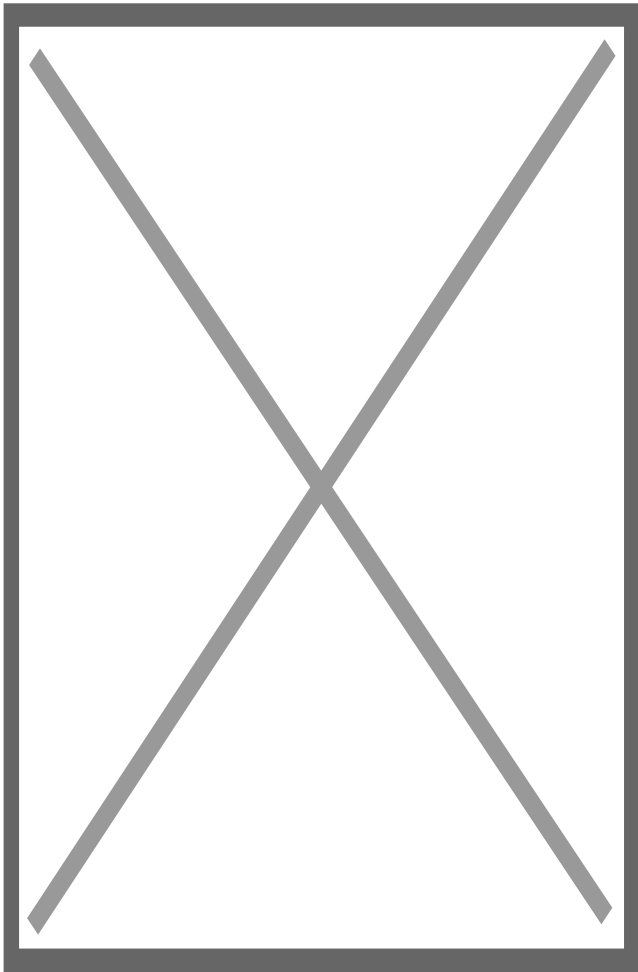


Between the synagogue and the streets

Chaim Grade's characters give voice to the questions, quarrels, and quiet devotions of European Jews on the cusp of the Second World War.

by [Beth Kissileff](#) in the [September 2025](#) issue

In Review



Sons and Daughters

A Novel

By Chaim Grade, translated by Rose Waldman
Knopf

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

On page 613 of this newly translated novel by acclaimed Yiddish writer Chaim Grade, a poet named Khlavneh says to the family of his fiancée, “And who said I abandoned Jewishness? I left the synagogue and went to the Jews in the street.”

Sons and Daughters was serialized in two New York-based Yiddish newspapers in the 1960s and '70s. After Grade died in 1982, his widow, Inna Hecker, refused to allow the serialization to be translated and published as a novel. She died without a will in 2010, and only after Grade's literary estate was transferred to the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and the National Library of Israel could his final work be translated into English.

Grade himself, like his character Khlavneh, left the Lithuanian yeshiva where he spent eight years of his life (more than any other modern Jewish writer, according to Yiddish literature professor David Fishman). Certainly the tension between the expectations of the rabbis and the world of the Jew in the street is at the heart of all of Grade's writing. Beyond that, tragically, is the fact that the European world of the yeshiva which Grade exited ceased to exist on that continent once the Second World War began.

The poignancy of reading a book set in 1930 about characters unaware of the cataclysm to come—although its reverberations can be felt on every page—cannot be overstated. The plot of *Sons and Daughters* resides in the tension felt by the rabbi of Morehdalye, a small town in Poland, over the fact that none of his five children (three sons and two daughters) follows in the path he has laid out for them. He deeply loves his wife from an arranged marriage and serves faithfully as the town rabbi—one of three local religious functionaries, alongside a *dayan*, or rabbinical judge, and a rabbi's substitute funded by the impoverished townspeople.

All the children diverge from their father's path: one goes to Switzerland to write a dissertation on Spinoza and marries a Christian woman there, one marries a rabbi her father chose for her but does not love him, one goes into business in Warsaw, one becomes a nurse in Vilna (much like Grade's first wife, Frumme-Liebe Klepfish, who was killed in the war), and the youngest becomes a pioneer in Israel. The children's mother—the rabbi's beloved wife—has one brother who has immigrated to America to be a rabbi there and another who tries his best to antagonize those around him, especially his own wife, at every turn. Scholars believe the tempestuous nature of this marriage is based on Grade's own turbulent second marriage. Inna was 15 years younger than Grade, and her father was Christian. She did not speak Yiddish, so she and Grade spoke only Russian together in their Brooklyn home.

One of the intricacies of *Sons and Daughters* that is not accessible in translation is its use of multiple languages in the conversations between characters. The son in Israel generally writes letters home in Yiddish so that his mother will understand them, but he sometimes veers into a Hebrew that's hard even for his educated father to understand. Mostly Yiddish is spoken by the characters, but some phrases are in Polish (as when the young people of Morehdalye successfully goad their elders into boycotting Jewish businesses, causing widespread poverty). As Adam Kirsch writes in his introduction to the novel, the use of multiple languages foreshadows various Jewish postwar futures: German was spoken in Switzerland, English in America (although Grade himself never mastered English), and Hebrew in Israel. Of all the languages in the novel, only Yiddish failed to find a future home.

The sense of rupture created by the novel's multiple languages points to the characters' struggles around translation and transmission of values. The three central characters, two rabbis and a religious teacher, all have difficulty transmitting to their children their passion for the way they live and observe their religion.

The former genius Zalia Ziskind—a gifted singer who was once the head of a yeshiva and now assists with the teaching in Morehdalye—is one of the most tragic figures in a novel filled with them. Part of Ziskind's genius is his sensitivity to suffering. He reads newspapers to learn as much as possible about the suffering of the larger

world, and he tells a former student about how the tragedies pile up in his mind. Yet he is largely ignorant of the suffering of his own son, who turns his back on the world of his father and lands in Polish prison for inciting the masses with Karl Marx's ideas. Unsure of whether he should intervene, Ziskind asks, "Should I free my son from prison against his will?" This question reveals the larger struggle faced by many of the novel's characters: how to care for those who don't want your help and have not asked for it.

The character who seems most clearly a stand-in for the novelist is Khlavneh, the Yiddish poet engaged to the rabbi's daughter, who is a nurse. In an argument with the intermarried brother who lives in Switzerland, Khlavneh sums up the essence of his Jewish identity:

The truth is that, more than anything else, it's the songs and the pouring out of the heart that have kept Jews together, and still do. More than all the rules in the Ohr HaChaim about forgotten, omitted, or rushed-through prayers and blessings. And the most beautiful poem, the one Jews can't live without, is Shabbos itself. Who hasn't written about it?

This book is Grade's invocation of the poetry not just of the sabbath but of the whole scaffolding of Jewish life that surrounds it: the people, the pettiness, the quarrels, the enmity, the derision, and the arguments as well as the love. This scaffolding keeps the characters united in some ways, though not wholly. By the end of the book, the rabbi has family members living in the United States, Switzerland, Israel, and various Polish towns. Within a decade of the time in which the story is set, only those living outside Europe will have an unquestioned chance of survival.

Grade's invocation of a world whose characters still don't know what is coming is especially precious to those of us who want to look back and know what was lost. This new translation offers a picture of the depth and richness of humanity in the vanished world of European Jewry. When Isaac Bashevis Singer won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978, there were those (including Elie Wiesel and Joseph Soloveitchik) who thought that Grade was the Yiddish writer most deserving of the accolade. *Sons and Daughters* is an essential argument for why they were correct.