Contributor: Ben Furnish

Sholem Aleichem [pseudonym for Sholem Rabinovitz] (1859-1916)

Sholem Aleichem was born in Pereslav, Ukraine, and grew up in Voronkov, recollections of which would later inspire his fictional Jewish shtetl of Kasrilevke. His merchant father combined respect for traditional religious learning with respect for secular study, including contemporary Hebrew literature. Sholem Aleichem read and was influenced by Dickens, Shakespeare, and Cervantes as well as the Russian masters, especially Gogol. But his Yiddish writing is replete with Jewish tradition, albeit with a modernist satirical twist. He rebelled against the popular sentimentalism of Yiddish writers such as Shomer and at age 29 cast himself famously as the artistic “grandson” of the pioneer Yiddish literary writer S. Y. Abramowitz (Mendele Moykher Sforim), who was only 58 at the time.

“Sholem Aleichem is Jewish modernism writ small,”writes Jeremy Dauber in explaining how Sholem Aleichem’s career captures a full sweep of change and conflict that transformed Eastern fin-de-siècle European Jewish life. Though he wrote first in Russian and Hebrew, he was most prolific in Yiddish across the genres of fiction, nonfiction, and drama. He grew so widely beloved in the Jewish world that perhaps 200,000 mourners lined New York City’s streets for his 1916 funeral procession, representing every ideological gradation from right to left.

English-speaking readers best know his character Tevye, whose much-adapted stories include *Fiddler on the Roof*, among the world’s most widely produced plays. The ever-hopeful, ever-unlucky investor Menakhem Mendl, the musician Stempenyu, and Kasrilevke’s inhabitants are prominent among his other characters.

Ruth Wisse notes how Tevye’s stories alone of all the great modernist depictions of generational rebellion are told sympathetically from the traditional father’s rather than the children’s point of view. As Dauber writes, “Sholem Aleichem was a master at using *tsuris fun kinder*, trouble with children, to stand in for the changes and stresses of the modern period” (192). Tevye’s stories deal with market capitalism (Menakhem Mendl squanders the meagre savings Tevye invests with him), socialist and Zionist ideas, the threat to Jewish survival from cultural assimilation and Russian tyranny, and perhaps most of all with romantic love and the dislocation it wreaks on the traditional Jewish system of fatherly-sanctioned betrothal.

Rabinowitz the man (Sholem Aleichem was a pen name, a putative first-person narrator) inherited a fortune when his father-in-law died unexpectedly. He financed and edited two volumes of *Di Yidish Folks Bibiliotek* [The Jewish People’s Library], anthologies in which he sought artistically to elevate Yiddish literature. Then he then lost his fortune in the Kiev stock market, like his character Menakhem Mendl, and eventually made a genuine if always precarious living as a Yiddish writer, supporting his large family by newspaper serialization and playwriting. He visited New York City in 1906 and returned in 1912 until his death.

Sholem Aleichem’s work was celebrated in the Soviet Union, prompting stage and film adaptations. In the United States, he was often called the Jewish Mark Twain; both writers displayed outwardly folksy but artistically elegant satirical humor that captured the national spirit of each writer’s people.

References and Further Reading

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