

Sholem Aleichem: Eventful Years

A chronicle of his life and career, 1859-1916

1859

Sholem Rabinowitz, who later assumed the pen-name of Sholem Aleichem, was born in the Russian city of Pereyaslav, in the government of Poltava, on March 2, the third child of Menahem Nohum and Hayeh Esther. His childhood was spent in the nearby small town of Voronkov which, according to Sholem Aleichem, was "as big as a minute." But it was there, he says, that "I passed the best, the golden years of my naive childhood." Later he immortalized Voronkov in his writings as Kasrilevke. He tells us in his autobiographical *Funem Yarid* [The Great Fair] (speaking of himself in the third person) that "no other place in the world is so deeply imbedded in his memory as this blessed Kasrilevke-Voronkov." This despite his short stay there, for he left his birthplace before his *bar mitzva*. Yet it was mainly with Voronkov types that he peopled his works.

Sholem's father was a *maskil*—an adherent of the Jewish movement of enlightenment—and a fervent reader of neo-Hebrew literature. Withal he

was devout and a follower of the Hasidic rabbi of Talno. He was gentle, complaisant and taciturn. He was one of the pillars of the Jewish community of Voronkov and reputedly its wealthiest citizen. He plied a variety of trades but depended for his livelihood chiefly on a dry-goods store operated by his wife Hayeh Esther.

According to Sholem Aleichem, his mother was a masculine type: practical, a good manager, "a fast worker, and frightfully stern with her children," of whom there were more than a dozen.

Sholem early showed superior scholastic aptitude, as well as an uncanny bent for mimicking people and their mannerisms. He was superbly imaginative. "Houses assumed the shape of cities," he tells us, "courtyards became foreign lands, trees were transformed into men and women; girls into princesses, youths into princes; grass became an army of warriors, thorns and thistles were Philistines, Edomites, and Moabites; and I used to wage war on them." . . .

1869

Sholem's stay in Voronkov came to an end when a dishonest partner brought financial ruin to his father, who then returned with his family to

Adapted from Melech Grafstein's Sholem Aleichem Panorama, published by The Jewish Observer, London, Ontario, Canada, 1948, pp. 347-351.

Pereyaslav. There he dragged out a poor living by keeping a wretched little hotel and making raisin wine.

1872

Shortly after his *bar mitzva* Sholem's mother died in a cholera epidemic. Along with five other young children, he went to live for a short time with their maternal grandparents in Bohuslav. They were definite "types." The grandfather was a fanatical *hossid* and a mystic; and his wife, though a helpless bed-ridden paralytic, was the manager of the family finances and a strong-minded woman.

When the children returned home, they found a shrewish stepmother, whose stock of curses was so ingenious and plentiful that young Sholem collected and alphabetized them—"the first literary work of the future Sholem Aleichem," as he tells us later.

Nohum Robinowitz's squalid hostel also served as a rendezvous of the intelligentsia of the town. From them Sholem got an early taste for the Hebrew writers of the period. Abraham Mapu's (1808-1867) famous novel *Ahavas Zion* (The Love of Zion, published 1853) was the first novel read by him, read stealthily, "devoured one Saturday, from beginning to end, while lying in the attic and burning like a straw roof." This book stimulated him to write—also stealthily—a Hebrew "novel" of his own, patterned on it and entitled *Bas Zion* (The Daughter of Zion). He was interrupted one night by his stepmother raising a hue and cry about the lamp-oil he was wasting. He was, however, compensated by the admiration for the unfinished "work" expressed by his father and one of his literary cronies. . . .

1873

Entered Russian county school at Pereyaslav. . . .

1876

Graduated from county school with distinction. For a short time he gave private lessons in Russian.

1877

Engaged by elderly rich country squire, Elimelech Loyev (his future father-in-law), as tutor on his country estate of Sofievka in the government of Kiev. His sole pupil was Loyev's fourteen-year old daughter (by a second marriage) Olga. The squire was a born ruler of men, maintained a stern discipline in his home and on his estate, but was as revered as he was feared by his subordinates.

He had the "appearance of a general, a field-marshal, with the voice of a lion"—Sholem Aleichem wrote in his memoirs—"an unusual type, eccentric and original, a man of wide experience, with a prodigious memory and a remarkable gift of speech." His proficiency as a practical farmer was equally amazing.

Spent three years in Sofievka. Continued his voracious reading of both modern Hebrew and Russian, previously begun with an eye to preparing himself for the vocation of *rabbiner*, or government appointed "crown" rabbi. But he wrote even more than he read. "I wrote every genre of literature that I read," he tells of the period between the ages of 17 and 21. He wrote "lyrical and narrative poems, novels, no end of dramas, and published articles. . . . I used to send my 'works' to all the Jewish and Russian periodicals . . . and supplied the newspaper offices with fuel for their stoves."

1879

Appeared in print for the first time in the Hebrew periodical *Ha-Zefirah* (Warsaw), in a letter in defense of the Jewish youth of Pereyaslav. . . .



Sholem Aleichem

1880

Elected *rabbiner* in Luben in the government of Poltava.

1881

Published in the Hebrew *Ha-Meliz* (St. Petersburg) an article on education and the next year two more articles on kindred themes.

1883

On May 12 married his former pupil Olga Loyev. At the request of his father-in-law, he gave up the rabbinate and settled in Belozerkov. Was unhappy to live on father-in-law's bounty, and there is evidence of a severe conflict between them.

The year 1883 was an epochal one in his career as writer: published his first Yiddish story, *Tzvey Shtayner* (Two Stones) in Alexander Zederbaum's (1816-1893) *Yiddishes Folksblat* (St. Petersburg).

1884

Encouraged by Zederbaum, wrote voluminously for *Folksblat*: stories, feuilletons, articles and poems, frequently under pseudonyms. . . .

1887

Moved to Kiev and became active in commerce, trading in grain and sugar and on the stock exchange.

Did business by day and wrote at night. His great literary triumph of the year was his short story "Dos Messerl" (The Pocketknife), published in *Folksblat*. It was enthusiastically lauded by the Jewish historian S. M. Dubnov (1860-1941; then the literary critic of the Russian-Jewish periodical *Voskhod*). Sholem Aleichem regarded this story as a turning-point in his literary career. Now wrote almost exclusively for *Folksblat*. . . .

1888

Feverish literary activity, including the writing of two novels (*Sender Blank* and *Stempenyu*) and a play, in the midst of the vortex of commercial enterprises which yielded him great wealth. Began to publish an ambitious Yiddish literary yearbook, *Di Yiddische Folks-bibliotek*, to which he attracted the best literary talent of the period, paying such honoraria as had never been paid for Yiddish writing. The book contained numerous contributions on varied themes by himself, for the most part written under pen-names. The annual created a sensation in literary circles and gave a fresh impetus to Yiddish literature.

Visited Odessa—the Mecca of Jewish letters—and formed the personal acquaintance of notable Jewish literary men, including Mendele Mocher Sforim (1836-1917), I. H. Ravnitzki (1859-1944) and Mordecai Ben Ami (1854-1932). Had long revered Mendele and been under his literary influence. . . .

1890

Met with financial disaster on the stock exchange, losing a fortune he had amassed. Went into bankruptcy. Fled abroad, living by turns in Paris, Vienna and Czernowitz.

1891

Gave artistic expression to his stock-exchange experiences in Kiev and Odessa in his *Menahem Mendel*, begun the following year.

1893

Returned to Kiev and until 1899 dabbled in stocks and other business ventures, while devoting every spare moment to writing. "I am asked by people who see me daily: 'When do you write?'" he revealed in a letter to his friend Mordecai Spector (1859-1925) in 1892. "My word, I hardly know myself. I write while walking, running, sitting in somebody's office, riding on the street car, and while somebody is worrying me about an unknown forest, a high-priced country estate, a factory—that's just the time when the most beautiful images emerge. Yet you can't tear yourself away for a moment to put it all down on paper. Confound business! Confound everything!" . . .

1901

Year of feverish writing. A number of his best-known stories were done during this and the next few years, including *Dos Tepl* (The Little Pot), *Ven Ich Bin Roitschild* (If I Were Rothschild), *Funem Priziv* (Conscript), *Gimnazyeh* (Gymnasium), *An Aytzeh* (Advice), etc. . . .

1903

Bloody pogroms in Kishinev and Homel. Contributed to literary anthology *Hilf* (Aid), published in aid of the sufferers.

1905

Wildly acclaimed by Warsaw audience at the performance of his play *Tzezayt un Tzeshprayt* (Scattered and Dispersed) in Polish translation. "After the first act," he wrote to his daughter from Warsaw, "they rained (literally) a shower of flowers on me. After that I was called out repeatedly after every act. . . . And at the conclusion . . . a nameless elemental force was struggling to reach me, as though bent on devouring me. For a moment I thought the theatre was going to collapse. . . ."

Toured Lithuania and Baltic provinces and was accorded wildly enthusiastic reception at public appearances.

The year 1905 was a fateful one for the Jews of Russia. The Tsar's October manifesto, which promised "freedom of conscience, of speech . . . and of association," was promptly followed by a wave of bestial pogroms, incited and directed by St. Petersburg.

Unnerved by pogrom in Kiev and economically broken, resolved to emigrate to the United States. Left Russia in December. Lacking travelling expenses, stopped for several months in Lemberg, where he renewed his literary activity.

1906

Toured and was warmly received in many centres in Austria, Romania, Switzerland, Belgium, France and England.

Arrived in New York with wife and youngest son in October, leaving the rest of the family in Geneva. Wildly acclaimed on landing. Contributed to American and European Yiddish journals. Tremendously impressed by warmth of American Jewish audiences in cities he visited. "I hope this is the end of my wanderings," he wrote one month after his arrival. "A very brilliant future awaits me here."

1907

Stay in the United States (921 E. 156 St., The Bronx) was shortlived. Too deeply rooted in European traditions and mode of life to fit easily into American scheme of things. Was irked by the low literary standards of the American Yiddish press of the time and by their factionalism and petty rivalries that even colored their estimate of his literary qualities. Thus a friendly critical reaction to his plays by one section of the press (both his *Shmuel Pasternak* and *Stempenyu* were produced that year) was apt to provoke a hostile review by the other section. . . .

Wrote *The Storm* on the Russian Revolution of 1905, and began *Mottel, the Cantor's Son*.

Left New York in June to join his children in Geneva. Met at Zionist Congress in the Hague the Hebrew poet Haym Nachman Bialik (1873-1934), whom he had long admired and corresponded with. They now became fast friends. . . .

1908

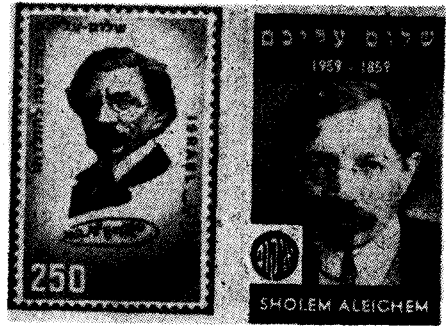
Two momentous events of the year: a pulmonary haemorrhage and the celebration of his twenty-fifth literary jubilee. During a reading tour of Russia he suffered an acute attack of tuberculosis while in Baranovich, where he was bed-ridden for seven weeks.

1909-10

Wrote *Blondzhende Shtern* (Wandering Star). His works appear in Russian translation. Gorky aroused to enthusiasm. . . .

1913

Developed bladder disease which gave him agonizing pain. . . . "The torments of hell are as nothing compared with what I am enduring," he



The Israeli Government has issued a 250 pruta postage stamp for the Sholem Aleichem Centennial. Below his portrait is his well-known signature. The seal at the right was issued by the Yiddisher Kultur Farein (YKUF), 189 Second Avenue, N. Y. 9 (5c per seal).

wrote in January. A few weeks later: "Last night I thought I was descending to my grave. There was just one step between me and death. . . . I am not grieving because my life is being cut off, for I have lived enough and have had great honors in my time. I have also left something of a legacy, after my death, to my people that I love with great love." Improvement soon set in and he was relieved of anxiety over dreaded surgical operation.

Only insufferable physical pain could ever keep him from writing. Did much of his work while bed-ridden, frequently during brief respites from pain. "What do you mean, not write?" he said in one of his letters of the period. "How can a man get up in the morning, eat and drink and walk about—and not write? How is such a thing possible? Can a man stand it? How long can he live that way?"

1914

Returned to Russia after an absence of five and a half years. Reading tour

of Poland, Lithuania, Baltic provinces and Russia proved a triumphal march.

On the way back to Switzerland stopped over in Germany, only to find himself stranded there as an enemy alien (a Russian subject) when the war broke out. Fled with family to Denmark, physically exhausted and without means. . . .

Left with family for New York. Eldest son Misha stayed behind, a patient in a Danish sanatorium. Arrived in New York December 2.

1915

Joined staff of new Yiddish daily, *Tog* (Day), contributing twice a week and receiving a salary of \$5,000 a year. . . .

Began his great autobiographical work *Funem Yarid* (The Great Fair), which he could not complete. . . .

1916

The last year of his life.

He took a bad turn on May 9,

when all hope was given up. The end came Saturday, May 13, at 968 Kelly St., the Bronx.

He lay in state for two days, watched over day and night by a guard of honor of Jewish writers and public men, while thousands filed by to catch a last glimpse of the most widely loved of all Yiddish writers. His funeral was attended by hundreds of thousands (including many workers who stayed away from the shops on this occasion), the most numerous procession of men and women ever to follow the hearse of a Jewish public figure. In accordance with his will, the full text of which was printed in *The New York Times*, May 17, 1916 and in the *Congressional Record*, he was buried "not among aristocrats, men of high lineage, or men of great wealth, but among ordinary Jewish workmen, with just ordinary folk."

His resting place is the Mount Carmel cemetery of the Workmen's Circle in Brooklyn, N. Y.

SHOLEM ALEICHEM ON RECORDS . . .

Sholem Aleichem Stories in Yiddish read by Gustave Berger. Notes include Yiddish text and English synopsis. 1-12" LP. FL 9907, Folkways, \$4.98.

The World of Sholem Aleichem. Dramatized by Arnold Perl. Music by Serge Hovey. Includes Sholem Aleichem's "The High School." 1-12", LP, Tikva, \$4.98.

Tevya and his Daughters. A play by Arnold Perl based on Sholem Aleichem. Music by Serge Hovey. 1-12", LP, Columbia Masterworks, 5225, \$4.98.

Holiday Stories—Six stories by Sholem Aleichem in Yiddish. Read Available at Metro Music Company, by Serge Hovey. Includes Sholem 54 Second Ave., N. Y. 3. \$4.98.

. . . AND ON 16MM FILM

Laughter Through Tears, full-length feature (82 minutes), based on the Sholem Aleichem story *Mottel, The Cantor's Son*. Directed by Grichter. Produced in USSR. Rental \$22.50 through Brandon Films, Inc., 200 W. 57th St., N. Y. 19.

D. P.