

The Leydik-geyer and other stories

In contrast to the powerful fictional trains of 19th-century Europe which raced across countrysides, overran the economic, social, and political fabric of nations and empires, and brought opportunity as well as modernity to the rural hinterlands, the slow, small, narrow gauge Jewish train in SA's Tsarist Russia traveled neither great distances nor worked up much speed or steam. Certainly it did not link the provincial shtetls to any of the great Russian cities or make it possible for the Jewish population to better its economic situation with employment in urban centers. For with few exceptions, until the revolution Jews in Russia were not permitted to live or to work in her large cities. Instead, they were confined to a vast, economically depressed area in the western border regions of Russia called The Pale of Settlement. Inside that remote area, the narrow gauge train in Sholem Aleykhem's story "der leydik-geyer" connected a small number of shtetlekh in the Pale and made travel and trade possible among towns with suggestive heymish names like Bohopoli, Teplik, Heysen, Nemirov, and Khashchevate. The Jews of that area represent one part of a larger varied Jewish population which exists in the Pale. They are described in chapters 7, 9¹ of *The Railroad Stories*.

The unnamed narrator who tells this story wryly refers to the shtetlekh connected by the narrow gauge train as "gebentshte ^{mekoynim} ~~mekoyim~~", and he appears correct in his judgment for the reader soon discerns that in the entire book, only this group of Jews possess the spiritual resources and emotional resilience necessary to deflect the destructive consequences of

¹Chapter 7, "der leydik-geyer" ("The Slowpoke Express"); chapter 8, "der nes fun hoshana-rabe" ("The Miracle of Hoshana-Rabbah"); and chapter 9, "a khasene on klezmer" ("The Wedding that Came without Its Band")

So you
see, you
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situate a
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within its
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the encounter between the Jews of Eastern Europe and 20th-century modernity.

The narrator's judgment is, for the most part good. It should be for he spends eleven months of the year traversing the rapidly changing world of the Pale and writing about it. He is a commercial traveler who whiles away the long hours that he spends on the trains with literary compositions, centered on his fellow passengers. The "true stories" he collects and edits are conversations he says that he either overheard or which were told directly to him. In fact, of course, the book was written by the master storyteller, himself, Sholem Aleykhem who stands behind the narrator manipulating all the action, speaking all the roles.

The commercial traveler describes the Bohopolites with affection and amusement. He quietly spoofs their smug provincial behavior and naive beliefs. Yet beneath the gentle irony of his voice, there is respect for these local communities which cope successfully with two separate threats from the outside world: (1) the encroaching 20th century and its new technologies symbolized in the railroad, and (2) the age-old, unchanging patterns of pogroms and anti-semitism. What makes these communities so admirable is that at a time when the Jews he meets riding other trains are showing the destructive effects of modernity in one way or another, the area around Bohopoli is still able to adapt to change even as it holds on to kehile and traditional values. What qualities they possess in order to achieve that miracle is the focus of this paper and the subject of the very short tale, "di leydik-geyer", which relates how the narrow gauge train first came to the district and how the people responded to it.

The entire district holds its train in such esteem that local residents have affectionately dubbed it "The Leydik-geyer" (The Empty Train). It is

the subject and hero of endless conversations and stories which local residents gladly reel off. Its mayles are inestimable, they say, and proof is that the ride is calm and quiet; there is never a need to fight for seats, since --as its name indicates--it is usually empty. A work-weary Jew (is there any other kind?) always finds room either to sit down or to stretch out completely as if in his own bed at home. Because the train does not go fast, a passenger can really relax for there is little danger of accidents. In addition, there is never a need to worry about being late or missing the train, for whenever one gets to the station, it is always there waiting. Indeed, Bohopoli suggests that there is almost something magical about the train. As in other tales of wonder, it sometimes appears to be possessed with life and have a mind of its own.

The train has an interesting history, which Bohopoli also loves to relate. Initially, when it was reported that a train would be built in the district there was disbelief:

S'iz a lign. vos darf teplik, oder golte oder heysen, a ban? zey zenen take andersh nit oyfgetsoygen gevoren gor af ayzenbanen?

There was in Bohopoli joked in its usual fashion that there would no more be a train there than hair would grow on a Boholpolian palm. However, when an engineer arrived to measure land and to draw up plans, and Bohopoli realized that it had [?]errored, it did not waste time in grief. Instead every man made a 180 degree turn and became an enthusiastic supporter of the railroad. Like ✓ Menakhem-Mendl, Bohopoli's enthusiasm knew no limit. There was no reason, some said, why they also could not become millionaires like Poliakov, the rich Jew who had made a fortune in railroads and was allowed to live in Russia. Unlike Menakkhem-Mendl, however, the shtetl tempered enthusiasm

with humor and laughed at themselves as they spoke of "Our Poliakovs" who were already busy calculating their profits.

51. While many did obtain profitable employment contracting for the train, there was not enough work for all. There was some discontent and rumbling, however, the community did not split into haves and have-nots and no cut-throat competitive, internecine warfare for parnose occurred. Some who could not get work banded together to raise funds and to try their hand at private railroad entrepreneurship. Just how financially strained the shtetl was becomes clear when the method they employed to raise capital is revealed. Since there were no bank accounts to dip into, no property to mortgage, no rich relatives to ask loans of, funds were raised by selling a family's most valuable possessions, which were the wife's pearls and the husband's shabos kapotkes. Unfortunately, their plan failed and some families lost everything. However, money or private problems were not permitted to spoil their appreciation of the new train. They made the best of their situation and found something to feel blessed about, for theirs was a fatalistic but consciously non-tragic view of life. After all they had the remarkable "Leydik-geyer" to spin wondrous yarns with all the relish and color Yiddish discourse could supply, even though they had not read Harshav.)
What is the wisdom of this train? they asked in Talmudic sing-song. They replied to their own question, structuring their answer as a proverb in order to give their words universal significance:

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ver es geyt pavoylye, der falt nit.

They developed a store house of affectionate anecdotes were developed which illustrated just how slow their slow train was: for example: a man left for the briss of a grandchild and arrived when the child was ready for

bar mitzva; or: a young couple meeting half way to look each other over discovered at the juncture that he had become gray and she was toothless.

What the reader perceives when the stories and jokes are processed into the medium of normative, non Yiddish, non ironic speech is that a train which would be regarded as a calamity anywhere else in the modern world and judged a shameful failure of efficiency and technology, is seen to possess extraordinary virtues in Bohopoli. Clearly what the world thinks about a variety of subjects is perceived differently by the residents of Bohopoli, where necessity is the mother of perspective, and invention follows a close second. That is, the inept train in Bohopoli is perceived positively because it is necessary to see it that way if they are to prevail. Given a choice either to bewail their situation or to find the humor in it, Jews of the district opt for a creative perspective and humor. After all, what do they need a train with speed, time-tables and efficiency for, when there is no place to go to except another nearby shtetl as backward and impoverished as they are themselves?

The name of their train alone, "Leydik-geyer", makes it is clear that Bohopolers think differently from the rest of the world. Years of experience with adversity have taught them to deal with hardship and pain by turning it around to their advantage. Give a Bohopoler lemons and he will make orange juice, if lemonade is not to his advantage. Unlike the other third class passengers in the rest of the book, Sholem Alekhem's average Bohopoler is an imaginative thinker who, as part of an adaptive survival process of the cleverest, manages to find something to laugh about in his own difficult situation. Like the shlemiel, the artist, the mad man, this Jew looks at the world from an singular perspective, and with his alternative

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vision, he creates a new kind of magic lodged in talk and in stories which are filled with absurd humor.

Equally important, with his uniquely Jewish mind-set the Bohopoler sees the hand of God and fate continuously at work in daily life. Isolated from the rest of the world and steeped in religion and superstition, he exists in a part of the Pale where God's miracles and fate's misfortunes exist as commonplace occurrences in daily life and are as real-- even more real-- than recent intrusions of modern technologies into his shtetl or events in the newspapers (which he seldom can read^g). His mindset makes it patently clear that it is God Who determines and decrees the outcome of all events and not reason, science, progress, or invention. Thus, when the the run away "Loydik-geyer" in "der nes fun hoshana rabe" finally came to a miraculous halt and disaster was averted, it was because God stepped in to intervene rather than because the train ran out of fuel. Unlike the Priest in the story whose faith failed him in crisis, the Jew at the throttle had no fear for his life because he knew as plain as the nose on his face that God determined a year in advance who lived and who died for the year. That kind of perspective and belief meant that a pogrom in the shtetl of Heysen was averted because the town asked God for a miracle and He granted it. It did not hurt, of course, that bribes were paid, strings were pulled, secret agents intervened, and pogromchiks approaching by train several towns away stopped for a few drinks. In the end, although man could help himself through deed and prayer, it was God Who ultimately judged and determined that the train, which was always late every other day of the year, would depart on time, leaving the carousing prgromchiks behind. 1

In addition to ironic humor and traditional beliefs, the simple shtetlnik in narrow gauge train district survived the Pale and life in general, because he had other unique attributes.:

(1) He lived with a different sense of time and history. His calendar, the Luekh, was not only capable of making an error in a day, as he said. It also recorded a different and older century and was structured on biblical events of long ago which, nevertheless, continued to inform the stetl in all aspects of daily life. This gave people a different, deeper sense of history and time, infused everyday life with the infinite power, beneficence, mercy of God and the possibility of His miracles.

(2) At the same time, these Jews also lived in a practical world of flexible belief. Should a Bohopolian predict an event, swear to a fact, or assert absolutely that no such occurrence could occur, and then be proven wrong, --e.g. a railroad was built in the district, --he did not take it to heart, he was not compromised, fought no duels, did not renounce life. Instead, he simply figured out how to make a profit from his error.

(3) He was able to look at life positively, not because he was an optimist but because everything was fated anyway. What God did not decide, would be acted upon by the far reaching hand of undefined Fortune.

(4) Through story-telling he merged his experiences with his beliefs. From that mixture, he concretized a wisdom which he transformed into allegory, tall tales, miracle tales, myths, and stories of fantasy and magic. Those he used in the community for instruction and delight.

(5) His survival techniques kept the kehile united. There are no individualized voices in the stories about Bohopoli and her neighbors. The voices that are singled out have a fairy tale ancestry. No one, for example, address the narrator with a private story; everyone acts in concert with

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tradition and with one another. In the backwards district of the narrow gauge train., unlike the other shtetls in the book, the individual, though a comical, and his community remain integrated. Thus in a world of restrictions and disadvantages, the local wits, whom a bemused narrator says think that they are known world wide for their humor, have time to tell jokes and to weave tall folk tales with happy endings about themselves and their train. Through the miracle of storytelling, and with the help of miracles from God, with a belief in fate, a different perspective on time, history, and reality, and a sense of community, the provincials around Bohopoli triumphed over modern 20th century technology and over the bigoted Russian priests who tried to negate their very existence by refusing to remember their names

But there are other communities and individuals in *The Railroad Stories* who are unable to cope with modernity and technology for they lack the survival skills of Bohopoli. The stories the commercial traveler tells about them are characterized by varying degrees of divisiveness: (1) economic and social distinctions between rich and poor, and between upper, middle, and lower classes; (2) varying degrees of assimilation; (3) weakened spiritual faith; (4) a rise in individualism and an attendant loss of communal cohesion. People are no longer associated with the shtetl; deny they are Jews; have lost the ability to communicate with each other both within the family and outside it. People have become so immersed in private grief that, while mouthing phrases in praise of God they lose connection with Him and with humanity. Other are so alienated from the traditional value system that token philanthropy replaces responsibility and belief. People engage without guilt in cynical brazen scams. The local boy who makes good and

now supports his shtetl with lavish gifts is in reality a white slavery dealer who found almost to his surprise that there was nothing he would not do for money. He lives by a philosophy that is the antithesis of Jewish beliefs and values. With zest he explains how he never looks back, never has second thoughts about his deals, never questions the level he finds he must stoop to. Brutalized as a child, he now dehumanizes others and lives in a world of physical pleasure, which he calls a cesspool. Yet he is without remorse or humanity.

Young shtetl women are no longer good yiddishe tokhters. like Rokhl in *Stempenyu* They disobey parents, read forbidden books, have love affairs with Russians, and take their own lives almost wantonly. The competition for parnose, and for secular schools is so cutthroat that it destroys family life.

✓ Even the narrator is corrupted by his encounter with modernity. Almost always in transit, and with no mention of links to any community, he lacks the impeccable character of Sholem Aleykhem. There is something disturbing and suspect in the way the commercial traveler either holds himself apart from evils in the world about him -- a horse being unmercifully beaten in the landscape as the train passes; or does not hold himself apart from the evil of an ebullient white slavery shoykhet whose hospitality the narrator accepts but whose obvious occupation he seems oddly unable to grasp.

✓ One senses strongly here that the real author, Sholem Rabinovitch, is passing judgment upon the strangely distanced commercial traveler and adding a cautionary note about the danger to artists who immerse themselves so completely in their art that they separate from community and lose connection with important values and with real life.

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In the background of the stories about the small gauge Jewish train, the writer, SA, quietly takes note of the plight of Jews cut off from opportunities in the cities of the Russian empire. Even when the modern world and its wonders came to the Jews of the shtetlekh, it was often so reduced in scope, or worn out, that it was of little benefit. All that a sophisticated humanistic assimilated modern Jewish writer like Sholem Rabinovitch who was distanced by light years from the mindset and perspective of the provincial Bohopolers could do, was to acknowledge the difficulty of their situation in delightful stories which pay loving tribute to inventive adaptive East European Jews who found a way for a while to survive and prevail over technology and the twentieth century.

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