

THE  
Three Great Classic Writers  
OF  
Modern Yiddish Literature



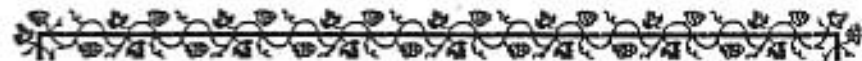
SELECTED WORKS OF  
Mendele Moykher-Sforim

EDITED BY

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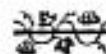
Joseph Simon Pangloss Press



## Introduction

A SUMMARY OF MENDELE'S LIFE, WORK, AND TIMES

by Gerald Stillman



MENDELE Moykher-Sforim wrote his *Notes For My Biography* in 1889, when he was fifty-three years old, at the request of Nokhem Sokolov,<sup>1</sup> who was compiling a series of biographies of prominent Hebrew and Yiddish writers for his *Seyfer Zikorn* (*Book of Records*). Mendele, as he is commonly (and endearingly) called, was then the director of the large reformed *Talmud-toyre* in Odessa, a position which allowed him to support his family but cheated him of time to write. "A cursed job," he called it, "which transforms me into a kind of dray horse...."

At this time, Mendele had started *Dos Vintshfingerl* (*The Wishing Ring*), an epic novel, which he wrote and published serially between 1888 and 1905. The demands on Mendele's time of his directorship and his writing, coupled with his natural aversion for discussing details of his personal life, account perhaps for the meagerness of the *Notes For My Biography* (see page 31). Many important details of his life are not mentioned. A later, unfinished novelette, *Sbloyme Reb Khayim's* (see p. 397), contains autobiographical material, but it too cannot be considered an autobiography.

This introduction aims to fill in some of the gaps and provide a more complete picture of Mendele—the man, the writer, and his times.

Mendele's lifespan, from 1836 to 1917, encompassed a period of great change for the Russian Empire and for the five-and-one-half million Jews (according to the census of 1887) who lived in it. He was born during the oppressive regime of Nicholas I, and died three weeks after the Bolshevik revolution. At the beginning

of this period, Russia was a feudal country; the vast majority of Jews lived in conditions of indescribable poverty as a result of the brutality of the Tsarist government and the economic exploitation by *kabal*, the semi-autonomous Jewish governing body. Toward the end of the period, capitalism, and its attendant industrialization, made significant inroads in Russia. Among the Jews, nationalism and socialism had become important movements.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the economic condition of the Jews in Russia was one of misery. Aside from a few very wealthy Jews, most Jews were never sure where the next meal was coming from. The one certainty in life for them was its instability and the ever-present threat of hunger and disease. In *The Jews in Russia* (1872), I. Orshansky described the plight of the Jews in White Russia and Polesye:

Half, if not three-quarters of the Jewish population consists of individuals who could be classified as go-betweens and middlemen, as vagrants and loiterers—not because these characteristics stem from laziness or lack of desire to work, but rather because these wretched people's sole concern is to obtain a crust of bread. They live in torment from day to day, not having the slightest means or opportunity to find gainful employment in productive work....These unfortunate families own nothing, live in filth and poverty, not knowing how or whether they will eat on the following day. Sheer necessity forces them to employ irregular means to provide themselves with the barest essentials of life...

In Berditshev, there are as yet no welfare laws concerning the poverty-stricken and unsanitary conditions of the Jews. Some 5,000 families, about 25,000 souls, live from day-to-day only on what the Lord provides. They live in extremely crowded conditions. It very often happens that several families occupy one or two rooms in a ruined hovel, so that at night there is no free space on the floor between the sleepers....<sup>2</sup>

In 1847, Honore de Balzac traveled through Poland and the Ukraine to visit his betrothed, Mme. Hanska, on her estate. His journey took him through Berditshev, the city which Mendele called "Glupsk":

Toward midday, I saw, rising before me, a height, upon which is perched the most illustrious city of Berditshev which, like its sister city Brody, belongs to the Radziwils. There, I saw, with renewed astonishment, houses dancing the polka — all of them leaning, some on their right haunches, some on their left, others with their heads thrown back; most of them falling apart, many of them smaller than our [Parisian] market stalls

and fit only as cattle pens. It is a spectacle so unexpected for a European, for a Parisian, that one must see it repeated in a number of cities before one gets used to it... One asks oneself, on seeing Berditshev, whether these houses, which three Parisian porters could carry away, have any occupants...<sup>3</sup>

Mendele, in a charming passage in *The Travels of Benjamin III*, conveys the pointlessness and hopelessness of the Jewish occupations in the Pale:

Ask a Jew of Tuneyadevke how he makes a living. His first reaction is to stand there paralyzed. The poor man is befuddled and doesn't know what to say. But soon he revives and begins to explain:

"Who, me? How I make a living? Me? *Et*, there is a God, I tell you here and now, who does not forsake any of his creatures. He has provided before and will probably provide some more, I tell you here and now."

"Still, what do you do? Do you at least have a trade or a craft?"

"Praise the Lord! I have, thank God, as you see here, a gift from His Blessed Name, an instrument, a musical voice, and I also recite the supplemental prayers during the Solemn Days. Occasionally, I am a *moyel*, and before Passover I knead dough for making *matses*—there isn't another kneader like me in the world, I tell you right here and now. Sometimes, I manage to make a match, I do. Also, this is between me and you, I have an interest in a tavern which can be milked a little. I have a goat which can be milked a lot, may the evil eye not harm her, and not far from here, I have a rich relative who can also, when times are bad, be milked a little. Now, aside from all these things, I tell you right here and now, God is a father and the children of Israel are both merciful and generous...<sup>4</sup>

Mendele Moykher-Sforim (literally, Mendele-the-Book-Peddler) is a pseudonym. He was born Sholem-Yankef Broyde<sup>5</sup> in Kapulye, a small town in the Province of Minsk. In his *Notes For My Biography*, he wrote:

My birth-date is nowhere recorded. Jews didn't pay attention to such things in those days, particularly in the small towns. But I have assumed that I was born in the year 1836, and my family determined December 20 to be my date of birth."

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<sup>5</sup>December 20, 1836, the date generally accepted as Mendele's birthdate is the date given here by Mendele according to the old Julian calendar in use in Russia at that time; according to the new calendar, the date is January 1, 1837, twelve days later. Contemporaries of Mendele's have said that he himself thought he might be seven or eight years older.

It was no accident that "Jews didn't pay attention to such things" during the reign of Nicholas I. In addition to other repressions, the Tsar experimented with various methods of Russifying and assimilating the Jews. He instituted severe conscription laws making ten Jews in every thousand liable for service in the army for thirty-one years, starting at the age of twelve. Jewish conscripts were transported thousands of miles from their native towns, far from any Jewish influence. Small wonder, then, that birth-dates of males were not recorded. The name would then not appear on any list, or, if the child were identified by the Jewish agents of *kabal*, his age could be falsified. Furthermore, it was not the custom among East-European Jews to take much note of birthdays. Birthdays were not celebrated as they were in the Christian world. (Among these Jews the date of death, on the other hand, was carefully noted so that the religious obligation to recite the yearly *kadish*, or prayer for the dead, could be fulfilled precisely on the anniversary of the date of death (*yortsayt*)). In Mendele's case, his lack of a birth record became a source of grief later in life, as we shall see.

Mendele's father, Khayim-Moyshe Broyde, a prominent and respected figure in Kapulye, was for many years the collector of the tax on kosher meat. There is a note of irony here.

The kosher-meat tax and the tax on salt were among the most oppressive levies on the tables of the Jewish poor. Mendele, with his keen sense of social justice, vehemently attacked the collectors of food taxes because of their impact on the life and health of the Jewish people. One of his best known works was *Di Takse* (*The Kosher Meat Tax*), a drama which dealt specifically with this aspect of Jewish life.

From available biographical material, however, his father was, despite his occupation, a kind and sensitive man, whose advice on all kinds of subjects was sought by the entire community. He served as crown rabbi<sup>6</sup> for the community without pay. He was also a fine Biblical scholar who wrote well in the stylized, flowery Hebrew current at the time. As he approached forty, his business affairs failed, and he died at the age of forty-one, leaving the family in poverty.

The thirteen year-old Mendele, the middle child of seven, left home to study at various Lithuanian *yesbives*, "lived in misery like the most learned of men...took meals at a different house each

day and experienced all the attendant humiliations."<sup>7</sup> After spending three years at *yesbives* in Timkevitsh, Slutsk, and Vilna, he returned to Kapulye when he was nearly nearly seventeen. Finding that his mother had married a widowed miller in Melniká, an isolated village near Kapulye, he stayed with a divorced sister in Kapulye. But he felt like a stranger in the town of his birth. He therefore jumped at his stepfather's invitation to come live at the mill. The village, with its woods and waterfall, was beautiful. In addition to tutoring his stepfather's children, Mendele spent many hours communing with nature. In the *Notes For My Biography*, he describes how he fell in love with nature here and "became betrothed to her for eternity."

Life at the mill became tedious, however, and he went back to the house of study in Kapulye to take up his religious studies again. At this time, Avreml the Limper, a well known tramp, returned to Kapulye from a lengthy journey through Volhynia and the south of Russia. He had a stock of wonderful tales about these regions and the good life of the poor Jews who, he maintained, lived more prosperously there than the wealthy ones in Kapulye, and ate braided *kbales*, even during the middle of the week. The tales fired the imagination of the seventeen-year-old Mendele, and he left with Avreml. They wandered through Lithuania and the southwestern portion of Russia—through Volhynia, Podolye and the Ukraine—sleeping in poorhouses or on the benches in houses of study. They begged their way across the Jewish Pale of Settlement<sup>8</sup> for the better part of a year. The unscrupulous Avreml used Mendele, and an aunt of Mendele's who was traveling with them, to beg for alms. When they arrived at Kamenets-Podolsk, Mendele, with the help of a friend who lived there, escaped from Avreml's clutches. His travels in the broken-down wagon drawn by a gaunt old mare became the model for Abramovitsh's character, Mendele, and his van of books and wares, drawn by his wise, perpetually hungry horse—particularly in the opening chapters of *The Little Man* and *Fisbke the Lame*. They also provided much of the material which Mendele used with such telling effect in his other novels and dramas.

He settled in Kamenets and was henceforth known as Sholem-Yankef Abramovitsh (son of *Abram*—the Russian version of *Abraham*) possibly naming himself after *Avreml* (the Yiddish

diminutive of *Abraham*). In the house of study, his knowledge of the Bible, the *gemore*, and Hebrew grammar created a stir. It was suggested that he meet the finest scholar and grammarian in Kamenets. This turned out to be the poet and *maskil*<sup>9</sup> Avrom-Ber Gottlober<sup>10</sup>, who was then a teacher at the local crown school for Jews. Gottlober encouraged Mendele to acquire secular knowledge and gave him the full use of his extensive library. With the help of Gottlober's daughters, Mendele applied himself to learning European languages and literatures, mathematics, science, and natural history. He also became acquainted with the works of the Russian critics Belinsky, Dobroliubov, and Pisarev. The notes he took were, at least until World War II, preserved in the Mendele Museum in Odessa. He became a teacher in the crown school when he was twenty, after passing the examination for that position.

The young scholar was an eligible bachelor and widely sought after. He married the daughter of a wealthy man who had some secular education. But within three years the marriage ended in divorce. Both his wife and his father-in-law showed great understanding for Mendele, and they parted as friends.

While working as a teacher in Kamenets, Mendele wrote a lengthy answer to a letter from one of his older brothers who was a *melamed* in a small town. His brother had complained about the misery of teaching. A friend of Mendele's found the first draft of his reply and sent it to Gottlober, who was then teaching in Staro-Konstantin. Gottlober forwarded it to the newspaper *Hamagid*<sup>11</sup> with a cover letter urging that the letter be printed not only in the original Hebrew, but also in Russian translation. Mendele's article, *A Letter on the Subject of Education*, created a stir among the readers of *Hamagid*, both because of its content and its Hebrew style. Y.H. Ravnitzky<sup>12</sup> wrote that it is impossible to appreciate its impact without being familiar with the trivial content and poor quality of writing in the first-year issues of *Hamagid*. Mendele's *Letter* was explosive, introducing, as it suddenly did, the thoughts "of a mature and developed person, who used fresh words, concisely and clearly, without convoluted flowery phrases, and introduced such new ideas as the need for a good teacher to understand the child's soul."<sup>13</sup>

A year later, in 1858, Mendele moved to Berditshev. There he married Pesye Levin, daughter of a prominent, well-to-do notary,

Zalmen Levin. His father-in-law undertook to support him, and Mendele plunged into his literary activities with renewed vigor.

Mendele's initial literary efforts were in Hebrew. By the time he was twenty-four, he had already gained a reputation as an innovative stylist. Hebrew was understood only by a select circle of intellectual *maskilim*, and it was the uneducated whom he wished to address. In his *Notes For My Biography*, Mendele described the dilemma facing a writer who wanted to publish in Yiddish:

I observed the life of my people and wished to provide them with stories in the Holy Tongue based on Jewish sources. Most of them, however, did not understand this language, because they spoke only Yiddish.... Our writers... were interested only in the Holy Tongue and not in the people. They looked down upon Yiddish. If one in ten ever remembered the 'accursed tongue' and dared to write something in it, he did it behind seven locked doors and hid it beneath his holy prayer shawl so that his shame might not be uncovered to damage his good name. How great then was my dilemma when I considered that if I were to embark on writing in the 'shameful' tongue, my honorable name would be besmirched!... My love for utility, however, overcame my hollow pride, and I decided: come what may, I will write in Yiddish, that cast-off daughter, and work for the people. A good friend of mine... stood by me, and together we persuaded the editor of *Hameylits*<sup>14</sup> to publish a newspaper in the people's language... Enthused, I wrote my first story, *Das Kleyne Mentshle*.<sup>15</sup>

The editor referred to was Alexander Tsederboym.<sup>16</sup> Mendele submitted the manuscript to him in 1864 under the pseudonym Senderl Moykher-Sforim, using the name of a real book-peddler who used to visit Kapulye from time-to-time. Since "Senderl" is the diminutive form of Alexander, Tsederboym was afraid that his audience might suspect he had written the piece himself, so he changed "Senderl" to "Mendele," without consulting the young Abramovitsh. And that is how the grandfather of modern Yiddish literature acquired his *nom-de-plume*.

Mendele was almost twenty-five when Alexander II (reigned 1855-1881) abolished serfdom in 1861, ushering in a brief period of hope for reform among Russian liberals and intellectuals. The hopeful atmosphere affected the Jewish intelligentsia also, particularly the *maskilim*, and Mendele among them, who were in touch with the outside world. In dedicating *Fishke the Lame* to his friend Menashe Margolius, Mendele wrote:

You and I, dear friend, both began our work in Yiddish literature in the springtime of Jewish life here in our land. From 1860 onward, a new life seemed to have begun for Jews.

The hope was that the pitiful economic situation of the Jews could be reversed by improving their backward social and cultural conditions. The great majority of Jews were still living in the middle ages. Beyond the limits of their town or village lurked all kinds of unknown terrors. Their daily lives were filled with fears of elves, goblins, evil spirits, demons, and ghosts. Superstition governed almost every act. Whatever learning a poor child received came from a rod-wielding *melamed*, who, as Mendele would later put it, died three times a day from hunger himself. The child repeated by rote from the *khumesb* (Pentateuch), learning to read, but rarely to understand what he read.

Like other *maskilim* of the time, Mendele believed that the way to improve the living conditions of the Jewish people lay in popularizing science and mathematics, in urging Jews to use the Russian language, to learn useful trades, and to wear modern clothes. To this end, he wrote articles on education and published attacks against *khasidism*, which (as a true *maskil*) he regarded as a benighting influence. To make it possible for Jews to have access to natural science, he published a Hebrew translation of a then popular text on biology<sup>17</sup> under the title *Toldos Hateve* (*Natural History*) in three volumes—Mammals, Birds, Reptiles and Amphibians in 1862, 1867, and 1872, respectively. He also translated a history of the Russian people into Hebrew, so that ordinary Jews could become acquainted with the history of the people among whom they lived; and he translated various prayers and religious texts into Yiddish so that ordinary Jews could appreciate their beauty.

But Mendele was too well aware of the social injustices within the Jewish community, of *kahal's* economic exploitation, of the repressive measures of the Tsarist government, to believe that the appalling economic conditions of Jewish life could be reversed solely by education. His awareness of these factors distinguished him from most other *maskilim*. A healthy realism was already apparent in his early works in Yiddish.

*Dos Kleyne Mentshele*, Mendele's first major work in Yiddish, is a confessional novel in which the protagonist describes his

climb from poverty to riches in a small Jewish town. It portrays the abuse of charitable contributions, the tax on kosher meat, the kidnapping of poor Jewish boys to serve in the army in lieu of rich ones, overcharging for medical services, graft, payoffs—all of which came out of the hides of the poor. *Di Takse*, subtitled *The Gang of Town Philanthropists*, is a drama which is even more outspoken, its cast of characters including various *kahal* officials, rich men, and their lackeys. But they were apparently too recognizable. The publication of the play caused such an uproar among the wealthy proprietors of Berditshev, that Mendele was forced to move, and he and his family resettled in Zhitomir. Even there, the long arm of the Berditshev *kahal* reached after him.

With the publication of *Di Klyatsbe* (*The Mare*) in 1873, he parted company with the *maskilim*, poking fun at their shortsighted belief that Jews would acquire basic human rights as soon as they became enlightened and educated. The mare, a talking horse, is a symbol of the Jewish people; her story is an allegory of Jewish history. This work introduces the then nascent feelings of national consciousness among Jews. Here is a passage in which the mare lectures Yisrolik, the well-intentioned member of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (a parody on the influential Society for the Promotion of Culture Among the Jews—an official organization of the *haskole* movement) who pities her and wants to help her get out of the ditch into which she has fallen:

I am the equal of others...of the same flesh and blood as any other...entitled to the same right to live. If someone commiserates with me, he implies that I am living on his merits. Thus he is privileged to live, while I am not! My very existence is due to him... I want to live on an equal footing with others—on my own merits, that is. Now, do you understand me, my righteous defender, my merciful master? As for your mercy and any possible advantage you may derive from me—I place no reliance on these possibilities... But if you were to treat me as you do others, fairly and squarely, we could have a friendly chat about all sorts of clever arts...<sup>18</sup>

In articles written in 1864 for *Hameylits* (*The Advocate*) and later published separately as *Eyn mishpat* (1867), Abramovitsh, according to Tsingberg's *A History of Jewish Literature* (Volume XII, p. 139ff) "comes forth...with a sharp critique and portrays the

*baskoie* literature in extremely dark colors." As Tsinberg puts it:

Mendele concludes that the *maskilim* also are "desirers of old things and maintainers of received things," that they still cling to the obsolete and remain faithful to the traditional forms. In their writings, too, the spirit of arid scholasticism and *pitpul* prevails in considerable measure. In the *baskoie* literature, Abramovitsch declares, the breath of modern life is not felt. It is not organically bound up with real needs.... A literature in which the echo of life is not felt is also incapable of affecting life.... Abramovitsch addresses the *maskilim*: "If you really wish to ameliorate the condition of your people, then throw away the old [threadbare] arguments about the barbarization and "superstition" of the people and request the government to grant us equal civic rights, to open for us the necessary sources of life. But demand it without any conditions, do not associate it with the question of education. (Note by Tsinberg: It is interesting that Abramovitsch here [disagrees with] his own teacher Gottlober, who, in fact, argued in the same columns of *Hameylits* that Jews must learn to speak Russian as quickly as possible: "And the language of our country will be fluent in the mouth of all the *maskilim*, until it becomes the language of the people, for only then will we succeed in ascending to the levels of the natives of the country and to inherit the good of the blessed land, like all its inhabitants.")

*Fishke der Krumer* (*Fishke the Lame*), first published in 1869, is a book about beggars and tramps. "It has been my lot to descend to the depths, to the cellars of our Jewish life. My stock in trade is rags and moldy wares. My dealings are with paupers and beggars, the poor wretches of life... the dregs of humanity," wrote Mendele in his introduction. As in the other works, he exposed the injustices within the Jewish community and their effect on the people:

Once a Jew has broken himself of the vile passion for eating, food ceases to be a matter of importance to him, and he can spend the rest of his life requiring virtually nothing. To this very day, in these modern times, many a Jew can be found who has only the vestige of a stomach—truly, the size of an olive pit. And there are great hopes that with the passing of time—if only the kosher-meat tax is retained and the activities of the charity workers and their brethren are not restrained—Jews will drift further and further away from eating, until among future generations there will be no trace left of a digestive tract at all, except for piles. Jews will then present a pretty picture to the eyes of the rest of the world.<sup>19</sup>

Mendele's beggars and tramps are a varied lot. Many are helpless in the face of forces far beyond their control. Others

attempt to manipulate people, including their brother beggars, in an effort to survive. But there is anger, too. Here is a speech by Faybushke, the red-headed thief in *Fishke*:

Why should the rich sit around like princes, doing nothing, while others work for them? Doesn't everything they own come from other people's toil, other people's tears and sweat? They think they're fine folks. They take care of themselves and want others to work. A rich man, the fatter he is and the bigger his belly the more honor and respect he gets. With us it's just the opposite. A healthy beggar has to be ashamed and hide like a thief. Otherwise people raise a hue and cry and want to know why such a healthy lout isn't working. It's time for a change....<sup>20</sup>

Despite the literary productivity of the years in Zhitomir, Mendele's life there was marked by privation. He had fled there in 1869 to escape the wrath of the *kahal* officials of Berditshev, who were infuriated by his too accurate descriptions in *Di Takse*. Tsvayfl<sup>21</sup> claimed that many of these individuals could not walk along the streets of Berditshev without being pointed at and called by the names of the characters in *Di Takse*. Even in Zhitomir, they made it difficult for him to find employment. Eventually, he obtained a certificate enabling him to teach at the crown school for Jews. But one of the characters in the drama, *Mendl der Geler* (*Mendl-the-Yellow-One*), whom Mendele had described as "a hatchet-man, a thug, who danced attendance upon the charity workers and roughed up whomever they ordered," would not rest until he had taken his revenge on Mendele. He found out that Mendele's birth had not been recorded in Kapulye and that he had changed his family name to Abramovitsch. Disclosure of this fact could have been ruinous for Mendele, a man with a government position as crown teacher, with a reputation among government officials as a fine pedagogue, a learned Jew — and a recognized writer. *Mendl der Geler*, realizing the implications of his discovery, blackmailed Mendele and extorted large sums of money from him. From 1877 to 1884, Mendele stopped writing. During this time Mendele told his friend J. L. Binshtok<sup>22</sup> that writing "it seems, has become impossible for me. My brain is filled with lead, and my heart has turned to stone."<sup>23</sup> Two close friends eventually rescued Mendele from *Mendl-the-Yellow-One* by finding a way to have Mendele listed in the Kapulye registry. Gradually his creative powers returned. Concerning Mendele's

last years in Zhitomir, the historian Dubnow<sup>24</sup> writes:

I cannot forget the description of the poverty that he experienced in the last few years before he moved to Odessa: "My expenses were large — a family of seven. The receipts from my books didn't even cover the rent. The publishers in Vilna and Warsaw cheated me. They reprinted *Di Takse*, *Di Klyatshe*, and *Dos Kleyne Mentshele* surreptitiously and sold each other the stereotypes of my books in secret. It came to such a pass that I wasn't sure how we would eat the next day. In those hard times, Baron Horace Günzberg,<sup>25</sup> who knew me in my youth in Kamenets, came to my aid. He heard about my difficulties from friends in St. Petersburg and began to send me a fixed sum of money each month — 100 roubles, if I remember correctly."<sup>26</sup>

In 1881, Mendele moved to Odessa, where he lived for the rest of his life (except for a two-year interruption in Geneva, where he fled following government-inspired pogroms in Odessa in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1905). In Odessa, he became the director of the large reformed *Talmud-Toyre*. There he wrote *Dos vintshfingerl* (*The Wishing Ring*), which was published serially between 1888 and 1905. It is an epic novel about the Jewish people in the Pale. Jewish life is portrayed in painstakingly realistic detail. Dovid Frishman<sup>27</sup> wrote that

if a flood were to destroy all that mankind had created, leaving this one book, we would be quite capable of using it to reconstruct the overall picture of Jewish life and Jewishness in the small towns of Russia during the first half of the 19th century... Not a detail is omitted, and, regarding his manner of writing—his descriptive powers have produced marvels again, even more so than in his previous works.<sup>28</sup>

The novel presents a social history of the period which cannot be obtained from any history book. Dubnow related that Mendele told him more than once: "I am an historian also, but of a different cut. When you will want to write a history of the nineteenth century, you will have to use my works to depict the life of those generations." The 1890's were years of political ferment in the Jewish communities of eastern Europe, particularly among the intelligentsia. Mendele, the social historian who knew on which side he stood when describing the past, remained unaligned in this active time, but not for lack of definite opinions nor for lack of sympathy for any of the announced programs. Dubnow writes:

He could not recognize any program as a necessity, or any system of principles as a proven solution. On social and political questions, he was by nature 'untamed.' He had moods, sympathies and antipathies, but no fixed principles, and his moods changed often as his personal, subjective perceptions changed, for example, in regard to this person or that representative of one party or another. He did not like the modern, clamorous political movements. The more adherents a movement had, the greater was his opportunity to see the negative or ridiculous aspects of individual adherents and the way ideals were distorted by individuals with little understanding. He, the artist who portrayed the way people lived, always proceeded from people to ideas, and not the reverse.<sup>29</sup>

Once, during a conversation in Dubnow's study, when Mendele was asked why he did not come out in support of those who were waging a struggle against the menace of assimilationism among Jewish youth, he flared up:

So I'm a bad Jew because I don't belong to the Nationalists! No, you are all Jews with labels: Nationalists, Zionists, Palestinians,<sup>30</sup> and I'm a plain Jew, but our entire people consists of such plain Jews.<sup>31</sup>

His non-alignment with any program or ideology may have enabled him to observe the weaknesses of each of them and depict them in his work of that period—the novels *Dos vintshfingerl*, *Shloyme Reb Khayim*'s; and the short stories *Tsurik Abeym* (*Back Home!*), *Di Alte Mayse* (*The Old Story*) *Shem un Yofes in a Vagon* (*Shem and Japhet on the Train*), *In a Shturem Tsayt* (*In a Time of Turmoil*), *Di Nesrofim* (*The Fire Victims*). The short stories deal with the turmoil in Jewish communities throughout the Pale after the persistent pogroms of the 1880's, following the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. These works depicted the aftermath of the pogrom period which, in the 1880's and 1890's, saw the dislocation of large numbers of Jews, the first waves of mass migration to America, the creation of Palestine-oriented societies, and of nationalistic and socialistic groupings.

In 1899, the first edition of *Shloyme Reb Khayim*'s, subtitled "A Picture of Jewish Life in Lithuania," appeared. This unfinished autobiographical novelette was followed by further autobiographical chapters, published in various magazines in 1912, 1913 and 1917. In these later works, Mendele continued to reveal his

mastery as portrayer of all aspects of the life of the Jewish people but, now a new element entered—a conscious desire to preserve for future generations the knowledge of how their predecessors lived:

Let children's children know in what kind of houses their *zeydes* lived and spent their years, together with their children, big and small, and married couples who also lived with them.<sup>32</sup>

Although he lived most of his life in the larger towns of Berditshev and Zhitomir, and in the city of Odessa, most of Mendele's works are concerned with life in the Jewish villages and hamlets of the rural areas in the Pale, where, according to the census of 1887, more than half of the Jewish population of the Russian empire lived.<sup>33</sup> He used the beauty of the forests and fields, the hills and the valleys, the rivers and lakes which surrounded the towns and villages, as a contrast to life in the towns proper. He never forgot his adolescent experience at his stepfather's mill, where he had "betrothed himself" to nature and had "made a covenant with the trees in the countryside, with the birds and fruits of the earth."<sup>34</sup>

Mendele's trees, flowers, sunbeams, shadows, birds appeared to be members of the human community with similar joys and sorrows.

It is hushed and quiet in the forest in the fall during the High Holidays, like in Kabtsansk [Poor Town] on the Sabbath, when folks are napping in the afternoon and the stillness casts a melancholic mood over the town. The trees are pensive, worried...the buzzing of the leaves is a bitter wailing, a sighing, a moaning of a loving mother who remains alone after her children have gone off in all directions...The nests are abandoned. The little birds have flown away...<sup>35</sup>

Mendele's romanticism was at least in part an outgrowth of his familiarity with European literature. Hebrew reviews that he wrote as a young man in the 1850's, when he was studying in Kamenets, show that he had become acquainted with the works of the major Russian, German, and English writers. Alexander Binshtok (1866-1937), son of J. L. Binshtok, described Mendele's attitude toward certain classical English writers: "Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* was a favorite book of his. And in this book, the chapters

he liked best were those dealing with Gulliver's stay among the Houyhnhnms. He also had a very high regard for Thackeray, Dickens, and their predecessor, Fielding. I became acquainted with Fielding's *Tom Jones* at Mendele's recommendation..."<sup>36</sup>

Writing did not come easily to Mendele. In this respect, he differed markedly from Sholem Aleykhem. According to Dubnow, the latter could write anywhere—on a train, in a street car, in the midst of noise and commotion—while Mendele would isolate himself in the furthest room and sit for hours rapt in thought before he wrote a single line. Dubnow relates an anecdote in which Mendele compared his manner of writing with that of Sholem Aleykhem's:

A woman often takes several days to deliver a child. The whole household is a quiver. Everyone walks on tip-toes. People whisper to each other, waiting night and day until the good news is announced that, with luck, a child has been born. At the same time, a little hen sits for while in a corner, squeezes a bit, and there it is—an egg...<sup>37</sup>

Mendele was a severe critic of his own work. He continually revised and polished what he had written, mercilessly scratching out every inappropriate expression. He rewrote his works for each new edition, sometimes to such an extent that the later version bore little resemblance to the earlier one. This was particularly true when he translated works into Yiddish that he had originally written in Hebrew, or vice versa.

Mendele wanted the people to read and understand him. He used the language of the people, but it was far more than an ethnographic reproduction of their speech. He drew his inspiration from their language, from its sentence structure, its idiom, its colorful rhetoric. His respect for it was boundless. He took a language which, despite a literary and philological history which has been traced back to the twelfth century, was referred to as a "kitchen tongue" and a "jargon," and gave it literary status. He performed for Yiddish that service which Chaucer performed for English, Rabelais for French, and Dante for Italian. Much of the Yiddish literary heritage before the 1860's, when Mendele started writing, consisted of romances and minnesongs translated from the medieval French, German, and Italian troubadours; religious tales of a moralizing and didactic nature, *tkhines*—

prayerbooks for women with lachrymose commentaries on contemporary life; short novelettes of a sensational and shallow type; and *khasidic* tales. The written language was awkward, Germanized, and bore little resemblance to the language in daily use. The condition of written Hebrew was not very different and is graphically described by Mendele in the *Notes For My Biography*. Mendele's accomplishments in raising the level of both languages and literatures is summarized succinctly by Y. H. Ravnitzky:

He is not only the creator of one literature, but of two—and simultaneously. This is such a rare phenomenon that it has no equal among other world literatures. Both in Hebrew and in Yiddish, Mendele had to hack out new pathways alone...Lucky were "the grandchildren"...Sholem Aleykhem in Yiddish and Bialik in Hebrew prose, that they came later...and had such an excellent model...<sup>38</sup>

In the summer of 1909, Mendele undertook a tour of four large Jewish cities in the Russian Empire. Dovid Frishman, who accompanied him, described the impact of the tour on the Jewish population:

His trip was, in the fullest sense of the word, a triumphal journey...The triumphal arch extended from Vilna to Bialystok, from Bialystok to Warsaw, Warsaw to Lodz. No other writer, let alone a Jewish writer, ever had the honor of such a journey...Thousands of people waited at each station; thousands pushed and shoved to get close to him and were counted fortunate if they shook his hand or saw his face...In Lodz, tens of thousands of people gathered in the street in front of the hotel where Abramovish was staying. <sup>39</sup>

Mendele was astounded by the reception given him in each of the cities. He continued to marvel at the people's enthusiasm and warmth: "Now I begin to believe that my work was not in vain. Can you imagine? Porters, plain street-porters, came to greet me!" <sup>40</sup>

A year later, in 1910, preparations were under way to celebrate his 75th birthday. Y.L. Perets wrote an article in honor of the occasion and assessed Mendele's role as the architect of Yiddish literature:

Not only is he the oldest of our living writers, but he is also, and this is the heart of the matter, the first. A literature was being built, and it was he who laid the cornerstone. He was the first, after a brief period of side experiments, to write unselfishly, to create pure cultural values... And he was the first who did not consider his work to be a stepping stone from which "to lead the mare [*di klyatsbe*] to pasture in greener fields."

He was the first to love and respect his artistic medium, the Yiddish language, and he developed it and kept it pure and clean—not Germanized, not Russified, not even Europeanized... and was thus the first to create a Yiddish style...

He was the first who said to his generation of *maskitim*: "You speak of reform, do you, and of enlightenment? The people need bread!" And the first who saw and depicted the officials of *kabal* in their true aspect....<sup>41</sup>

In the latter half of 1915, Mendele suffered a stroke which paralyzed the left side of his body. He recovered to some degree during the next year and a half. The February Revolution of 1917, which overthrew the Tsarist government, was a source of enthusiasm for the old fighter for Jewish rights. He sent a message of greeting to the Conference of Jewish Artists of Russia which took place in St. Vladimir's Hall of Kiev University on August 29, 1917:

Gentlemen! Need I tell you how sad it is, what a heartache it is, for parents not to be present at the festivities of their children, be it because of sickness, for example, or for lack of funds, and to have to stay at a distance, like strangers, while their friends and relatives gather from near and far to celebrate together?... If God will grant me health and life, I will come to visit you... and bring you new books...<sup>42</sup>

But this hope was laid low by a second stroke which took away his power of speech. Mendele died in Odessa on November 25, 1917.<sup>43</sup>

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