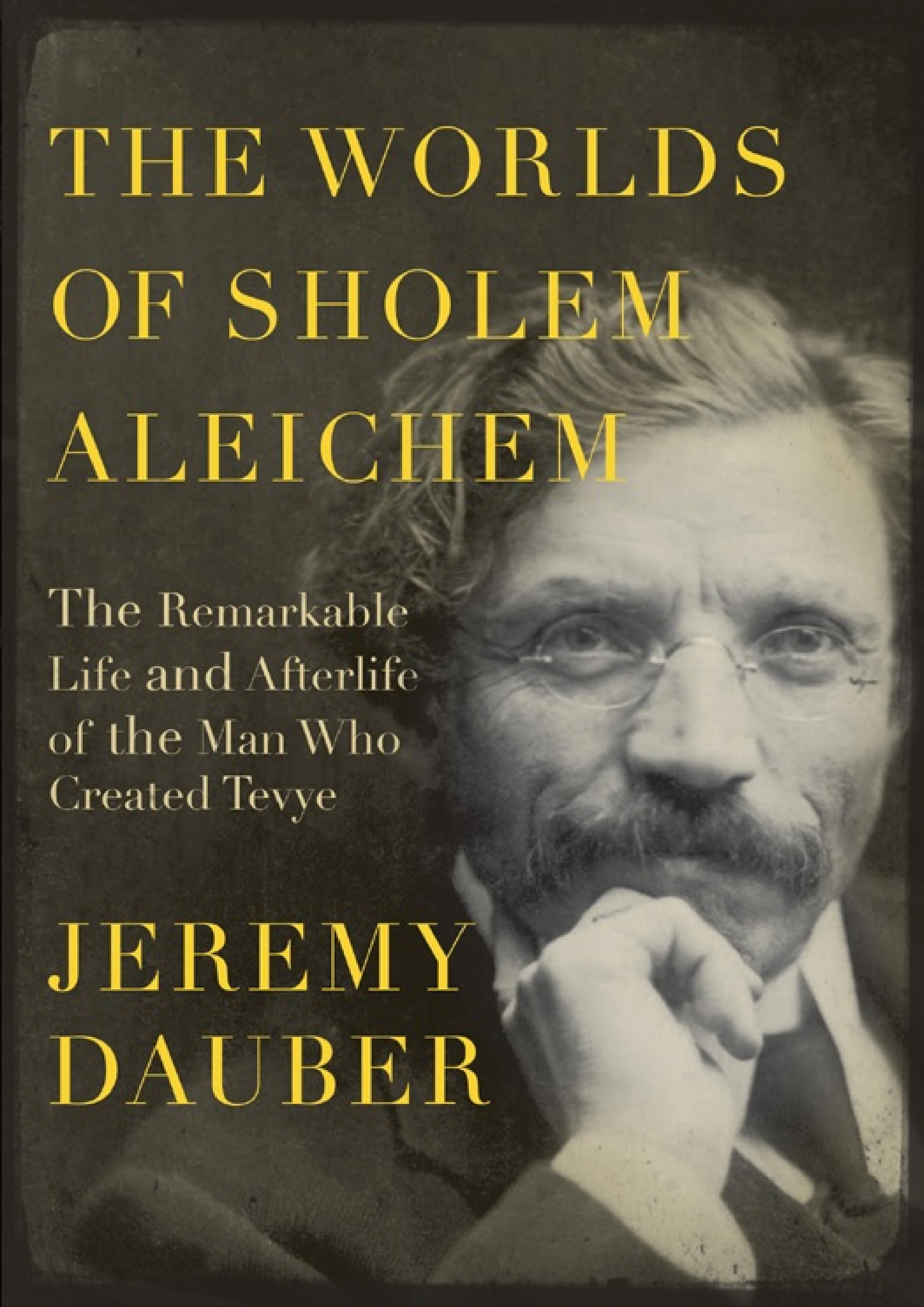


THE WORLDS OF SHOLEM ALEICHEM

The Remarkable
Life and Afterlife
of the Man Who
Created Tevye

JEREMY DAUBER



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THE WORLDS OF
SHOLEM ALEICHEM

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Jacket photograph of Sholem Aleichem, New York, 1907. Courtesy of Beit Sholem Aleichem Archives, Tel Aviv, Israel

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For Eli

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OVERTURE

In Which We Set the Stage

Here's a Sholem Aleichem story, of a sort: The mid-1990s. My college roommate's wedding. He was a Methodist from rural Ohio, the first person I ever met with a rural free delivery address, marrying a wonderful woman from small-town Iowa. The wedding took place in Hartley, Iowa—the town with a heart, the sign on the way into town attested. I was an usher. A guest, while being ceremoniously escorted to her pew, pointed at my kippah and proudly proclaimed she knew what it was; she had, after all, costumed *Fiddler on the Roof*.

And another:

The very late 1970s. My modern Orthodox day school. A first grade dramatic production. A half-dozen three-foot Tevyes in cotton-ball beards sing “Do You Love Me?” to a bevy of tiny Goldes. No other memory remains, for which I am eternally grateful. My parents claim it was cute.

If you're an American, Jew or no, of a certain generational span—born, say, between the time Sid Caesar first mugged for a television camera and the premiere of *Seinfeld*—there's no talking about Sholem Aleichem without talking about *Fiddler on the Roof*, the stage and screen adaptation of his greatest creation, Tevye the dairyman. Forget Sholem Aleichem: there's no talking about Yiddish, his language of art, without talking about *Fiddler on the Roof*. There's no talking about *Jews* without talking about *Fiddler*.

And it's not just Americans, either. Take a look at YouTube: as of early 2012, a clip titled “Japanese Fiddler on the Roof”—which looks like a rehearsal in a high school gym—had racked up 571,764 views. You can also find significantly less popular but far more professional-looking Hindi and Hungarian versions. Closer to home, high school marching band performances and at least one sock puppet parody nestle side by side with a seemingly infinite number of shaky recordings of high school and community theater productions.

Tevye and his daughters belong to the world, apparently; and as arguably the most popular and powerful representatives of Jewish life to the world at large since the closing of the biblical canon (Superman, as a metaphor, doesn't count), they certainly merit a closer look in their original literary setting. But this book isn't Tevye's story, though by book's end that story will

be told. It's the remarkable saga of his remarkable creator, the story of the man behind the show: the man responsible, in his day and ours, for the most compelling picture of the world of our great-grandfathers, a society in dizzying, wrenching transition from the traditional life of centuries past to the modern age. Sholem Aleichem was no Tevye, though, no simple man with a few pithy quotes and some piquant conversations with his Creator; he was really Sholem Rabinovich, a first-class intellect and brilliant writer, who translated the momentous events of his day for an audience looking for nuance wrapped in simplicity.

And he was no detached observer; Sholem Rabinovich did it all. He was an orphan and a devoted family man, a struggling rabbi and a fantastically rich stockbroker; he wore the "Gorky shirts" of the left-wing agitators and left Russia to try his luck in America—when he wasn't attending Zionist congresses. He suffered through family tragedies, personal illness, commercial disasters, World War I, and a pogrom literally at his front door to write some of the most optimistic works of Yiddish literature ever penned—though leavened with a strong dose of skepticism, sadly and honestly earned. His life is Jewish modernity writ small—just as his great creation, Tevye, meets the changing world without ever leaving his daughters and his horse. In the biography of Sholem Aleichem, you'll find a gripping narrative as exciting as any of his characters' stories, complete with a grand romance, financial rise and ruin, a war or two, and at least one revolution.

But his life was his writing. A graphomaniac like few others, he wrote thousands and thousands of letters; his collected works run to twenty-eight volumes—and include around half of his Yiddish output (to say nothing of his efforts in Hebrew and Russian). And it was in that writing that he did nothing less than create modern Jewish literature, modern Jewish humor, a modern Jewish homeland in literature. Before we get to that audacious claim, though, let's leave Sholem Aleichem, as he himself might have phrased it, and return to those first two anecdotes of mine, which, in their own small way, try to nod to Sholem Aleichem's work.

Not because, or only because, both anecdotes revolve around *Fiddler on the Roof*. Both are monologues, a literary form he mastered and used to remarkable effect with characters great and small, Tevye first in their rank. At least one of the stories doesn't, strictly speaking, have an ending—another Sholem Aleichem characteristic, showcasing the fine line between humor and frustration that his stories sometimes, always intentionally, engendered. Their themes—the changing nature of Jewish identity in the modern world, particularly with respect to confronting non-Jewish life and culture, often filtered through the prism of romance, are all solidly in Sholem Aleichem's wheelhouse, as every *Fiddler* viewer knows. And the tone: ironic, yes, but not immune to sentimentality; and ultimately optimistic, with a crowd-pleasing focus on lovers and children. That's Sholem Aleichem, too.

And both stories blur the line between author and literary character: a line Sholem Rabinovich—who, under that cheery pen name of Sholem Aleichem,

Mr. How Do You Do, was often buttonholed, petitioned, or even annoyed by his other literary creations—downright obliterated. In a time less attuned to postmodern game playing, his audiences sometimes confused literary persona with actual person; the 150,000 to 250,000 people who turned out for his funeral in New York in 1916—the largest public funeral in New York City then on record—were there to bury Sholem Aleichem, not Rabinovich. They had good reason for being confused: the author himself, as we'll see, was often an active and willing participant in the obfuscation.

Those men, women, and children who mobbed the New York streets mourned the writer who had given them (and us) a gallery of indelible characters—Tevye, of course, but also the dreaming Menakhem-Mendl, and the cheerful orphan Motl, and the citizens of the little town of Kasrilevke, who had already risen to the level of byword and archetype. You will make their acquaintance in these pages, if you don't know them already, along with a host of other characters who, once met, are impossible to forget. But they were also mourning a culture hero, a symbol: of the man who held it all together, who contained multitudes, who *was* Yiddishland. His comedy was as capacious as the landscape he sketched: whether they know it or not, every Jewish comic of the twentieth century—from your joke-telling uncle to Mel Brooks to Franz Kafka—walks in Sholem Aleichem's comic shadow, which mixes humor, horror, and anger in equal parts. The professor in me knows that all these statements, like any such, are exaggerations; and the book as a whole, of course, presents a fuller context. But I hope, as Sholem Aleichem's life and work unfold, you'll see exactly what I mean.

Because last, but certainly not least, “Sholem Aleichem” himself—the figure Sholem Rabinovich fashioned by will, effort, and imagination, undoubtedly one of his greatest and most influential creations—pointed the way to a new kind of Jewish identity. An identity that mixes tradition and modernity in uncomfortable measure; and which later generations will use—as they use Tevye—as a way of talking about their own beliefs and questions about Jewish life, history, and culture, many of which would have surprised Sholem Rabinovich no end. This book, then, is more than just a life of Sholem Aleichem: it's an afterlife as well—an afterlife that tracks the author's reputation and the history of his greatest work, of Tevye and his daughters, to tell us about American Jewish life and American Jewish history over the last century.

It's fitting, given Sholem Rabinovich's love of disguise, that a good part of that story takes place in the theater. The stage makes its prominent entrance in this book well before Tevye ever treads the boards: Sholem Aleichem's first voyage to America was intimately tied up with the Yiddish theater, and some of his dramatic writings became staples of the Yiddish repertoire. But, as his life was his best performance, it's perhaps fitting that this book's structure will be divided into five acts, complete with scenic epilogue. The acts themselves are the story of the life; the epilogue, a fragmentary afterlife—scenes glimpsed from the century spanning from Sholem Aleichem's funeral to today, with our

focus narrowed largely, though not entirely, to the history of Tevye and his daughters, particularly in America. Saying much more would give away the show, so let's begin. But before we do, one cautionary note: think of it as the small print in the theatrical playbill.

Any serious discussion of Sholem Aleichem's life and work runs immediately into a major, staggering problem. Not the questionable reliability of his own autobiographical statements; nor the death of all his contemporaries; nor the tormented publication histories of his works. (Though these are, of course, hardly small problems.) No, the major problem for our purposes is simply put: What do you call the man throughout the text? And in this the book's issues appear in miniature.

Our subject, as we'll see, was raised in, and had deep affection for, two cultures: the Jewish and the Russian. Both employ patronymics. Referring to him, though, as either Shalom ben Nachum, Sholem Nachum's (as the Yiddish might have had it), or Solomon Naumovich results in a character entirely unfamiliar to readers. Using the last name the family employed for official documentation, Rabinovich, offers similar problems and risks seeming overly pedantic; and sticking with just Sholem, especially after he reaches adulthood, seems criminally informal. Using "Sholem Aleichem," on the other hand, is also objectionable: first and foremost, it risks confusing historical figure with literary character—a confusion, as we'll see, that critics and followers alike often fell prey to. (Plus, since the pseudonym as a whole is a well-known Yiddish phrase, simply using the second part of it—"Aleichem"—is grating and inaccurate, like referring to him as "Do You Do"; it just wasn't done, and won't be done here.) On the other hand—and what would a book on a major Yiddish writer be without considering the other hand?—you've got to do *something*. So Sholem Aleichem it is, under protest and through gritted teeth, and I'll take special care, in the sections where I talk about the literary work, to distinguish between Sholem Aleichem the author and Sholem Aleichem the character.

More by way of introduction is, I think, unnecessary: let's get on with the story.