

Excerpts from the epic poem “An Obstinate Jew”

Translated by Freda Hodge (2015)

Motto: "A Jew is a *luftmentsh*"(*)

(The opinion of some gentiles and all Jews).

And an obstinate Jew sometimes says:

no! I'm not the wind, I am the forest.

That is why weirdness is found under my roof,
and darkness comes overs the heart of the tree trunks,
and when a storm rises, it comes to me,
because I am the forest.

The earth embraces me,
it flows upwards through my veins
and grows.

Earth and heaven twine around each other
above my old bushy unkempt head.

Sometimes it happens that I weep and weep into the sand,
stand up to my knees in muddy slime
and whoever visits me, curses his bones,

and curses me and my lack of a warm home,
only damp and mould and rotting moss,
and yet

I am the forest and I love my branches
but they, my children, are gloomy and silent
so cold, so deep, so hard.

Boughs are hesitant. They waver and tremble
and bend before the wind, that chills
and guffaws and tears at their hair
though the wind is afraid as well, is itself afraid...

My branches tense their arms ready for flight,
they strain and quiver and strive for distance,
become dark and thin from longing.

They do not rest but shudder, seeking
and always wandering, wandering,
although they stay rooted to the spot...

My growing children take after me:
everything eternal does not lock the door:
I and the earth, we are always on the move,

and while moving on, I hear
birdsong of birds which live only by my head,
and the crowns of my trees are enriched with their nests.

(1934)

*(Ed.): A *luftmentsh* ó õsomeone of no fixed occupationö according to the dictionary ó is an itinerant man such as a peddler, whose living comes õfrom the airö. He was a not uncommon member of impoverished East European Jewry.

Sholem Aleichem's character Menachem Mendl ennobled the *luftmentsh*, as a dreamer of great dreams.
