

YOUNG WORKERS AND A SHALOM  
ALECHEM EVENING

I.

I TOOK FROYKA'S ADVICE AND WENT TO THE CLUB ON Tverskaya Street to look for the Jewish youth of Moscow. I found them; in fact I heard them even before I entered the clubroom. The soprano voice of a woman was scolding someone:

"You don't study enough. You have accomplished a little, but you are still too ignorant. You don't develop any further . . ."

With difficulty I managed to elbow my way inside. A typical Russian workers' club: the room was dense with smoke and crowded to capacity with young men and women debating heatedly. Placards on the walls, depicting a healthy, tanned Jewish peasant, sitting on a tractor amidst a field of rye—Jews on land—announced the coming of the Ozet (Society for Promotion of Agriculture among Jews) lottery.

In a corner, a group of young men and women surrounded a girl who was scolding a man of about thirty-five. Her black braids, extending beneath a red kerchief, swayed rhythmically to and fro.

"Don't try to rest on your laurels, comrade Zoloff.

You have fought in the civil war? Good, history will acknowledge it. But you cannot stop in the middle. Now is the time for serious work and study."

The man made a feeble attempt to defend himself:

"But comrade Sonia, I haven't enough time to study. There is the Ozet lottery taking place now. I am up to my neck in work. Besides, I can't study at home. It is too crowded."

Zoloff's quiet words added fuel to Sonia's argument. Her round, gray eyes flashed with anger.

"So," she cried, "so comrade Hyman Zoloff, you have pity on yourself. You are beginning to complain. No place to study! And what do you think the libraries are for?"

"I know that there are libraries," replied Zoloff calmly. "There are also technical schools and universities; how does that solve my problem?"

"Yes," said Sonia, apparently not listening to his reply, "that's right, you must also prepare yourself for the university."

Zoloff raised his hand in despair:

"I must? Do you think I shouldn't like to? I would also like to read the classics. But with the little time I have, isn't it more important to read something by Lenin?"

"You are a defeatist! You are a defeatist, comrade Zoloff," Sonia cried in disgust. She turned about abruptly and left. In a moment I heard her melodious voice emerging from another corner of the room.

Zoloff remained alone. He sat like a scolded child. Only now did he become aware of my presence. It

seemed as though he were ashamed of himself. In his desire to soften the impression I may have received, he began to converse with me:

"You are a foreigner, comrade?"

"Yes."

"You probably did not understand the nature of our argument?"

"Not quite."

"You see, comrade, Sonia is a little hot-headed, but she is a realist. I, on the other hand, am a hopeless romantic. Now is the time for constructive work, but I still dream of the romantic and glorious past of the civil war—the past of heroic deeds and struggles."

He leaned towards me as he continued:

"You may not know, but fifteen years ago we could not have assembled so freely here in Moscow. Jews were not allowed. But now? Now it is different. It didn't come so easy. We Jews, too, had to battle for our rights. We, too, did our bit for the Russian Revolution. I myself spent four years on the front as a guerilla fighter."

Zoloff paused. It was obvious that he was not a man of words. Awkwardly, he dug with clumsy calloused fingers into his pocket, produced a handkerchief that once was white and began to wipe off the drops of perspiration from his enormously wide forehead and hooked nose. A short man, with stooped shoulders, he resembled more a Galician *yeshiva bochur* than a man of war, let alone a guerilla fighter.

Apparently he guessed my doubts.

"You know," he said after a moment of meditation, "there is a story by Shalom Alechem about a Jew who begot a son. Like every good Jew he at once ran to the rabbi for advice: 'Rabbi,' he cried, 'my wife begot a son unto me.' 'Blessed be the Lord,' replied the Rabbi. 'But Rabbi,' cried the Jew, 'I don't know how to register him. Should I register him that he was born a year earlier, he will have to go earlier to the military service. Should I register him that he was born a year later, he will have to go later to the military service. . . .' 'My son,' said the Rabbi, 'perhaps you will register him his right age?' 'Be blessed, Rabbi,' cried the Jew, 'I never thought of that.'

"You will be surprised if I tell you that my life as a soldier began with such a Shalom Alechem incident."

There, amidst the loud laughter, and gay chatter of the new race of Jews, Hyman Zoloff related to me his story:

"My father was a chassid from Galicia. When the World War began, Jews were driven forcibly from that region because they were accused of being German spies. We moved to Skvira, a little town near Kiev where my father opened a herring store.

"He was a pious Jew, my father, and, I suppose, a devout chassid. Like the majority of the Galician Jews he hated everything that was Russian. He hated the Tsar, the peasants, and even the Russian Jews. But his greatest fear of all was the thought that I and my brother might some day be drafted

into the Russian army. 'Over my dead body,' he kept on repeating, 'will my sons serve the Russian Tsar.' It never occurred to him that I was still too young to be conscripted, and my brother, because of his illness, was exempt from military service.

"Like the Jew in Shalom Alechem's story, he ran about town, forever seeking advice. Soon professional fixers appeared on the scene. They pumped my father for money and began fixing up our ages with the result that both of us were drafted into the army and sent to the front.

"A month after my brother entered the trenches he died. This killed my father. I remained alive, perhaps to enjoy a better life. Three years I spent in the trenches. I returned to Skvira on the eve of the October Revolution. Those were the mad days in the Ukraine. The country was plunged in an orgy of pogroms and persecutions.

"And my mother? I had left her a gay, blossoming woman; now she was only a shadow of her past, old and gray as a dove.

"At first I thought to remain with her. I could not, however, sit quietly while the country was crying for help. I joined Kotowski's detachment of guerilla fighters. We licked the enemies of the Soviet Republic. The rest, if you care to, you can read in a history of the Russian Revolution.

"What happened to my mother, I don't know. There are rumors that because of me she was tortured slowly to death by Petlura's soldiers."

Zoloff unbuttoned his coat. On his chest I saw the

order of the Red Banner, an order bestowed only on Soviet heroes. . .

2.

Together with Sonia I went to the Shalom Alechem evening that was being held at Moscow's famous Hall of Trade Unions.

"Go, comrade," she insisted. "You will discover an entirely new Shalom Alechem—Shalom Alechem rejuvenated."

Frankly, I was surprised. A Shalom Alechem evening in Moscow! What could sound stranger than that? First, however, I ought to say a few words about my companion.

I saw Sonia for the first time while visiting the Museum of the Revolution. Holding a long pointer in her hand, she was explaining to a group of peasants in tarred boots the history of the Revolution. The peasants, who had just arrived as a "cultural delegation" from the remote Ural region, listened to Sonia with amazement. Pointing to the portraits of well known Russian and European revolutionists as well as to numerous documents hanging on the walls, the girl recreated in colorful strokes the history of the great Russian upheaval. The peasants scratched their heads while Sonia poured out her enthusiasm.

The peasants departed. A group of workers from Kharkov, wearing caps and leather jackets, took their place. And, O wonder, Sonia repeated her story again. Her melodious voice continued the same

story—repeated probably for the twentieth time that day—with the same energy and enthusiasm.

After the groups departed, in reply to one of my questions Sonia repeated once more her short harangue.

On the way to the Hall of Trade Unions, my companion virtually bombarded me with questions. She wanted to know all about the West, particularly America. It seemed that she had seen an American film with one Boostér Keetón—probably Buster Keaton—and she didn't like it at all. The gaudy and gorgeous sex-appeal gowns of the girls in this film revolted her. There were numerous other things about the "bourgeois" world that Sonia disliked. It must, however, be said in justice to my companion that like the majority of the present-day Soviet youth, she was not concerned with petty details of life. This girl did not worry day and night because her neighbor wore a nicer dress than she. Indeed, it was the complicated problems of life, or as she put it, "the struggle for socialism," that interested her primarily.

Because of Sonia's thirst for information, we were late in reaching the Hall of Trade Unions. When we entered, the auditorium was already crowded to capacity. Here another surprise awaited me. I was certain that the tremendous auditorium would be half filled, and at that with Jews only. After all, my Shalom Alechem was the poet of a crumbling ghetto. Jewish life in present-day Russia is the very antithesis of that. True, Shalom Alechem has long since

captured a place in the heart of every Jew. Unlike, however, other great satirists, he never ventured far outside the Jewish pale. "But the world," as Sonia explained to me, "went topsy turvy." The auditorium was packed, and Russians, Ukrainians, Tartars and Caucasians intermingled with the Jews.

For good or bad, old values have acquired a new meaning in Revolutionary Russia. The Shalom Alechem I knew, the Shalom Alechem of the ghetto, suddenly, on the stage of the Hall of Trade Unions, emerged as prophet not only of a crumbling order, but also of a new life.

An actor of the Moscow Art Theatre was the first to appear. He read in Russian selections from *Tevye Der Milchiker*. How strange the naïvely-philosophical reflection of Tevye seemed. It was, however, Michoelis (director of the Gosset—Jewish State Theatre), beloved Yiddish actor of Soviet Russia, who threw the audience into a frenzy of enthusiasm. He read *Dos Messerl* (The Penknife) in Yiddish. Half of the audience did not understand Yiddish. They could only follow his motions and facial expressions. And yet, I saw Ukrainians and Tartars, Russians and Jews applaud violently.

On the other hand, and this is perhaps what the Communists call the dialectics of life, I heard Soviet Yiddish writers who were sitting next to me, chagrined, murmur contemptuously:

"Idiots, whom are they applauding, the glorifier of the lumpen-proletariat, the poet of bearded Jews . . ."

But the audience, particularly the representatives of the Jewish youth, felt differently about it. To them, as the well known critic Nussino pointed out, Shalom Alechem depicted the clash of the patriarchal village order with the capitalist city, thus paving the way for a new order.

Indeed, it was a new Shalom Alechem that resounded from the stage of the Hall of Trade Unions. That day, it seemed to me, perhaps for the first time, he took his place alongside of Mark Twain, Gogol, and other great humorists and satirists of the world.

Time and again Michoelis was recalled to the stage. Sonia was triumphant:

"I told you," she cried, "I told you . . . We have injected new life into an old body! We are creating something new . . ."