

Sholem Aleichem and America

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America in Yiddish literature is a highly important and interesting topic from various points of view, and Sholem Aleichem has certainly earned a most distinguished chapter within it.¹ The subject is especially noteworthy when considered within the framework of the entire body of Sholem Aleichem's writings. Yet until now, scholars and critics working in the broader subject area have dealt with it in a superficial and cursory manner. Numerous problems still need to be studied in detail before reliable conclusions are drawn. Let us list a few of these here.

The least complicated subject area appears to be the biographical, that is, the author's presence in America and all that was attendant upon it, both during the years 1906-7 and from 1914 until his death in 1916.² How Sholem Aleichem's works have been received and perceived in America is also definitely worthy of study. In addition, a historical review of American literary criticism of Sholem Aleichem's work, from its beginnings to the present, is in order. There can be no doubt that Sholem Aleichem's dramas as performed on the American stage are of special importance, beginning with the early failures in Adler's and Thomashefsky's theaters during Sholem Aleichem's first visit

to America³ and up to the enormous success of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Another good topic for study is the reaction of his American Jewish readers as compared to his non-Jewish American audience. Still another is the history of and the problems surrounding the American translations of Sholem Aleichem.⁴

It is not my intention here to draft a list of potential research projects on Sholem Aleichem and America. However, it is clear that his American works, experiences, and reputation are of prime importance within his artistic legacy.⁵ In this paper I will focus on several aspects of his American subject matter, systematically analyzing selected works as well as suggesting some conclusions that can be drawn from this material viewed from a historico-literary perspective.

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At the beginning of November 1906, shortly after his arrival in America, the New York Yiddish press published Sholem Aleichem's open letter of thanks for the festive reception held in his honor at the Grand Hotel. In this letter the following statement appeared: "The small number of Jews, who through God's hand were scattered here in a rather disorderly fashion with no prior design or plan, has greatly increased in the last twenty odd years, it appears, and has generated a font of energy on the happy soil of this free land—energy capable of . . . unleashing, very soon, a new splendid era in our age-old history."⁶

These passionate sentences breathe of a prophetic intuition concerning the role that American Jewry was destined to play in this century. Thus, as early as 1906, Sholem Aleichem already understood how to assess the power that Jews were to acquire in America. It should be noted that Sholem Aleichem himself was a living witness to two fateful waves of emigration from Eastern Europe to America, which in great measure helped create the basis for this energy. As a beginning writer, he was reacting directly to the wave of emigration in the 1880s. He

himself was a product of the post-1905 emigration, since his first stay in America—it can be said—was as an escapee from the Kiev pogrom.⁷

In considering his statement on the importance of Jewish immigration to America within the framework of his national and ideological worldview, it should not be forgotten that Sholem Aleichem was a fervent *kbyver-tzion* (lover of Zion) and later a dedicated Herzlian Zionist. There can be no doubt that in principle his ideal was a Jewish homeland in Israel.⁸ This superficial contradiction with his own ideology, however, did not prevent him from understanding and predicting the role that immigration to America was to have in Jewish history. He was certain that God's "hand" was revealed in this opportunity to immigrate to America, in this solution for East European Jews who were either forced to flee or wished to escape.

Sholem Aleichem's belief that the Divine hand guided Jewish immigration to America cropped up in his writings before 1906, that is, at the very beginning of his creativity in Yiddish, as well as in his later works in America, down to the very last years of his life. In 1884 Sholem Aleichem published a review of a book by I. M. Petrkovski,⁹ a Jewish student who had accompanied a group of immigrants and then returned to Russia. The title of the work, written in Russian, was *B Amepdyky!* (*Y Amerikn!* In American). Both the author and the reviewer basically were Zionists. The volume depicts the failure of the *Am-olam* colonies in America at the beginning of the 1880s. The young writer as well as the reviewer referred to the pogroms that had taken place "three, four years back": "When I read the book I thought to myself, 'God does indeed send the cure before the illness!' God is so good and loves his little world so much that he has gone to the trouble of creating an antitoxin to nullify the toxin. It could not be otherwise!"¹⁰ The antitoxin to the pogroms was, of course, the opportunity to immigrate to America.

Some thirty years later the same deep convictions are stated by Yankl Yonever of "Krushnik" in Sholem Aleichem's *Mayses*

fun toyznt-un-eyr-nakhi (Stories from a Thousand and One Nights). This World War I job-like character created by Sholem Aleichem starts out with the familiar discourse:

It does our hearts good to know that our Sholem Aleichem—do you understand or not?—is on board the very same boat that we simple immigrants are on and is traveling to the same country that God has created for Jews, so that we may have a place to which to escape, whenever a disaster—may one never recur—or a calamity, or a pogrom, or a war breaks out. (Vol. 3, 137)¹¹

This segment deals with the trip from Copenhagen to New York at the close of 1914, during the First World War. On the boat in Copenhagen, Sholem Aleichem met face to face with the first Jewish victims of the war.

In Sholem Aleichem's most important book about Jewish immigration to America, *Motl Peyse dem khazns* (Motl Peyse the Cantor's Son), written shortly before his death, we find the following passage: "Have you forgotten that America was created by God both to protect and to serve as a safe haven for all who are harassed and persecuted, all who get pushed about and driven from the four corners of the earth? . . ." (vol. 19, 64).¹²

Here the belief in Divine Providence gets expressed in universal terms, and although Sholem Aleichem lets us hear these comments from the mouth of "our friend Pinye," one should not doubt their significance to the author.

In view of the writer's long-held stand on the importance of Jewish immigration to America we may pose the question: to what degree was this idea adequately reflected in his fiction?

There is no single or easy answer to this question. A quantitative approach is certainly not in order. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning, as examples, such works as *Motl Peyse dem khazns*, the third part of *Blondzbende shtern* (Wandering Stars), the comedy *Di goldgräber* (The Gold Diggers), the unfinished novel *Der misteyk* (The Mistake), along with some

dozen short stories, one-act plays, and newspaper articles in which Sholem Aleichem deals with the American theme. The generalization can be made that his treatment of American themes is so deeply intertwined with the description of the fate of individuals who were living through the stormy immigration experiences that frequently the significance of his evaluations of important historical processes gets lost in his concrete descriptions of characters.

Although he did not formulate it in these exact terms, Sholem Aleichem was very aware of this. Right after the above-mentioned 1906 statement about America and in the letter of thanks quoted above, he publicly apologized for his own as well as others' criticisms of America and of American Jews. Sharp and sometimes revealing censorious critical comments create, within the Sholem Aleichem legacy, a tension, a dialectical contradiction that enriches and gives depth to the subject when confronted with the positive nature of his direct statements.

Let us turn to the works now and see what evidence they offer.

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Throughout his creative years, Sholem Aleichem absorbed and artistically adapted contemporary events and processes into his writings. Current events and reactions to them are among the most important underpinnings of his works. It should therefore come as no surprise that America is a rather well-represented theme many years prior to his arrival in America in 1906.

In 1892 Sholem Aleichem published his famous lullaby *Shlof mayn kind* (Sleep, My Child).¹³ The lullaby is sung by a weeping, lonely, and distraught woman. Her husband, the father of the child in the cradle, has disappeared to America. The baby is rocked to sleep with hopes that its father would send letters and come and welcome them in America.

It was common in those years for families to become separated in the process of emigrating. Clearly Sholem Aleichem had touched an open wound, for his lullaby spread very rapidly. By 1901, only nine years after its publication, it was listed as an “anonymous folksong” sung in at least five provinces from Kovno in the north to Poltava in the south.¹⁴

The lullaby expresses bold expectations of America:

Dos Amerike iz far yedn	America brings to everyone,
Zogt men, gor a glik,	So they say, great happiness,
Un far yidn a gan-eydn	And for Jews—a kind of Paradise,
Epes an antik.	Especially precious.

Dortn est men in der vokhn	There they eat on weekdays
Khale, zunenyu!	<i>Khale</i> [white bread], little son!
Yaykhelekh vel ikh dir dortn	I'll cook rich broths for you
kokhn,	there,
Shlof zhe, shlof l'yu-l'yu.	So sleep, sleep, <i>lyu-lyu!</i>

Basically, however, the lullaby is an expression of the most painful aspects of emigration. Not always was the separation of families a temporary one.

Sholem Aleichem's attention was already drawn to the darker sides of immigration; these had received expression in his writing as early as the 1890s. The economic and social degradation experienced by some of the Jewish immigrants in America is a theme that he repeats again and again in his works. In an unfinished short story written in Hebrew in 1890 he commented on the difficult situation faced by former merchants, salesmen, brokers, and others upon arrival in America without a trade. In America they could only become peddlers and would have to toil even on the Sabbath and on religious holidays. Since this short story is written with a clearly Zionist bias, it may not be a dependable source with respect to its generalizations or for Sholem Aleichem's own views.¹⁵ Both here and in later works we find signs of Sholem

Aleichem's maskilic predilection for “productivization” that conflicted with his views on the declassed Jewish middle class. His point of view is not always uniform or clear. In 1894 he wrote:

America, long may it live! Where else on earth can you find such a happy country where Jews, fine decent folk, who in the old country wore *shtreymlakh* [fur-edged hats worn by pious wealthy Jews on the Sabbath and holidays] and did not do a stitch of work, walk around in freedom with bundles on their backs, seated like lords at their sewing machines making stockings.¹⁶

Here, too, one cannot be certain about Sholem Aleichem's own attitude toward the “fine idlers” of the old country who were piteously overworked in America. This flagrant sarcasm is clear enough in the above quote, but when he writes, in the very same work, about the concrete case of Menakhem-Mendl Dolitski (1856–1931), Sholem Aleichem appears to take up the cudgels for this Hebrew poet. Dolitski came to America in 1892, and as early as 1894 Sholem Aleichem wrote about him on the basis of his letters:

When a refined intelligent person arrives there—how deeply unhappy, how far from home he feels! I have some letters in my possession written by Dolitski, a young Jewish poet, an intellectual, who was—Lord of the Universe!—cast from Moscow onto the shores of New York by an angry wave. How many tears, how much blood was shed! A stone would burst into tears upon reading this unhappy young poet's letters of laments and dirges. He had spent his best years composing poetry, not sewing patches on trousers. He carried his poems around New York until he came to realize that, in the land of the free, sausage and frankfurters were much more salable than pure spiritual poetry. And the poet Dolitski became a sausage maker. . . .¹⁷

As is well known, Sholem Aleichem brought his Menakhem-Mendl to America in 1903. Menakhem-Mendl's sole letter to Sholem Aleichem from New York, as it first appeared in the newspaper, is ironically titled "A gebentsht land" (A Blessed Land). The degradation of a middle-class immigrant is clearly depicted in this story of a man who in the Old Country had been "a householder with an apartment of his own, with fine in-laws and children."

He has a job in a laundry and earns a living there. As you can well imagine—woe is to such "earnings" and to such a "living"! But it's better than nothing. His job is to count and sort soiled laundry: to separate men's shirts from women's blouses, and after that, pardon my indelicacy, from underwear and socks. He has to handle dirty undershirts, sort them and mark them so that they won't get mixed up. "A very disgusting job," he says, "and boring to boot." And, he says, especially since he is not accustomed to such work . . .¹⁸

Menakhem-Mendl's compassion for this man is apparent, because he himself had hung around New York feeling humiliated and useless:

Thanks to the crowded conditions and to everyone's hurrying and scurrying about, I was frequently treated to a poke in my side and a jab in my back and this, to add insult to injury, was accompanied by the curse, "Go to the devil" which means *tsu al di shvartse yor*. Treated in this manner, my self-esteem dropped precipitously. I felt superfluous, like some kind of little dog that gets underfoot and every passing God-fearing soul feels free to give it a kick and a shove—*Pashol voni!* [Scram!—and continues on his way. Of course I was not accustomed to such behavior in Yehupets, not to mention Mazepevke or Kasrilevke. Who there would have had the nerve to say a mean word to me or, even worse, to punch me in the back so that I could see stars!¹⁹

The degradation of the Menakhem-Mendl figure is not treated simply as a subjective experience. Sholem Aleichem also thought it necessary to present Menakhem-Mendl's experience from the outside looking in, that is, through the mediation of Tevye, a more trustworthy character. During his first visit to America, Sholem Aleichem wrote a new Tevye monologue, "Shprintse." In it Tevye meditates about whether to immigrate to America or not:

. . . Make a shambles of my household, take it apart and set out for America with my wife and children now, when I'm old? [Oh no!] May Columbus not live to see me "make a living" like my ne'er-do-well relative Menakhem-Mendl from Yehupets, who writes me that he, may evil not befall him, is doing really well. All day long he peddles newspapers and at night he moonlights rocking strangers' children to sleep. Oh, woe is him! Look where he has landed! A fiery *shpegyelant* [speculator-shmecculator] in Yehupets, a stock-market schemer—and now a nursemaid in America!²⁰

Menakhem-Mendl's state of affairs is viewed compassionately even by his abused relative, Tevye. His position is so pitiful that it serves to explain why Tevye will not immigrate "in old age to America." Sholem Aleichem wrote this, when he had an opportunity to become directly acquainted with the fate of immigrants. And it was precisely then that he decided not to allow his beloved character, Tevye, to succumb to a temptation that would certainly have resulted in his degradation. Sholem Aleichem wrote the monologue "Shprintse" after the above-mentioned passionate statement of 1906.

Nor did Sholem Aleichem know what to do in an America setting with his character Menakhem-Mendl. The fantastic opportunities for dreams of affluence and upward mobility that America offered were not suited to Menakhem-Mendl from Kasrilevke. Note, however, that in the introduction to the book version of Menakhem-Mendl's and Shevne-Sheyndl's

letters, Sholem Aleichem had promised a sequel to Menakhem Mendl's letters from America: "... He found happiness nowhere. He had to do what all the Jews must do finally—immigrate to America. There, so they say, Jews can manage pretty well... We'll see how well from his later letters from America" (vol. 10, p. 7).

In the very last letter of the book, written while Menakhem-Mendl is en route to America, Menakhem-Mendl promises to send Sheyne-Sheyndl steamship tickets to the United States. However, Sholem Aleichem, as is well known, did not keep his word. Instead, he brought his Menakhem-Mendl back to Warsaw. It would seem that he felt that his hero would be better situated in Eastern Europe for the purposes of the so-called "second volume" of the book.²¹

However, it is highly unlikely that Sholem Aleichem brought Menakhem-Mendl back to Warsaw simply because he needed him for the new series of letters that appeared in *Haynt*. Perhaps it was because Sholem Aleichem was unable to find a suitable place for Menakhem-Mendl in the foreign American environment that he took him back to the old country, using some rather unconvincing justifications for doing this. Sholem Aleichem could find no suitable material in America for the degraded Menakhem-Mendl, who felt superfluous in this country. Sholem Aleichem's conceptions about America leave us with the impression that it would have been better had the gates to the "blessed land" remained closed to his two *adult* main characters. The two characters were created and shaped over a period of many years on the very specific terrain of Eastern Europe, and that is where they had to remain, untouched by the harmful temptation to immigrate.

Several years ago Arthur Hertzberg treated, in a very convincing manner, the subject of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rabbinic opposition to immigration. Rabbinic opposition was stated clearly in the colloquial expres-

sion *trejyene medine* (impure land), an expression used by Hertzberg as the title of his engaging paper.²²

This seems an appropriate place to note that much of the rabbinic religious criticism of immigrant life runs parallel to what we find in Sholem Aleichem's writing. After all, these writings mirror the same reality. Sholem Aleichem's works may, in fact, serve as suitable supplementary material to illustrate and substantiate Hertzberg's thesis that the traditional middle class, the scholarly and property-owning elements of the population, were proportionately less well-represented among the immigrants than were the lower classes of Jewish society.

It should be pointed out, however, that Sholem Aleichem is not consistent in his assessments of the options open to Jews in America, this despite the fact that he personally and deeply experienced difficulties in adjusting to the new country. Certainly he was less interested in the pitiful prospects for conducting religious life, as it had been practiced in the Old Country, than he was in the diversity of stereotypical personal fates. Sholem Aleichem grasped the historical significance of Jewish immigration to America better than the rabbis had. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that I was unable to find the expression *trejyene medine* in any of his works. This should not, however, be taken as a contradiction to the important fact that he did resist settling Tevye and Menakhem-Mendl in America.

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The economic and social degradation of some of the East European Jewish intelligentsia and of certain members of the middle class is, however, only one aspect of a more general theme that appears in almost all of Sholem Aleichem's works that relate to America. The comparison between "here" and "there," between the old East European home and the new home in America, is a constant element in his works about

immigration and about the immigrant's environment.²³ At times this comparison also becomes the structural foundation for his exploration of American themes.

This comparative underpinning can already be found in Sholem Aleichem's works of the 1890s, that is, in the articles he sent to Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Sholem Aleichem undertook to provide the readers of the Philadelphia Yiddish newspaper with "Regards from Home," as his letters from Russia were entitled.²⁴ In discussing the aim of the future series of feature articles, Sholem Aleichem revealed: "... I will not be afraid to state what I *wish* and what *should be* said. It is hard to imagine that [here, in America] one can be spared the censor's red broom."²⁵

On the purely political plane, comparisons always favor America, the free country that does not restrict the rights of individuals, including Jews. In America, unlike czarist Russia, a writer is free of censorship.

This is eminently apparent in the simple and transparent structure of the short story now known as "Nishto keyn naves" (There's Nothing New), written in 1907, shortly after Sholem Aleichem's first visit to America. When it first appeared the title was "Tsvey leshone-toyve-brivlekh" (Two Jewish New Year Letters). The short story indeed consists of two letters, one written by an "operator" in America to his friend in the Old Country; the second, by this Old Country tailor back to his friend, the immigrant author of the first letter. In the letter from Eastern Europe there is a description of a pogrom and its aftermath. In the letter from America, we find the following passage, among others: "It's true that we toil away our lives here; on the other hand, we are free" (vol. 22, 142). The American writes about problems that seem trivial compared to the horror of the pogroms that grip the reader. And yet the American writes, "One thing we don't succeed in is: feeling at home here. Oh, how we miss the Old Country!" (ibid.). On the other hand, the friend from the land

of pogroms declares decisively, "I shall not emigrate. Your America does not begin to appeal to me" (ibid., 147).²⁶

The pointed contrasts between the two letters is enhanced by means of linguistic and stylistic effects. The writer from Russia uses a considerable number of Russian words and phrases in his Yiddish. Yet America does not appeal to him, because the letter from the American is chock full of Americanisms. Thus *gazel*, the Yiddish term for "newspaper," has become Americanized out of recognition to *peyper* "paper"; and the familiar woman's name "Blume" is changed to "Jenny" (ibid.).²⁷

Perhaps this is the appropriate place to point out an important stylistic device used in all of Sholem Aleichem's writings on American themes. We find it in his writings of the 1890s, that is, long before his personal contact with the English language. The appearance of Americanisms in Yiddish in Sholem Aleichem's writings is meant not only to reflect the actual contact of Yiddish speakers with English; also, in his hands it becomes an element of humor, of language play, even providing the basis for comic situations. This phenomenon is especially clear in *Motl Peyse dem kbazns*, beginning with the chapter "London, far vos brenstu nit?" (London, Why Aren't You on Fire?). In the last year of his life, Sholem Aleichem achieved virtuosity in this bilingual playing with language in his monologues "Mister Green Has a Job" and "The Story of a Greenhorn."²⁸

In reading the monologues about American Jews it is at times difficult to decide what is more important: the plot or the language of the two characters. Yiddish and English are blended together idiomatically in the most natural and effective manner. A study of this stylistic phenomenon is definitely called for, and it goes without saying that the translators of Sholem Aleichem into English have had a hard time dealing with this.

If the political comparisons in "Nishto keyn naves" can be perceived as overly transparent, even primitive, this is not

true of *Motl Peyse dem kbazns*. Here they are not as simplistic and indeed, in some passages are quite perspicacious. It is "our friend Pinye" who draws the contrasts. He never misses an opportunity, sometimes fitting, sometimes not very apt, to tear down czarist Russia and at the same time praise America. Here are just a few good examples of this:

... America is not Russia. In America there is no bribery. (Vol. 19, 40)

... Didn't I say before that America is not Russia? That there are no swindles in America, no cheating, no chicanery? Columbus, long may you live! (P. 47)

... Listen you donkeys, you evil creatures, you drunkards, hooligans, pogrom-makers! It's you we have to thank for our living in such a free and agreeable land! Were it not for you and your persecutions and oppressions and pogroms, we should not have known about Columbus, and Columbus would not have heard of us! You'll have to wait a long time before we ever return to you! Just as you will never see your own ears, so, too, you will never set eyes on us again as long as you live! Some day you will realize that living among you were the People of Israel, and that you did not know how to let us be. You'll have a bitter end, just like the Spaniards did. You'll live like church dogs. In time you'll miss us! You'll try to buy us back. You'll invite us back, but we'll be damned if we'll return! (Pp. 58-59)

... And school is free, and, on top of that, books are free, too. Our friend Pinye, when he heard this, was beside himself. He recalled that in the Old Country Jewish children were not allowed to enroll in a public high school [*gimmazyel*]. And here, in America, you were forced [by law] to go to school. Otherwise you have to pay a fine. "For this reason alone," said Pinye, "*Fonye* [Russian nation, derogatory] should bow his head in shame [lit., 'bury himself alive']!" (P. 85)

Oh, you unhappy, abused people! Rooted deep within you is the exile you suffered in that dismal land of *Fonye's*, may his name and remembrance be blotted out! But America is not *kbazer-land* [land of impurity, literally 'pig-land']. All the millionaires and trillionaires in America worked long and hard in their youths. One in a shop, another on the street. Ask Rockefeller, Carnegie, Morgan, Vanderbilt what they once were. Didn't they once sweep streets? Weren't they newspaper boys? Didn't they polish shoes for a nickel? (P. 95)

It is because we are dealing with a comic figure, who reacts in a predictably obsessive manner, that his statements and comparisons are at first received with a certain amount of reserve. However, we can assume that, as far as the negative attitude toward Russia is concerned, Sholem Aleichem's readers generally were ready to agree with everything "our friend Pinye" had to say. On the other hand, his passionate speeches about America, studded as they are with hyperbolic formulations, still provoke reserved smiles to this day. Sholem Aleichem achieved his aim superbly through the vehicle of this character and the exaggerations he had him utter.

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There is yet another interesting aspect to the system of comparisons that long dominated Sholem Aleichem's American themes. On the surface it may appear that Sholem Aleichem has introduced a theme that is the opposite of degradation, that is, the theme of an immigrant's achieving success. The truth is, however, that this apparent "success" has negative consequences and, if anything, intensifies the sense of degradation.

As early as 1903 Sholem Aleichem's famous hero of "A gebentsht land" (A Blessed Country) tells us about the character from Mazepevke, Berl Dovid-Moyshe's, who "dealt in

treffe [unclean, i.e., illegal] goods, got into deep trouble, and had to escape as far as America."²⁹ In America he became a *khazn* (cantor), a *shoykhet* (ritual meat slaughterer) and a *rov* (rabbi). Menakhem-Mendl can hardly understand how such a person can serve as a *khazn* or a *shoykhet*. He certainly cannot comprehend how he came to be a *rov*:

O.K. I might forgive [your being a *khazn* or a *shoykhet*. . . . But a *rov*! I say, how can you possibly make judgments on matters of ritual? For shame, Reb Berl! *Paskenen shayles*?

"Eh," says he to me. "Menakhem-Mendl, you are still so green, as green as a cucumber! Wait. After you've been here a while, then you'll see some surprising things. You'll see what a country this is, what a blessed country!"³⁰

In fact, Mister Green himself, whose job it is to blow the shofar, is yet another example of a "freshly baked" Jewish religious functionary, whose new line of work is made possible by conditions specific to the "blessed land."

It was in *Motl Peyse dem khazns* that Sholem Aleichem presented this motif most poignantly. Here the degradation of a former position is seen against the fraudulent elevation of incompetents to rabbinic positions:

My brother Elye and our friend Pinye work in two different shops. One is an "operator." That means, forgive my spelling it out, that he is a tailor. The other one is a "presser." . . . What can my brother Elye know about this line of work, considering the fact that our father, and our father's father, and our father's father's father never were tailors, nor did their eyes ever see the likes of a sewing machine! According to Momma we come from a pure line of cantors, rabbis, and sextons. You might think that that can present a problem! But this is America. In America there is no such thing as a person's lacking the appropriate knowledge for a job. In America you learn. Here's an example: take a rabbi. To

be a rabbi you must, of course, know a lot. A rabbi must at the very least know how to answer questions about ritual matters. Yet here, in America, there are rabbis—here they are called "reverends"—who back in the old country were only butchers. My brother Elye met a *moyel*, a "reverend," who gets called upon to perform circumcisions. In the old country he was a tailor, and a women's tailor, to boot! (P. 106)

The impression given is that America is a country of status reversals. In the Jewish community, at least, anything goes. While Old Country aristocrats who had been respected there become degraded and suffer greatly in America, others with absolutely no qualifications achieve prestigious positions.

Why is it that these two manifestations are viewed with such pain by Sholem Aleichem's characters—and probably by many of his readers as well? The answer is simple. The immigrants continued to live with the same aspirations they had in *shetlekh* epitomized by Kasrilevke. They had internalized small-town values and held onto the *shetl* for dear life. Motl's weepy mother could only find peace in New York because she found friends from Kasrilevke there, and most importantly because she could attend her very own Kasrilevke synagogue in New York. She did not want to *myf* (move) to another neighborhood because she would have had to pray in a strange synagogue.³¹

The Kasrilevke-America connection crops up in Sholem Aleichem's works in several ways. For example, the competition between the newspapers, the progressive *Kapelyush* and the pious *Yarmelke*, was carried over by Sholem Aleichem from America to Kasrilevke. The descriptions of the two newspapers that appear in *Kasrilevker progres* are no more than a continuation of "Kasrilevke in America."³² In one passage Sholem Aleichem goes a step further and adds the aside: "Let there be no mistake: The Kasrilevke newspapers took the same road that the newspapers in America took; only they went even further."³³

And it is precisely because America and Kasrilevke are so similar that Sholem Aleichem can find the same grotesque occurrences in both places. The American *olraynik* (“all-rightnik,” parvenu) and the ignorant, boorish parvenu in Eastern Europe are cut from the same cloth. It is therefore simple for Sholem Aleichem to take an old bitter-comic story “Yos iz khaneke?” (What is Hanukkah?) and turn it into an “American” tale in 1907.³⁴ In the East European version, a Hanukkah celebration is depicted as taking place in the home of an affluent parvenu in Kiev, while in the American variant it becomes a New York Hanukkah “party.” The invitation to the Kiev celebration is written in Russian, and the Yiddish spoken at the party is russified. In the 1907 version the invitation is written in a mixture of Yiddish and English, which is how the characters speak as well. Both in Kiev and in New York the guests either don’t know or pretend they don’t know what the holiday is about. In both versions the hosts’ young son confuses the names of the holidays and the names of the Jewish dishes when he stumblingly attempts to explain the significance of the holiday. In Kiev he does this in Russian; in New York in English.

Sholem Aleichem did the same thing in his sarcastic story “Ma nishane” (Is This Passover Night] Different [from All Other Nights]), published in 1902, in which he writes about assimilated affluent Russian Jews who are ashamed of their Jewishness. The American version was reformulated by Sholem Aleichem in 1916 and retitled “Di fir kashes fun an amerikaner ‘boy’” (The Four Questions of an American Boy).³⁵ Since the principle was the same, Sholem Aleichem had no difficulty in transferring the story to America. He merely had to substitute Americanisms for Russianisms. The American “allrightnik,” however, is, if anything, even more boorish than the European parvenu, becoming a totally absurd figure. That is how Sholem Aleichem depicts him in “Oylem habe: a sharzh in eyn akt” (A Share in) the World to Come: A Joke in One Act), 1915. Here we find a boorish married couple,

“allrightniks,” who buy a share in the world to come from a swindler in an ostensibly traditional purchase-ceremony.³⁶

* * *

If the above is taken to represent the true expression of Sholem Aleichem’s expectations of life in America, it would indeed appear that the writer’s fictional works contradict certain of his own statements on the subject. In fact he did attempt—in his fiction—to devise a concept that could resolve the superficial contradiction. According to this view, immigrants arriving with a completely formed “Kasrilevke” mentality could not succeed in America. The future belonged only to those young people who arrived at an early enough age to rid themselves of old values and adopt the values necessary to fit into the new life-style.

Tevye understood this, and in his statements quoted above, he stresses that he will not come to America because he is too old. This also holds true for the not-so-young Menakhem-Mendl. “Our friend Pinye” says this as well, in one of the above quotations, where he mentions the millions and billions in America who all “worked and toiled as young men and women.” We also find this in the comedy *Di goldgreber* (ca. 1907), where the figure of a Jewish youth who becomes affluent in America through hard work appears for the first time in a work by Sholem Aleichem.³⁷

The action of this comedy takes place during the 1880s in “a Jewish shtetl in Poland. . . . Benny Ben (formerly Benditsen) . . . , a young man of 30, on a visit from America” appears on the scene. According to a remark in the comedy, he is “healthy, of ruddy complexion. . . looks like a true Englishman.”³⁸ Sholem Aleichem did his best to depict him as attractive and sympathetic, even in his appearance, and not merely because Benny plays the part of the first lover in the comedy. He also serves as living proof of what one might hope to achieve in America through productive and pleasur-

"allrightniks," who buy a share in the world to come from a swindler in an ostensibly traditional purchase-ceremony.³⁶

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Motl Peyse dem kbazns. We can only surmise that he might have developed this concept more convincingly in *Motl* than he had in *Di goldgreber*, where Benny Ben played the role of the young, successful immigrant.⁴¹ Motl and his buddy Mendl were to have achieved the American dream, the dream of which their parents and older brother could not even conceive.

Again, I am of the opinion that the full development of this idea would not have been an easy task for Sholem Aleichem. It seems too inflexible to be developed successfully in all cases. We can gain insight into the complicated problems it entails by referring to the close of Sholem Aleichem's novel *Blondzibende shtern*. In this work we again find a young man from Eastern Europe. Here it is Leo Rafalesko, a gifted actor—the counterpart of Motl, who is a gifted artist. The newspaper version of this novel, as is known, had a happy ending. Roza Spivak, happily in love, writes a letter to her girlfriend:

[He is] very childlike and has had little education, but with so much talent and enthusiasm that we all have to keep our distance from him. His ideal is the stage, and his aim is to reform the Yiddish theater, to put it on as high a plane as possible. I don't know if he'll succeed. I only know that he won't stop halfway, and I—as far as I am concerned—I'll help him achieve his goal.⁴²

The reader finishes the book wanting to believe that Rafalesko, with Roza's assistance, will indeed succeed in reforming the Yiddish theater in America.

Sholem Aleichem probably sensed that he had misled his reader with high hopes that bore no resemblance to the American Jewish reality. He later changed the ending of the novel. Rafalesko and Roza merely "met," and would not ". . . get together. The *blondzibende shtern* [wandering stars] had met too late." Sholem Aleichem also found it necessary to make a radical change in the part about Rafalesko's future. On the last pages of the book we learn that Rafalesko won't

try to reform the Yiddish *shund-theater* (vulgar theater) in America. Like Roza Spivak, he, too, leaves the Yiddish stage “for one of the largest English-language theaters.”⁴³ In both variants, the young and talented Rafalesko is a success in America according to the model mentioned above. However, Sholem Aleichem vacillated about where this success would be more secure, in the end deciding that it was in the English theater. There can be no doubt that cutting *Blondzbende shtern* short without developing the theme of Rafalesko’s long road to success—either among his fellow Jews or on the American stage—resulted from the problematic notion of the “positive hero” in modern Yiddish literature, a concept troublesome both prior to and after Sholem Aleichem. And perhaps for these same reasons, he never finished *Motl Peysedem khazans* and *Der misteyk*, both of which presented similar difficulties. Sholem Aleichem had little faith in the future of the Yiddish theater in America, and he had an old score to settle with it stemming from his first visit to New York. These issues are reflected in *Blondzbende shtern*, and they lead us to another chapter in the broad topic of “Sholem Aleichem and America,” to be treated on another occasion.

NOTES

This essay was originally given as a paper at the Fifty-eighth Annual YIVO Conference on 13 October 1985.

1. Yiskhok Elkhonen Ronish’s work, *Amerike in der yidisher literatur* (America in Yiddish literature) (New York, 1945), mentions Sholem Aleichem’s collection *In Amerike* (In America) on p. 252 of his bibliography. See n. 5 below.

2. Interest in Sholem Aleichem’s biography has led to a significant number of attempts to collect and analyze letters and memoirs. To date the most reliable published source for biographical research on Sholem Aleichem remains *Dos Sholem-Aleykhem-bukh* (The Sholem Aleichem book) (New York, 1926), as well as the writer’s letters, published simultaneously in the New York newspaper *Der tog* and Warsaw’s *Haynt* during 1923–24. Of especial importance is Y. D. Berkowitz’s memoir, *Kitney Y. D. Berkovits*, part 2, *Hartsbomin kitney-adam* (Tel Aviv, 1959); for the American periods see 115–19, 328–48. See also Berkowitz, *Undzere risboymim* (Our classical

writers) (Tel Aviv, 1966), vol. 2, 156–226, and vol. 5, 154–227, as well as Kalmen Marmor, “Sholem Aleykhems ershter bazukh in Amerike” (Sholem Aleichem’s first visit to America), *Yidische kultur* 6 (1939): 23–27. For a biased treatment of this topic, see Shaklne Epshteyn, “Sholem Aleykhem in Amerike,” in *Sovetish beymland* 12 (1941): 307–59. This study is based mainly on materials in *Dos Sholem-Aleykhem-bukh* as well as a few dubious, undocumented memoirs. Epshteyn’s article reflects an anti-American bias and seeks to make much of Sholem Aleichem’s contacts with radical circles in New York.

3. See Berkowitz and Epshteyn; see also A. Shulman, “Sholem Aleykhems sisenisher debyut in Amerike” (Sholem Aleichem’s debut on the American stage), *YIVO-bleter* 4 (1932): 419–31. See also Jacob Weitzner’s unpublished dissertation, *Hadrama shel Sholem-Aleykhem ummusba babinait* (The drama of Sholem Aleichem and its realization on the stage) (Jerusalem, 1982), 1–52, 264–81, for a discussion of Boris Thomashevsky’s production of *Stempennyu*.

4. The most important bibliographies of English translation are Uriel Weinreich, “Guide to English Translations of Sholem Aleichem” in *The Field of Yiddish* (New York, 1954), 285–91; D. N. Miller, “Sholem Aleichem in English: The Most Accessible Translations,” *Yiddish*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1977): 61–70; Dina Abramowicz, *English Translations of Yiddish Literature 1945–1967*, with an addendum through April 1968 (New York, 1968). About the English translations, see J. Shatzky, “The Untranslatable Translated,” in *Sholem Aleichem Panorama*, ed. Melech Grafstein (London, Ontario, 1948), 55–59; R. S. Kachuk, “Sholem Aleichem’s Humor in English Translation,” *YIVO Annual* 11 (1956–57): 39–81.

5. There has been an attempt to collect Sholem Aleichem’s works on American themes written in 1915–16 during his final American visit in *In Amerike: letste shtiftin* (In America: final works) (New York, 1918). In this volume, published by the *Varhayt*, there appeared: *Motl Peysedem khazans in Amerike* (Motl Peysedem the cantor’s son in America), the one-act play *Oylem habe* (The world to come), and the two monologues *A mayse mit a grinborn* (The tale of a greenhorn) and *Mister Grin bot a dzhabab* (Mr. Green has a job). In the anthology *Amerike in yidishn vort* (America in the Yiddish language), ed. N. Meisel (New York, 1955), Sholem Aleichem is represented by his lullaby “Shlof, mayn kind” (Sleep, my child), p. 76, and the first chapter of *Motl Peysedem khazans in Amerike*, 7–81. Sol Lipitzin also writes on this subject in “Sholem Aleichem Scans America,” in Grafstein’s *Sholem Aleichem Panorama*, 30–31. See n. 4.

6. This later appeared in almost identical variants in *Forverts* and *Di varbayt* on 4 November 1906. The headline in *Forverts* read, “A Letter from Sholem Aleichem. The recently arrived Yiddish writer offers thanks for the reception accorded him and offers a few thoughts about America.” *Di Varbayt*’s caption read, “Sholem Aleichem on Jews in America.”

7. See Mark Wischnitzer, *To Duell in Safety* (Philadelphia, 1948), 27–66, 105–12, regarding the two great waves of emigration.

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7. See Mark Wischnitzer, *To Dwell in Safety* (Philadelphia, 1948), 27–66, 105–12, regarding the two great waves of emigration.

the title “Keyn Amerike: Tsvey letste briv fun Menakhem-Mendl” (To America: Two final letters from Menakhem-Mendl), *Di tsukunft*, no. 2 (1903): 30–36; in Eastern Europe the title was “Adve! Der letster briv fun Menakhem-Mendl” (Adieu! The last letter from Menakhem-Mendl), *Der fraynd*, no. 220 (22 October 1903). The only letter from America, “A gebentsht land: A briv fun Menakhem-Mendl fun Amerike” (A blessed land: A letter from Menakhem-Mendl from America), was published solely in *Der fraynd*, no. 1 (1 January 1904). The quotation cited here is taken from *Menakhem-Mendl* (Tel Aviv, 1976), 31; the title of the letter is missing here.

The theme of degradation is repeated throughout Sholem Aleichem’s work, including his final efforts. *Der misteyk* is an unfinished novel that appeared serially in *Der tog* from 30 October through 25 December 1915. The quotations cited here from this novel are from a reprint in *Sovetish beymland*, no. 2 (1961): 91–106 and no. 3 (1961): 89–102. The following passage appears there: “There in the Old Country she was once the proprietress of her home, was respectfully called ‘Madame Blumfeld’ and had a maid, two maids; while here she is just a poor widow who does her own cooking and baking and is called just plain ‘Mrs. Feld’ and nothing more” (p. 89).

19. *Menakhem-Mendl* (Tel Aviv, 1976), 29–30.

20. For the publication history of the *Tevye* series, see Khone Shmeruk, “Tevye der milkhiker: Le-toldoteha shel yetsera” (Tevye the Dairyman: The history of its publication), *Ha-sifrut* 26 (1978): 26–38. This passage is taken from *Undzer lebn*, no. 61 (16 May 1907). Sholem Aleichem was in America until the middle of June 1907. He withdrew the above passage from the version printed by *Progres* (Warsaw, 1913), vol. 7, as well as from the translations. The passage is missing from all subsequent editions of the book. As is known, this edition—as well as the translations into Hebrew and Russian—ends with the chapter “Tevye fort keyn Erets-Yisroel” (Tevye goes to the land of Israel), in which he decides not to emigrate to America (see n. 15 above).

21. See *Menakhem-Mendl*.

22. A. Hertzberg, “‘Trefene Medina’: Learned Opposition to Emigration to the United States,” in *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 6, Panel Sessions, Jewish History (Jerusalem, 1984), 1–9.

23. It goes without saying that Sholem Aleichem was not the originator of this comparison. Such comparisons are an integral part of immigrant life and of the literature that attempts to express their feelings. For example, when *Di varbayt* printed “A lid fun yidish lebn in der life” (A poem about Jewish life in Lithuania), the editors felt that they had to defend themselves, thus: “Although these scenes are not socialist in nature, we print them nevertheless to offer our [immigrant] Russian readers a little something about their former life, so that they can better compare it with the present.” Cited in A. Shulman, “*Di varbayt*: di ershte gezeshafteleke yidische tsaytung in Amerike” (The *Varbayt*: The first community-minded newspaper in

America), in *Zambubeh lekoved der tsveybundert-un-fufstistsn yoyul fun der yidisher prese 1686–1936* (Anthology in Honor of the 250th anniversary of the Yiddish press, 1686–1936) (New York, 1937), 209. See also J. Opatoshu, "Fufstik yor yidische literatur in di fareynike shtrah" (Fifty years of Yiddish literature in the United States), *YIVO-bleter* 38 (1954): 39–49.

24. The title of the letters is typical of the period; up until the 1880s the Yiddish press in America attempted to satisfy its immigrant readers' curiosity about what was happening in the Old Country. The growth of the Yiddish press in America was closely tied to this interest. See Shmuel Nigert, "Mer alt-heyimish vi amerikansh: kapitlekh amerikaner yidisher literatur-geshikhe" (More like the Old Country than America: Chapters in the history of American Yiddish literature), *Di tsukunft*, April 1940, especially pp. 212–13.

25. *Felyetonen*, 36.

26. "Tsvey leshone-toyye-brivlekh" first appeared in *Der fraynd* no. 191 (1907). However, the letter to America, entitled "Shril, dank got!" (Quiet, thank God!) was printed in *Minikes yomin-neyoyim un sukes blat* (New York, 1907), 7–8. In the American version the Russianisms were dispensed with (e.g., *nelem gevorn* replaces *istsispeynyet*, *shtil* replaces *blabopolushtne*, *misbpokhe* replaces *semyestvo*), and there are a number of additional changes at the beginning and end of this version. For example, here the writer of the letter does want to come to America: "If what you say is true, perhaps you would send us some steamship tickets. They may come in handy. Should there be another pogrom, I'll be able to thumb my nose at them" (p. 8). Similar hesitations are expressed in the final chapter of *In shturem*, when one of the immigrants "wants to convince" everyone that he is not going to America "permanently": "No doubt we'll all return—certainly I will. . . ." (vol. 7, 217). See Epshteyn, "Sholem Aleykhem in Amerike," 322–23.

27. The language barrier as a reason for not emigrating to America is repeated quite often by Sholem Aleichem's characters. See, e.g., Leye Spivak's letter from Holoneshti to her daughter in America in *Blondzbernde shtern* (New York, 1912), 482.

28. "Mister Grin hot a dzhahb" first appeared in *Der tog* on 28 August 1915 and was incorporated into vol. 21, 243–49. "A mayse mit a grinhorn" was published for the first time in *Di varbayt* on 12 January 1916 and appears in vol. 21, 251–59. See also the statement of the American atheist in "Di ershte yidische republik" (The first Jewish republic), in *Di mayse verk fun Sholem-Aleykhem*, vol. 2 (Warsaw, 1909), 157ff. This was first published simultaneously in St. Petersburg in *Der fraynd*, nos. 141–215 (1907) and in the New York *Yudishes tageblat* from 14 July to 27 August 1907.

29. One can also conclude from Teyve's statements that those who fled to America were often swindlers and charlatans (vol. 5, 173, 192–93).

30. All citations are from *Memabem-Memal*, 32–33.

31. See the chapter titled "Kasrilevke in Amerike" (Kasrilevke in America), vol. 19, 129–36. Regarding the Kasrilevke and the "foreign" synagogues, see 196–97.

32. *Kasrilevker progres* first appeared in *Der tog*, 24 April–19 June 1915. Portions of it had been published earlier in *Dos leben* (Warsaw, 1917), nos. 115–67. This appears in vol. 1, 84–89 of the Folksfond edition. The two competing newspapers that figure here are *Der fierer* and *Tageblat*. See Berkowitz, *Kiney Y. D. Berkovitsch*, vol. 2, 336 in Hebrew and *Undzere risboymim*, p. 183 in Yiddish.

33. See the short chapter "Sensatsyes un romanen" (Sensations and novels) in *Kasrilevker progres*, vol. 1, 21–24. From as early as 1894—in his "A grus fun der heyim"—Sholem Aleichem continued his battle with Shomer, who was already in America at that time; see *Felyetonen*, 34–46. Nor did Shomer spare Sholem Aleichem; see Malakhi, "Sholem Aleykhem in der yidish-amerikaner prese" (n. 17 above). Regarding these novels, see also Sholem Aleichem's letter of thanks dated November 1906 (see n. 6 above). In "Di ershte yidische republik," Sholem Aleichem parodies Yiddish novels published in America, thus: "Already in its seventh edition. . . the novel has a very long title, 'Captain Horibaba. . .'" See *Di mayse verk fun Sholem Aleykhem*, vol. 2, 135, 146. The battle against literary trash figures prominently in the "American" part of his novel *Blondzbernde shtern*. See, e.g., pp. 331–36 of the 1912 New York edition. See also Sholem Aleichem's novel *Der misteyk*, wherein the author again seizes the opportunity to take a stand against trashy novels (see n. 18 above), *Soverish Heymland* 2, 106 and 3, 101–2. Note here that Sholem Aleichem was himself criticized for *Der misteyk*, which was erroneously viewed as a "dime novel" by those who failed to understand his intended irony. Criticism was leveled against him in so-called "left-wing" circles; see Epshteyn, "Sholem Aleykhem in Amerike," 346 (n. 2 above), and later A. Pomerantz, "Sholem Aleykhem's 'Misteyk' un Oyslenders toes" (Sholem Aleichem's *Mistake* and Oyslender's error) in *Frage arbeter shtime*, 15 October 1905, as well as E. Lifschutz's comment in the 15 November 1905 issue of *Frage arbeter shtime*.

34. "Vos iz khaneker?" was first published in *Der yud*, nos. 48–49 (1901). See the version in the Folksfond edition, vol. 2, 185–208, dated there as Hanukkah, 1902. The American version is called "Khaneker in der finfter evenyu: a bild, der yidisher 'hay lay' in Nyu-york" (Hanukkah on Fifth Avenue: A portrait of Jewish high-life in New York), *Yudishes tageblat*, 2–3 December 1907.

35. "Ma nishane?" was first published in *Der yud*, nos. 16–17 (1902). The American version appeared after the writer's death in *Di varbayt*, 17 March 1918. Both were reprinted in the Folksfond edition, vol. 23, 7–17.

36. A similar social setting is described in his "Feylekh in di mauntenz: a bashtraybung" (Fun in the mountains: A description) in *Der tog*, 4 September 1915 (never reprinted).

37. The comedy was first published in *Di tsukunft*, October–December 1927, 555–68, 618–23, 682–87. See Y. D. Berkowitz, "Forbamerkingen tsu

der geshikhte fun *Di goldgreber*" (Prefatory remarks on the history of *The Golddiggers*), 555. Cf. my article about *Motl Peyse dem kbazns* (n. 12 above), p. 313.

38. *Ibid.*, 555.

39. *Ibid.*, 618.

40. Again, see the passport episode, which is intended to poke fun at Russian laws and customs compared to the freedom in America; *ibid.*, 623.

41. The unfinished American novel *Der misteyk* has two similar characters as its central figures. At the very opening of the novel the two rich Tsher (formerly Tsherkaski) brothers are depicted thus: "Two sons, two precious sons, Motl and Khaim. Who knows what might have become of them had they not left for America *at a young age* [emphasis mine] to work for a man from their home town?" *Sovetish beymland*, 2 (1961): 94.

42. *Blondzhende sbtern* (New York, 1912), 477.

43. *Ibid.*, part 2: 'Na-venad' (Warsaw, 1922), 390, 494.