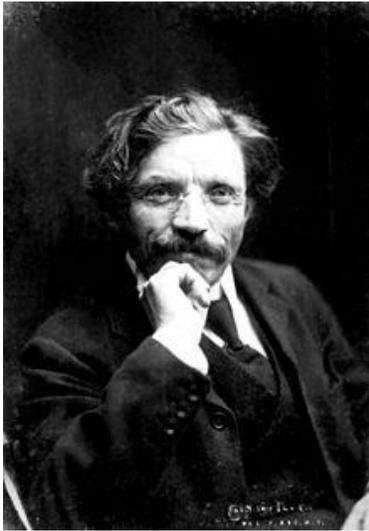


A Ray of Light: Sholom Aleichem Biography



Sholom Aleichem is a Yiddish greeting used by Jews around the world which means *Peace unto you*. It is also the pen name of the author born Solomon Rabinowitz on March 2, 1859, in the western section of Russia known as "The Pale of Settlement"-the only area of that vast country in which the Czar allowed Jews to dwell. In segregated, rural villages called *shtetls* the Jews lived in often abject poverty, "packed as closely as herring in a barrel".

The young Aleichem was born in Pereyaslav, Russia "a place no bigger than a peanut," which would later serve as the prototype for Mottel's fictional Kasrilevke-the name derived from the word *kasriel*, meaning a person who is poor but proud, one who can laugh at his own misfortunes and keep his self-respect.

Wit through conversation and storytelling was abundantly present in Sholom's boyhood home. The author's father would often amuse guests by reading aloud from a tattered book of humorous tales; hearty laughter filled the room and the young man became determined that someday he would write books that would brighten people's lives.

At the age of seventeen, having completed his schooling, Aleichem took a job tutoring the daughter of one of the few Jewish farmers in Russia. Olga's father was a highly cultured man. Sholom's time on the estate was blissful: not only was there a magnificent library which contained the classics of world literature, but he also had the time for writing. Olga, his adoring student who loved his stories, eventually became his wife.

"Laughter through tears" is the classic description of Sholom Aleichem's works. His writings embody the resilience of spirit and timeless values of a people whose circumstances were often filled with the most bitter pain and sorrow. Yet literary portraits of indomitable faith, humor and compassion glimmer through, causing Aleichem to be called the "personification of European Jewry". Concerned that his writings be available to everyone, particularly the poor, Aleichem's series of "*Books For All*" was published in brochure form at the lowest possible price. When a woman bought her Sabbath fish and vegetables, her market basket often included

one of these inexpensive collections of stories, so that the father could read aloud to the family after the meal as part of the Oneg Shabbas (Delight in the Sabbath).

Sholom Aleichem's works and their extraordinary success and popularity within the Jewish community and beyond may be attributed, in part, to the fact that he drew from personal experience. He, himself, was a victim of the prejudice and persecution by the Czarist Russian government while living in Kiev, when many of his fellow citizens were massacred in 1905 during a three-day pogrom. The savagery and horror he described in his own words:

Together with a number of families, my wife and children and I are cowering under a storm of bullets over our heads. We remain powerless, useless, paralyzed . . . a rumor was spread abroad that orders had been given to attack the Jews—and the attack began from all sides... Seeing soldiers on the street—and Cossacks—we felt reassured; and they did help, but not us. They helped to rob, to beat, to ravish, to despoil... Before our eyes women were hurled from windows and children thrown to the cobblestones. Now, imagine, what is happening in hundreds of Jewish towns and villages... To act, to help, to resist, that we are not permitted... What shall we do? No place to hide. Gentiles will not give shelter to Jews... My people are being consumed. The whole of Russian Jewry is in danger.

The brutality of those three days so terrorized Aleichem's children that he was convinced to take his family out of Russia. They lived several years in Italy, safe from the pogroms, and also where doctors hoped the climate would cure the ailing author of tuberculosis. Eventually the family became "a bubble in the turbulent westward torrent" of emigrants to "The *Goldeneh Lond* America---a country which held forth a promise of equality, freedom, and opportunity.

On May 13, 1916, Sholom Aleichem died in New York City.

His story of *Mottel the Cantor's Son*, was never completed—its thirty-ninth chapter entitled "*We Move*" contains the last words Aleichem wrote as he lay on the bed from which he was not to rise again. The beloved Yiddish storyteller was honored with what was the largest funeral in New York's history; more than 200,000 people lined the streets to witness the funeral procession. Upon his modest tomb in Brooklyn, is the epitaph Sholom Aleichem wrote for himself:

"Let me be buried among the poor, that their graves may shine upon mine, and mine upon theirs."



Perhaps the most poignant and profound memorial and testament to Sholom Aleichem is described in the book: "My Father, Sholom Aleichem." A quarter of a century after his death, Aleichem's humble shtetls and most of their inhabitants disappeared forever: the villages razed; six million men, women and children systematically murdered. Marie Waife-Goldberg relates what survivors of the Nazi death camps told her:

"My father's stories, miraculously retained in captivity and held on to by them as their most precious possessions, were a source of solace, cheer and courage in their misery.... They said Sholom Aleichem had been the only 'Ray of Light' in their darkest hours."