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### Sholom Aleichem

By Nathan Ziprin

Old cliches die hard. The oldest about Sholom Aleichem is that he was a "Jewish Mark Twain," an identification to which even his daughter, Marie Waife Goldberg, falls prey in her memoir, My Father, Sholom Aleichem, recently published by Simon & Schuster.

Of course there are comparisons between the two men, but only in the sense that all writers in a way have common threads. Both were men of profound wit, both drew on folk wisdom for their material, both were magicians of the pen and both were veritable treasures of laughter. But they were men apart in every other respect, not alone in language but even in their indigenous humor. It looks fine in print to say of Sholom Aleichem that he was a "Jewish Mark Twain," but it is a formulation that distorts the pictures of both men.

What kind of a man was Sholom Aleichem? Mrs. Waife-Goldberg does not give a complete answer, obviously because of her proximity to the subject. What she has done however -- and most excellently -- was to present a picture of her famed father through intimate and hitherto unpublished family stories, interspersed with a good deal of material shedding light on the literary paths of her father. The author does not pretend to write a literary history, yet the book abounds with many moving passages delineating Sholom Aleichem's literary roots and creativity.

Sholom Aleichem in his day was the most popular writer among Jews in Eastern Europe for they sensed that, in him the shtetl had found distillation as in no other writer of the time, even Mendele Mocher Sforim, the Grandfather of Yiddish literature. But while Mendele's symbolism has been rendered largely obsolete by the tragically sweeping changes of our generation, Sholom Aleichem has survived not alone because humor is indestructible but because he mastered the art of pure story telling, the art of elevating the personal experience to the level of common recognition and acceptance. Because his canvas was of real people, it has retained remarkable freshness even though the world of Sholom Aleichem has collapsed under the turmoil and brutality of the new age.

There has been much speculation whether the characters Sholom Aleichem immortalized in his works were conjured up or real. From his daughter's memoir we learn most of them were real. But whether they were real or imaginary, the more important thing is that the people of the shtetlach and the milieu in which they lived are destined to go on living eternally in the pages of this master even though time and poisoned swords have largely obliterated them.

Sholom Aleichem was able to portray that vanished world because he was rooted in it deeply and agonizingly. He combined in him Teveyeh, Menachem Mendel and all the wondrous characters who survived adversity only because they could laugh it off. In fact, the story of his financial dealings and frequent failures could well have been penned by one of his characters.

Yet, it would be a mistake to regard Sholom Aleichem as merely a wit, a humorist. Many of his pages are dipped in red ink that came from a bleeding heart. When he laughed, it was often "wigh yascherkes," an inimitable and untranslatable Yiddish expression meaning laughing when it hurts, out of agony, out of bitterness, out of dismay.

It is an interesting story that Mrs. Waife-Goldberg

tells about her famed father, his early life, his business ventures and failures, his first steps toward writing, his happy relationship with his children and all members of his family and his contacts with some of the leading literary of his time. But above all, it is a significant contribution to an understanding of one of the most luminous pages in Jewish living in the suffocating enclaves of Eastern Europe -- the remarkable burgeoning of Yiddish literature.

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