue and fewer still could read his poetry. It would be interesting to know how he felt the change, what literary friends he made, how he kept up his contacts with Yiddish writers. But all that is left of his stay in Kentucky, besides the poems written during the first five years, is the spare account of his domestic and commercial movements, a few photographs, and blurred recollections.

Schwartz came to Lexington at the suggestion of his sister Lena, wife of Rabbi Samuel Krasne. The Krasne family had preceded him to Kentucky by fourteen years, coming from Corry, Pennsylvania, around 1904. Rabbi Krasne was lured by an overoptimistic friend (Nathan Rogers, a local rug dealer), who assured him that Lexington's Jews could support a kosher butcher shop. Krasne thus became the city's first *shohet* (kosher butcher), and, when plans for the shop failed, he functioned as a rabbi and Hebrew teacher as well.<sup>6</sup>

With his wife Mary and their daughter Sylvia (called Tselia in the dedication of *Kentucky*), I. J. Schwartz moved in with the family of Jacob Alperin, to whom he was related by marriage and whom he had known in Kovno. The Alperin house, at 377 South Upper Street, still stands in a block almost unchanged since the Civil War, amid low-rent apartments and expensively restored town houses. It was the first of at least five rented houses into which the Schwartzes moved during their residence in the Blue Grass.<sup>7</sup> When Mrs. Schwartz and her daughter returned to New York in 1928, the poet went back to live with the Alperins until he could close down his shop and leave Lexington.

Schwartz and his wife, who was the business-minded member of the family, opened the New York Wholesale Millinery (which also



sold expensive ready-to-wear clothing for women and children) by 1924, first at 335 West Short Street, and, in 1927, at 317-19 West Main Street.<sup>8</sup> The locations of the shop were in the same block, back-to-back. Schwartz's former customers would now find a dreary parking lot where the New York Wholesale Millinery once stood. In 1928, Schwartz seems to have reduced the size of his store: the telephone directory lists only 317 West Main Street, and the number disappears entirely from the directories in 1929.

Beside the rented houses and stores, the Schwartzes also had, for a while at least, a summer cottage at the river beach near Boonesboro, a few miles from the city, to which their daughter often invited her friends. During her eleven years in Lexington, Sylvia attended public schools and, for one summer session and two semesters, the University of Kentucky. Family tradition says that she fell in love with an English instructor and that her mother took her back to New York to put a stop to the affair.<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Schwartz had a reputation for strong convictions as well as for business acumen, cooking, and generosity.

The few Lexingtonians old enough to remember Schwartz invariably mention his exceptional learning, his fine looks, and charming manners. No one, however, seems to remember his works, though it is possible that he had already begun lecturing on his own poetry, traveling around the country and as far afield as Curaçao. If he did begin his lecture-tours while he still lived in Lexington, he must have done so after 1925, the publication date of *Kentucky*, his most important work.<sup>10</sup>

Schwartz's poems are written in Yiddish, a language closely related to medieval German. Yiddish developed its own special character after the thirteenth century, and migrating Jews took "Jewish"—which is what Yiddish means—with them into Poland, Russia, and other Eastern European countries. Several million immigrants brought it to America, where its literature continued to flourish with such writers as Scholem Aleichem, whose characters are familiar to all Americans in their reincarnation in the popular musical comedy *Fiddler on the Roof*. This essay does not deal with the original text of Schwartz's book, however, but with a translation made by a doctoral student at Columbia in 1972, and thus it makes no judgments about the literary merits of the original language. But Schwartz's narrative poetry has authentic historical and local elements important for the total effect of the poems, for their plausibility, and for the implied criticism of the society they





I. J. Schwartz and his daughter Sylvia on the steps of their duplex at 115 West Second Street

portray. The identification of contemporary landmarks, figures, or occurrences that provided material for his fiction allows a tantalizing glimpse of the process by which Schwartz translated banal reality into the imaginary world of *Kentucky*.

The volume contains nine poems, three of which are short lyrics (the dedication, the poet's autobiography, and a twelve-line poem—the oldest of the collection—which introduces the narratives about black life). Of the six remaining poems, by far the longest is a two-hundred page narrative called *New Earth*, which is the biography of Joshua, a Lithuanian immigrant who comes to the Blue Grass soon after the Civil War, selling housewares and trinkets from a backpack. The story of his hardships in New York and separation from his wife and child touches the farmers of the community



where he spends a night, and they offer him a dilapidated house and barn. Joshua starts a hides and scrap metal business, sends for his wife and young son Jacob, and begins to prosper. His first American-born child dies and is buried in a Christian cemetery, but soon there are other children to take her place. Within a few years, more Jews begin to arrive in the now thriving town: first a small group of Germans and then a number of Lithuanian families. Joshua uses his influence to organize the wrangling factions of Reformed Germans and Orthodox Lithuanian Jews into a congregation, and he buys a church in a run-down neighborhood which becomes the first synagogue. As the city and the Jewish community grow, as Joshua's business contacts spread into the surrounding states, as his family increases in number and importance, Joshua begins his decline into unappealing senility; he grows eccentric and stingy; and he finally expires quietly in his garden, dreaming of his first days in Kentucky.

Such is the outline of a long and event-filled poem, dated 1921-22. *New Earth* is followed by *John*, the story of a reckless moonshiner from the hills, a descendant of the pioneers, who is lured into the city by the cinema, dance halls, and the racetrack. He meets a city girl, marries, settles down in a neat cottage, sires a child, and only occasionally disappears for a night on the town. At an annual fair and racing meet, he gets drunk and sleeps with a fifteen-year-old girl, whose father ambushes him the next morning. At John's funeral, his wife vows that their little son will avenge his father's death.

The third narrative of the collection is a poem entitled *Joe*, about another immigrant peddler, but one who does *not* rise by virtue and hard work. Joe is a greenhorn who peddles on foot and then with a wagon, and even starts buying hides, wool, and so on, much like Joshua. But he makes the fatal mistake of seducing Suzy, an ugly, stupid farm girl, who becomes pregnant and whose family forces Joe to marry her. Suzy's father and brothers put Joe to work in the tobacco fields, and though he hates it at first, he soon takes to it "as if he had roots growing in the soil" (p. 402). He is beginning to understand what the older settlers treasured in the "security of the old Kentucky home and old glory" (p. 402) when a saloon quarrel with a resentful in-law ends his life.

The last three pieces of Schwartz's book describe the black component of Kentucky society. They concern the rivalry between George Washington<sup>11</sup> and Thomas, which ends in the murder of



George, Thomas's trial, and the threat of a lynching.

All of the poems in the volume, including the autobiography, revolve around the theme of the collection, which is the forging of a new culture on "the broad plains of Kentucky" (p. 152) from European and African elements. *New Earth* is the most important poem in the collection by virtue of its length, but the shorter narratives are essential to Schwartz's plan to treat the three elements—white Christian, Negro, and Jewish—that make up the new society. His effort to penetrate the immigrant experience of Anglo-Saxons and Negroes is only partly successful, however. The poem about John, the mountaineer in conflict with urban society and the law, is a sort of benevolent tourist's view of the backwoodsman, distorted, if sympathetic, and as parodic as today's television world of the rural South. It must have been a great novelty in Yiddish literature in the twenties, nevertheless. A much more original and successful effort to comprehend the ways of rural society is the poem about "Jewish Joe," the loser. Here, Schwartz explores the possibility that the two white cultures, the old rural Christian and the new immigrant Jewish, may come to respect each other's ways. The characters of the poem are deftly sketched and original. The old farmer is not the stereotyped, offended father but is encouraging and kind. The violent, resentful brother Walt, who kills Joe, has a plausible motive for his hatred. In fact, the only motive not well explained is Joe's lust for Suzy. But Joe's lapse leads him to discover the positive values of agrarian life, even if it ultimately prevents his assimilation into the new society.

In the final three poems, about blacks, Schwartz invents a little world of good-natured poor people, living in shanties, doing unskilled work for whites or, like the character Thomas, pilfering and sponging. Sex, emotional religion, and drink are the consolations of these blacks. At the same time they precipitate the conflict between the representative men, George, the hard-working married man, and Thomas, the charming drone. The hostile white community appears only when Thomas infringes the law by murdering his rival. Schwartz offends the sensibilities of readers of the 1980s with his coarse minstrel-show clichés of shining black faces, rolling eyeballs, and tap-dancing. But when he forgets to be picturesque and concentrates on the universal human emotions of fear and rejection, as in Thomas's ordeal while hiding from the law, he can be very good indeed.<sup>12</sup>

Schwartz appears to have had no systematic knowledge of local



history, though he absorbed a certain amount from his surroundings. He lived in the center of Lexington, near the oldest churches and public buildings. He doubtless read the local newspapers, which only a few months before his arrival had published a good account of the history of the Jewish community, with photographs. And he had obviously brought with him notions about the South and its inhabitants that were already a part of American folklore. Schwartz may, of course, have read the city and county histories. He lived near Lexington's new public library (built 1904-05), which had a substantial collection. But there are no unmistakable signs of it; and given Schwartz's intentions, it was hardly necessary.

Schwartz's fictional city is clearly modeled on Lexington, as the street names Vine, Water, and Clay prove (p. 239);<sup>13</sup> but Lexington's real history, from late eighteenth-century outpost to prosperous city by the 1860s, is replaced in the poem by an imaginary account of a post-Civil War farm community which expands as Josh's business and family increase. Schwartz's symbols of civic growth are luxury shops on a newly paved main street, a new courthouse, the statue of a Confederate hero on the market square, railroads, and modern flour mills.<sup>14</sup> At the same time there is still, "only a block or two from the dressed-up main street . . . a labyrinth" (pp. 227 ff.) of Negro shanties.

The description of the courthouse and square illustrate Schwartz's methods of fictionalizing real objects:

The wooden court-house disappeared.  
And in its place there proudly stood  
A large three-storied building, solid and broad,  
Of heavy gray stone blocks  
With dozens of marble steps  
Ascending to the height of justice . . . .  
The broad square around it was covered  
With fine green grass cut short, . . .  
On the broad, smooth, market place  
Arose, proud and knightly,  
Massive and heavy, the statue  
Of brave Lee . . .  
He sits [on his horse] and looks down on the market  
From the high, gray, stony pedestal—  
People and horses are like toys below him. (pp. 227-29)



The metamorphosis of Lexington's courthouse, of which there have been five, from a log building into the late Victorian specimen which still looms over the center of town, is collapsed into two stages. Schwartz may be describing the three-storied post-Civil War (1884-97) structure of gray granite which is depicted in a number of late nineteenth-century histories and guidebooks,<sup>15</sup> but the modern building fits his description almost as well. The "statue of brave Lee" which surveys the courthouse lawn is patterned on the 1911 statue<sup>16</sup> of General John Hunt Morgan, a local celebrity whose name would have been less well known outside central Kentucky. The busy market over which the bronze general presides still convened monthly in Schwartz's day, not far from his store. It was the colorful "court day" assembly, a horse-, flea-, and farmer's-market abolished in 1921 as a public nuisance.<sup>17</sup>

Lexington's two synagogues also appear in *New Earth*, albeit disguised in form. According to the poem, it is the influx of Lithuanians and their concern over religious education for their children that stimulates talk of building a synagogue for the congregation, whose members have "roamed around like gypsies every Friday night and Saturday morning / Looking each time for another place / Where they could pray together" (p. 267). Joshua reconciles the German and Litvak parties and persuades both factions to contribute. He buys an old Catholic church in a seedy neighborhood and converts it into a synagogue, making the best of its faults (wrong orientation, no room for an altar in the center of the sanctuary, no separate gallery for women).

Schwartz has incorporated several real events in the composition of these episodes in *New Earth*. The "Israelites of Lexington" began observing the Day of Atonement together in private homes beginning in 1864; and in 1878 or 1879 they attempted to establish a congregation.<sup>18</sup> The first permanent one, however, was Adath Israel, which came into being in 1903, when families from Lexington and Paris, Kentucky, met in the Odd Fellows' Hall and then in a new German Evangelical Church (built in 1898) at 529 Maryland Avenue, which they eventually bought in 1905. A second, Conservative congregation was founded in 1915 and likewise bought an old church on Maxwell Street, which it still occupies. Perhaps Schwartz had heard the anecdote, recorded by Mrs. Dubrovsky, about the founding of the Conservative Ohavay Zion synagogue. In 1914, a seminarian's talk on the meaning of Yom Kippur extended the service, held in the Odd Fellows' Hall,



past the rental period, and the arrival of the owners for a meeting interrupted the solemn worship. The congregation immediately began searching for a building lot but finally bought and converted an old church.<sup>19</sup> This synagogue was around the corner from the Alperin house, where Schwartz lived at the beginning and end of his stay in Lexington.

Schwartz's description of the fictional synagogue is a collage of images. It combines the Maxwell Street building and a now demolished Catholic church, St. Peter's, which stood until 1930 on North Limestone between Second and Third Streets, almost in sight of Schwartz's Second Street duplex. It was, as the poem says, "an old, tall church of red brick, / With long narrow windows of stained glass / Which ended in an arch close to the cornice" (p. 271). "Over the tall, narrow, arched doors," a marble plaque declared, "You are Peter and on this rock will I build my church" (p. 272).<sup>20</sup> Other details, such as the tree-shaded lawn, and the interior, with its crucifix, black pews, ranks of organ pipes, and painted ceiling, are imaginary. The noisy, decaying neighborhood of the old church, the Irish tavern, smelly Greek restaurant, Italian fruit market, Chinese laundry, and milling "crowds of blacks" could be a description of the area around St. Peter's, if one allows Schwartz a little poetic scope. The blocks of North Limestone Street between Main Street and the church, in the pre-Prohibition days when Schwartz had recently arrived in Lexington, were full of bars (some of whose owners might well have been Irish, e.g., Sullivan, Vaughn, Coyne, Slattery), Greek restaurants (Paulus, Dadas, Karos, Popos, Pollis), and at least one Italian fruit-seller (Frank Ginocchio). Lexington's only Chinese laundry (Charles Woo's) was a few blocks away, at 200 East Main Street and Walnut. In contrast, the Maxwell Street synagogue was, in the early twenties, surrounded by residences; the old Maryland Avenue Evangelical church still presides over an avenue of shabby Victorian houses.

In *New Earth*, Joshua's first American-born child dies and is interred in the community cemetery:

"May God help you as you till now have  
"Been of help to me in my day of need—  
"Show your mercy to my dead one, too.  
"Grant me a grave for my child."  
And his words with their  
Trembling sounds touched all hearts . . .



And then the eldest of the neighbors  
Stepped forward, stopped,  
And in a quiet voice answered softly:  
"The cemetery is open to you,  
"Choose a place there among the best rows . . ."  
The Jew bowed humbly . . .  
And quietly, trustfully, he spoke again:  
". . . I ask a separate piece of ground  
"To start my own cemetery;  
"And if I am destined to live  
"I will repay this enormous debt." (pp. 209-10)

But the Jewish cemetery that Joshua wants is still part of the town's Christian cemetery when other sickly immigrant children and Joshua's own wife Sarah go to their last rest, "encircled by alien crosses" (p. 250).

Schwartz had obviously been to Lexington's beautiful old cemetery, set spaciously on the west side of the city. The cemetery includes a plot purchased by the Jewish burial association, the Spinoza Society, in 1884, to which thirty bodies from the original Jewish cemetery, begun in 1872, were removed.<sup>21</sup> The lichen-encrusted headstones of three children are the oldest Jewish graves in the section.<sup>22</sup> These markers may have provided Schwartz with suggestions for the chronology of his fictional Jewish settlement; children's graves from the 1870s presuppose, of course, an earlier community of families. Schwartz returned to descriptions of the Christian-Jewish cemetery three times in his longest poem. His translator, who visited Lexington in 1975, was amazed to discover that the graveyard is not an invention of the poet's. Mrs. Dubrovsky seems to find the proximity of Christian and Jewish graves oppressive, while Schwartz views the combined burials as symbolic of the painful aspects of assimilation. Neither knew, apparently, that Jewish families of Lexington had closed down their own remote cemetery and bought property from the trustees of the city's cemetery, and that the members of the Spinoza Society considered the transaction a shining example of cooperation between Jews and Gentiles.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, to a person used to the ancient Jewish cemeteries of Europe or the vast burial parks of New York, carefully separated by religion and sect, the sight of "crosses, crosses, crosses everywhere" (p. 312) around the Hebrew-inscribed markers must have been unforgettable.



If the landmarks and streets of Lexington provided Schwartz with suggestive material for his recreation of immigrant life, the folk-culture of Kentucky supplied examples of humanity new to his experience: the feudist, lyncher, murderer, and ex-slave among them. In 1921, while Schwartz was still compiling his book, the most notorious living Kentucky feudist, "Devil Anse" (Anderson) Hatfield, died peacefully in his bed, and even the *New York Times* took note. Perhaps this newsworthy item caught Schwartz's eye. But even if it did not, Kentucky's vengeful mountaineers were already permanent fixtures in America's gallery of character types, known far beyond the boundaries of the Commonwealth. (A young scholar from the mountains of eastern Kentucky, who presented his master's thesis on the subject of feuds to the University in 1913, states that he had once met an English missionary from India who knew about the feuds of Breathitt County.)<sup>24</sup> Not long before Schwartz came to Lexington, another immigrant, a Swiss named C. G. Mutzenbergh, had tried to analyze the lawlessness of the citizenry in his book *Kentucky's Famous Feuds and Tragedies: Authentic History of the World Renowned Vendettas of the "Dark and Bloody Ground"* (Hyden, 1897). Mutzenbergh attributes the vendettas to the "courageous but revengeful disposition of all Kentuckians" (p. 12); and Schwartz explains this same disposition as a legacy of frontier life, which sharpened a man's instincts but also made him "savage, unpitying in wrath." (p. 194) A man settled his quarrels with murder, and his family or friends turned his grievance into a private war:

Right or not—his brother and his friend  
Immediately enlisted on his side;  
Whole families, old and young, wives and children  
Fought for generations.  
The cause of the original battle long forgotten by the battlers.  
(p. 194)

Schwartz's character Joshua has just such touchy, clannish neighbors; and his heroic moonshiner John, shot down by the outraged parent, has a young son who will grow up to avenge him (p. 376).<sup>25</sup> Schwartz sees this violence as part of the Anglo-Saxon immigrant's heritage, which once had survival value but has become a destructive force. He endows all of his characters except the Jews with this murderous impulse: Joshua's grandson sees a



drunken black killed, his skull crushed by a whiskey bottle, when he staggers into a white man on the street (p. 336). "Jewish Joe," the failure, dies after his brother-in-law beats him into a coma. And even black Thomas, the ladies' man, kills a rival over the striped shirt which symbolizes his sexual attractiveness.

During his first years in Lexington, Schwartz was also able to see another manifestation of Kentucky violence, the lynch mob, to which he alludes with chilling effect in *The End of Thomas*. In the poem, the black culprit, waiting to be sentenced in the courtroom, "can hear the angry, impatient roar, / Coming from the street, / Reverberating on the wall of the courthouse / Like a cold, stormy wave" (p. 448). The incident which must have caused Schwartz to ponder this dark side of Kentucky life is still remembered in Lexington. In February, 1920, a deranged black known as Will Lockett confessed to the murder of a ten-year-old girl, as well as to four other killings. Lockett had barely been arrested and sent to Frankfort for protection when the governor and local police had to disperse a crowd bent on lynching him. At his trial in Lexington five days later, the National Guard was forced to shoot six men in order to stop a huge mob that assaulted the courthouse.<sup>26</sup> The governor then called in the Army, which placed Lexington under martial law for two weeks. This depressing affair caught the nation's attention, since it was the first case in which Southerners had put down a lynching by force. Lockett died in the electric chair in March. That same month, Grant Smith, a black accused of sleeping with his employer's fourteen-year-old daughter, was brought back from Michigan to nearby Paris, Kentucky, in elaborate secrecy. In spite of precautions, a gang of twenty men surprised the officers, took Smith out on the Lexington-Maysville Pike, and, according to the newspaper account, hanged him from telephone pole no. 787, where he was discovered by a reporter. *The Lexington Herald* (March 31, p. 4) blamed the governor for returning the prisoner to a region "still inflamed on account of the tragedy in Lexington" a few months earlier.

The next year, in 1921, a black named Richard James was shot by police during a robbery in Midway (a neighboring village half way between Lexington and Frankfort) in which two young white watchmen were killed. James escaped and hid out in the field until his wound (a bullet in the stomach) forced him to surrender. When one of the jurors at this trial refused to vote for the death penalty, the judge declared a mistrial; and on the same night, fifty men,



some masked, woke the jailer at Versailles, in the next county, where James was lodged, took the jail keys, dragged James from his cell, and hanged him from a cottonwood tree on the outskirts of the town (March 13, 1921).

The similarities between James's flight and that of Thomas in Schwartz's poem are suggestive. Thomas, after murdering his antagonist, hides out in the woods for three days until hunger, tearing his innards like an angry dog—to paraphrase the verses—drives him out. He is "caught in the field / His blue coat was smeared / With half-dried wet clay and soil" (p. 446); he is brought to trial still disfigured from the struggles of his arrest (p. 447). He knows he can count on no mercy, and outside he hears the roar of the lynch mob. The poem is, at least in translation, the most effective piece in the collection, and its evocation of human guilt and fear is enhanced by the protagonist's oppressed, outcast condition. Schwartz's blacks are unconvincing except in this one case. No doubt during those dismal months from February 1920 to March 1921 he had seen in the eyes of black Lexingtonians the fear he describes so well in the poem, dated 1922.

Since Schwartz has demonstrably used fragments of Lexington life and history in his poems, the question arises whether he might have had a real model for his symbolic character Joshua—who like Joshua of old leads the Israelites to a New Canaan—and perhaps for others, like "Jewish Joe." It is now too late to know with certainty, for most of Schwartz's acquaintances are dead. But there are similarities between the Joshua of *New Earth* and a prominent early settler of the Blue Grass named Joshua Speyer. Born in Saxony in 1829, he emigrated to America in 1863, spent time in Cincinnati and Fort Smith, Arkansas, and arrived in Lexington in 1867, where he went into a partnership in hides, wool, and scrap metal, a business which he pursued with notable success for fifty years, until his death in 1920. His son Jacob joined the firm in 1890. Joshua Speyer had three sons (instead of four like the fictional Joshua), and two of them bear the same names, Jacob and Edwin; he also had three daughters.<sup>27</sup> An 1887 guide to Lexington praises the Speyer family's reputation, which was already "familiar in every county of Kentucky as well as Tennessee" and "in all the large cities in the United States"; it extolls the firm's extensive yards and buildings, enormous annual business, and concludes, "they have by industry and thrift, and fair dealings, built their large business out of almost nothing."<sup>28</sup> When Joshua Speyer died in



1920, still "active in the affairs of the concern," he was one of the oldest citizens in the town, and the senior Jewish merchant. The similarity of names and occupation, of chronology, as well as the coincidence of Speyer's death in 1920 while Schwartz was working on these poems, all make a *prima facie* case for him as the model for at least certain aspects of the fictional Joshua of *New Earth*.

But Speyer was a Saxon, not a Lithuanian, and he had not begun his career, like Schwartz's protagonist in *New Earth*, as a peddler—an unlikely hero for an "epic." The choice of hero is, however, a stroke of originality, and for Schwartz's purpose, which is to describe the immigrant experience in Kentucky, the peddler seems particularly apt, because he is a metaphor as well as a historical type. From the 1880s until the 1920s, when these "forgotten pioneers" began to disappear, perhaps as many as a quarter of a million European Jews, often mere boys, struck out alone into rural America with 120 pounds of merchandise on their backs, dreaming of becoming another Guggenheim, Altman, Gimbel, Marshall Field, or Levi Strauss, ex-peddlers all. The peddler is a kind of Jewish equivalent of the frontiersman who starts out as a buckskin-clad fur-trapper and ends up as a great landowner, though Schwartz only hints at the parallel between the two types of pioneers (Cf. pp. 173-74). To every Americanized Jew of Schwartz's day, the wandering salesman's experience was a first- or second-hand reality. Many of Schwartz's acquaintances in Lexington (like the Herman brothers) had made their way to the Blue Grass as peddlers. Thus the peddler was a sympathetic figure to Yiddish readers in America and in Europe. Furthermore, his experience in the South was an interesting variation on the theme. The Jewish peddler, with his unmistakable "nose and pack," to use Schwartz's irony (p. 235), did not meet with contempt in Dixie, as he had in Pennsylvania, but instead with a mixture of curiosity and awe:

The reason for special treatment was because he was a Jew and precisely because it was the South. There were two reasons for this: economic and religious. Because the Jewish peddler began to deal with the Negroes and rural sharecroppers, he eliminated himself as serious competition for the local storekeeper. Not until some forty years later was the local storekeeper interested in the Negro trade. But the important reason for the peddler's happiness in the South—the



Bible belt—was his religion . . . fundamentalist in its Protestantism, with heavy emphasis on the books of the Old Testament. In small towns and rural communities where probably no one had ever seen a Jew before, the peddler was the "living witness" of Biblical truth, and many people were particularly anxious to have him as a lodger for a night. The peddler himself may not have been aware of it, but for these fundamentalist Protestants, he bore identity with Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Second Coming. He would be asked questions about the Bible and in this he was fortunate. Most peddlers started out at the age of sixteen, some a year or so earlier. These young boys were still steeped in the orthodoxy and Judaistic legalism of their upbringing. The Southern farmers listened to them with respect and looked forward to their coming.<sup>29</sup>

So Schwartz's account of the reception of Joshua by the farmers and pastors of his future home is essentially true: Joshua's story recalls their grandfather's tales of loneliness and hardship on the frontier, and the austere preacher urges his flock to take in the Jew for the sake of the Old Testament Patriarchs and of Jesus himself.

In the course of the sixty years since the *Kentucky* poems were composed, the society and most of the landmarks that Schwartz observed so attentively have disappeared. Even the traits that separated the three human groups on which he concentrated his attention have become blurred; it is harder to distinguish a mountaineer from a city boy, a Jew from a gentile; and the lifestyle of blacks is changing dramatically. The modern reader of Schwartz's poems thus finds his Kentucky almost as quaint as Dicken's England and must make an effort at mental reconstruction to be able to read the work with a balanced appreciation of what has aged badly and what is permanently valuable. Schwartz reminds us that we are all immigrants in this country, that we or our families have all shared the traumatic experience of separation, and that not all of our people have survived. His ability to portray the emotions of the lonely pioneer, or peddler, or ex-slave, shines through even the stilted prose of a translation, and he makes us see Kentucky afresh with the bewildered eyes of a newcomer. Such an intuition is priceless.<sup>30</sup>



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Dubrovsky, "I. J. Schwartz's *Kentucky*" (Ed.D. diss., Columbia University, 1972). Dubrovsky is citing A. Mukdani. Citations of *Kentucky* in my text and notes refer to the translation by Gertrude Dubrovsky in her dissertation.

<sup>2</sup>Dubrovsky, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup>Kovno is now Kaunas, in the Lithuanian S.S.R. There are a number of villages called *Petraičiai*. Schwartz's home was probably the one about forty miles east of Kaunas, near the East Prussian border. When Schwartz left Lithuania in 1906, it was part of Russia and had a population of about two million, of which over half of the urban population was Jewish.

<sup>4</sup>The Haskalah was a movement to end the cultural isolation of European Jews by modernizing and secularizing education, replacing Yiddish with German (or the national language), and encouraging Jews to adopt the life-style of the surrounding culture. Moses Mendelssohn was the leader of the movement in late eighteenth-century Germany. The Enlightenment reached Russia somewhat later, notably c. 1860-80, the years before Schwartz's birth.

<sup>5</sup>Details of biography taken from Dubrovsky, pp. 2-26. Schwartz's greatest contribution to Yiddish literature is his influence within Di Yunge, which Irving Howe, in *World of Our Fathers* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 428, describes as responsible for "the beginnings of a distinctively modern Yiddish literature." As a group, Di Yunge rejected the political commitment typical of earlier Yiddish writers and instead turned to European literatures in search of an aesthetic rather than an ideological basis for writing. They read the Symbolists and Walt Whitman and translated important authors, looking for models of sophisticated form, meter, and language. For as literary pioneers, they had no classics to imitate or against which to rebel. Schwartz was the first Yiddish translator of Whitman, a "tasteful" translator of Shakespeare (Howe, p. 444), whose blank verse he adapted to his purpose in *Kentucky*, and an explorer of novel forms like the narratives written in Lexington, which owe something to Longfellow as well as to Whitman.

<sup>6</sup>Krasne seems to have suggested to Schwartz the idea, if not the figure, of the *shohet* and Hebrew teacher in his poem *New Earth*.

<sup>7</sup>In 1920 they took a house at 241 East Sixth Street, now in a modest black neighborhood and in the early twenties apparently a mixed residential area, to judge from one of the poems: "And in the nights, with the stars close overhead, / Sounds reach me, here on my porch: / Sounds of horses whinnying, and the rhythm / Of mandolins, soft, tender / Which are gaily interrupted / By the peculiar resounding laughter / of big black, Negro children" (p. 153). The small frame bungalow on Sixth was probably inconveniently far from the family business, so in 1922 or 1923, they moved to 258 Market Street, into what is now a handsomely restored early nineteenth-century town house, across the street from the public library and the campus of Transylvania University. In 1924, they moved once again, this time into a new brick



duplex at 113 1/2 (now 115) West Second Street. In 1926, the Schwartzes rented larger quarters, the so-called Bradford House, at 193 North Mill Street, on Gratz Park, like the Market Street house. The Bradford House was the home of Kentucky's first newspaper publisher, and the razing of his late eighteenth-century house in 1955 led to the formation of the historical preservation society that has done much to save Lexington's interesting buildings.

<sup>8</sup>One informant (Paritz) believes that the store first opened in the first block of North Limestone Street, but I find no evidence in contemporary city directories.

<sup>9</sup>According to two informants, Paritz and Friedman (see note 10 below), the instructor was Joe Lee Davis, on the faculty from 1925-30. He subsequently became professor of American literature at the University of Michigan.

<sup>10</sup>I am indebted to Ruth Reed, of Lexington, Mrs. Helen Alperin Paritz of Lexington, Mrs. Goldie Krasne Wides of White Plains (Schwartz's niece), and Mrs. Shirley Friedman of White Plains (Mrs. Wides's daughter) for details of Schwartz's life in Lexington.

<sup>11</sup>Washington is a common surname among black Kentuckians, and the current Lexington city directory lists a George Washington, Jr. Schwartz was not satirizing blacks with an inappropriate name.

<sup>12</sup>*The End of Thomas*, about the flight, capture, and trial of Thomas, anticipates by a few years a somewhat similar poem, "Pondy Woods," an anthology piece by Robert Penn Warren (a Kentuckian), about Big Jim Todd, a black who is hiding from a posse for an unspecified crime.

<sup>13</sup>"They settled near the canals, / On Vine Street, Water Street, Clay Street, / The streets which cut across / The gleaming train tracks, / And where convivial blacks congregate . . ." (p. 239).

Water Street, now combined with Vine Street, ran beside the town branch, which was an open canal until the end of the nineteenth-century. The railroad tracks ran along this creek, behind the stores on Main Street. There is a view of the canal, tracks, and Water Street in *A Review of Lexington, Kentucky, As She Is* (New York: John Lethem, [1887]), p. 32. Schwartz was undoubtedly thinking of Clay Avenue, not Clay Street (a distinction which may not be obvious in Yiddish).

<sup>14</sup>According to *Illustrated Lexington* (Lexington: Transylvania Printing Co., 1919), unpaginated, printed the year after Schwartz arrived, the three leading industries were construction, flour-milling, and tobacco. Milling has virtually disappeared.

<sup>15</sup>E.g., G. W. Ranck, *Guide to Lexington*, 2nd ed. (Lexington: Transylvania Printing Co., 1884), p. 17. It appears on the cover of *A Review of Lexington* as well as on the frontispiece. See J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *The Court-Houses of Lexington* (Lexington: privately printed, 1937), which has a photograph of the building at p. 24.

<sup>16</sup>Coleman, *Court-Houses*, p. 38, n. 42.

<sup>17</sup>Coleman, *Court-Houses*, pp. 35-38; photo at p. 33.

<sup>18</sup>G. W. Ranck, *History of Lexington, Kentucky* (Cincinnati: R. Clarke, 1872), p. 390; and W. H. Perrin, ed., *History of Fayette County, Kentucky* (Chicago: O. L. Baskin, 1882), pp. 335-36.



<sup>19</sup>Gertrude Dubrovsky, "Kentucky's Yiddish Poet," *Courier Journal and Times Magazine* (Louisville), 14 September 1975, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup>J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *The Squire's Sketches of Lexington* (Lexington: Henry Clay Press, 1972), p. 39, has a photograph of the church. The white (not black) marble plaque over the door is illegible in the picture and no one recalls whether the inscription was in gold gothic script, as Schwartz says, or in roman; or whether it was in English or Latin.

<sup>21</sup>L. K. Frankel, ed., *History, Charter, Constitution, By-Laws, Rules and Regulations of the Spinoza Society of Lexington, Kentucky* (Lexington, [1937]). There is a short history of the cemetery in *The Lexington Herald*, 15 April 1917, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup>According to the plats kindly made available to me by Mr. James Frankel, they are the graves of Simmy David, d. 1868, and twin infants, d. 1875, also the children of Joe David, an early settler who (according to the *Herald*, 15 April 1917, p. 3), was a veteran of Woolford's Confederate cavalry regiment.

<sup>23</sup>"The action of the Trustees . . . in conveying the part . . . of the cemetery in their charge to the Jewish community of their city, was characterized by that liberal and kindly spirit 'which makes the whole human race akin,' and which is peculiarly in keeping with this age and this century and Kentucky chivalry. . . . No where on earth could a consecrated spot have been selected more beautiful for the loved ones of our race . . ." (*History . . . of the Spinoza Society*, pp. 4-5).

<sup>24</sup>J. E. C. Johnson, "Social and Historical Background of Kentucky Feuds" (M.A. thesis, University of Kentucky, 1913), p. 19.

<sup>25</sup>On children involved in feuds, cf. Meriel D. Harris, "Two Famous Kentucky Feuds and Their Causes" (M.A. thesis, University of Kentucky, 1940), pp. 10-11. James Anderson Burns, *The Crucible: A Tale of Kentucky Feuds* (Oneida, Kentucky: Oneida Institute, 1928), p. 35.

<sup>26</sup>Coleman, *Sketches*, p. 80, has two photographs of the crowd.

<sup>27</sup>Obituary notice, *The Lexington Herald*, 29 November 1920, p. 1, col. 3.

<sup>28</sup>*A Review of Lexington*, pp. 60-61. Cf. the poem, pp. 253-57.

<sup>29</sup>Harry Golden, *Forgotten Pioneer* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1963), pp. 41-42.

<sup>30</sup>I wish to pay special thanks to four people who helped me gather material for this tribute to Schwartz: Mrs. Miriam Siegel, who first brought *Kentucky* to my attention; Mrs. Helen Paritz, whose recollections and photographs have been invaluable; Mr. Burton Milward, whose knowledge of local history is unsurpassed; and Dr. Arthur Graham, who translated portions of *Kentucky* for me and tolerated my beginner's enthusiasm for Yiddish.

When this essay was in proofs, Dr. Graham discovered another Kentucky poem by Schwartz entitled "Mammoth Cave" which had not appeared in any of the editions of the poet's works which we had examined. Perhaps there are still other Kentucky-inspired poems among the numerous untranslated verses.