

# JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY

EST 1917

The New York Times called Isaac Bashevis Singer a Polish writer. Here's how Wikipedia warriors made him Jewish again.

BY ASAF SHALEV JUNE 4, 2021



Author Isaac Bashevis Singer poses for a portrait outside the S. Rabinowitz Hebrew Book Store on New York's Lower East Side in 1968. (David Attie/Getty Images)

(JTA) — Few things rile an online crowd like a mistake in *The New York Times*. One example is the Twitter account of a contemptuous troll dedicated to pointing out typos and grammar mistakes in the paper of record.

But there's another category of error — the botching of a fraught historical detail — that elicits a special shock and insult.

In April, novelist Sigrid Nunez, writing an essay about unexpected bonds between strangers in the *Times*' style magazine, was found to have committed such a violation. She described, in passing, Isaac Bashevis Singer as a "Polish-American author."

The various reactions featured words like “yikes,” “obscene,” “disgusting,” “aghast” and “shanda.”

“Shame on @NYTIMES for erasing his identity and heritage,” one Twitter user wrote.

It may be true that the Nobel laureate was born and raised in Poland, but Singer is, in fact, best described as a Jewish author, and any labeling that elevates the former while ignoring the latter will strike many Jews as tone-deaf at best. This sensitivity is understandable given that Singer’s hyphenated identities are the result of his immigration to the United States only a few years before the near annihilation of Polish Jewry.

Since Nunez surely didn’t mean to bring about a crime against history, the question is where did she pick up the wording that appeared in The Times?

The likely answer is quite obvious: Wikipedia.

At the time, the introduction to the Wikipedia entry on Singer described him as a “Polish American writer in Yiddish.” The word “Jewish” appeared lower, in the body of the text.

Check now and you’ll see a different first line: Singer is “a Polish-born Jewish-American writer.” But the process of editing these few words was long and complicated, offering lessons on the pitfalls and continued promise of decentralized knowledge in the era of disinformation, with some possible insights about Polish ultranationalism.

The story of how a set of Wikipedia warriors made Isaac Bashevis Singer Jewish again starts a few years ago with a keyboard battle between two strong-willed strangers on the internet.

On one side: Wikipedia novice David Stromberg, 40, an Israel-born, U.S.-raised literary scholar and writer who lives in Jerusalem and whose research on Singer appears in academic journals.

“I’ve been in this battle since 2019, have gotten really obsessed with it,” he told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. “You ask yourself, ‘how could this be happening?’”

On the other side: seasoned Wikipedian Oliver Szydlowski, 22, a Polish college student enrolled in a construction management program at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia.

“Wikipedia is a battleground, and you do tend to argue with a lot of people,” Szydlowski told JTA. “What I’m trying to do is to improve every single article as much as possible.”



David Stromberg, a writer and scholar who studies the work of Isaac Bashevis Singer, sits at his computer in his Jerusalem home, May 2021. (Courtesy of Stromberg)

At first, Stromberg found himself consulting the Wikipedia page on Singer for work. He’s a serious Singer scholar, but the page provided a quick and easy reference for certain details, like the listing of Singer’s published works.

There were little mistakes in dates and titles, and Stromberg fixed them as he went along. Then one day, he noticed Singer was identified as a “Polish American,” so he fixed that, too.



Oliver Szydowski, a member of WikiProject Poland, is a college student from Poland who is attending an Australian university. (Courtesy of Oliver Szydowski)

“And within like an hour it was back,” Stromberg recalled. “So I went and changed it again. And again it was back.”

Stromberg navigated to the backend of the page and searched for who was making the changes. It was a user that went by the Polish-sounding “Oliszydowski.” A user page for Oliszydowski seemed to hint at the motivation of Stromberg’s adversary. The page showed that Oliszydowski was awarded the Polish Barnstar of National Merit, 1st Class by something called WikiProject Poland for having created an article on Polonophilia, which means fondness for Polish culture and history.

To Stromberg, Szydowski’s Wikipedia profile suggested that he might belong to the movement of Polish ultranationalists who have been fighting to improve the world’s perception of Poland’s 20th-

century history. The sanitized narrative advanced by this movement is that the Polish people bear no responsibility for the Holocaust and were themselves victims of the Nazis.



Singer won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978. (Getty Images)

As the back-and-forth over the Singer article continued, Szydowski's track record as an editor and knowledge of the Wikipedia rules allowed him to trump Stromberg's corrections. The Wikipedia administrators who got involved sided with Szydowski.

Eventually Stromberg's account was blocked. He had picked the username IBSLiteraryTrust, after the Isaac Bashevis Singer Literary Trust, where he serves as an editor. It was a bad choice — Wikipedia frowns on anything that looks like promotional activity by a business or organization.

Stromberg occasionally felt silly about continuing to fight and thought of letting the error stand, hoping that internet users would know better than to trust Wikipedia. But he also knew that Wikipedia is widely read and worried that the idea of Singer being a Polish

American could enter the wider culture — the kind of scenario that eventually happened with the phrase’s appearance in *The Times*.

So Stromberg fought on. He pleaded to have his account unblocked.

“I have been put here in order to stop a clarification that is scholarly in nature and has nothing to do with promotion or sales,” Stromberg wrote as part of a Wikipedia grievance process in November. “User Oliszydowski is constantly undermining these changes and using all kinds of Wikipedia tricks to block my access. Please help!!”

Oliszydowski, meanwhile, chimed in to say he merely hoped to enforce Wikipedia’s rules. According to his understanding, the descriptor “Jewish” didn’t belong in the lead sentence. Only a person’s nationality — rather than religion or ethnicity — is allowed in the lead, and Jewish is not a nationality, he argued.

Stromberg countered by giving the example of articles on important figures whose lead sentence did say “Jewish,” like Walter Benjamin, Martin Buber and Shalom Shabazi. And he added that according to Wikipedia itself, Jewish can, in fact, be considered a nationality.

“The Wikipedia entry on ‘Jewish’ clearly frames being Jewish as an ethnoreligious group and a nation, and states that ‘Jewish ethnicity, nationhood, and religion are strongly interrelated,’” Stromberg wrote.

Oliszydowski’s repeated rejections, Stromberg wrote, suggested “national belligerence.”

Nothing worked. Stromberg kept posting the wrong answers from the wrong accounts at the wrong moments and was rebuffed each time. He decided to give up.

“The administrators on Wikipedia were not interested in upholding what might be factual information,” Stromberg said in a recent interview. “Their main concern was that people should play by their rules. To me, that kind of game is not a game worth playing.”

Then he reconsidered.

“It’s not a game worth playing alone,” he said.

In the 20 years since it was launched, Wikipedia has proven remarkably resilient. Run by a nonprofit and edited by anyone with an internet connection who would like to volunteer, the site turned out to be reliable in defiance of its early critics while standing as the only noncommercial entity among the most popular websites on the internet. Wikipedia has become a part of the digital infrastructure.

Corporate propaganda and political agendas always made the job of Wikipedia difficult, but with the rise of state-sponsored, social media-powered disinformation, the Wikipedia community has struggled to fend off rogue editors and bad-faith revisions. When fighting breaks out in Gaza, for example, mobs wage war over related Wikipedia pages and administrators are forced to freeze editing. Meanwhile, the entry for the Second Intifada, which ended more than 15 years ago, is still being litigated.



Singer signs autographs at a reception hosted by members of the local Jewish community in Stockholm, Dec. 9, 1978. Singer was in the Swedish capital to receive his Nobel Prize. (Chuck Fishman/Getty Images)

The battle over Singer's identity didn't erupt in quite that way, but a small crowd did coalesce after the article in The Times was published. Stromberg recruited help through Facebook; others came from Twitter. Someone would edit the first line to add the word Jewish, and Oliszydowski would immediately undo it, adding comments that grew increasingly impatient and acerbic — for example: “Disruptive vandalism” and “No such nationality as Jewish. How hard is that to comprehend[?]”

An Israeli Wikipedia administrator named Amir Aharoni joined the challengers as the matter went into a dispute resolution process.

Aharoni wanted the word “Jewish” added “somewhere, anywhere, in the first, all-important sentence” of the Singer article, but with his more than 15 years of experience editing Wikipedia — and sorting through countless such disputes as an administrator — Aharoni also felt a responsibility to keep the debate civil.

“With sensitive things like the nationality of famous people, and especially Jews, of course, it's better to be careful and not fight with other editors,” Aharoni told JTA.

(Aharoni, who is an employee of the site's operator, the Wikimedia Foundation, said he edits Wikipedia as a volunteer, and that the two functions are independent of each other.)

Rather than argue against Singer's Polishness, Aharoni emphasized his Jewishness by citing sources like newspaper accounts and the Nobel Committee's summary of Singer's accomplishment.

To Oliszydowski's point that ethnicity and religion don't belong in the first line, Aharoni noted the Wikipedia Manual of Style, which says that ethnicity and religion do belong if they are “relevant to the subject's notability.”

The final decision, based on a consensus, excluding Oliszydowski, was to identify Singer in his entry's first sentence as Jewish, not Polish.

“There was a bit of an argument,” Aharoni said, “but it was small compared to many other arguments that happen in Wikipedia.”

A few weeks later, Szydowski agreed to an interview with JTA. He didn't sound exactly like the Polish propagandist that Stromberg suspected him of being.

Logging in from Australia, where he is finishing up a bachelor's degree in construction management and urban development, Szydowski said he still thinks it's correct to refer to Singer as a Pole but has accepted the community's decision.

“Me, personally, I don't really have an opinion,” he said. “If they concluded that he should be described as this or that does not matter just as long as it's correct within the Wikipedia guidelines. Really, I'm very neutral in this perspective in this dispute. I'm satisfied now that it has actually been discussed.”

His argument was that Singer was not only Polish by nationality but that the country played a significant role in his life and career. Singer left Poland when he was in his 30s, Szydowski noted, having already begun his career as a writer. And the literature he produced examined not just any Jews but Jews in Poland.

Szydowski doesn't deny Singer's Jewishness and, in fact, is something of a Judeophile. He talked about the richness of prewar Ashkenazi culture in Europe and recited statistics on the historical size of the Jewish population of different cities. His user profile says he has Ashkenazi heritage. Asked about that, Szydowski shared that his great-grandfather was Jewish and survived the war by concealing his identity.

“I love researching Jewish topics, and I love comparing what Polish and Ashkenazi Jewish cultures were like because the mutual influence was unbelievable,” Szydowski said.

The Singer dispute is not the only time Szydowski has insisted on striking “Jewish” from the first sentence of Wikipedia articles on notable Polish Jews. In 2019, for example, he became embroiled in an

argument with other Wikipedians over Renia Spiegel, a Holocaust victim whose diary has been compared to that of Anne Frank.

The nerdy-scholastic confidence of Szydłowski appears to have been shaped by years as a volunteer on Wikipedia. Starting as a young teenager, he admittedly had “no knowledge, no experience” and focused on fixing typos and grammatical errors or adding references.

Szydłowski eventually became involved in a group known as WikiProject Poland, one of more than 2,000 such collaborations on English Wikipedia alone. Each country has its own WikiProject with the goal to create standard language, improve the quality of related articles and generate new content. The 170 or so members of the Poland team help maintain tens of thousands of articles.

“It’s very difficult to say why I do it,” Szydłowski said. “I really enjoy it. I enjoy writing about history and reading about it.”

Asked about Stromberg’s suspicion that he’s a Polish nationalist harboring a certain agenda, Szydłowski denied the assertion. He said that as an editor his job is to enforce Wikipedia’s rule against personal points of view, which includes nationalism.

“I understand where [Stromberg is] coming from because there is a lot of nationalism on Wikipedia,” Szydłowski said. “It is a battleground, but what he’s saying — no, it’s not true.”

Stromberg said that Szydłowski’s denial belies the record of his actions — his insistence and persistence up until the point that other Wikipedians got involved and an arbitration mechanism was imposed.

“What’s a college student in Australia doing working overtime on the WikiProject Poland?” Stromberg asked. “Would a troll reveal that he’s a troll?”