

Inventing the Shtetl

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THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, remarkable for its invention of the apparatus of the modern world—drains and trains, engines and electric lights—was not behindhand in also inventing many of the traditions that make contemporary Europe seem so picturesque today. Pugin and Viollet Le Duc created a new Middle Ages, the German bourgeoisie costumed the peasantry, and the English enjoyed a spectacular success in inventing ceremonials on a grand scale for its royalty. The Jews from Eastern Europe have taken a little longer, but they, too, in the last half century have created an idealized past for the shtetl—the Jewish village of Eastern Europe—which now shares with the products of the nineteenth-century imagination the charms of a brightly simple reconstruction animated by highly stylized figures and rituals.

The shtetl, in fact, has been invented twice, once in the eighteenth century by administrative decree, which gave it corporeal being, and again in the twentieth century, to serve as a consolation to American Jews. Before the shtetl had been reinvented in America, Jewish life had a less affirmative quality than it has now assumed. As it was related in the old country, Jewish history was a succession of persecutions and dispersions. From Babylonia, to the destruction of the Temple, to the martyrdom of the Crusades, to the expulsion from Spain, to the pogroms under the czars, there was no limit to the ferocity of the Gentile world, nor was there any sense of the passage of time. In the collective mind of the shtetl, Haman, recalled by every Purim as the wicked vizier at the court of Ahasuerus, and Chmielnitzki, the seventeenth-century Polish cossack instigator of frightful massacres, were only different aspects of the same story. All this was conveyed in the Yiddish phrase *laiden golus* (to suffer the Exile). No heroics, no charm. Life was perceived, accurately and rationally, as dangerous, fragile, and punctuated by disaster. In this context, the outbreak of a fresh misfortune was hardly news; it was expected. This was, after all, *golus*.

Since the Second World War, when the catastrophe of the Hitler regime wiped out Jewish life in both Germany and Eastern Europe, the new image of the shtetl that has developed bears an uncanny resem-

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blance to the idealized worlds that Europeans conjured up during their long imperial service in India and Africa, both inventing a past and living it at the same time. In their own search for the past, the Jews of the United States were helped immensely by the brilliant construct published in 1952 by Elizabeth Herzog and a sometime anthropologist and alleged Soviet agent, Mark Zborowski. In their book, *Life Is with People*, they provided just the myth that was needed for American Jews as a counterpoise to the suddenly discovered, newly celebrated villages of origin of their Irish, Ukrainian, Swedish, and German neighbors.

Zborowski and Herzog and their fellow nostalgia seekers were not the first to idealize the Jewish past, but unlike their predecessors they were doing it at a safe distance. A century earlier, the German Jewish painter Moritz Oppenheim provided the acculturated German Jews of his day with a cycle of charming paintings showing the Jewish holidays. Set a generation before they were painted, they had the soft colors and dreamlike quality of fairy-tale illustration. Unlike Zborowski and Herzog, Oppenheim was working within a situation of real physical continuity. He shows his German Jewish ancestors firmly embedded in German life, living in recognizably German households and wearing fashionable German dress as they conduct their Passover seders or celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles in a gaily decorated booth. What German Jews saw, then, was a somewhat idealized rendering of themselves, but with a visible connection to their living present.

Zborowski and Herzog's characters, meant to be equally engaging, had their attraction heightened by their separation from the American Jewish middle class—not only by a distance in time, but also in place. They are of another country, speak another language, are part of a different society. While the German Jew looking at the Oppenheim cycle might have smiled at the "improvements" on the past made by the painter, the American Jew has no direct experience of the shtetl against which to check Zborowski and Herzog's account.

Unlike the situation of continuity in which Oppenheim painted the shtetl, Zborowski and Herzog's shtetl seems to have been created to give American Jews a past that they would find flattering and to which, by the time the authors created it, they were already strangers. What are glossed over in the authors' and other recent idealizations are the hatred, the poverty, and the pogroms amidst which the Jews lived, in favor of a portrait emphasizing the ordered tranquillity of a static religious community. Implied also is an invidious comparison with the presumed anomie of the individual in our time. It does not seem in our age as if we need to be reminded of any more Jewish horrors, and yet the shtetls of the Pale have suddenly become the envied habitations of shoemaker philosophers; its controversial Chasidic rabbis are all transcendent seers; its

women range only from fishwives (with hearts of gold) to virginal maidens (with characters of steel); and everyone speaks in language both pithy and unendingly amusing. Along with a lot of simple self-gratification, this panoramic vision contains a lot of condescension.

A bare three-quarters of a century lie between us and the vanished world of the Jewish shtetl, and while we concentrate on trying to recapture its physical image, its spirit lives on unobserved. The shtetl of the nineteenth century is like a dybbuk, a lost spirit changing its form as it changes the body in which it lives, and there are many ways of approaching it. We can read of the shtetl in Russian government reports, in travelers' and journalists' accounts. We can read the works of its sympathizers, such as Sholom Aleichem, writing about his archetypal Kasrilevke, or I. B. Singer, with his love of the demonic. We can also read its critics in the autobiography of Salomon Maimon, an eighteenth-century Jew who fled the shtetl's ignorance and narrowness, or in the novels of Karl Emil Franzos, an assimilated Jew in nineteenth-century Galicia, who fought against the superstition of the shtetl. There is the voluminous evidence of the newspapers, magazines, and memoirs of the period, as well as the letters and diaries of countless emigrants. Of these many sources, fiction may offer us the truest portrait because, with its ostensible aim of presenting plot and character, it unselfconsciously reveals the hidden sources of shtetl life.

Two chroniclers of the shtetl, Sholom Aleichem and Karl Emil Franzos, writing only a decade apart, provide us with complementary views of their world: Franzos in Galicia, Sholom Aleichem in Russia; Franzos writing in German, Sholom Aleichem in Yiddish; Franzos the outsider, Sholom Aleichem the insider; Franzos the reformer, Sholom Aleichem the celebrator. Vastly different though their perspectives may be, they are united by their ability to transmit the feeling of the lives and the very voices of their times.

Despite Franzos's extravagant plotting, his novels retain a certain power today because his characters are real and their adventures have the unmistakable ring of truth. The town of Czortkow in Eastern Galicia, which is his principal subject, had only five thousand residents at the end of the nineteenth century, of whom half were Jewish. Small as it was, it was a microcosm of the nationalities in that corner of the Hapsburg Empire. The German-speaking Austrian bureaucrats, the Polish aristocrats, the indigenous Ruthenian and Polish peasants, the Jews in the ghetto, the visiting Chasidim from all over Eastern Europe arriving to attend the court of the Ruzhyn *rebbe* are all painstakingly depicted, particularly in their tensions with one another. Franzos brings to his characterizations a native sense of the telling gesture. Although he writes in German, he is so skillful in rendering the rhythms and

cadences of his characters' speech that we almost believe that we are hearing more than one language.

Sholom Aleichem's task was in some respects simpler. He wrote the language of the world he was describing—but with an oddly distancing effect. His education, his worldliness, his objectivity created the separation that gave his writing its ultimate sardonic bite. It is not surprising that one of his favorite forms is the long monologue in which the speaker addresses himself to "Mr. Sholom Aleichem," a sympathetic but nonetheless impartial observer.

Sholom Aleichem's enormous output has been translated in part into English prose; but it has suffered a further translation for the American stage (*Fiddler on the Roof*) and finally for a movie. I am not going to complain about how much has been lost in the transposition to stage and screen—though it has been a great deal—but we must be wary of how much of the complexity of his world has been stylized and simplified in the process. We need to listen closely to what Sholom Aleichem says, because the official reports and migration statistics can help us only a certain distance toward recapturing the lost society of the shtetl. Sholom Aleichem's fiction brings us the genuine voice of the past, while the stage and screen productions tell us more about American Jewish nostalgia than about actual life in Kasrilevke.

Sholom Aleichem was born as Solomon J. Rabinowitz into the world of the shtetl in 1859 in Russia, where he received a traditional Jewish education, together with a Russian one. He spoke Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian and wrote—steadily, almost obsessively, in a tiny hand—stories, observations, essays, and novels about a world that was already breaking up. Although the darling of the Yiddish-speaking public, he profited very little from his writings, only managing a little comfort at the very end of his life. In 1914, caught by the war in Germany, he fled to the United States where he died two years later, just as his beloved shtetl also was coming to an end.

A man of infinite charm and altogether winning ways, Sholom Aleichem was no businessman. Early in his marriage, he managed to lose his wife's fortune and then his mother-in-law's in speculation on the stock market. As a consequence, his whole life became a desperate struggle to support his large household on the scanty payments he received for his writing. Occasionally he would make a tour of Jewish centers in Eastern Europe, where he would read aloud from his works to full houses whose wild enthusiasm refreshed both the family coffers and his own flagging spirits.

His devotion to that public extended even to his moving last testament. Written in pain, in the knowledge of his impending early death, in the midst of a war, in strange surroundings in the Bronx, remote

from every familiar sound and place, Sholom Aleichem's last wishes express his indissoluble tie to the ordinary Jews of Eastern Europe. "Wherever I die," he wrote, "I should be laid to rest not among the aristocrats, the elite, the rich, but rather among the plain people, the toilers, the common folk, so that the tombstone that will be placed on my grave will grace the simple graves about me, and the simple graves will adorn my tombstone, even as the plain people have, during my life, beatified their folk writer." That this feeling was returned was all too rapidly demonstrated. Sholom Aleichem's death in May 1916, at the age of fifty-seven, shortly following the writing of his will, became an occasion for an outpouring of Jewish feeling. Far, far away from Kasrilevke, hundreds of thousands of Jews found their way to the East Bronx to pay their last respects.

Karl Emil Franzos, who wrote equally obsessively all his life about the Jews of Galicia, was never part of their world, though he was born in 1848 just outside of Czortkow, a capital of Chasidic Jewry. His father, the officially appointed doctor in the region, was a Jew by birth, a man of the Enlightenment by belief, as had been *his* father, and passionately German in speech and culture. Before his early death in 1858, he imparted to his son both his convictions and his feelings, and did it so powerfully that one feels, in Franzos's description of Jewish life and in his opinions, that he is as much a man of the Enlightenment as his father. What all three generations shared was an admiration for the power of rationality, an abhorrence of "superstition" that included *all* religions, and a complete confidence in the superior and redeeming qualities of German culture. The Franzoses, father and son, saw the improvement in the situation of the Jews as tied to a general raising of the intellectual level of mankind, when the triumph of reason would banish hatred and division among peoples.

Although Franzos's father felt himself isolated by culture and belief from the Jews of Czortkow, he firmly retained his Jewish identity. Every evening, Franzos recalled, after his father had given him a German lesson, "he would continue with stories, sometimes of the German War of Liberation or the battles of the Maccabi, or sometimes of Herman, chief of the Cherusci, or of the Jewish martyrs of Worms." In this way, Franzos concludes, "Germanness and Jewishness grew together in me as a single unity, since I heard only of the noblest deeds of both which inflamed me to the highest pitch of enthusiasm." In fact, however, the only Jew he knew was his Hebrew tutor. "Only rarely did I ever enter a Jewish house, never a synagogue, and I knew nothing of the religious customs."

Despite the welter of languages and peoples into which he had been born, in what he called "half-Asia," Franzos learned early where he

belonged. "As to nationality," his father told him, "you are neither a Pole, nor a Ruthenian, nor a Jew. You are a German. But as to your faith, you are a Jew." Yet, Franzos reports, he "grew up as if on an island," outside the Jewish community, but also outside the Catholic community in whose schools he was educated. When he has to give up an academic career whose price is, as he puts it, "the baptismal font," he finds it "out of the question [*ausgeschlossen*] to make a bargain with my religious faith." But the sacrifice had the effect of making him more inquiring about Judaism, and while his "feeling of Germanness did not diminish," he described how his "feeling that he also belonged to another community grew stronger."

In 1859, when he was eleven, Franzos moved with his widowed mother to Czernowitz as his father had wished. Not far from the city of Czortkow, it was the capital of Bukovina, with a population of some fifteen thousand when Franzos moved there. It had good schools, a rich Jewish communal life, and could even support a theater, although it had no university until 1875. To Franzos, what made it infinitely superior to Czortkow was that it was "a small, friendly and thoroughly German city. I felt myself to be in the anteroom of the paradise of Germany."

Once there, Franzos explored the Jewish quarter, where, he wrote, "I was attracted to the poetic qualities of many of the customs . . . but what I felt to be particularly painful was the superstition into which those who had once been the standard-bearers of the purest monotheism had sunk." This word, "superstition," which would have been his father's word—and his grandfather's—recurs again and again in Franzos's description of ghetto life. While, as a true man of the Enlightenment, he will often pair the superstition of a rabbi with the ignorance of a monk, his self-imposed mission to rescue the Jews of Eastern Europe from their isolation became the driving impulse behind his writing. In his stories he renamed Czortkow, calling it Barnow, because, he said, the Galician name was too difficult for Germans to pronounce, and because some of his characters were drawn from the town of Sadagora (a journalist's rather than a novelist's scruple). But he was unsparing in laying bare the unrelenting poverty, squalor, and physical darkness of the Jewish settlement. When his novels and stories were criticized by Chasidim and others who suggested that he might just as well have let himself be baptized, Franzos's response was, "This is the best sign that I have done my duty."

While Franzos seems somewhat puzzling today, in his time he was neither alone nor eccentric. Many of the well-educated Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in Western Poland adopted German culture as their own, as Franzos and his father had done, fostering schools and theaters, publishing newspapers and magazines, and main-

taining steady contact with the German world, particularly by attendance at the German universities. Yet the ideas of the Enlightenment so cherished by Franzos, which, translated into politics, promised so much to the Jews of the West, hardly penetrated beyond the Imperial Russian border. In the epoch of the Enlightenment, the Jews of Eastern Europe were placed under stricter confinement than they had ever been, and they did not emerge from it until more than a century later.

The Jews were the unwelcome part of the bargain that Russia made in the first Partition of Poland in 1772. In December 1791, wanting to keep this population from spreading into Russia proper, Catherine II promulgated the ukase establishing the Pale of Settlement for Jews. Among its many restrictions were those that barred Jews from borderlands (lest they smuggle), forbade them to move from the area designated as the Pale, and prohibited them from living in Moscow or St. Petersburg unless they were merchants of the first class, which meant that they were very rich and had paid a large tax for the privilege. With superficial amendments, Catherine's ukase remained in effect through various Alexanders and Nicholases until 1917, when the new revolutionary government abolished it. The immediate effect of these laws relating to the Pale was to exclude East European Jews from society at large, to enclose them in their own communities so that their language, culture, and even government were different from those of their countrymen.

Taking in a north-south corridor of one million square kilometers, the Pale became a prison by the end of the nineteenth century for nearly five million Jews. Jewish settlements had existed, of course, long before Catherine's decree, not only in Russia/Poland, but in other parts of Eastern Europe as well. The importance of the ukase of 1791 is that it froze the conditions of Jewish life for the largest single group of Jews in Eastern Europe. Shtetl life developed differently, therefore, in the Russian Empire than in Galicia or Hungary or Romania, bent by what was or was not permitted by legislation or social custom. What these villages shared, however, under whatever government they existed, was a fundamental social and physical isolation from the rest of the population. As a consequence, the shtetl fostered its own language—Yiddish—developed its own culture, and took Judaism into new and exotic byways unknown in other parts of the world.

Yet at the very worst moment for the Jews of the East, the Jews in France were experiencing a literally revolutionary change in their status. In August 1791, four months before the Pale was established, the French also promulgated a decree concerning the Jews. In keeping with the spirit of the Revolution, it explicitly granted Jews full citizenship, "annulling all adjournments, restrictions and exceptions."

The counterpoint between the East and the West exemplified in

these two pieces of legislation has continued to this day. If we consider only the intentions—one to liberate, the other to confine—the Jews in these two parts of the world lived under entirely different expectations and with a profoundly different sense of their place in society. In the West there was a legal assurance of freedom and equality that was carried across the Rhine to the German states as Napoleon's armies advanced. It gave Jews hope for a new position in the world in which they would finally shake off the stigma of the Middle Ages.

Jews in the West rapidly adopted Western languages, were educated in secular schools, and became full-fledged participants in Western culture. The consequence, of course, was that as they took on, more and more, the characteristics of the culture of the countries in which they lived, they were also more and more estranged from the Jews in the East. The Eastern Jews, in turn, receded into their internal religious and political struggles, which were largely irrelevant to the West. Yet even for the Jews in the East, cut off as they were from European politics, Napoleon became a name to conjure with. So unworldly a figure as the Chasidic rabbi Menahem Mendel of Rymanov in southeastern Poland is reputed to have offered a prayer for Napoleon's success in his campaign against the czar. In the ebb and flow of Napoleon's fortunes, Jewish life was deeply involved, directly in the West, and indirectly in the East.

At first the possibilities Napoleon opened made only hairline cracks in the life of the shtetl. But however powerful its structure and however terrifying the outside world, the Jewish village of Eastern Europe could not contain all of life and indeed had carried the seeds of its disintegration from its origin. It was this inner tension that both Sholom Aleichem and Franzos recognized and used as the propelling agent of their stories about ghettoized life in the shtetl.

For the orthodox Jews of the shtetl, the most feared seducer of all was Western learning. Individuals slipped away to learn Western languages, to study at universities, and to begin the struggle with a new way of life. New types began to appear in Europe. Replacing the old court Jews, the private financiers of kings, were Jewish intellectuals (both men and women), writers, painters, doctors, lawyers, bankers, businessmen, who by virtue of their talent, charm, intelligence, or money gained admission to European society. It was a bewildering time, filled with strain and conflict for those who crossed over or were tempted to.

Those who remained did not find their life made easier by these defections. In fact, there was a sense in the East that the entire German community was lost to Judaism. German Jews dressed like Germans; by 1830 they even spoke like Germans and, much more subtle, and indeed ruinous to continuity with the East, were educated like Germans. In the East reverberations from the Western world continued to assault the

shtetl, and by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the cracks had begun to widen alarmingly. There was no longer a single mode of Jewish life in the shtetl. There were many ways of life, and there were also many kinds of shtetlach. Karl Emil Franzos saw these differences quite distinctly as he contrasted Barnow with Buczacz, another Galician town. He wrote:

The Jews of Barnow are Chasidim: bigots and visionaries, wild fantastical fanatics who swing in an extraordinary way between cruel asceticism and voluptuous indulgence. . . . In Buczacz, in contrast, live the "Misnagdim," hard, rational people, who honor the Bible above all else, and the Talmud only insofar as it elucidates the Bible. . . . In Barnow, there is much fasting, but also much feasting; Buczacz life proceeds along measured uniform tracks. In Barnow disputes on learned questions fill the whole livelong day while financial speculation occupies only the intervals. In Buczacz they are dedicated to crafts and trade; industriousness and bourgeois dignity are greater. . . . The Barnowers are eccentric and passionate; the Buczaczers have the reputation of being hard and calculating.

For Franzos, the key differences among Jews were religious.

Sholom Aleichem worked with a broader panorama, bringing in not only Chasidim and Mithnagdim but also the many varieties of secularized Jews—socialists, atheists, Zionists—to populate his stories. There were also observant Jews in modern dress; there were Chasidim who cared about the worldly as well as the otherworldly news. There were the handful who sought out secular and higher educations, who traveled to the universities in Vienna or Moscow or St. Petersburg. There were the learned and the illiterate.

What ultimately drained the shtetl of its vitality and its population was the glimmer of hope held out by the legacy of the French Revolution and the possibility of realizing that hope in the West. Between 1881 and 1930 nearly three and one-half million Jews acted on that possibility and left Eastern Europe. Of these, two and one-half million came to the United States, not least among them Sholom Aleichem himself.

Although Sholom Aleichem was writing about Jews in Imperial Russia and Franzos was writing about Jews in the Hapsburg Empire, the characters they wrote about were essentially the same poor Jews. Those well-to-do Jews in Eastern Europe who adopted European culture without abandoning their Jewish identity, who built great synagogues, who established institutions of learning and charity, are still awaiting their historian. From memoirs, however, we learn that even the privileged Jews who lived in Moscow were keenly aware of their marginality. Boris D. Bogen, who was a contemporary of Sholom Aleichem, and the son of a Jewish government contractor, tells in his autobiography how he came to be born in Moscow. His father, he writes, "having spent the

requisite five years of business in the Pale and having paid an enormous fee for membership in the first guild . . . was entitled to live in Moscow." But the Hebrew school to which this contractor sent his son was illegal. "For the first time," Bogen reports, "I saw poverty . . . the threadbare dress of the women in the teacher's home, the anxious doling out of wood for the fire in the brick stove, the bare, peeling walls in that room. Sometimes I played with my teacher's children in the courtyard and I remember wondering why they dressed so poorly when their father had so many pupils; it was some years later that I knew of the large bribes that the teacher had to give in order that his school might exist without interference from the police."

The themes of Bogen's story—the realities of poverty and fear, the unreality of Jewish learning in the contemporary world, and the mediating force of bribery—appear again and again as the absolutes of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. One of the richest aspects of the Yiddish vocabulary, and a measure of its importance in the language, is the number of ways Jews found to describe poverty. "They were so poor that they starved to death three times a day." "He didn't have the money to buy the water to pour over his kasha [buckwheat groats]." "He looked like a poor man before Passover." A Yiddish thesaurus needs nineteen columns of fine print to set out all the synonyms and comparisons for *misfortune*; *good fortune* takes only five.

Poverty and fear went hand in hand. As the least favored minority in Eastern Europe, Jews had only a tiny economic base of permitted occupations from which to draw their livelihood. At the same time real physical perils were a daily accompaniment of this life. In Eastern Europe a Jew—visible by his dress, his speech, his gait—was free game. Everyone from a schoolchild to a government official could insult him with impunity, and a Jew counted himself lucky if he were not set upon and beaten. The village peddler, a stock figure in Eastern Europe, who left his shtetl at the beginning of the week to make a circle of the surrounding peasant villages before returning the following Friday, was a physically defenseless figure in a hostile natural and cultural world.

The dog was the powerful symbol for the enemy in Jewish life—irrational, implacable, dangerous. Dogs were ever one of the primary hazards of the road, even more to be feared than the violent and unpredictable tempers of the peasants. There is little sentimentality about animals in Yiddish, a language that uses special pejorative words for the way they eat and the way they die. Sholom Aleichem, who understood this antipathy, writes almost apologetically about his pet dog and describes what an exception he was when he was adopted as a stray. "Silver was so clever," he writes in his autobiography, "that he immediately acknowledged his new masters. Moreover, he treated Jews with

respect: he did not worry them like most dogs, who boil with hatred as soon as they see the long Jewish gaberdine." Jews, then, did not own dogs. Dogs were understood either as a peasant necessity or as an aristocratic indulgence. In fact, these attitudes are so ingrained in East European Jewish thinking that as late as the 1950s, when the famous Jewish actor Maurice Schwartz was directing the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York, he could depend on the dog to telegraph his meaning. In a family saga, he wanted to show the transformation in the life of an elderly couple who has suddenly come into a fortune. The second-act curtain rose to reveal them seated in thronelike chairs on either side of a baronial fireplace. Sitting beside them, one at each chair, were two Great Danes, their heads practically reaching to the shoulders of the little old couple. Nothing needed to be said. Wave after wave of laughter shook the house as the scene was taken in, and it was some time before the actors could get on with the play.

The shtetl thus needs to be seen as a place embedded in a system in which legally nothing was permitted and in which a curse and a blow—expressions of the deepest disgust—were in and of the nature of life for Jews. But they coped, and one of the simplest and easiest ways to cope was through bribery. A German pastor, using the pseudonym Kurt Aram, who traveled through Russia just before the start of World War I, reported on the vital role of bribery in the life of the Jews. To begin with, he notes, some two thousand regulations stood on the books concerning the Jews, which the police were willing to forget when a few rubles were adroitly applied. If the police officer in town needed some extra cash, he would, of course, remind himself of some neglected ordinances proscribing Jewish activity. In Bessarabia, the governor, Prince Urussov, estimated that in his province one million rubles annually flowed into the hands of the police through bribery. Using this figure as his base, Aram concluded that the Jews in Russia must have been spending between ten and fifteen million rubles a year on blackmail payments that simply made it possible for them to continue living. Not for privileges, not for advantage, just to continue living.

Both rich and poor were caught in this game, and Sholom Aleichem recorded it in all its variations. As a way of heightening the distinctions among the classes of Jews in Russia, he uses a geographical device. He concentrates his poor Jews, whom he loves best of all, in his fictional town of Kasrilevke, his middle-class Jews in equally fictional Yehupetz, and gives them both a summer "resort" outside Kasrilevke, which he calls Boiberik. In his description of life in Boiberik, further divided into "Eretz Israel" for the poor and "Palestina" for the rich, he begins with its legal—that is to say, its illegal—origins.

As Sholom Aleichem describes the settlement in *Summer Romances*,

it becomes a veritable paradigm of life in the Pale, of the constant resort to chicanery and illegality that was built into the texture of daily existence. "Formerly this waste land outside Kasrilevke," he writes, "belonged to the Gentiles; today it belongs to the Jews. Which is to say, as far as ownership goes, today it is still owned by the Gentiles because it is reckoned to be outside the town limits. And there, of course, a Jew is not permitted. But in the summer, living in the dacha of a Gentile, that is permitted. Which is to say, as far as permission goes, one is not permitted. But, if you pay the police commissioner and get a paper from a doctor that you are sick and that you need a rest cure, then you are permitted to enter the forbidden Garden of Eden."

In another brilliant little vignette, Sholom Aleichem reports on what happens when the system breaks down. When a new government overseer comes to Kasrilevke and will not take bribes, it is a disaster for the Jews. Life grinds to a halt and the Jewish community finally sends a petition to the czar asking that the new official be dismissed and their old approachable, corrupt inspector be returned so that life can resume. Or, in "The Passover Expropriation," Sholom Aleichem describes how "the town has experienced a series of burglaries, each more frightful than the next. It is dangerous to be alive! One began to long for the good old days when a police inspector (you only had to slip him a ruble) knew how to keep a whole city in his hand."

Other stories turn on the right of residence, one of the most vexatious of the two thousand regulations against the Jews. The agitation of Sholom Aleichem's great character Menachem Mendel is enhanced in his letters to his wife because he does not legally have the right to live in Odessa, where he is currently conducting his wild stock market speculations. In another story, "Two Anti-Semites," where Sholom Aleichem very gently touches on the expedients of a Jew trying to pass as a Gentile, he describes his hero as a great traveler. "He travels from Lodz to Moscow and from Moscow to Lodz several times a year. He knows all the buffets, all the stations along the way, is hand in glove with all the conductors, and has visited all the remote provinces---even the ones where Jews are only allowed to stay twenty-four hours." There it is again---not particularly relevant to the plot, but indispensable in conveying the suffocating atmosphere of life in the Pale.

In his stories Sholom Aleichem explores two kinds of problems: the everyday evils of poverty, corruption, ignorance, and anti-Semitism, and the long-range threats to shtetl life, principally from the attraction of Western culture and secularism. Like his readers, he took the daily hardships as the given; his charm lay in his ability to make his characters believable, even as they attempt to sweep back the ocean with a broom. He can write a hymn of praise about a tailor whose clientele was so poor

that he never worked on a whole piece of cloth, and whose specialty was mending, darning, patching, and converting exhausted garments into something wearable. "He could, for example," Sholom Aleichem tells us, "take an old caftan and turn it into a cloak; then the cloak into a pair of trousers; of the trousers he could make a shirt; and of the shirt something else again. Don't think that's such easy work." Here is Sholom Aleichem at his most exuberant best.

He probes with great care, and without emphasis, the tensions of modernity that will eventually tear the shtetl apart. Sholom Aleichem saw the consequences of modernity even as he announced with exaggerated awe the arrival of various mechanical wonders in Kasrilevke—the streetcar, the sewing machine. In his most famous series of stories about Tevya the milkman, he deals directly with the problems of social change when one of Tevya's daughters runs off with a revolutionary and another marries a Gentile. His intimations that all is not quiet in the shtetl are sometimes louder, sometimes softer, but they are always insistently present, frequently thrown in as an aside. Like every society, the shtetl accepted, even indulged, deviations up until certain boundaries were crossed, and Sholom Aleichem rarely lets slip the opportunity to note these transgressions. In his story "Eternal Life," the deviance appears parenthetically as his hero begins, "I was a young man, living as the custom was, off my in-laws, sitting at my studies, dipping into forbidden books on the sly when my father-in-law and mother-in-law weren't looking."

What made his readers laugh was his accuracy in exposing the absurdity of everyday life, but some of the absurdity lay less in the characters than in the inherent contradictions of shtetl life itself. Even the rich Jews could not escape its tyranny, and the joke seemed even better when a rich man rather than a poor one was caught in its meshes. In Sholom Aleichem's one novel about the middle classes, *Marienhof*, he contrasts a series of frivolous love affairs played out in a parody of European style by his Warsaw cast of characters with the unrelieved earnestness of a traditional family that is also visiting the spa. The ladies from Warsaw, on arriving at their hotels, shed their marriage wigs. They flirt with the young men. They go rowing together on the Sabbath—a forbidden activity. It is rumored that someone has eaten unkosher food. And all of this goes on as a counterpoint to the efforts of a mother trying, in a most traditional way, to find husbands for her daughters among these wastrels. She engages a marriage broker, a *shadchan*. No laughing matter there, but it heightens the absurdity of the romantic farce in the first plot when the lovers there are the prospective husbands in the second.

Sholom Aleichem was intensely aware of the tenacity of traditional

institutions and used the conflict between old and new in his stories to fine effect. The arranged marriage was only one of many usages that were beginning to stir a sense of restlessness among the young, and it becomes the pivot of his tale "A Story with Seven Matchmakers." It begins with the decision of the editor of the progressive newspaper in Kasrilevke to run a personals column so that young people can find their mates directly, in a modern way, without the intervention of a *shadchan*. But what does the prudent father of a marriageable young man do? He calls in a *shadchan* to investigate the qualifications of a promising young beauty who has advertised herself. This is only the beginning. By the time the story is finished and all the matches have been made, half the town has been involved, including the newspaper editors.

There are few real villains in Sholom Aleichem's stories, because he would rather expose the absurdity of everyday life and the frailty of humanity than indulge in a rant. Sometimes he shows us the struggle between the rich and the poor, sometimes the struggle between the Orthodox and the secular Jews, and sometimes, ever so gently, he pokes fun at the benighted ignorance in which Kasrilevke lives. In a gem of a story entitled "Dreyfus in Kasrilevke," he describes how the Kasrilevkeites discover the Dreyfus case, their subsequent absorption in its progress, their excited interest in the retrial, and their dismay at Dreyfus's second conviction. Because there is so much detail in setting the stage for the story—namely, that there is only one newspaper subscription in the whole town, that even the Jew with the subscription must wait humbly for the Russian postmaster to give him his paper, and that the Kasrilevkeites, in order to understand the case, immediately transpose it into shtetl terms—we almost forget that he is really pointing his finger at Kasrilevke's isolation from the rest of the world and at its uncertain grasp of the realities of that world.

Despite his sympathies, Sholom Aleichem was no Kasrilevkeite. Although he grew up speaking Yiddish, he spoke Russian with his wife and children, gave his children a Russian secular education, and, when he was sick at the end of his life, asked his daughter to read him stories from Chekhov, his favorite author. Even by his children's generation, traditional Jewish learning was thinning out, though they all knew Yiddish. His daughter, Marie Waife-Goldberg, reports in her biography of her father that, when the original Tevya came by their summer cottage to chat with her father, Sholom Aleichem would often laugh out loud at remarks that Tevya made in Hebrew but that his children could not understand.

The generations in Sholom Aleichem's own family were, in fact, a demonstration of the change that he was charting in his stories. His children could aspire to a university education and the professions,

where, as a young man, he had had to depend on private tutors for his secular learning. For them the Russian language was their mother tongue, just as a Russian education was the center of their schooling. His children's intellectual world, then, turned on a different educational axis from his. The Bible and its commentaries were replaced by Russian literature; his children saw themselves as worldly Europeans rather than as ghetto Jews.

As in Sholom Aleichem's family, the act of connecting with the surrounding culture is a process that is renewed by Jews in every generation—with more or less pain, difficulty, and alienation. In the two centuries since the French Revolution, each generation of Jews in Europe has wrestled with the promise of equality and the reality of legal and social disablement. Until Hitler, this promise was a shimmering goal that drew each generation forward, the bright prospect making them patient, dogged even, in their day-to-day struggle for a better place in society and enhancement of their self-respect.

Although Western and East European Jews seemed widely separated in language, culture, and economic status, they shared one ineradicable quality, their Jewishness, which gave even the most assimilated Jew a perpetual sense of imbalance, self-consciousness, and a special kind of bifocal vision. In every generation the emerging adult had to rediscover for himself the position that expressed his own relationship to his forebears and to the world in which he would live. While the responses were various, the process was inevitable and endlessly repeated. The tremendous past of Judaism and the emotional power of its closed world are not lightly shouldered aside, however seductively the riches of secular culture beckoned and in spite of the aching need to belong to the country of one's birth. For every Jew standing between his two heritages, there is a process of reconciliation.

The autobiographies, memoirs, and essays of Jews in the United States and Europe make up an instructive anthology of how they thought about this process. Yet it would be hard to chart these responses on any kind of "developmental" scale. While the second, third, and later generations take for granted what was a source of wonder to the first, there seems to be no difference between those first explorers, whatever their period or place. The same process seems to be at work on Moses Mendelssohn, in the 1750s, studying philosophy in Berlin, or Salomon Maimon, in Poland during the 1760s, teaching himself German from printers' marks in his Hebrew books. A century later Karl Emil Franzos ate dry bread for dinner rather than forego an evening at the theater in Czernowitz, and Sholom Aleichem would report his excitement on discovering Russian literature at his father-in-law's house in Sofievka in 1877. In Vilna, "the Jerusalem of the North," more than one yeshiva

student taught himself Russian by laboriously learning the letters from signs on shop windows, or studied English from antiquated grammars in preparation for embarking for America, the Golden Land. Abraham Cahan tells of how, when he came to the United States, he taught himself algebra from a textbook using the only technique that he knew: by chanting it and memorizing it as if it were a Talmudic text. And finally, in the 1920s, there was a whole generation of immigrants' children who immersed themselves blindly, dazedly in Western learning in the wide-windowed libraries planted by Andrew Carnegie for just that purpose across the United States.

To understand the true heroism of the inhabitants of the shtetl, then, we need to rescue them from the myths that have been woven around them. If we do not see the darkness, we cannot appreciate the light. The myth diminishes them and diminishes the generations who struggled to make bridges between the ghetto and the outside world. Although we must be on guard against the picture-book clichés of the shtetl world—the fine-baked Sabbath loaves, the warmth of candlelight, the festive table—what cannot be denied is that it was a complete world and that any breach in the educational system, language, dress, any sense of self outside the norms approved by the community brought serious consequences: social ostracism, alienation, ultimately even religious excommunication. Those who wanted to know about life outside the shtetl were aware of the danger of their desires. Jewish literature of the late nineteenth century, writes one historian of Russia, “is replete with descriptions of secret excursions of Talmudical students into the realm of forbidden knowledge. In the dead of night, these lads would stealthily enter the screened and deserted portion of the women’s synagogue; there safe from intrusion, by the light of a candle or of the moon, they would devour forbidden fruits of knowledge, such as a Hebrew periodical, a Russian textbook or a German grammar.”

These collisions of cultures, like an atomic explosion, release an enormous amount of energy. They produce characters with a driving, obsessive, almost missionary quality, who spend their lives coping with the consequences of the explosion that they have generated. There is a profound disjunction in their lives before and after the explosion, and much of the force that brought them to the break is then needed to support a new life that they take up without community, kin, habit, or even language.

This conflict is the theme that preoccupies Karl Emil Franzos, and it must be said at once that he is better at describing the conflict than at plotting its progress. Much of his work is based on the scenes, events, and people he had known as he was growing up, and his very career as a

novelist owes its origin to an unrequited love. In 1868, in a white heat of passion, he wrote his first story, "Das Christusbild," which eventually became an important part of the collection to which he gave the title *The Jews of Barnow*. The story was his revenge for his rejection by a Gentile girl who wrote him at the last moment that she could not bear to be married to a Jew, "Ich bring's doch nicht über's Herz. . . ." He also wove much of himself and his father into his writing. Wherever there is a saintly village doctor, that is Franzos's father, whose memory and teachings he honored in this way. He commemorates his own years as a student at a Dominican monastery with many vignettes of monks, servants, abbots, and the customs of monastery life.

Without the range of Sholom Aleichem or the suppleness of his portraits, without the ease of the native, Franzos offers us a different, yet still important, angle of vision. His novels are also populated with matchmakers, *schnorrers*, pompous rabbis, poor tailors, students reading forbidden books. But there is this difference: these characters all exist in the service of Franzos's overriding passion to expose the crushing effect of Orthodox Judaism (and occasionally Christianity) on the human spirit and to celebrate the liberation made possible by the adoption of European, more specifically German, culture.

Although Franzos depicts with touching warmth the happiness generated by the reading of Schiller or the joyous freedom that follows escape from the ghetto, none of his characters really succeeds; none is happy. We are left, therefore, with a strangely ambiguous message. In the story "Esterke Regina," a young man who goes to Vienna to become a doctor loses his childhood sweetheart, Esterke, who feels that she cannot fit into his new life. After he receives a deathbed letter from her, confessing both her love and her estrangement, he ends by taking a clearly suicidal appointment as a doctor in the East Indies. Again, one of Franzos's women characters who marries a Gentile is ostracized by both the Jewish and Christian communities in Barnow. Another girl, the daughter of the richest man in the ghetto, the Shylock of Barnow, runs away with a hussar. Here the story takes a more conventional, melodramatic turn when she is spurned by her lover, turned away from her father's door, and dies on his threshold.

In an unusual variation on the theme of forbidden love, Franzos attempts to show such an affair from the perspective of each community. In "Der wilde Starost und die schöne Jutta," a nobleman abducts a beautiful Jewish girl who then falls in love with him. The two live happily together in his castle outside of Barnow. She bears him a son, decides to convert, and they are about to marry. On the night before the wedding, while the nobleman is away, Jutta and her son are carried out of the castle by a group of Jews who then spirit her away deep into

Russia. On the long journey, the child dies in her arms, and shortly thereafter she throws herself from a bridge into the Dniester. There is a double revenge in the story, because after months of fruitless searching, the nobleman orders a pogrom in Barnow. One of his servants, who is one of the narrators, kills the ringleader of the Jewish kidnappers. But nothing helps to relieve the nobleman's pain, and he goes mad. The other narrator is the mother of the murdered ringleader, who tells, with heartrending detail, of the torment of the Jewish community and the death of her son.

The double narration is a real tour de force, since the reader is deliberately left with an uncertain feeling about where justice lies. But Franzos is too much of a moralist to leave us without guidance. "A lie," he concludes, "has reverberated through the centuries and into our own day—that only religion brings bliss and love is blind. There is no way of counting how much blood and tears have flowed in order to sustain this lie. Let us finally understand the truth, that only love can bring bliss and that religion is blind." This is a gloss on the Enlightenment passion for reason.

Many of Franzos's most telling scenes turn on the love of outcasts for one another, a love that transcends the proscriptions of both their societies. Sometimes it is romantic love between a man and a woman, but often it is the love of a teacher and student or of two comrades. At such moments we are quite convinced by Franzos that we have reached a very high plane of human experience.

Franzos rings another change on the theme of difference in his novel *Moschko von Parma*, where his hero is distinguished from birth by exceptional size and strength. As he grows up, instead of fleeing from the attacks of the Gentile boys in the usual Jewish way, he knocks a few heads together. He has no talent for learning and runs away to try to enlist in the army when he is thirteen, again contrary to Jewish custom. The Jewish community is bewildered about what to do with such an exception and finally apprentices him to a Ruthenian blacksmith, who very grudgingly accepts him. Yet he flourishes in the workshop as his strength and talent win the old man over. But even here there is no happy end. The lad falls in love with a Ruthenian peasant girl who also loves him, but before that affair can be resolved, he is taken away to the army, this time most unwillingly. When he returns twenty-one years later, broken in body and spirit, his final happiness is to die in the arms of his illegitimate son.

We smile at such melodrama today, but Franzos's stories may be less improbable than we think. Long absences over long distances, uncertain mail delivery, no telephones, the poor state of medicine, the violent consequences of social transgressions—all combine very naturally to

produce the extravagant gestures, the sudden appearances and disappearances that we call melodrama.

Sholom Aleichem also deals with the estrangement from the community that followed the long years of military service. Where Moschko is rejected by his community but taken in by his Ruthenian comrade, Sholom Aleichem's Jonah, in his story "Jonah the Bather," is treated by the Jews as the village fool. He is given a job in the bathhouse, and his isolation is symbolized by his barely comprehensible language. After twenty-five years in the czar's army, he speaks an amalgam of "half-Russian, half-Yiddish" and lives as an outcast, neither a Jew nor a Russian. On only one day in the year does Jonah become a part of the Jewish community—on Purim, a day of masks and make-believe, when he, too, has a place among the revelers.

It is a curious question why neither Franzos nor Sholom Aleichem could let their breakaways live happily ever after. Reality was, in fact, kinder to them than these writers suggest. Many students from villages in Galicia went to medical schools in Vienna. Jews in such large Polish cities as Warsaw and Lodz created a flourishing secular culture that included not only intellectuals but also workers and artisans. There was also a larger number of middle- and upper-class acculturated Jews in Eastern Europe than the current emphasis on the shtetl allows.

Yet what is more arresting than tragedy? Both Franzos and Sholom Aleichem used it to provide an edge to their stories. But Franzos had worked too long as a journalist to be able to resist pathos, and his good intentions ended by making his stories less successful than his characters. Sholom Aleichem, with the discipline of an artist, used the impending or actual disaster that was, in any case, part of the grain of shtetl life to give a tinge of irony to his work, bringing the reader into complicity with him by forcing him to recognize a special view of reality.

These dark aspects of shtetl life appear again and again in Sholom Aleichem's work and bespeak a longer perspective than his anecdotal style would suggest. In his unfinished autobiography, *The Great Fair*, he tells of being accosted while on a reading tour by two young Chasidim who had waited for him outside his hotel. "I have been praying for this moment for a long time," one of the young men said as he kissed Sholom Aleichem's hand. "You are our comforter, you sweeten the bitter exile for us." It was this idea of exile—*golus*—that was the ever-present frame around his work.

Golus has overtones in Yiddish that are missing from the technical sounding *Diaspora* in English or the formal *Galuth* of Hebrew. In Yiddish it hangs in the air like a sigh, an utterance of despair. In the depths of the Russian Pale it was a word layered with meaning, but also and above all, it had a concrete actuality. It expressed not only the

spiritual condition of the Jews, but explained the poverty, humiliation, degradation, and hopelessness of daily life. Only a word with the fatefulness of *golus* could contain the bitterness of the Jewish condition.

When Yiddish came to America, a certain disjunction crept into the relationship between Jewish life and *golus*. They no longer defined one another perfectly. The darkness and bleakness of eternal *golus*, until the coming of the Messiah, was not the existential reality of the immigrant Jew.

In America there was hope, opportunity, even prosperity. Soft beds, enough food, safety. This was not *golus* in its heartrending, ultimate blackness. If the truth be told, this was Paradise, and the only way to resolve this contradiction was humor. The word began to be used lightly, frivolously. A family that moved from its familiar neighborhood would talk of being in *golus*.

Sholom Aleichem, too, believed that *golus* came to an end in America. There, as he wrote in a famous lullaby, Jews needed to have no fear, were rich, and ate *challah* (Sabbath bread) on weekdays. The end of *golus* for Sholom Aleichem was the end of the physical misery that crushed the lives and spirits of the Jews in the shtetl. Although his own experience of America was disappointing, he assumed that his fellow Jews would bring their intellectual baggage with them—the wit, the absurdity, the passionate engagement with ideas that fed the endless spring from which he drew his inspiration.

Franzos turned the image upside down. He cannot conceive of a change in the Jewish condition without a change in their ideas. Indeed, he views Jewish learning as a great cage that prevents the self-realization of Jews. One of the important stock scenes in Franzos's work is the encounter with nature by a ghetto Jew, where the sweetness, light, and freedom of a meadow are made to contrast with the cramped ghetto streets. In several stories he places the scenes of intellectual liberation in the open air, in an open field, in the ruins of a castle open to the sky. The openness of nature comes to stand for the expansion of the mind in a free world of learning.

In some unimaginable way the visions of both Sholom Aleichem and Franzos were realized in America, where the apparently immutable characteristics of Jewish life in Eastern Europe suffered a remarkable sea change. Imperceptible at first, as shtetl life seemed to be reconstituted whole across an ocean, the forces of the new world rapidly altered what appeared to be a powerful, stable culture. In a few decades Yiddish became moribund, the religion of the shtetl was honed into conformity with middle-class America, the constellation of family forces changed, Jewish talent left the ghetto, and even the question of how to remain a Jew became problematical.

Fulfilling the Franzos vision, the Jews of America wholeheartedly entered American society. They embraced Debs and Whitman, perhaps, instead of Schiller and Goethe, but they certainly abandoned the shtetl. Sholom Aleichem's premonition—that the safety and plenty of America meant the end of the complex Jewish life he had chronicled—has only become a source of concern now that the last authentic survivals of the shtetl have vanished. The old quarrels are forgotten. One doesn't struggle with ghosts; one placates them and lures them back.

As the cradle of Western Jewry, the shtetl has exerted a powerful if invisible influence on Jews everywhere, because its ideas were not left behind. Even those who fled in rebellion could not divest themselves of every shred of their past. And for the ordinary emigrants, the shtetl culture was as much a part of their baggage as their feather beds and candlesticks. However attenuated the minutiae of religious observance may have become, the attitudes of Jewish life as developed in Eastern Europe remained firm. Handed on in other languages, in other countries, they have become the unexamined bedrock on which the assumptions and principles of Western Jewish life rest today.

Now at a distance of three-quarters of a century, we can perceive what a network of contradictions the shtetl supported. Yet, while its institutions collapsed in the West, some of its intangible qualities—its skepticism and its superstitions, its scale of values, its mode of thinking—showed remarkable resilience. As they struggle with its reinvention, American Jews need not worry about building a monument to the shtetl. They have only to look within themselves to find its heritage still valiantly alive.

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