## Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh

Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1835–1917), commonly known by his literary persona Mendele Moykher-Sforim (Mendele the Book Peddler), is considered to be the founding father of both modern Yiddish and modern Hebrew prose literature. Born in the town of Kapulye (Kopyl) in Belarus, he lived significant parts of his life in the Eastern European cities of Berdichev and Odessa. While in Berdichev, he published his first novel, *Limdu hetev* (*Learn to Do Well*). Published in Hebrew in 1862, this work was a product of the Jewish Enlightenment, i.e., the *Haskalah*, with its didactic tone and its emphasis on the need for reform in Jewish education. He twice rewrote and republished *Learn to Do Well*, first in 1868 and again from 1909-1912. Such revisions were typical of Abramovitsh throughout his long writing career, and also characterized his adaptations of his own works from one language to another. He adapted many of his early novellas to fully-fledged novels in Yiddish and in Hebrew (see list of second version in 'list of works'). He also adapted science books into Hebrew, as part of his ‘enlightening’ project.

Abramovitsh's Yiddish debut appeared in 1864, with the novella *Dos kleyne mentshele* (*The Little Man*), followed by another novella *Dos vintshfingerl* (*The Magic Ring*) in 1865. In *The Little Man* Abramovitsh first introduced the dramatic character of Mendele Moykher-Sforim, whom he continued to develop throughout his works as the narrator of his stories. At least on the surface, this character belongs to the traditional Eastern European Jewish society of the little town (the *shtetl*). But being a traveling book salesman, he is exposed to the modern ideas of the Haskalah circulating in the Jewish world, thus leading the character to develop a semi-modern consciousness. Mendele would function as an intermediate character between the urban enlightened Jews and the traditional Jews of the little town. He spoke to them in their familiar, day-to-day language of Yiddish, rather than in the Hebrew favoured by the Haskalah but not understood by the masses of Jews.

Abramovitsh wished to form a standard Yiddish literary language that would unite the different Yiddish dialects. In his later works and adaptations he omitted colloquial language, replacing much of the Slavic vocabulary with Germanic and Hebraic Yiddish equivalents.

In 1869, Abramovitsh produced two works – the play *Di takse* (*The Tax*), and the novella *Fishke der krumer* (*Fishke the Lame*), which reflected his deepening concern over Jewish poverty. These works clearly challenged the belief that poverty could ever disappear under the rule of the benign capitalist. Exhibiting a clear influence of Hugo and Dickens, a clearly sentimental element became part of his literary work, alongside his stand as an enlightened rationalist that he exposed in his essays and science-books. In *Fishke* he shows how his poor protagonists are more capable of achieving genuine feelings of romantic love than the modern, enlightened ‘rationalist’ Jew.

Although Mendel was a city dweller, the fiction he wrote was mostly based in the *shtet*; it has been argued that Mendele’s fiction represents a romantic narrative of return to some pre-modern, non-urban Jewish experience, rather than strictly the promotion of modern ideas such as rationalist science and education reform. Although he was influenced by the nationalist tone that arose in the Jewish street in the early 1880s, he himself never became a Zionist and, in fact, expressed criticism toward that movement in his work.

### References and Further Reading

Olga Litvak, *Haskalah: The*Romantic *Movement in Judaism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press,2012); Dan Miron, “Der onheyb fun aktueln hebreishn roman: Historishe un kritishe bamerkungen tsu Sh. Y. Abramovitsh’s *Limdu hetev,*” in *Limdu hetev,* by Sh. Y. Abramovitsh, pp. 1–88 (New York, 1969); Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1973); Samuel Niger, *Mendele Moykher-Sforim: Zayn lebn, zayne gezelshaftlekhe un literarishe oyftuungen* (New York, 1970). Gershon Shaked, *Ben seḥok le-dema‘* (Ramat Gan, Isr., 1965).

### List of Works in Yiddish

* *Dos kleyne mentshele* (The Little Man). Odessa 1864-5; 1879 (second version).
* *Dos vintshfingerl* (The Magic Ring). Warsaw 1865; 1888-1909 (second version).
* *Fishke der Krummer* (Fishke the Lame). Zhitomir 1869; 1888 (second version).
* *Di takse* (The Tax). Zhitomir 1869.
* *Di klyatshe* (The Nag). Vilna 1873.
* *Kitser masoes Binyomin hashlishi* (The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third). Vilna 1878.

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