

Sholem Aleichem

On the twentieth anniversary of his death

By Yisroel Shtern

Translator: Beni Gothajner (2005)

Why are Sholem Aleichem's books so full of life? The talk is, after all, not of blue but of grey skies; of angry clouds, that often scream dark rains over the frightened heads of a whole people. Just as our foolish world has as many unemployed as there are stars in the night sky, so Sholem Aleichem's work is full of troublemakers, miseries, misfortunes, the need for permits to reside outside the Pale, ethnic quotas, and (for a change) straightforward poverty, suffering and wanderings.

So how does he come by all this brightness? Answer: if it's the Grandchild you want to understand, then you must travel to his Grandfather's land.¹ Not however, as is usually the case, to get to know what the one learned from the other – but to see what he *stopped* learning from his grandparent. How the grandchild rebelled against the tall old Jew with the white beard and the gold-rimmed spectacles.

If you want to catch exactly what is happening on the stage or on the screen, then turn off the lights in the hall you are sitting in. And if you want to become well acquainted with Sholem Aleichem, then brother, sit yourself down with a volume of Mendele.

Are there any pleasant Jews in Mendele Moikher Sforim? You can find them if you want to – but you have to really want to! “Fishke the Crooked is a prince” one fanciful reviewer exclaimed. But if a nation had 50,000 such “princes” it would be *eliminated* from the family of nations and consigned to gypsy encampments.

The Grandfather's Jews can be divided into two categories: the rich, who are either mean or horrid, and poor folk, who are all horrid, being beggars. And because the rich are few and the poor an ocean, we have a grab-bag as deep as the ocean. The great, familiar Jewish bag. With the exception of “Shloyme, Reb Chaim's” which is less bagged and more humane, almost all the Grandfather's books are populated with alms-takers, beggars, *schnorrers*, or with applicants for the begging profession.

Sitting alongside this Mendele, so sombre (apart from his bright smile, as it were), you look across to that corner where the light is. Things are happening, a lot is going on. The movie is dotted all over with events taking place. There is no passivity, no laziness, no hint of hypocrisy, no waiting for a handout, for alms. Sholem Aleichem drives his heroes to

¹ Mendele Moikher Sforim (Sholem Abramovitsh, 1835-1917) is known as the Grandfather of modern Yiddish literature, Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinowitz, 1859-1916) as the Grandson.

upholstery, watch-making, ink-making; one is an actor, another a merchant, another a milkman. Everyone must be doing something.

You rub your eyes: Ha! So this means that Jews are busy searching, working, earning more, earning less, but.. hang on, who suddenly stole the bag? It's gone. You can't find any beggars at the Grandson's! Well, does that mean there aren't any? There are as many as everywhere else, but no longer is begging a *peculiarly Jewish national profession*.

The social unworthiness and the pushiness that make our society so difficult and sad are indeed absent from Sholem Aleichem. He doesn't begrudge himself likeable companions. And so almost all of them are. What, for example, do you want from the poor old Yidene² with the pot? In Mendele, only the rich are mean. For them it's a shame to untie their purse-strings, or to spoil a nice round sum by reducing it. The poor though are not mean; why should they resent what belongs to others? Is it theirs? No matter, they will just stick out a hand again and, God willing, offerings will be there afresh... The poor folk of Sholem Aleichem know, as well as Tevye³ does, the verse *al tivtahu bandivim*⁴, in the first place they depend on God's grace and after that, on their own ten fingers. The *Yidene* relies on herself as much as she can: in the first place, she already returned the pot, secondly she never ever borrowed it, and thirdly...⁵ she will swear by anything and lie, rather than pay for breaking that cup! A pity to lose even a penny, she worked so hard for it.

That's what his Yidenes and Jews, young and old, are like. They can be peculiar, but not dangerously so. One can laugh in good heart. Sholem Aleichem is never uncertain. Unsavoury characters? Well yes, but none who remain unredeemed. Where humanity is concerned, faults there are but no-one is hopeless or doomed. Changing circumstances may even transform some characters in virtue. This adroitly prestidigitating Yidene could have made a good lawyer...

And Menachem Mendel? He doesn't appeal at all, does he? You expect him to be the partner of every super-shlimazl⁶. You are ready to pin the Order of Menachem Mendel to the breast of every good-for-nothing. But believe me, gentlemen,⁷ this Jew shows more diligence, initiative, energy and ambition than ten Stakhanovites⁸...

Set against these cruel circumstances, despite all his talents he could do no more. The surrounding conditions were unsuited to his capacities... and so his plusses – become minuses. An exotic plant, this Menachem Mendel,

² A Jewish woman, usually of mature years; often seen from a Chauvinist perspective - thus Weinreich's Dictionary gives "especially a petty, sentimental, talkative Jewess".

³ Tevye the Milkman, Sholem Aleichem's most famous character, who is always misquoting holy books.

⁴ "don't trust alms-givers!"

⁵ In Sholem Aleichem's well-known story, she also says that it was already broken anyway!

⁶ Shtern's term is "Shlim-Shlim-Mazl" - "bad-bad-luck person".

⁷ Yiddish Raboysay - the polite form of address to a group of men in the synagogue - Shtern is imitating Sholem Aleichem's own fiction style.

⁸ In Shtern's day, model workers of the neighbouring Soviet Union who exceeded the norm (named after Hero of the Soviet Union, the worker Stakhanov).

but find a suitable climate for him and you will see how nice and strong he will flourish.

Mendele Moikher Sforim sees a hateful growth on the Jew's back. So he looks around in every direction for a surgeon to cut off the hump. And most likely as things turn out, the Jew (such a pity) is left an ugly, deserted cripple. That is why a cloud hangs over his books.

But somehow Sholem Aleichem is full of hope. He sees the hump as well. But to him *it is the hump on a camel's back*. It's foolish to want to excise it. Take the camel off to that distant steppe where it belongs and you will see how useful the hump is, in bright vistas and open spaces and freedom...

That is why Sholem Aleichem's books are so full of light.