

Dalia Wolfson

03/10: Mapping Jewish Ukraine: A Shpatsir with Sholem Aleichem

1. Mazapevka (Pereyaslav)

Rabinovitch, Sholem. *The Great Fair*. Trans. Tamara Kahana. (New York: Noonday Press, 1955)

“If the city seemed empty and dark at night, in the morning it shone and glittered and delighted the young villagers. They were delighted by everything. Never had they seen such long broad streets, flanked by wooden sidewalks, such housetops of tin, such windows with red, green and blue shutters, and brick shops with iron doors. The marketplaces, churches, synagogues, even the people—everyone and everything seemed so big, lovely, clean and festive!” (120)

2. Kasrilevke (Voronkiv)

Rabinovitch, Sholem. “The Town of the Little People.” Trans. Julius and Frances Butwin in *The Old Country*, 1946.

The town of the little people into which I shall now take you, dear reader, is exactly in the middle of that blessed Pale into which Jews have been packed as closely as herring in a barrel and told to increase and multiply. The name of the town is Kasrilevka. How did this name originate? I'll tell you: Among us Jews poverty has many faces and many aspects. A poor man is an unlucky man, he is a pauper, a beggar, a schnorrer, a starveling, a tramp, or a plain failure. A different tone is used in speaking of each one, but all these names express human wretchedness. However, there is still another name—kasril, or kasrilik. That name is spoken in a different tone altogether, almost a bragging tone. For instance, “Oh, am I ever a kasrilik!” A kasrilik is not just an ordinary pauper, a failure in life. On the contrary, he is a man who has not allowed poverty to degrade him. He laughs at it. He is poor, but cheerful.

...

That's how they all are, these little people. None of them are gloomy, none of them are worried little men of affairs, but on the contrary they are known everywhere as jesters, story-tellers, a cheerful, light-hearted breed of men. Poor but cheerful. It is hard to say what makes them so happy. Nothing—just sheer joy of living. Living? If you ask them, “How do you live?” they will answer, with a shrug and a laugh. “How do we live? Who knows? We live!” A remarkable

thing-whenever you meet them they are scurrying like rabbits, this one here, that one there. They never have time to stop. "What are you hurrying for?" "What am I hurrying for? Well, it's like this. If we hurry we think we might run into something-earn a few pennies-provide for the Sabbath."

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But it is of the old cemetery that the people of Kasrilevka are especially proud. This old cemetery, though it is overgrown with grass and with bushes and has practically no upright headstones, they still value as they might a treasure, a rare gem, a piece of wealth, and guard it like the apple of their eye. For this is not only the place where their ancestors lie, rabbis, men of piety, learned ones, scholars and famous people, including the dead from the ancient massacres of Chmelnitski's time-but also the only piece of land of which they are the masters, the only bit of earth they own where a blade of grass can sprout and a tree can grow and the air is fresh and one can breathe freely.

3. Odessa

Rabinovitch, Sholem. *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl and Motl, the Cantor's Son*. Trans. Hillel Halkin. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

FROM MENAKHEM-MENDL IN ODESSA TO HIS WIFE SHEYNE-SHEYNDL
IN KASRILEVKE

To my wise, esteemed, & virtuous wife Sheyne-Sheyndl, may you have a long life!

Firstly, rest assured that I am, praise God, in the best of health. God grant that we hear from each other only good and pleasing news, amen!

Secondly, words fail me in describing the grandeur and beauty of the city of Odessa, the fine character of its inhabitants, and the wonderful opportunities that exist here. Just imagine: I take my walking stick and venture out on Greek Street, as the place where Jews do business is called, and there are twenty thousand different things to deal in. If I want wheat, there's wheat. If I feel like wool, there's wool. If I'm in the mood for bran, there's bran. Flour, salt, feathers, raisins, jute, herring — name it and you have it in Odessa. I sounded out several possibilities, none of which were my cup of tea, and shopped along Greek Street until I hit on just the right thing. In a word, I'm dealing in Londons and not doing badly!I tell you, my dearest, the streets of Odessa are paved with gold! I don't regret for a moment having come here. But what am I doing in Odessa, you ask, when I was on my way to Kishinev? It seems God wanted to deal me in. Listen to what He does for a man. (3)

...

SHEYNE-SHEYNDL TO MENACHEM-MENDL

“Second, I’m having trouble with my teeth. I wish Odessa and its market had my toothache! It’s killing me. So are the children — and his lordship couldn’t care less. He lives in Odessa like God, buys seventeen pairs of shorts, and bathes in the sea to music! What more could a body want? Well, you may go around in short pants and half-shaven, but my mother would say you’ve outgrown your britches.” (9)

4. Yekhupetz (Kyiv)

Rabinovitch, Sholem. *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl and Motl, the Cantor's Son*. Trans. Hillel Halkin. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

“Secondly, I’m through with investing. You can have it! It’s no occupation for a Jew. It’s made me old and gray before my time. I could write a book on all I’ve been through. Yehupetz is in ruins. The market has gone bust. There isn’t a ray of hope. The carnage, I’m sorry to say, is worse than it was in Odessa. Everyone is in the soup. Everyone is bankrupt and so am I. Filing for bankruptcy is the latest fashion.” (38)

“You know I’m not supposed to be in Yehupetz. Well, now and then the police show up at our boarding house to search for bad apples. We’re always tipped off in advance by our landlady and away we melt like salt in water—some of us to Boiberik, some to Demyevka, and some to Slobodka.” (49)

The upshot is that I’m in tight with all the agents and have acquired quite a reputation. I sit with them in Semadenni’s at marble tables like Fanconi’s and drink coffee and eat French pastries. That’s how it works here, too: if you don’t order, you’re out in the street. Semadenni’s is the real Yehupetz Exchange. All the traders in town gather there. It’s as loud and noisy as (you should pardon the comparison) a synagogue. The entire place shouts, laughs, talks with its hands. (53)

5. Boiberik, Anatevka

Rabinovitch, Sholem. *Tevye the Dairyman*. Trans. Hillel Halkin. New York: Schocken Books, 1987.

In “Tevye Strikes it Rich”

“First we bought a pair of horses and quickly sold them for a windfall; then with the profit we opened a grocery store in Boiberik, sold out all the stock, and

opened a dry-goods store; after that we invested in some woodland, found a buyer for it, and came out a few more rubles ahead; next we bought up the tax concession for Anatevka, farmed it out again, and with the income started a bank... But why buy a horse, I ask you, when we could just as well have bought a cow? We live close to Boiberik, which is where all the rich Yehupetz Jews come to spend the summer in their dachas. And you know those Yehupetz Jews—nothing's too good for them" (19)

In "Tevye Blows a Small Fortune

"I talked about everything under the sun and he talked about Yehupetz and Odessa, where he had been, as they say, through thick and thin, now on top of the world and now in the pits, one day a prince, and the next a pauper, and then a prince again, and once more without a shirt on his back." (25)

In "Shprintze"

"God wanted to do us Jews a favor and so He sent us a new catastrophe, a Constantitution [1906 Constitution]. Believe me, that's all we needed! You should see what a panic the rich Yehupetz Jews are in, how they're all running abroad—that is, to the baths in Germany to take care of their nerves... and what with everyone leaving Yehupetz, you'd think, wouldn't you, that all the fresh air and green trees and dachas of Boiberik couldn't keep it from going to the dogs.... Have we had a summer season here! They've come flocking to Boiberik from Odessa, from Rostov, from Yekaterinoslav, from Mogilev, from Kishinev—thousands of Jews, filthy with money!... But why, you ask, are they all running here? For the same reason, I tell you, that we're all running there! It's an old Jewish custom to pick up and go elsewhere at the mention of a pogrom." (83)

6. Zingman, Kalman. *In Edenia, the City of the Future*. 1918. Part I of III, Jordan Finkin's translation on *In geveb*: <https://ingeveb.org/texts-and-translations/edenia-part-1>