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Sholem Aleichem and Others: Laughing Off the Trauma of History

SHOLEM ALEICHEM LIVED just long enough to see his comic muse tested to the limit. As we follow his writings in chronological order, in a time span of escalating violence, we see an ever-growing tension between *what* is being narrated and the *way* it is narrated. The greater the pain, the greater the discrepancy. This, strange to say, is the stuff of his humor. By drawing on folk tradition, on concepts of normalcy and on models of communication, Sholem Aleichem perfected an art of the incongruous to take on the vicissitudes of modern times. It was a comic paradigm which could be followed by very few because so few could sustain a vision of human inviolability as the divergence between catastrophe and the tongue became ever more extreme. How Sholem Aleichem trained to walk the tightrope and who it was among the survivors of later cataclysms that followed his precarious lead are the questions that concern us, as we set out to write a garrulous chapter in the modern Jewish literary response to catastrophe.

It is particularly to the postwar generations that Sholem Aleichem holds out the greatest challenge, for jaded as we are by a modernist bias and an apocalyptic temper, we expect the writer to find new artistic means commensurate with the new violence. As Malcolm Bradbury reminds us, the modernist movement itself, which took shape between 1890–1914, was finally vindicated by the violence of the Great War, so that by the 1920s realism had been all but dislocated and only the most brutal form of anti-epic could survive in the scarred landscape of postwar fiction.¹ Sholem Aleichem, by virtue of his literary credo, his political ideology, and the tools of his narrative art, stands in total opposition to the subversive tactics of literary modernism.²

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He plied his trade with language and myth against an historical field of disarray and destruction. Much has been written about each of these components. Sholem Aleichem's characters use language, an idealized form of colloquial Yiddish, as a protective shield, as a surrogate for action, and as a veritable code of survival.³ The basic features of this colloquial usage are fixed phrases and analogies; wordplay, a superabundance of synonyms; a direct form of intimate address (the *du-monolog*) and pointed dialogues; a calculated and often outrageous blend of high and low diction; a fine-tuned dialectology including non-Jewish vernaculars, professional argots, and children's speech.⁴ At his best, the author wields total control over a seemingly inexhaustible and wild flow of language. When compared to Yiddish folk locution "in the raw," to the extent that such records have been preserved, Sholem Aleichem's version thereof is strikingly devoid of obscenity, especially the scatological kind, and uses Slavic and regional forms with great precision.⁵ These linguistic resources are then sufficient to take in and to artistically reshape any human experience.

Sholem Aleichem achieves a mythic quality by the open-endedness of the individual stories and story-cycles; by repeating a rise-and-fall pattern of imagined success and catastrophic failure; by reworking common folk motifs and by linking certain characters to the regenerative rhythm of nature.⁶ A trip across the Bug River becomes a replay of Exodus and Jonah; a winter's ride through a perfectly credible forest takes on the quality of a folk tale complete with ogres and enchanted inns. Tevye stands fast in the face of adversity like a proud oak in the forest. Working against the resilience of language and the infinite repeatability of mythic paradigms is history, a permanent vehicle of destruction, effecting its upheaval from within and wreaking havoc from without.

History is relentless and inscrutable. To the extent that the old world characters are people of faith, such as Tevye, the comic Job, or Reb Yuzifl, the schlemiel rabbi of Kasrilevke, they can still accommodate history to a divine scheme, but the moment a character is thrust into the new world—Menakhem-Mendl the jack-of-all-modern-trades, or any of the travelers in the third class train compartment—they experience a world in which miracles, if they happen at all, are a result of human error, not of divine will. Old world characters and moderns alike "view the life around them as a fixed entity that cannot and will not be altered," to quote from an early critic,⁷ except in a far off utopian future, be it in the Land of Israel, Russia or America.⁸ Tevye, in the end, is forced to pack up and leave his village, and even Reb Yuzifl dies without benefit of the Old Age Home he fought for so bravely. History, therefore, provides an ever more frightening backdrop; myth, folklore and earlier literary traditions supply the limited repertoire of plots, while a fabulous gallery of talking Jews—traveling salesmen, market

women, upstanding householders, fathers, mothers, and sons—narrate their adventures in such a way as to keep one step ahead of destruction.

Sholem Aleichem began his Yiddish career shortly after the first series of tsarist pogroms of 1881–82. Whether for reasons of external or internal censorship or because his youthful enthusiasm compensated for the trauma of history, the pogroms did not figure directly in his early writings.⁹ Sholem Aleichem was certainly not alone here, for according to Israel Bartal, the *pogromshtshik* hardly appeared at all in Yiddish and Hebrew fiction until 1903.¹⁰ This, of course, was the year of Kishinev, which unleashed an artistic floodgate of response in European as well as Jewish languages, in the visual as well as verbal arts, in America as well as in Europe.¹¹ Sholem Aleichem's reaction to Kishinev was unique in several respects. He initiated a project designed not only to raise funds for the pogrom victims, but also to raise a cry of protest from within the liberal sector of Russian society. *Hilf (Aid)*, subtitled *an almanac for literature and art* (Warsaw, [1904]) was, from an aesthetic point of view at least, the most impressive Yiddish publication in its time and contained, besides the work of major Yiddish and Hebrew writers, three parables by Tolstoy written especially for the volume and a story by Vladimir Korolenko, both in an authorized translation by Sholem Aleichem.¹² Understandably, the censor was especially zealous. David Pinsky's realistic drama *Di familye Tsvi (The Zvi Family)* was expunged altogether, not to appear until 1905 in a foreign publication of the Bund.¹³ Korolenko was represented by a rather sentimental story in marked contrast to his eyewitness account of the Kishinev massacre which circulated underground.¹⁴ Sholem Aleichem's own contribution to the volume was similarly mild in its indictment.

Hundert eyns ("A Hundred and One") tells the story of two neighboring towns that are gratuitously severed by administrative fiat. Holte is decreed a village under the "Temporary Rules" of May 3, 1882 which means that no Jews are allowed to settle there anew, but since Holte is the more prosperous place, the inhabitants of neighboring Bohopolye will do anything in their power to steal across. With the local police waiting to turn them back at the bridge, Jews must meet the challenge with special rhetorical skills and with a working knowledge of Ukrainian:

"How can that be!" he argued. I've lived in Holte for many years! Ja maje sobstvene gorod uv škole [lit. I have my own city in the school]—I've got my own seat in the studyhouse! Ja maje skilke rodiči na kladbišče [lit. I have my several relatives in the cemetery]—and my relatives are buried in the cemetery!"

But the entreaties were as efficacious as yesterday's snow.¹⁵

The Jewish claim to ownership is so spiritual and other-worldly and is expressed in terms which are so culturally specific (having a “city” in the *besmedresh*), that rendering them into another language, even that of the native peasantry, only heightens their vulnerability. Increasingly, their manipulation of various codes will be an index of how Sholem Aleichem’s characters negotiate the perilous terrain of history.

At this point history closes in on two not altogether innocent victims. For one thing, their double names already type them as geographic split personalities, like so many Jews who happened to be registered in one place and to live in another. Secondly, Yerakhmiel-Moyshe Bohopolske from Holte and Nakhmen-Leyb Holtianske from Bohopolye are sworn enemies. The May decree catches each of them on opposite turf, so that Yerakhmiel-Moyshe the bona fide resident of Holte happens to be staying in Bohopolye, and vice versa. Each then begins to inform on the other, until a plague descends on both their houses: neither is permitted to reside or even to set foot in Holte. Time passes until, one day, someone suggests an appeal to the Senate. As ridiculous as it sounds, the Russian Senate did in fact take up cases such as this, and not implausibly decides in Yerakhmiel-Moyshe’s favor.¹⁶ Though six years have already passed in “exile” and poverty, Yerakhmiel-Moyshe is jubilant: “When God sends deliverance, it is surely a welcome thing, but the combination of deliverance and revenge is one of the sweetest things on earth, prompting indescribable joy” (Y 109). But the Tsar’s ways are as inscrutable as the Lord’s. He who gives can also take and as symbolic restitution for the excesses of Kishinev the Tsar, on May 10, 1903, opened up for “free domicile” 101 localities which had previously been barred to Jews under the Temporary Rules of 1882.¹⁷ It was a cynical gift at best, since many of these villages were never villages to begin with. Holte, to be sure, is on the list and Yerakhmiel-Moyshe’s Pyrrhic victory, now to be shared by an undeserving rival, drives him to the brink of insanity. In the end, Nakhmen-Leyb is the one to move back to Holte and Yerakhmiel-Moyshe inexplicably remains in Bohopolye.

History is what fuels the petty rivalry of men and women; it severs the bond of two neighboring towns and operates so arbitrarily as to frustrate all action or intervention. The meaning of Kishinev is that Jews continue to be the butt of diabolical tsarist jokes, though mutual aid and cooperation—across cultural barriers far more formidable than those between Bohopolye and Holte—can soften the blow. Help comes in small doses in a crazy world bent on destruction.

Comic discrepancies require a great deal of detachment and if “A Hundred and One” doesn’t quite rank among Sholem Aleichem’s best efforts, it is probably because his tale of two cities was too closely

bound up with the nitty-gritty of recent events. The open narrative cycles proved to be a better artistic vehicle for reducing the tremors of historical upheaval. Kasrilevke, the Town of the Little People, was many years in the making before it emerged as Sholem Aleichem's shorthand for Jewish collective survival in exile. In these stories, Sholem Aleichem mined the most popular of Yiddish folk motifs, the foolstown of Khelm, as well as the core of maskilic satire to produce a normative community of faith, solidarity and limitless talent to transform defeat into victory through the medium of language.¹⁸

The finest episodes in the Kasrilevke cycle are deceptively simple. They use well-worn plots and a gallery of recognizable types. As these stories were serialized in the Russian-Yiddish press, readers gained familiarity with the stock characters of Fishl the Correspondent, Zeydl Reb Shaye's, the only man in town who subscribes to a newspaper, and a Hebrew one at that; Reb Yuzifl the Rabbi and—pardon the proximity—the town's two or three domesticated goyim. Many plots were lifted straight out of folklore and nineteenth-century satire, sometimes with a title that revealed the probable source. Thus, when Sholem Aleichem came out with one of his longest Kasrilevke narratives, "The Great Panic in Kasrilevke" (renamed "The Great Panic of the Little People," 1904), the word *בהלה* in the title invoked a forty-year tradition of spoofs on shtetl hysteria, complete with a standard three-part plot: (1) the arrival of news from the outside world sends the isolated shtetl into a state of panic; (2) all normal activity stops as the entire shtetl prepares feverishly for the imminent event, but (3) when the truth is finally revealed, everyone is disappointed, duped or disgraced.¹⁹

So long as the shtetl was viewed as a provincial backwater fanatically resistant to change that enlighteners and the Tsar had designed for its own benefit, the satire scored its points on the shtetl's penchant for overreaction. But once the intellectuals grew disenchanted with their government's intentions, they came to view the shtetl's resistance as a quixotic struggle against malevolent forces. Straddling the two positions in 1890, Sholem Aleichem could joke about the shtetl running scared over a blood libel that didn't come to pass, but concluded with a stern warning not to take antisemitism too lightly.²⁰ Fourteen years later, with Kishinev a reality, Sholem Aleichem still held out the hope of a Jewish-liberal alliance, but now wished to strengthen that alliance by a compassionate overview of Jewish-Gentile relations.

In "The Great Panic," the comic plot of overreaction is merely a pretext for a full-scale anatomy of Jewish-Gentile relations from the cradle to the grave, in the home and marketplace. Secondly, and this is where our interest lies, Sholem Aleichem illustrates how open or closed channels of communication will determine whether language reduces or magnifies the tremors of historical upheaval. Kasrilevke gets

word of the pogrom through an ornate and clichéd Hebrew letter received by a ritual slaughterer from his semi-learned son-in-law:

With trembling hands and quaking knees do I write these words to you. Know that the weather here has undergone a severe change. No pen can possibly describe it . . .²¹

As one of several language codes that Jews adopt in times of danger, this particular one (which I shall dub the High Cryptic Style) is doubly incongruous because the use of flowery Hebrew is a social register of intellectual prowess, here comically demoted to *prost zhargon* ("simple Yiddish"). Enlisting its use to communicate a warning, when a direct, terse and unambiguous form of address would presumably be far more efficacious, compounds the tension between the What and the How. The Kasrilevker, however, are adept at this. "Sages and savants have long noted that the Jews are incomparable at the art of reading between the lines." So the people of Kasrilevke are thunderstruck, especially when Zeydl, the sole subscriber to the Hebrew *Hazefirah*, corroborates the news.

Kasrilevke in this story is as much a real fictional setting as a transparent symbol for Russian Jewry. It is the crucible of human suffering, the world's stepchild, yet the Kasrilevker never cease to identify with other people's plight (with the Boers or the Serbs, for instance). As the same native narrator informed us elsewhere, Kasrilevke's is not a functional tie to the outside world, based on the law of supply-and-demand, but an emotional one, based on a scale of good-and-evil.²² Morality is the touchstone of Kasrilevke, even in the material realm of reluctant reciprocity between Jews and Gentiles. Each side curses the other with rhymes and taunts learned and augmented from childhood. Methods of bribery and appeasement are equally governed by convention (a glass of whiskey for the *shabes-goy*; a piece of challah and gefilte fish for the sheriff). But underlying these appearances of ethnic and religious animosity are strong mutual loyalties between peasants and Jews. What happens to disturb the delicate balance is the injection of antisemitic propaganda absorbed by a minute but influential segment of the population and the greed for power of a petty Jewish merchant.

Makar Kholodny (the "cold-one"), apparently modeled on a real-life antisemite from Sholem Aleichem's childhood,²³ absorbed the traditional attitudes towards Jews, and then went on to become a ranking official in the municipal hierarchy, thanks to a little Church learning. Now, wearing the mantle of a "philosophical antisemite," he is eager to prove that Jews drink Christian blood for Passover. This leads to a confrontation with the local sycophant, the merchant and community *macher*, Mordkhe-Nosn, who throws him out of the house. To clinch his hatred for the Jews, Makar is caught in an act of sexual misconduct and only thanks to the shtetl's intervention, for the sake of poor Hapke, the

peasant girl involved, does he come out clean. And so, Makar's belligerent behavior, combined with the news of pogroms elsewhere in the Pale of Settlement, send all the Jews of Kasrilevke running for cover.

Only the cemetery and bathhouse remain untouched by the forces of history, for they are the mythic centers of the town. The myth of Kasrilevke comprises fully half of the narrative (chaps. 9–14), matched by the six previous chapters on mercantile Kasrilevke (chaps. 3–8). The life of the marketplace is run on a language of deceit and derision, and most of its practitioners are tainted, be they Jews (Mordkhe-Nosn the merchant and his wife, "the big-bellied samovar") or Gentiles (Hapke, Khvedor the Goy-for-the-Sabbath and, of course, Makar). But part of Kasrilevke exists in a state of nature and ecological balance: since the old Jewish cemetery is the only grazing area in town, it feeds the Jewish goats who in turn provide Jewish children with their much-needed milk. The second locus of ironic myth is the bathhouse, long since endowed with symbolic (if not demonic) significance by S. Y. Abramovitch.²⁴ Here the view is entirely benign. Adam and Eve, the bathhouse attendants, live in perfect innocence; having never engaged in sex (the rabbi calls them *kinderlekh*, "children") they go around naked most of the time, sleep out of doors and commune with the frogs in the summer. The community has also entrusted the aged Reb Yuzifl to their care. Reb Yuzifl is "a pure soul in a broken vessel," a pathetic Job who justifies God's ways with a parable for every occasion. As opposed to Mordkhe-Nosn's obsequious play for power, Reb Yuzifl retains his rabbinic authority even in retirement. His is a language not of deceit, but of faith, and when he sees the Jews of Kasrilevke fleeing en masse, he responds with anger and stubborn piety.

It is language, in the end, that resolves the crisis. Whom should Kasrilevke meet on the road but its historic enemy, the neighboring town of Kozodoievke. Before the comedy of errors draws to a close—each town having sought refuge from the imagined pogrom in the other town—Sholem Aleichem reminds us that the enmity between groups is always expressed through language—be it the language of prayer as when Hasidim fight Misnagdim, or through the in-group code of Hebraized Yiddish (the Low Cryptic Style), when Jews rebuff the Gentile world.²⁵ The two shtetlekh are reconciled to each other and to their fate—by talking through their fright and embarrassment: *un me hot zikh tseredt, ongeredt vi di poykn, zikh oysgeredt dos harts . . . un nokh dem hot men zikh gegeben di hent, me hot zikh gants fayn opgezegnt un tsekusht zikh* ("and they talked away, talked themselves full as a barrel and talked their hearts out . . . then they shook hands, took leave of each other nicely and embraced") (Y 209–10). The faith of mythic Kasrilevke wins out over the fear of mercantile Kasrilevke.

The very fact of two Kasrilevkes, however, already points to dangers ahead. Reb Yuzifl's piety is absolute but ineffectual. A Kasri-

levke that puts all its faith in language—as a collective shield, a way of channeling aggression, as a system of codes—can conceivably fall victim to language as well. One cryptic letter is all it takes. Communication, in short, is only as strong as its weakest link. Fortunately, Kasrilevke is greater than the sum of its parts. As a symbol of collective solidarity, Sholem Aleichem will never allow it to be wiped out. Its eventual destruction—by fire, not pogrom—becomes part of its regenerative myth, just as its cemetery becomes the culminating image of the forces of life that flow from death.²⁶ And one mustn't forget that in the Motl stories, Kasrilevke is transplanted onto American soil. Meanwhile, the full force of history is gradually descending upon the Jews of Eastern Europe just as they have every reason to expect a reprieve.

Tolerance levels are a function of expectation and since every pogrom, to paraphrase Paul Fussell, is worse than expected,²⁷ the measure of expectation is oftentimes more weighty than the degree of objective damage. For many, Kishinev shattered the hopes of a new enlightened era to be ushered in by the twentieth century. For Sholem Aleichem, the faith in political reform lingered on until the February revolution of 1905, until, that is, a cycle of military pogroms, more brutal and widespread than before, followed by one day the granting of civil liberties to all citizens of the Russian Empire.²⁸ Sholem Aleichem lived through the pogrom in Kiev and almost as the atrocities were unfolding, his unmediated cry of pain was recorded in the American Yiddish press: "Brothers! Did you once weep over the Kishinev disaster? Forget it! Listen instead to what happened in Nyezshin." "Jews, throw out your old laments. Cry for Odessa!"²⁹ With the pogroms came exile. Sholem Aleichem left Russia at the end of 1905, never to resettle there again.³⁰

Paradoxically, artistic and geographical distance only intensified the sense of terror that emanates from his work. The more mediators he placed between himself and his subject matter, the greater grew the tension between the What and the How. While the monologue remained his favored form, an artistic sleight of hand transformed the monologues into modern parables of destruction: the train became both his medium and message of narration. Travel allowed for the possibility of multiple narrators from all walks of life, telling stories that began and ended abruptly, who held their listeners in suspense with rhetorical virtuosity, while the train as a fictional setting was the very essence of movement, modernity and dislocation. From Abramovitsh Sholem Aleichem learned that the third-class train compartment could also serve as symbolic shorthand for the plight of exile: all those Jews, en route to nowhere, crammed into a few filthy cars and vying with each other along the way.³¹ But Sholem Aleichem's *Train Tales*, written mostly

between 1909–10 when the author himself suffered a near-fatal attack of TB, made Mendele's train ride of 1890 look like a field trip.³² In their final version of twenty stories, an anonymous traveling salesman (the quintessential Jewish profession then, as now) presented a veritable anthology of misfortune: tales of insanity, blind ambition, reckless gambling, apostasy and self-hate; pogroms and antisemitism, and even a tale on the white slave trade. Each class and each train had a character of its own.

The train, like the goyim of Kasrilevke, is there to be domesticated, humanized, even belittled, lest its otherness threaten to disrupt the tight fabric of Jewish life. The two stories relevant to my topic occur, not coincidentally, on what appears to be the least fearsome train of all, nicknamed the *leydikgeyer* (or straggler special, in the Butwins' felicitous translation) with a mixture of endearment and mockery. Seldom do more than two passengers travel in a car at any one time, allowing Jews the rare privilege of stretching out "as in their father's vineyard," and of sharing in a story. Then again, its infrequent and unpredictable schedule, its interminable ritual of switching and fueling conducted by a band of inebriated goyim, as you wait on the *platzform* and go crazy with boredom—are constant reminders that technology was not designed with the Jew in mind.

In these stories, therefore, Sholem Aleichem sets up a contest between the survival instinct of the Jew as against the forces of technology conspiring against him, albeit in their state of Russian imperfection. Narrated in a back-and-forth, deliberately convoluted style—in concert with the *leydikgeyer* itself—are two "miracle tales," complete with a devotional framework and biblical allusions. Working against the manifest level of divine providence, however, are acts of hatred and violence made more sinister by the coming of the trains.

"The Miracle of Hoshana Rabba" is set against the traditional belief that on that night of the Sukkoth festival, one's fate for the coming year is sealed in heaven. What actually transpires is a confrontation between a Jew and a priest on board the runaway locomotive of the Straggler Special as frantic telegrams are being cabled this way and that. Beyond exploiting the obvious comic potential, Sholem Aleichem envelops the tale in multiple narrations, so that by the time the hero, Berl Esigmakher, delivers his final rebuttal to the priest, we are hearing his own words as related to the merchant from Heissin who told it to the traveling salesman who wrote it down for us. In this brilliant parable of antisemitism run wild, catastrophe is averted because the locomotive runs out of steam and victory is conferred upon the Jew on the strength of his verbal mastery.³³

A khasene on klezmer ("A Wedding Without Musicians") promises, at worst, to be a domestic tragedy, unless *khasene* is to be construed in its slang meaning of "misfortune." Indeed, in the spirited narration that

follows, every upbeat statement is qualified to mean its opposite. The play of language seeks to render the experience harmless through a set of rhetorical maneuvers. First, the tale is introduced in mock storybook fashion:

Vayehi biymey, this took place, heaven help us, during the days of the Constitution, that is to say, when the salvations for the Jews began. Though I must tell you that we Jews of Heissin have never been afraid of pogroms. Why weren't we afraid? Simply because there was no one in our town to beat us up.³⁴

Not that the addressee, the worldly-wise traveling salesman, and by extension, each one of us, would be taken in by such a ridiculous claimer:

Of course you can imagine that if we looked very hard we could find one or two volunteers who wouldn't deny themselves the pleasure of ventilating us a little, that is to say, breaking our bones.

Even so, for a real pogrom to take place, the hooligans have to be imported by an embittered Polish nobility:

For the proof is, when the good news began drifting in from all sides, the few scoundrel squires in our parts sent off confidential letters to the proper places, saying: whereas it would be a good idea if "something were done" in Heissin also, but since there's no one here to do it, would they be so kind as to send help, in other words, would they please dispatch some "people" as quickly as possible.

The more imminent the danger, the more our narrator tries to explain it away. Now the cast of characters takes its place: Noah Tonkonog the bearer of bad tidings and Nakhmen Kasoy the man with connections. At each step in the drama it is Noah who carries the news "in strictest confidence" to every person in town.

And that was how the whole town became aware of the fact that a mob of hooligans was on the way, and that a plan for beating up Jews had been worked out. The plan told exactly when they would start, on what day, at which hour, and from which point, and by what means—everything to the last detail. (Y 131; E 57)

The hooligans will be arriving by train and their approach is heralded by telegrams. It is worth pausing for a moment, as Sholem Aleichem would do when he has us sitting on the edge of our seats, to recall that ever since the 1880s the trains played a major catalytic role in the tsarist pogroms. Most of the pogromists of 1880–81 were train workers, drawn from the dispossessed and recently "liberated" serfs who lived near the stations and were easily organized to carry their violence along the route.³⁵ Lest our own visual images of cattle cars crowd out the terror that Sholem Aleichem's readers must have felt in their day, we

should note that the train was already being transformed in Sholem Aleichem's fiction from a vehicle of dislocation to a vehicle of death.

The Jews of Heissin marshal the scant human resources available for their protection against the coming onslaught of muscle and machine. The narrator here interjects his own word of sober pragmatism which, if we may be allowed an intentional fallacy, perhaps reveals Sholem Aleichem's growing scepticism since the days of *Hilf* about the good will of the peasants and the compassion of the liberal intelligentsia.

I was the only one in town who wasn't anxious to hide. I am not boasting about my bravery. But this is the way I see it: what's the sense of being afraid of a pogrom? I don't say that I am a hero. I might have been willing to hide too, when the hour of reckoning came. But I asked myself first, "How can I be sure that during the slaughter the friendly peasant in whose cellar I was hiding, or the Notary, or the Director of the factory himself, wouldn't . . ." You understand? And all that aside, how can you leave a town wide open like that? It's no trick to run away. You have to see about doing something. (Y 132; E 57)

The course of action they hit upon, to buy protection from the Police Inspector through the mediation of Nakhmen the contractor, is ironically undercut by idiomatic expressions that suggest the fatal inevitability of making such desperate choices. The Russian inspector is referred to as a *porits* ("Polish squire") and Nakhmen is reduced to delivering a handsome bribe like a medieval court Jew without the frills (Y 133). The Inspector of Police accepts the money and assures them that all will be well. But when Noah announces the hooligans' impending arrival, the hopes and fears of Heissin begin fluctuating wildly at each new turn of events—in the up-and-down pattern so characteristic of Sholem Aleichem's work as a whole. The Inspector sends for the Cossacks.

When we heard this we breathed more easily. When a Jew hears that a Cossack is coming, he takes courage, he can face the world again [lit. he shows the world a fig]. The question remained: who would arrive first, the Cossacks from Tulchin, or the band of hooligans from Zhmerinko? Common sense told us that the hooligans would arrive first, because they were coming by train, while the Cossacks were coming on horseback. (Y 133; E 58).

The time-tested methods, it seems, have not kept pace with technology. Leaving aside for now the irony of Cossacks as saviors of the Jew, the immediate issue is whether God will perform a miracle and the Straggler Special, true to form, will be delayed. "But this one time it looked as though a miracle wouldn't take place. The Straggler kept going from station to station as regular as a clock." One can hardly resist the temptation to retell the whole story, if only to convey Sholem

Aleichem's brilliant manipulation of suspense and the reader's cathartic laughter when the train finally pulls in—without the cars. Not God but human error intervened. At the last station the hooligans got stone drunk, drawing the crew in with them, and the uncoupled locomotive left them all behind. By the time they arrive on foot, the Cossacks have beat them to it and *וקסמים בידם — מיט די קאַנטשיקעס אין די הענט* that is, with whips in their hands, the Cossacks disperse the rabble. Now a more ironic gloss on the story than this Hebrew-Yiddish wordplay can hardly be imagined. When the elders of Moab and Midian come to Balaam with Balak's message to curse the tribes of Israel, they set out *uksomim beyodom* ("with divination in their hand"; Num. 22:7). Beyond the incongruity of translating *ksomim*, a word denoting magic, with the Slavic word *kantshikes*, something all too concrete, lies a haunting analogue: that to be rescued from a pogrom by Cossack whips is not unlike being caught between Balak's curse and Balaam's equivocation.

Miracle and prooftext notwithstanding, that was the closest call yet, closer by far than the private rage that a hundred and one randomly shuffled boundaries could provoke and the panic that false messages and motives unleashed in a traditional society. Now the signals are coming in loud and clear and the margin of error grows narrower by the moment.

In Sholem Aleichem's fictional universe, the *shtetlekh* fixed in pre-industrial time like Kasrilevke are far less vulnerable to *real* destruction than the towns that line the railroad and, by the same token, the great triumvirate of archetypes is considerably more resilient to historical tremor than the occasional passengers whom one meets on a train. This is because Tevye, Menakhem-Mendl and Motl were fashioned to maintain their essential character through two decades of new installments. Motl, to begin with the clearest example, is the living embodiment of adaptability and freedom and Sholem Aleichem regretted ever having burdened him with pogroms.³⁶ The personal tragedies that befall Tevye, the patriarch-without-sons, are all sketched against a changing historical backdrop, so that Tevye's faith is most sorely tested by Chava's betrayal and Shprintse's suicide—the sexual fallout of the revolutionary debacle of 1905. But when history finally catches up with Tevye's own person, he can still literally talk his way out of expulsion from the village, though in the end Sholem Aleichem did have him banished.³⁷ Menakhem-Mendl skirts the historical maelstrom (except for one brief episode in Kiev) until he is reincarnated as, of all things, a Yiddish journalist in Warsaw. In this second series of letters, written in 1913 and only recently reissued in book form, it is actually his cantankerous wife Sheyne-Sheyndl who experiences the effects of oppression first hand. It is she who reports back on the refugees from the neighboring villages, on one family whose male members perish while in

hiding from the police and another which commits suicide rather than die of starvation.³⁸

Like all of Sholem Aleichem's archetypal characters, this odd couple will never change, regardless of what goes on around them. Nothing will shake Menakhem-Mendl's fantasy life or bring him back home again. When, at the end of his adventures, he is sent back to Kiev on assignment to cover the Beilis Trial, he contrives to put even this act of barbarism to good advantage. Once the trial is over, he plans to be the agent of Beilis' American tour! As husband and wife counter new extremes of human suffering with the same formulaic passages and set of reactions—whether fanciful or down-to-earth—the clash of the What and the How makes laughter itself almost sacrilegious.

Yet, as pogroms, expulsions and blood libels gave way to the Great Crescendo, the first total war in Europe's history, Sholem Aleichem pushed the art of incongruity even a step further. "Kishinev! You call *that* a town? Kishinev was a dog compared to Krushnik."³⁹ Narrated by a survivor, these "Tales of a Thousand and One Nights" are at once brutally mimetic and openly mythic, and betray speech patterns both obsessive and coyly self-indulgent. Much in the telling is apparently true to life: Sholem Aleichem and family escaped war-crazed Germany by ship bound for America and a Polish Jew from the provinces accosted the celebrated author as he investigated life on the lower decks. Bombarded with "a mishmash of actual occurrences and fairy tales . . . a sampling of Jewish war folklore,"⁴⁰ Sholem Aleichem recast it all—while still on board ship—into a highly structured and richly variegated, comic saga.

It is as if the enormity of the event called for the full measure of defense that the author could muster, whether from within his own arsenal of storytelling tricks, or from the Jewish cultural heritage. Fully appreciating that a refugee ship in the mined North Sea was the ultimate symbol of dislocation, Sholem Aleichem adapted the plot of a father, one of whose sons was hanged, the other of whom went mad, from an unused pogrom story he had wanted to incorporate into the *Train Tales* in 1909.⁴¹ The father-and-sons motif, further inspired perhaps by his informant's learned style, suggested, in turn, that he create a variation on Tevye. Yankl Yunever of Krushnik, yet another geographic split personality, uses quotations in a more literal-minded way than Tevye—the biblical allusions "support" the situation at hand; he is as rooted in the shtetl as Tevye in the village and both their stories are double-ended, though hardly to the same degree. One son, after being rescued by his father's eloquence, is sent off to be killed on the front, while the other, after winning three medals of valor, is court-martialed. Gambling on the favorable report, that his second son wasn't shot but managed, like his father, to talk circles around his executioners, Yankl Yunever sets out to find him in America.

Above all else, this is a story in which the sustaining structures of old collapse one by one: no “good Russians” intervene to stay the execution of a peaceful, native population; Krushnik is destroyed, even after its miraculous rescue; nothing, not language, not secret codes, not even the Jewish survival instinct can prevent the slaughter. Never has finding the right code been so critical a survival mechanism, because this time the Cossacks arrive not to protect the Jews, but to murder them, aided and abetted by the local Poles. Early on in the war, the Jews of Krushnik rejoice at the Russian defeat and Yankl even humorously bemoans the fact that he might forget his *rishes*. The wordplay says it all: *rishes* meaning “evil” is a metathesis of *rusish* (“Russian”; pronounced *risish* in dialect). German, he concludes, is a whole lot closer to Yiddish and this linguistic affinity will give Jews an edge over the hateful Poles. When the first delegation of Jewish notables appears before the German authorities, Yankl’s son Yekhiel, who is known for his language skills, uses the wrong rhetorical dialect, addressing the commandant in Hebrew, instead of Germanized Yiddish (Y 146). As a Jewish dignitary, Yekhiel is taken hostage against a huge ransom, but the commandant relents and Yekhiel is miraculously appointed mayor of the town. Just when the Jews, Poles and Germans are on the verge of establishing a truce, the ritual slaughterer is arrested on charges of espionage and the delegation reconvenes, this time with a ready-made speech from the Bible:

We decided that I would begin and address him in the words of Moses: “O Lord, you have begun to show your servants your greatness—that is to say, you have been gracious toward us, Herr German, from the day you set foot upon the land.” (Y 178–79; E 234)

Instead of the friendly commandant, however, they are met by “some other devil” who frightens them into silence.

But how can you say something if you can’t talk? Besides I was waiting for the rabbi to start—he was older. And the rabbi was waiting for the *rabbiner*—he’d been appointed by the government. (Y 181; E 235)

The whole “speechless delegation” is promptly thrown into prison where, once again, our hero rehearses a biblical speech which he is never to deliver (Y 184; E 237). His intuition fails him entirely when, that very night, he finds himself in the Jewish cemetery, ordered to dig his own grave: he, the two rabbis and the Jewish “spy” are about to be shot. But since Yankl Yunever lived to tell the tale, and there are still a thousand more nights to go, they are saved by the Russian counter-attack. “But for all that, we just couldn’t say a word to each other, not a word! We’d lost our tongues and that was that” (Y 189; E 240). The spell of terror is broken by the rabbi who is suddenly inspired to lead them in an ecstatic Blessing of the Moon. Like Reb Yuzifl of Kasrilevke, he gets

a little carried away with his own religious fervor until the more sober householders awaken to the new danger. The Russians have returned with a vengeance and the Poles are quick to denounce the enemy within. Jewish Krushnik is razed to the ground and among the countless victims is the rabbi himself: "So he hung there, the old rabbi, wrapped in his prayer shawl and tefillin, beaten and bloodied, in the middle of the marketplace, swaying back and forth in the wind, as though standing in prayer" (Y 196; E 244).

Though words and prayers did nothing to stop the murder, the tableau of sacrilege left in its wake is made more manageable through interpretation. "He wasn't standing," Yankl Yunever concludes, "he was hanging, if you see what I mean, hanging in prayer!" *Er hengt shimenesre*. As Ruth Wisse pointed out, these words transform a vile humiliation into triumphant martyrdom.⁴² Literally and figuratively, the rabbi is suspended in time, at the moment of his most intense devotion, the Eighteen benedictions or Standing Prayer which he did not interrupt even as the Cossacks dragged him off to the makeshift gallows.

Acts of desecration only work when the enemy knows what it is that Jews live by and what they are ready to die for. Jews respond by committing those acts to memory and by linking them to memories of past persecution. When all other defenses fail them, Sholem Aleichem's characters fall back on the oldest stratum of Jewish response to catastrophe: myth. Sometimes the myth is subtly interwoven, as when Yekhiel's rise and fall is patterned on the Joseph story, and sometimes the narrator spells it out, as when the Russians order Yankl to hang his own son and he begins the episode by asking: "Excuse me, Mr. Sholem Aleichem, could you please explain to me what's so special about the Akedah, that all the prayers in the siddur are so taken up with it?" (Y 197).

The story loses its effectiveness the more overtly mythic it becomes, because the fine points of human frailty and human freedom—that which makes life inviolable in Sholem Aleichem's scheme of things—drown in the grand pathos of the myth. A second climax is reached with Yekhiel's Akedah, here telescoped with the rabbinic martyrdom in Roman times. This once, Yankl Yunever delivers his impassioned defense, with the equivocal result that the other Jews are hung at once while Yekhiel is sent off to die at the front (Y 207–10). Even more disappointing is the last, apologetic and overwritten episode which treats the son who volunteered for action. Perhaps the madness of history had finally thwarted the best efforts even of the master himself to balance the What and the How.

The art of incongruity thrives on a system of shared meaning which comes up against a world gone measurably mad, but when either

end of the equation gets overloaded, the comic tension either dissipates or snaps. When the system of codes, memories, and myths explains too much, when it is too fraught with meaning, the comic ambiguity is lost to high rhetoric. When, on the other hand, the system is simply inadequate to mediate the new reality, the hero is destroyed by the totally unfamiliar world he is forced to inhabit. This is precisely what happens in the works of Kafka, to whom Sholem Aleichem is so often compared,⁴³ whereas Sholem Aleichem's fictional characters are never allowed to capitulate. Now the comparison to Kafka raises again the question as to whether a pre-existentialist, antimodernist sensibility, one in which the private person remains inviolate, can offer a viable response to Auschwitz, or for that matter, to the Somme.

Sholem Aleichem did not, to my knowledge, return to the subject of war, and so it was left to others to test the art of incongruity against the trenches and the gas. This was achieved most brilliantly by Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek. His good soldier Švejk wages a consistent "obedience campaign" which effectively undercuts the authority of his superiors but appears rather commonsensical in relation to his fellow privates. Like Sholem Aleichem's heroes, Švejk remains intact by maintaining contact with the world around him, which world he then renders nonsensical, harmless and familiar.⁴⁴ If *The Good Soldier Švejk* remains a distinctly un-Yiddish achievement nonetheless, it is because its obscenities violated Yiddish norms and because it presupposes a war in which the Czechs would be fighting on the *right* side.

We turn, then, to the next generations of East European Jewish writers who, in their response to subsequent catastrophes, took each strand of Sholem Aleichem's comic art and recycled it, in an almost ecological way. Some, like Fishl Bimko, were unequal to the task. His *Brivelekh* (*Letters*), an epistolary novel of the German occupation in World War I, was a poor imitation of *Menakhem-Mendl*, complete with matrimonial strife and frenzied commercial activity.⁴⁵ Julian Strykowski, responding to the Holocaust through the prism of World War I, used a Tevye-like character, inappropriately, it seems to me, to voice an overtly Christian theology of suffering.⁴⁶ Itsik Kipnis and Jurek Becker, two other native sons, took Sholem Aleichem's child characters and Kasrilevker and brought them face to face with a brutal reality they had never known before. The results were worthy of the master himself.

Narrated with the naive exuberance of a childlike man, Itsik Kipnis's *Khadoshim un teg* (*Months and Days*, 1926), a classic of Soviet-Yiddish literature, is a study in bifurcated time. Idyllic time—the quiet joy of a newly-wed couple in the sleepy but prosperous shtetl of Sloveshne—is measured in months, while tragic time—the terror of the pogrom itself—is measured in days. Once again, it is the tension between the what and the how that conveys the unbearable human predicament.

In 1919, whole Jewish populations were being massacred in the civil war between the Ukrainian nationalists and the Bolsheviks. Isaac, the autobiographical hero, is initiated into manhood during this period, yet as he narrates the events, some five-and-a-half years later, there are unmistakable signs of a younger, more carefree narrator, Motl the son of Peyse the cantor: the same spirited asides to an implied listener, the same eye for domestic detail and comic discrepancy. Sloveshne, in fact, bears a striking resemblance to Kasrilevke. It, too, is safely removed from the nearest railroad and is a model of social integration: "I go around dressed in my Sabbath best (in our town it is the only Jewish day of rest for everyone, for young and old, for all except the [Gentile] pharmacist)."⁴⁷

Most of the "chronicle" is so disarmingly simple, that one barely notices the gradual incursion of premonitions, fears and actual violence. The Gentiles, seemingly nonexistent at the outset, are strategically introduced at mid-point in the narrative, and from there Kipnis builds to a rise-and-fall pattern of terrifying intensity. Through it all the violence is never experienced directly, and only the sense of time split in half carries the full weight of the terror. The narrative which opened with an extended holiday mood, with summer in full bloom and the newlyweds irrepressibly in love, draws to a close with the desperate hope for an end to the festivities—to the carnival of murder and theft. The narrator, always so acutely aware of time, loses track of it on the third and final day of the pogrom, just as his extended family is about to perish.

Revenge and rebirth mitigate the tragic finality of the book: revenge is exacted measure for measure, thanks to the Red Army's intervention, and rebirth compensates for some of the victims, as Isaac's beloved Buzi has a little girl. Myth plays no mitigating role whatsoever, whether because Soviet Yiddish poetics would not allow for such, or because Kipnis himself rejected the mythic component of Sholem Aleichem's legacy. This, of course, did not protect Kipnis from falling prey to the venom of the Party.⁴⁸ It is especially significant that in restoring the moral order, in what is otherwise a faithfully accurate account, Kipnis deliberately avoided closing on a far more bitter note: Buzi died of typhus soon after the pogrom.⁴⁹ From this we learn that the art of the incongruous is essentially life-affirming. It transforms the details of the everyday into a meaningful pattern, while allowing the seams and the rips to show through.

Perhaps, too, it is an art that thrives in coercive situations, or in what Goffman calls total institutions; in the army, and by analogy, in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes where an oppressed group, preferably one with a keen sense of past oppression, closes ranks whenever danger lurks, but does so in a subtle or artless manner so as not to

antagonize the powers that be.⁵⁰ There is no room here for individual acts of heroism, because no one can escape the common fate and the only way to survive the indignation and the torture is by maintaining communication with those around you.

Historical memory runs very deep in Eastern Europe, as does group identity. In-group codes have had centuries to develop and Jews, with two languages of their own, were probably better equipped than most to keep the enemy at bay. They could speak High Goyish (Russian, Polish) and Low Goyish (Ukrainian, White Russian), and had both a High (all-Hebrew) and Low (mixed-Hebrew) Cryptic Style. Obviously, this was no way to avert disaster; words could not prevent the train carrying the pogromists from coming in on time, or the peasants of Sloveshne from getting caught up in the circle of violence. But where Jewish life was able to constitute itself within a knowable and external danger zone, the art of incongruity came into visible play and was, I shall now argue, an effective, if limited, line of defense.

My prooftext is Jurek Becker's novel-scenario *Jacob the Liar* (1969), arguably the finest comic transformation of the Holocaust, which was written in German for an East German audience. Yiddish words and intonations are all that survive in a German echo chamber whose sole inhabitant is a young German-speaking Jew, formerly from Lodz. Just as he crosses linguistic boundaries with impunity, Becker blurs the line between description and prescription, showing not only how history can be deflected through art, but also how art may explain the course of historical events.

In Becker's narration, the terror is twice removed. First, and most brilliantly, he portrays the Nazi ghetto as a latter-day Kasrilevke. Like its fictional model, Becker's ghetto (Lodz in real life) is cut off from the outside world; only one man purports to have a radio. This isolation makes the ghetto Jews susceptible to anything, but also helps them develop a sense of higher truth in the face of adversity. Second, Becker achieves a sense of comic incongruity by comparing the dismal reality of the ghetto with the most mundane details of past normalcy. This is essential to Becker's meaning, for under Nazism (or East German Communism, for that matter), truth and plausibility become relative concepts. In a world of the Big Lie intent on murder, lying can also be a supreme act of resistance.

Becker strips away the real inner workings of the ghetto (there is no Judenrat, no political, cultural or religious life to speak of), so as to highlight and neutralize the uncanny aspect of the Holocaust. The uncanny, in Freud's classic formulation, "is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar."⁵¹ To speak of the Holocaust as being totally without precedent is to minimize the Nazis' genius for evil. They took great pains to set back the clock: they reinstituted the ghetto, the yellow star and the Judenrat and thereby

created a world which was both utterly terrifying and strangely familiar. To equate the ghetto with Kasrilevke is Becker's way of offsetting the terror, of cutting the evil down to size, of invoking precedent and making us laugh.

In the Lodz Ghetto, as Becker surely must have known, monitoring foreign broadcasts was the major form of organized resistance. There was no other access to the world outside. As one ghetto diarist wrote in May 1944: "The little bit of news which reaches us here in the ghetto is a form of support which prevents people from giving up altogether."⁵² In Becker's version, the existence of a radio is itself a lie, an improvised cover-up that eventually becomes a studied act of consolation:

"Of course, I know myself that the Russians won't arrive any sooner," says Jacob half way through his cigarette. "And even if I tell it a thousand times, their route will be the same. But I want to draw your attention to another little detail. Since the news reports have circulated in the ghetto, I know of no incident where anyone has taken his life. Do you?"⁵³

Little deeds and misdeeds constitute resistance when there is nowhere to run to and no way to fight. Words still defend those on the inside, as they did the Jews of Kasrilevke, only now they're conscious lies, not words of unblemished faith, and they save one from despair, but not from death.

Becker's is a highly muted work, written many years later and filtered through several layers of narration by someone who was still a child in the ghetto. There is evidence, however, from the ghettos themselves (and to some degree even from the camps) that comic juxtapositions were the stuff of everyday life. Song was the medium that conveyed this best because "the chief function of song is to express the shared feelings and mold the joint activities of some human community."⁵⁴ The content of song communication, the scholars go on to tell us, is social, not individual; normative and not particular.

Now within the huge repertoire of songs produced in the ghettos and concentration camps, the most conventional, highly stylized and most normative were the so-called contrafacts, primitive lyrics set to well-known melodies. According to one theory, the supply of melodies could not meet the demand for new lyrics, and so old tunes were expediently pressed into action.⁵⁵ Another theory has the melodies serving as a mere mnemonic device.⁵⁶ The more intrinsic point seems to have been missed: the essential disparity in these songs between the melody and the lyrics. By drawing on the most popular prewar repertoire, the singer could create a terrible tension between the familiarity of the tune and the brutality of the lyrics. The effect, once again, was to domesticate the horror.

Avrom Akselrod, an otherwise unknown poet in the Kovno Ghetto, was the author of several such songs. The brutalized life of the

Jewish work brigades returning home through the checkpoint—the only way of smuggling food into the ghetto—provided him with material for a song he set to Mark Warshawski's *Afn pripetshik*, the melody par excellence to evoke nostalgia for one's childhood:⁵⁷

ביים געטא-טויערל
ברענט אַ פֿײַערל
און די שרעק איז גרויס;
סיגייען יידעלעך
פֿון די בריגאדעלעך
און סיגיסט זיך פֿון זיי שווייס.
צי זאָל איך ווייטער גיין?
צי זאָל איך בלייבן שטיין?
כיווייס ניט, ווען און ווו;
דער קאָמענדאַנטעלע
אין גרינעם מאָנטעלע
נעמט דאָך אַלעס צו.

(At the ghetto gate / a fire burns. / Inspection is fierce. / Jews are coming / from the work brigades / dripping buckets of sweat. // Should I go ahead / or stand still? / I don't know what to do. / The little commandant / in his green uniform / takes everything away.)

In the ghetto, the use of codes was literally a matter of life and death, especially since the enemy spoke German. Many of these code words are themselves studies in incongruity. From the Yom Kippur liturgy comes the climactic call *ya'aleh*, may our prayer ascend to heaven. In ghetto parlance, the word denoted those who ascended to power at the expense of other Jews—the Judenrat and the Jewish Police.⁵⁸ This bizarre code word inspired Akselrod to compose another song:⁵⁹

זאָג מיר, זאָג מיר דו געטא-יידל,
ווער שפּילט אין געטאָ דאָס ערשטע פֿידל?
ווער פֿון די יעלהס מער אָדער ווייניק
ווייל דאָ רעגירן פּונקט ווי אַ קעניג?
טומבאַלאַ טומבאַלאַ, שפּיל געטאָ-יידל,
שפּיל מיר פֿון ייִדישע יעלהס אַ לידל—
פֿון אַלע "שעפֿן" און "אינספּעקטאָרן"
וואָס זיינען אין געטאָ מענטשן געוואָרן . . .
ווער פֿון די יעלהס קען אַ קאַרטע געבן
און אַ שײַן צום בלייבן לעבן?
און וויפֿל דאָרף מען דערפֿאַר באַצאָלן
כדי אַ בריגאַדע אַ גוטע צו האָבן?

(Tell me, oh tell me, you ghetto Jew, / who plays first fiddle here in the ghetto? / And which of the *ya'ales* / hands out orders just like a king? // Tumbala, tumbala, play ghetto Jew, / play me a song of the Jewish top

brass— / About all those bosses and inspectors / who rose to fame here in the ghetto. // Which of the top brass can issue a card / and a permit to save your life? / And how much do you pay / for an easy work brigade?)

The consummate satire must surely be an anonymous song from the Vilna Ghetto. In the first winter of the German occupation, fur coats and collars were confiscated for the German soldiers fighting on the eastern front. At about this time, October 1941, the diabolical system of working passes was instituted whereby the able-bodied recipient was exempted from “resettlement in the east,” as were his spouse and two children. Young workers registered total strangers as husband, wife or children. People gave away all their valuables to buy into somebody’s pass. In the first registration, the Nazis issued only 3,000 permits (for some 10–12,000 people), condemning the other 23,000 Jews to certain death.⁶⁰ These two events inspired the following song:⁶¹

הָאָט זיך מיר די שיך צעריסן,
וויי צו מיינע יאָרן,
די קראַגנס האָט מען אונדז אָפּגעריסן —
ווער איך דאָך פֿאַרפֿראָן.
טאַנץ, טאַנץ, טאַנץ אַ ביסעלע מיט מיר,
אוי, איר גרויסע פֿרעסטערלעך,
איר קומט דאָך פֿון סיביר.
געלע שיינען, ראָזע שיינען,
אַלערליי קאַלירן.
ווען וועל איך מײַן ווייבל זלאָטע
צו זיך אַהיים שוין פֿירן?
טאַנץ, טאַנץ, טאַנץ אַ ביסעלע מיט מיר,
האַסטו אַ געלן שײַן,
האַב איך חתונה מיט דיר.
ברויט אויפֿן סענטימעטער,
האַלץ אויפֿן דעקאַ
האַט אונדז פֿאַרזאָרגט דער יידנראַט,
דער יידנראַט פֿון געטאָ.
טאַנץ, טאַנץ, טאַנץ אַ ביסעלע מיט מיר,
האַסטו אַ געלן שײַן,
האַב איך חתונה מיט דיר.

(Woe is me, my shoes are torn / My collar’s ripped off, / And I’m freezing to death. / Dance, come dance a bit with me, / Oh, you miserable cold winds, / You must be from Siberia. // Yellow passes, pink passes / Every kind of color. / When will I bring / My wife Zlate home again? / Dance, come dance with me, / If you have a yellow pass / I’ll marry you instead. // Bread measured by centimeters / And wood by decimeters, / Provided by the Judenrat, / The Judenrat of the Ghetto. / Dance, come dance with me. / If you have a yellow pass / I’ll marry you instead.)

The melody, recognizable to all, was that of a popular prewar wedding song. The original lyrics went:

ס'האט זיך מיר די זיפ צעזיפט
און ס'האט זיך מיר צעשטאָטן.
האָבן זיך מיר די שיך צעריסן
טאָנץ איך אין די זאָקן.
טאָנץ, טאָנץ, טאָנץ אַ ביסעלע מיט מיר,
זי האָט ליב די איידעמס
און איך האָב ליב די שניר!

(Woe is me, my sieve got broke / and everything spilled. / My shoes got torn, so I dance in stocking feet. // Dance, come dance with me. / She enjoys the sons-in-law / but I prefer the daughters.)

On the backdrop of harmony, familial well-being, dancing until your shoes are worn thin; through a song of celebration, revelry and joy, the ghetto responded to the total disruption of the love bond, of family, security and life itself. It transformed a wedding dance into a *Danse Macabre*. The tension between the remembrance of things past and the terror of present reality is almost unbearable. It gives way to cathartic laughter.

The art of the incongruous is akin to fitting round pegs into square holes. First, the experience is stripped down to its bare essentials (tsarist oppression—to a comic plot; technology—to a slow-moving train; the Holocaust—to a credulous ghetto), and then it is pushed into a pre-existing mold which doesn't quite fit: Kasrilevke becomes the great equalizer for vastly different places; lilting, lively melodies embrace the most demoralizing aspects of Nazi domination. Because the peg and hole don't match, there are no grand lessons to be learned, but we are compelled nonetheless to marvel at how stubborn humans can be.

Or look at it as midrashic performance: the presence of the speaker-singer is almost palpable; we are hearing it live, as it were, even if multiple narrators stand between us and the event; the juxtaposition of text or tune with experience is both startling and engaging; and the end effect is to tie everything back to the beginning—to the sustaining myths, to the power of speech and to man as created in the image of God. In normal times, this is a talent well worth cultivating. In times of trouble—government harassment, expulsions, blood libels, sporadic pogroms, civil war and even mass murder—it can cast the deciding ballot between life and death.

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NOTES

1. Malcolm Bradbury, "The Denuded Place: War and Form in *Parade's End* and *USA*," in Holger Klein, ed., *The First World War in Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays* (London & Basingstoke, 1976), pp. 193-209; idem and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism*, Pelican Guide to European Literature (Harmondsworth, 1976).
2. On S.A. as a nineteenth-century realist, see Nokhem Oyslender, "The Young S.A. and his Novel *Stempenyu*" [Yiddish], *Shriftn* (Kiev) 1 (1928): 5-72, and two Yiddish studies by H. Reminik: "S.A.'s Struggle for Realism in the 1880s," *Shtern* (Minsk) no. 5/6 (1938): 122-48; and "S.A.'s Activity as a Literary Critic," *Sovyetish literarisher almanakh* (Moscow, 1941), pp. 155-83.
3. Dan Miron, *Shalom Aleikhem: pirkei masah* [S.A.: A Critical Essay] (Ramat Gan, 1970); Murray Baumgarten, "Language, Luftmenschen, Catastrophe: Some Themes of S.A.," *Yiddish* 2:4 (1977): 28-54; Ruth R. Wisse, *Sholem Aleichem and the Art of Communication*, The B. G. Rudolph Lectures in Judaic Studies (Syracuse, 1979); Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Voices of Ambivalence in S.A.'s Monologues," *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 158-71.
4. Israel Bartal, "Non-Jews and Gentile Society in East-European Hebrew and Yiddish Literature, 1856-1914" [Hebrew], Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1980, chap. 5, sec. 6; Yudel Mark, "S.A.'s Sayings—Created or Inherited?" [Yiddish], *Di tsukunft* May, 1946, pp. 379-82; E. Spivak, *Sholem-Aleykhems shprakh un stil: etyudn* [S.A.'s Language and Style: Studies] (Kiev, 1940).
5. Cf. Ignaz Bernstein's erotica supplement to his *Yidishe shprikhverter un rednsartn* [Yiddish Sayings and Proverbs] (n.p., 1908); M. Vanvild, ed., *Bay undz yidn: zamlbukh far folklor un filologye* [Among Us Jews: Anthology of Folklore and Philology] (Warsaw, 1923). In the collection most relevant to my topic, obscenities were deleted; see Z. Khrapkovski, *Milkhome-vits* [The War Joke] (Vitebsk, 1922).
6. On the rise-and-fall pattern, see Miron, *Shalom Aleikhem*; on open-endedness, see Irving Howe, intro. to *The Best of Sholom Aleichem*, ed. by him and Ruth R. Wisse (Washington, D.C., 1979), pp. xxii-xxiv.
7. Ba'al-makhshoves, "Sholem Aleichem," *Geklibene shriftn* [Collected Writings], 2 vols. (Vilna, 1910), 1:103. See also, Shmuel Werses, "Sholem Aleichem: Changing Evaluations in the Light of Fifty Years of Criticism" [Hebrew], *Molad* 17 (1959): 404-8.
8. On S.A. as a Zionist-utopian, see Dov Sadan, "Between Humor and Satire" [Yiddish], *Folk un tsiyon* 34 (May-June, 1980): 20-22. On his Russian liberal sympathies, see Bartal, chap. 5, sec. 7. On his view of America, see Dan Miron, "Bouncing Back: Destruction and Recovery in Sholem Aleikhem's *Motl Peyse dem khazns*," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, 17 (1978): 119-84. Khone Shmeruk, while dismissing Miron's or any other interpretation that does not encompass all the variants of *Motl*, agrees with Miron that S.A. celebrated the ability of the young to make it in America; see Shmeruk's "The Stories of Motl the Cantor's Son by S.A.: The Epic Situation and the History of the Work" [Hebrew], *Siman kri'ah* 12/13 (1981): 313, n. 18.
9. On the unwritten agreement among Yiddish writers not to describe the pogroms, see Oyslender, pp. 11-12. S.A.'s first oblique reference to the pogroms appeared in a Hebrew story of 1890; see S.A., *Ktavim 'ivriim* [Hebrew Writings], ed. Khone Shmeruk (Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 182-91.
10. Bartal, p. 12.
11. See A. R. Malachi, "The Kishinev Pogrom in the Mirror of Hebrew and Yiddish Poetry" [Hebrew], *'Al 'admat Besarabia* 3 (1963): 1-98; Zosa Szajkowski, *An Illustrated Source-book of Russian Antisemitism 1881-1978*, 2 vols. (New York, 1980), 2:21-41.
12. See also, Aleksander Shifman, "Lev Tolstoy and S.A." [Yiddish], *Sovyetish heymland*, no. 9 (1978): 17-22.
13. David Pinsky, *Di Familye Tsvi* (Geneva, 1905), preface.

14. Vladimir Korolenko, *Dom No. 13-ij* [House No. 13: An Episode from the Kishinev Pogrom] (London, 1903). See also, S. M. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland from the Earliest Times until the Present*, trans. by I. Friedlander, 3 vols. (Phila., 1920), 3:76.

15. Sholem Aleichem, "Hundert eyns," in *Oreme un freylekhe*, book 2 (= *Ale verk fun S.A.* [henceforth: AV], 28 vols. [New York, 1917–25]), 17:104. Translated by Curt Leviant in *Old Country Tales* (New York, 1966), pp. 101–15. Quotations brought in the text will be designated as Y[iddish] and E[nglish].

In the original version of the story, as it appears in *Hilf*, the towns are different in every respect. The shtetl of Bohopolye is a God-fearing (*Boho* is Ukrainian for 'God'), medieval place where the Jewish inhabitants eat each other up alive, for lack of any other sustenance, while across the river, Holte is a hotbed of modernity where religious law is openly defied and the Jews are gainfully employed in a variety of factories. Demoting the more urbane and urbanized town to the status of a village is merely a perverse way of preventing more Jews from moving there. In the final version, the differences are gone and there is no clear motive for the Bohopolyer wanting to move there.

16. Dubnow, 3:17–18.

17. *Ibid.*, 3:80–81.

18. Y. Dobrushin, "Two Basic Editions of S.A.'s *Kleyne mentshelekh mit kleyne hasoges*" [Yiddish], *Visnshaftlekhe yorbikher* 1 (1929): 147–62; Ruth R. Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago & London, 1971), pp. 3–49; Dan Miron, "Some Thoughts on the Classic Literary Image of the Shtetl" [Hebrew], *Hadoar* 55 (1976): 610–11; 56 (1976/7): 68–69. Much work remains to be done on this topic.

19. Ish AMID (pseud. of A. M. Dik), "Habehalah," *Hamelits* nos. 41–43 (1867); the Yiddish version appeared as *Di shtot Heres* (Vilna, 1868). Cf. S.A.'s "Ha'otsar" ("The Treasure," 1889) in *Ktavim ivriim*, pp. 106–15.

20. "Alilat-dam" ("The Blood Libel"), *ibid.*, pp. 140–48.

21. "Di groyse behole fun di kleyne mentshelekh," in *Kleyne mentshelekh mit kleyne hasoges* (= AV, vol. 6), pp. 160–61; trans. as "The Great Panic of the Little People" in Leviant's *Old Country Tales*, pp. 100–101.

22. See the opening passages of "Dreyfus in Kasrilevke."

23. See Volf Rabinovitsh, *Mayn bruder Sholem-Aleykhem* [My Brother S.A.] (Kiev, 1939), p. 197.

24. See, for instance, Abramovitsh's *Fishke the Lame*.

25. The bane of all translators. Cf. Leviant's solution, p. 133.

26. Miron, "The Classic Literary Image of the Shtetl." See, especially, the concluding section of "Di shtot fun di kleyne mentshelekh" ("The Town of the Little People") which S.A. added in the final recension, sometime between 1914–16.

27. Paul Fussell, *The Great War in Modern Memory* (New York & London, 1975), p. 7.

28. Dubnow, 3:113–31.

29. *Yudishes tageblat* (New York), 24 November 1905 and 26 November 1905. These reports were commissioned by the paper.

30. Kh[one] Sh[meruk], "Sholem-Aleykhem," *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* (New York, 1981), vol. 8, p. 682.

31. See Abramovitsh's "Shem and Japeth on the Train," trans. by Walter Lever in *Modern Hebrew Literature*, ed. Robert Alter (New York, 1975), pp. 19–38.

32. Max Erik, "Concerning S.A.'s *Ksovim fun a komivoyazhor*" [Yiddish], *Visnshaft un revolutsy* 3/4 (1935): 161–72.

33. I owe this reading to a conversation with Ruth Wisse many years ago. Cf. her brief comments on the story in *S.A. and the Art of Communication*, pp. 16–17. For an abridged translation, see *The Tevye Stories and Others*, trans. Julius & Frances Butwin (New York, 1965), pp. 217–25.

34. *Ayznban-geshikhtes*, AV 26:130. I cite the Butwin translation wherever possible; cf. *The Tevye Stories*, pp. 56–60.

35. See Yehuda Slutzky, "The Geography of the Pogroms of 1881" [Hebrew], *He'avar* 9 (1962): 16-25.
36. Shmeruk, "The Stories of Motl the Cantor's Son," pp. 316-17.
37. On the double ending to the Tevye cycle, see Khone Shmeruk, "Tevye the Dairyman: The Evolution of a Literary Work" [Hebrew], *Hasifrut* 26 (1978): 35-37.
38. *Menakhem-Mendl* (Nyu-york—Varshe—Vin—Yehupets) (Tel Aviv, 1976), pp. 102-17.
39. *Mayses fun toyznt eyn nakht*, in *Mayses un fantazyes*, AV 3:191. Partially trans. as "The Krushniker Delegation" by Sacvan Bercovitch in *The Best of S.A.*, pp. 232-44. The quote is on p. 241.
40. I. D. Berkowitz, *Undzere rishoynim* [Our Pioneers: Memoiristic Episodes about S.A. and his Generation], 5 vols. (Tel Aviv, 1965), 5:169.
41. See *Dos Sholem-Aleykhem bukh*, ed. I. D. Berkowitz (New York, 1926), pp. 335-36.
42. See the intro. to *The Best of S.A.*, p. xvi.
43. *Ibid.*, p. viii; Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, p. 53.
44. See J. P. Stern, "War and the Comic Muse: *The Good Soldier Schweik* and *Catch-22*," *Comparative Literature* 20 (1968): 193-216.
45. Fishl Bimko, *Kelts, Geklibene verk*, vol. 9 (New York, 1947), pp. 15-164. According to the author's preface, this work was written during World War I.
46. Julian Strykowski, *The Inn*, trans. from the Polish by Celina Wieniewska (New York, 1972).
47. Itsik Kipnis, *Khadoshim un teg un andere dertseylungen* (= *Geklibene verk*, vol. 3) (Tel Aviv, 1972), p. 22. For other points of contact with S.A., see I. Nusinov's intro. to the first ed. (Kiev, 1926), pp. 5-9.
48. See Esther Rosental-Schneiderman, "Itsik Kipnis, the Way I Know Him" [Yiddish], *Di goldene keyt* 61 (1967): 123-36.
49. See Rokhl Pressman, "In Glowing Memory" [Yiddish], *Vokhnblat* (Toronto), 25 January 1968 and Kipnis's recently published diary, *Tog un tog* [Day After Day] (Tel Aviv, 1980), pp. 11-13.
50. Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City, N.Y., 1961), pp. 1-124.
51. "The 'Uncanny'" [1919], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17 (London, 1955), 220.
52. Quoted in Isaiah Trunk, *Lodzher geto* [Ghetto Lodz: A Historical and Sociological Study] (New York, 1962), pp. 469-70.
53. Jurek Becker, *Jacob the Liar*, trans. with a preface by Melvin Kornfeld (New York & London, 1975), p. 181.
54. Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture* (Washington, D.C., 1968), p. 3.
55. Ruta Pups, ed., *Dos lid fun geto* [The Song of the Ghetto] (Warsaw, 1962), p. 7.
56. Yechiel Szeintuch, "Yiddish and Hebrew Literature under the Nazi Rule in Eastern Europe (Yitzhak Katzenelson's last bilingual writings and the ghetto writings of A. Sutzkever and Y. Spiegel)" [Hebrew], Ph.D. dissertation, The Hebrew University, 1978, vol. 1, p.33.
57. Josef Gar, *Umkum fun der yidisher Kovne* [The Destruction of Jewish Kovno] (Munich, 1948), p. 406.
58. Israel Kaplan, in his invaluable collection *Dos folks-moyl in Natsi-klem* [Folk Expression under Nazi Persecution: Sayings from the Ghettos and Camps] (Munich, 1949), derives *ya'ales* from the *יעלה ויבא* prayer recited on festivals, but also records *יעלה תחנונו* from the Kol Nidre service; see pp. 7-8.
59. Gar, pp. 408-9.
60. See Mark Dworzecki, *Yerusholaim deLite in kamf un umkum* [Jerusalem of Lithuania in Struggle and Destruction] (Paris, 1948), p. 101.
61. S. Kaczerginski, compiler, *Lider fun di getos un lagern* [Songs of the Ghettos and Camps], ed. H. Leivick (New York, 1948), p. 205.