CLASSIC YIDDISH FICTION

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Sarah Blacher Cohen, Editor

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Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz

KEN FRIEDEN

Cover: Photograph of four Yiddish and Hebrew writers in Geneva, 1907, courtesy of Dvir Publishing Company. From left to right: S. Y. Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, M. Ben-Ami, and H. N. Bialik.

Maps by Martin Gilbert

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PREFACE

Two or three generations ago, Yiddish was the primary language of the Jews in Eastern Europe and America. Today, following the Nazi genocide—and after half a century of vigorous assimilation—Yiddish is sinking into oblivion. By providing a bridge to the lost continent of Yiddish literature, this book resists a deepening estrangement from European traditions. The return to Ashkenazic origins also extends to broader horizons, since the development of Yiddish culture in Europe and America parallels the history of other ethnic traditions.

Yiddish writing in the late nineteenth century may be compared to postmodern architecture in the late twentieth century, because both Yiddish fiction and postmodern architecture make parody a dominant mode. Postmodern parody appropriates disparate styles and traditions while retaining ironic, critical distance. Some postmodern architects, for example, juxtapose Egyptian or Greek columns, Romanesque arches, and Gothic buttresses. By evoking precedents, postmodernism deliberately counters the ahistorical aesthetics of modern art. For entirely different reasons, classic Yiddish fiction relies heavily on parody and creates a patchwork of styles.

Few American readers understand that the Nobel-Prize winning stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer are only the tip of the iceberg; despite its remarkable accomplishments, Yiddish literature has never received the recognition it deserves. The present book remedies this neglect by interpreting the best Yiddish fiction of Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Isaac Leybush Peretz.

Yiddish fiction uses the distinct forms represented by oral-style narrative, satire, and parody. At one extreme, oral monologues assume realistic conventions and appear to transcribe the colloquial speech of fictional characters; at the other extreme, parodies call attention to their fictionality by setting themselves in relation to prior literary models. Satires bring social criticism to bear on the reader's world. Given the character of Yiddish culture, orality was a guiding feature of nineteenth-century Yiddish fiction. This rhetoric of the spoken word differed from the predominant modes of modern Hebrew writing, which initially had only textual and liturgical exemplars.

As a result of their successive exiles, Jews neither integrated fully into European society nor remained completely rooted in origins; Yiddish literature expressed this double life by creating personae, fictional masks through which narrators speak. Yiddish authors frequently resorted to pseudonyms, which reflected their sense that they could not speak directly. Y. Y. Trunk shrewdly observed that as Jews "we do not appear in history as we are; we appear in disguise. Like the Jewish God, the Jewish people acts behind a cloud. . . . Who knows the true Jewish countenance? It appears like that of an actor, behind a mask." Much Yiddish writing speaks ironically, behind a mask.

While nineteenth-century Western European fiction typically revolves around heroic characters and their exploits, Yiddish writers employ irony, satire, and parody. Classic Yiddish authors seldom reveal the creation of a positive, new identity, but instead expose foibles that stand in the way. Often using irony, their satires of social norms go hand in hand with parodies of literary forms. Parody, in particular, was integral to the rise of Yiddish fiction. As latecomers to modern literature, Yiddish writers were obliged to rework prior traditions, from the Bible and rabbinic commentaries to contemporary Russian narrative. Unable to rely solely on the resources of ancient Hebrew Scripture or popular Yiddish storytelling, Yiddish writers also parodied—appropriated, incorporated, and modified—diverse elements from European novels and stories. For instance, both Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem wrote parodic versions of Cervantes' *Don Quixote,* set in a Jewish milieu. Twentieth-century British literature refers to centuries of writing in English; under the weight of past canons, implicit and explicit quotations become the general rule. In Yiddish literature, however, antecedent traditions could appear only in translation. Hebrew and Slavic words were embedded and altered in Yiddish, while biblical and talmudic quotations were embellished and revised.

Leaders of the nineteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment, following the program set by Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86) in Berlin, often shunned Yiddish or regarded it primarily as a means to educate the uneducated. This approach implied a "suicidal principle": as soon as the masses became sufficiently enlightened to speak French, German, Russian, and English, they and their benefactors would abandon Yiddish. Today, in light of prevailing igno-

rance of Yiddish culture, the time has come to reeducate the educated.

Scholars and other enthusiasts are contributing to a revival of interest in Yiddish. Many American universities offer courses on Yiddish language and literature, and intensive summer programs are sponsored by the YIVO (*Yidisher visnshaftlekher institut*) Institute for Jewish Research, by the Oxford Institute for Yiddish Studies, and by the Rothberg School at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Libraries around the world are building Yiddish collections, assisted by the National Yiddish Book Center. The Museum of Modern Art and the National Center for Jewish Film recently sponsored a retrospective of Yiddish cinema. Schocken Books has been issuing fresh translations in a series called "The Library of Yiddish Classics." The process of restoration and revival also has its pitfalls, fully evinced by popular books and films that appeal to nostalgic misconceptions of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Yiddish literature need not serve a romanticized search for Jewish culture; in fact, Yiddish authors repeatedly criticized provincial life in the *shtetl*, attacking self-destructive practices and sweeping aside problematic identifications. Returning to classic Yiddish fiction, this study examines the pivotal role of satire and parody in social commentaries on Eastern European Jewish life.

Among the popular notions concerning Yiddish literature, one of the most pernicious is the idea that Yiddish writers were primitive artists who had little contact with European writing at large. Jewish culture has always benefited from its contact with other cultures, and Judaic literature is typical in this regard. I have indicated some of the debts Yiddish fiction owes to English, French, German, Russian, Polish, and Spanish fiction. To avoid provincialism, scholars of Hebrew and Yiddish writing must be aware of historical connections to world literature and contemporary methods of literary criticism.

Much more remains to be done to render the Yiddish tradition accessible to English-speaking readers, since most of the existing scholarship is in Yiddish and Hebrew. Moreover, few Yiddish critics in any language have employed the techniques of twentieth-century literary studies. Much of the best Yiddish criticism has been produced by scholars at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (in Vilna from 1925 to 1940 and in New York from 1940 to the present), by Soviet critics (especially in the 1920s and 1930s),

and by Israeli academics (mainly in Jerusalem since the 1950s). Readers who desire a general introduction to the Yiddish language, which is beyond the scope of this book, may consult the reference works listed in the bibliography.

My readings draw eclectically from several methodologies. Taking a developmental approach to each author's work and to the relationships between them, I have concentrated on their early fiction. I emphasize the literary qualities of this tradition, and even where I sketch the biographies of the three major authors, I view their pertinent autobiographical writings as literary expressions. My goal is not to separate these authors, but to show the connections between them. Chronology is less determinative than are literary associations. Although Peretz was born before Sholem Aleichem, this study proceeds from Abramovitsh to Sholem Aleichem because this was the major line of influence in nineteenth-century Yiddish fiction. Peretz, in contrast, led a new group of writers into the twentieth century.

tance at several stages. I am especially indebted to Dan Miron for his oral and written guidance. His book *A Traveler Disguised,* the outstanding study of Abramovitsh's fiction, concludes: "This is the beginning of a new story. The story of the 'being' Sholem Aleichem, its development, its mode, or rather modes, of literary existence, its kinship with Mendele, and its points of departure from him—all this calls for a separate analysis and might be the subject of a sequel. Then there remains to chart the progress of the dramatic personae in modernistic Yiddish fiction. . . . Our present study must, however, end here." I have continued the story of Yiddish fiction where Miron leaves off.

Transliterations follow the YIVO guidelines, except in the case of names that have attained currency in another form. For the sake of consistency, I maintain the familiar spellings of the classic Yiddish authors' names throughout. When they occur in transcriptions of Yiddish or Hebrew titles, I have written Mendele Moykher Sforim (not Mendele Mocher Sfarim), Sholem Aleichem (instead of Sholem-Aleykhem or Shalom Aleichem), and I. L. Peretz (not Y. L. Perets). Phrases in Hebrew texts have been rendered by means of a straightforward system of transliteration based on current pronunciation. Less familiar Eastern European place names are spelled in accordance with Yiddish pronunciation, followed by other prominent spellings in parentheses. Chester Cohen's *Shtetl Finder* has been a helpful resource in this connection.

Much of Yiddish literature remains a closed book to today's readers; I have referred to available translations in my footnotes. An extensive list of classic Yiddish fiction in English may be found in the bibliography. Nevertheless, there is no substitute for the original works, and I have newly translated all of the passages that are discussed here. Often translation is a first interpretive gesture and an essential part of understanding. Because relatively few English translations are available—except in the case of Sholem Aleichem—one goal is simply to provide an overview of what is inaccessible to English readers. Ideally, this will inspire more people to read and translate Yiddish texts that would otherwise remain unknown.

Introduction

Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem (Rabinovitsh), and
Isaac Leybush Peretz actively contributed to the invention of mod-
ern Jewish identity, as their satires reflected and provoked transfor-
mations of the Jewish experience. Between 1864 and 1916, Yid-
dish fiction traversed far-flung pathways of Jewish life and literary
development. The three classic authors do not possess independent
voices; their work resonates together in moments of harmony and
dissonance.

S. Y. Abramovitsh (1836–1917) founded modern Yiddish
writing, and his most important creation was Mendele Moykher
Sforim—Mendele the Bookseller. The fictional Mendele became
so popular that readers have often referred to the author under the
name of his literary persona. When Abramovitsh invented this
fictional personality in 1864, he generated an effective mouthpiece
for the dissemination of his tales. Unlike the secularly educated
Abramovitsh, Mendele has the narrower perspective of a traditionally
versed Jewish man. Mendele's exposure to Western European let-
ters is sporadic; his circle of acquaintances reaches only as far as
the occasional German-Jew who has wandered into Poland and the
Ukraine. Abramovitsh conceals his guiding intelligence behind the
less obviously sophisticated Mendele.

Satire and parody gain prominence in Abramovitsh's Yiddish
novels after 1869. Although Abramovitsh continues to employ the
Mendele mask, during this phase he sets aside much of Mendele's
earlier naiveté and his satires condemn corrupt religious and politi-
cal institutions. As a consequence of the 1881 pogroms, however,
Abramovitsh adopts a gentler tone in his revisions of the Yiddish
novels and in his Hebrew stories of the 1890s.

Sholem Rabinovitsh (1859–1916), commonly known by his
pseudonym Sholem Aleichem, was a self-appointed heir to Abra-
movitsh—whom he dubbed the "grandfather" of Yiddish litera-
ture. Sholem Aleichem gave expression to diverse fictional charac-

ters in a polyphony of colloquial monologues. The most famous of all Yiddish monologists is Tevye the Dairyman, whose renown in the United States owes much to the musical and film *Fiddler on the Roof*. While no fiddler appears in Sholem Aleichem's original stories written between 1894 and 1916, Tevye does play the lead role. In some ways similar to Abramovitsh's Mendele, Tevye combines simplicity and astute observation. He reports personal setbacks that typify the conditions of Eastern European Jewry, while his numerous quotations link him to biblical and rabbinic traditions.

Sholem Aleichem also produced socially critical fiction. His earliest novels show the influence of Gogol's and Abramovitsh's satires, and two of his later fictions from 1905 and 1907 attack the Jewish plutocracy of Kiev with its insidious exploitation of the poor. During his final years in the United States, Sholem Aleichem penned short stories criticizing ruthless business practices and empty religiosity in New York's Lower East Side. Sholem Aleichem critiqued what he saw as misguided directions in Yiddish life and letters. Sholem Aleichem broke from the Enlightenment tradition, however, as he developed a less polemical humor. He shifted his sights from social goals to a broader literary program of realism that renounced the European plots emulated by trashy Yiddish novels.

I. L. Peretz (1852–1915) is recognized as the first modernistic Yiddish writer. For nearly two decades he dominated the Yiddish literary scene in Warsaw, editing journals and producing varied works of short fiction, poetry, and drama. Although slightly older than Sholem Aleichem, he was more attuned to the demands and tactics of avant-garde European fiction. After Sholem Aleichem proclaimed himself Abramovitsh's "grandson," Peretz became the father of another literary family. Yet Peretz and Sholem Aleichem were never friends. The Abramovitsh–Sholem Aleichem literary pedigree was rooted in the Ukraine, while Peretz's writing cultivated a new literary landscape in Poland.

Starting in 1886 and concealed behind more than a dozen pseudonyms, Peretz experimented with narrative forms. Using the innovative technique of internal monologue, he was the first Yiddish writer to probe individual psychology. Peretz wrote social criticism in the 1890s and was active in the workers' movement until 1899, when he was arrested after delivering a lecture to striking workers. Later, as he produced his stories and folktales, Peretz

moved away from the European realism sought by other authors. Instead he placed his stories in relation to internal Yiddish traditions, subtly employing traditional exemplars while distancing his texts from the folk versions of oral narrative. Peretz learned from popular traditions as profoundly as any other Yiddish writer, but he rewrote folktales in ways that delicately questioned superstitious beliefs. Some of Peretz's pious narrators themselves seem barely conscious of their own subtle hints at subversion. These critical works have, however, often been overshadowed by Peretz's simpler tales, which evoke a greater measure of sentimentality.

Satire and parody enable Jewish writers to present collective portraits and at the same time to situate their works in European literary history. Yiddish narrators frequently wield irony and—often posing as just one of the crowd—undermine their readers' assumptions. Through such personae, nineteenth-century Yiddish authors forge pathways for themselves while appropriating prior traditions.

Criticism of social hierarchies is implicit in most Yiddish satire, as when an ostensibly weak satirist questions the morals of those who are better placed. But Yiddish satire rarely presents an outright critique of powerful men and women. Instead it frequently employs strategies of self-satire, in which speakers lampoon themselves and their own social group. Sigmund Freud wrote in 1905 that self-criticism is typical of Jewish humor as a whole. This kind of self-scrutiny extended to Yiddish literary forms.

Intended for both general readers and scholars of literature, this book makes limited use of specialized technical terms. Several key words, however, require definition. *Parody* has a contemporary meaning associated with literary history; in that context, it refers to the appropriation of a prior form, or "repetition with a critical distance" (Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*). Parody often employs irony but need not include the element of ridicule, since parodic appropriations frequently convey respect for their models. *Intertextuality* refers to any relationship between texts, ranging from quotation, allusion, or imitation to distortion, mockery, or repudiation. Yiddish fiction illustrates a wide range of parodic and intertextual modes by virtue of its unusual historical and cultural situation.

While parody places a text in relationship to its forerunners, *satire* sets the literary work in a politicized relationship to current

events in the world. Hence it is sometimes useful to distinguish between fictional strategies that aim parodically at other texts and those that satirize current social situations. *Irony* is the central device for much parody and satire. The simplest definition of irony is "saying one thing and meaning another." The linguistic origins of irony—in ancient Greek, *eiron* refers to a dissembler in speech —indicate that conscious deception lies behind the ironic mask. Parodic works frequently use irony to mark their distance from the texts they parody, while satires employ irony to undermine the objects of their critique.

Skaz, or narration in an oral mode, was analyzed by the Russian formalists. They investigated the literary techniques that make possible this feigned orality. Nineteenth-century Russian and Yiddish fiction often used the device of *skaz* to create the impression of colloquial speech by a common, uneducated person. *Monologue* is related to the phenomenon of *skaz,* since both have recourse to first-person narration. In my earlier work *Genius and Monologue,* I define monologue as "solitary speech" in a variety of forms, of which dramatic soliloquy, conversational poetry, first-person narrative, and internal monologue are the most prominent. A more complex type of monologue creates another kind of isolation by deviation from the dialogical norms of speech. This latter sense of monologue somewhat resembles Mikhail Bakhtin's discussions of dialogue. Thus monologues are not necessarily monologic in Bakhtin's sense of being ideologically one-sided, dogmatic, or monolithic. On the contrary, Bakhtin's notion of *polyphony* applies to Yiddish monologues. The many masks and ironic personae of Yiddish literature bespeak a multivoiced fiction that may be compared to polyphonic music.

Yiddish literature has affinities to other writing in the margins of mainstream culture. "Literature in the Margins" might be another title for this study of a minority tradition, shaped and distorted by its marginal status. Yiddish literary styles evolved rapidly in the margins of Western literary history, when the leading authors explored successive styles; hence the case of Yiddish fiction might be a prototype for the stude of any minority (or colonized) culture that arises amid hostile surroundings.

No single theme unites this survey of Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz; one distinguishing feature is the intertextual evolution of Yiddish fiction. Prior critics, attempting to interpret

these authors individually, have tended to focus on narrower phases in their work. *Classic Yiddish Fiction* underscores the process by which Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz matured as creative artists. Rather than isolate and classify rigid periods in their careers, it is helpful to recognize influences, throwbacks, rivalries, lacunae, overlaps, progressions, and regressions.

Yiddish writing in Eastern Europe differs from some other minority literatures because of its linguistic separation from the majority. It is incorrect to state that Yiddish is a dialect of German, since both modern Yiddish and modern German have their parentage in medieval German speech. As has been said, with an irony that contains much truth, the difference between a language and a dialect is that a language has an army and a navy. What began as a medieval variant of so-called Middle High German in the Rhine region became an independent and socially insular language for the Jews, when they migrated eastward into Poland and Lithuania, Belorussia and the Ukraine—later known as the Russian Pale of Settlement. The premodern Jews' linguistic and educational isolation meant that Yiddish writers were initially influenced by literary traditions in Hebrew and Aramaic that had been the focal point of Jewish scholarship since talmudic times. This dependent relationship added importance to Yiddish translations of Scripture and the prayer book, and gave rise to prayers that were composed for women who were seldom taught to read Hebrew.

For many Jewish intellectuals in late nineteenth-century Russia, the cultural language was Russian, the popular language was Yiddish, and the scholarly language was Hebrew. According to Simon Dubnov, members of the Odessa circle of Hebraists and Yiddishists (including Abramovitsh, M. Ben-Ami, and H. N. Bialik) spoke Russian among themselves. Following their traditional Jewish education, then, Yiddish writers were exposed to modern European literature in the original and in translation. All three classic Yiddish writers read several languages: Abramovitsh, who knew Yiddish and Hebrew from childhood, learned Russian and German; Sholem Aleichem, who knew Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian from childhood, picked up some French, German, Italian, and English during his travels; Peretz knew Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish from childhood and studied Russian, French, and German. This multilingualism left deep traces in their writing. Between the traditional world of elementary Jewish education in the *cheder* and the secular

world of modern fiction, a polyglot culture assisted in the processes that were integral to the rise of Yiddish writing.

Yiddish writing has notable points of contact to women's studies. Until the late nineteenth century, Yiddish was predominantly a language read by women, not men. It was considered a "handmaid" to the nobler Hebrew, which was the domain of traditionally educated males. Yet Yiddish became a powerful instrument for Enlightenment secularization and a challenge to the prevailing traditionalism. Its aura was almost entirely worldly. As Hebrew suffused synagogue practices, Yiddish dominated the home and the Jewish marketplace, providing idioms of everyday life in a way that was impossible for Hebrew. Thus *leshon ha-kodesh* (the sacred Hebrew language) was male-dominated, while the *mame-loshn* (or the Yiddish mother tongue) reigned at home and in the secular world. The patriarchal/matriarchal implications of this situation have not been sufficiently explored, though a new generation of Yiddish scholars is beginning to examine these gender issues.

The Hebrew-Yiddish dichotomy may also be examined in connection with the relationship between writing and speech. According to Jacques Derrida's critique of Western metaphysics, philosophy since Plato has privileged the immediacy and presence of the spoken word, while suppressing the claims of writing. Derrida contends that writing is in fact a prerequisite to the supposed immediacy of vocalized speech. This tension is obvious in multilingual Jewish culture, since there is a prominent rift between the written Hebrew "Holy tongue" and the spoken Yiddish "mother tongue." Scripture, Talmud, rabbinic commentary, the prayer book, and medieval Hebrew poetry all stand as imposing textual monuments before any modern Jewish writer sets pen to paper. One obstacle for nineteenth-century Hebrew literati was precisely their inability to escape ancient prototypes, which led them to produce antiquated prose that seldom resembled everyday speech. The test came especially with the representation of dialogue, a virtually impossible task for an ancient written language such as Hebrew that had not been spoken in nearly two thousand years.

The challenge for modern Hebrew literature was unlike that of classic Yiddish fiction. Overburdened by an extensive corpus of erudite texts, Hebrew writers struggled to create the impression of orality. They could at best conjure up an illusion framed by elaborate conventions, since spontaneous Hebrew speech was unheard

of until the end of the nineteenth century. In contrast, Yiddish writing had access to the language as it was spoken. This link was insufficient, however, to enable writers to produce effective prose. Transcription of actual speech makes poor literature even in the case of reported dialogue. Necessary prototypes for the Yiddish writers came from Scripture, Talmud, Midrash, and modern European fiction.

Whereas Hebrew writers were at pains to simulate oral discourse, Yiddish writers had to compose a new kind of fiction combining oral and literary modes. This was one accomplishment of Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz. They effectively recreated intonations of the spoken word, and yet their achievement is deceptively simple. Each author developed unique strategies by which he brought spoken Yiddish into the literary fold. This required appropriating literary forms from all available sources ranging from the Book of Genesis to contemporary Russian fiction by Nikolai Leskov.

Hebrew and Yiddish fiction in the late nineteenth century were complementary and moved toward synthesis at an elusive meeting point that was never attained. Hebrew writing needed the inflections of Yiddish speech, and Yiddish fiction needed the lineage of Hebrew scholarship. Both learned from nineteenth-century European realism, engaging in the transformation of literary forms. Actual translation played an obvious role. In spite of biblical and rabbinic forebears, the narrative genre remained largely foreign to modern Jewish culture until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav told spiritualistic tales to his disciples. These stories were published posthumously in a bilingual Hebrew and Yiddish edition, which is an apt emblem for the symbiotic relationship between the two primary languages of Eastern European Judaic literature.

Classic Yiddish fiction inspired the Eastern European Jews' search for a modern identity that could replace outmoded forms. As increasing numbers of Jews renounced the ghetto of traditional Jewish learning, they turned to Western culture. Parody well describes their ambivalent relationship to a foreign culture they longed to emulate and yet held at a critical distance. Modern Yiddish fiction reflected that ambivalence, but it also furthered the process of cultural transfer—until the abrupt demise of the European Jews in the death camps.

PART ONE

Abramovitsh

FIGURE 1
S. Y. Abramovitsh

St. Petersburg

0   kilometres   300

0   miles   150

Moscow●

Baltic Sea

LITHUANIA

Vilna●   C Z A R I S T

●Minsk

Kapolia
(Kopyl)●
Timkovitz●   ●Slutsk

BELORUSSIA

Warsaw●
POLISH
PROVINCES

R U S S I A

VOLHYNIA

Lutsk●

Zhitomir●   ●Kiev

GALICIA   ●Berditchev

PODOLIA

AUSTRIA-   ●Kamenets-
HUNGARY   Podolsk   UKRAINE

RUMANIA   Odessa●

—·—·· Russia's western border,
       1815-1914   CRIMEA
········· Northern and eastern limit of
       the Pale of Jewish Settlement

Black Sea

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FIGURE 2
Abramovitsh's Eastern Europe

TABLE 1.
Chronology of Abramovitsh's Life

1836	Born in Kapolia (Kopyl), Minsk Province (date uncertain).
1850–52	Studied in yeshivot in Timkovitz (Timkovichi), Slutsk, and Vilna (Vilnius).
ca. 1853	Lived with his mother and stepfather in Melnik (Mielnik); traveled with Avreml Khromoy (the Lame) through Volin (Volhynia) and Podolia to Komenitz (Kamenets-Podolsk); became acquainted with Avraham-Ber Gottlober, whose daughters taught him Russian and German.
ca. 1854–55	Married and divorced his first wife.
1856	Passed examinations to become a teacher in Komenitz.
1857	First published in Hebrew: "A Letter on Education" ("Mikhtav 'al dvar ha-chinukh").
1858	Moved to Berditchev (Berdichev) and married his second wife, Pessie Levin.
1860	Published a collection of essays in Hebrew, *The Judgment of Peace* (or *The Judgment of Shalom, Mishpat shalom*).
1862	Published his first Hebrew story, *Learn to Do Well* (*Limdu heitev*), and edited the first volume of his Hebrew edition of the *Book of Natural History* (*Sefer toldot ha-teva'*), based on a German work by Harald Othmar Lenz.
1864–65	Serialized his first Yiddish novel, *The Little Man* (*Dos kleyne mentshele*), in *Kol mevasser*, the Yiddish supplement to Alexander Tsederboym's Hebrew newspaper *Ha-melitz*.
1865	Published *The Magic Ring* (*Dos vintshfingerl*).
1866	Published his second collection of Hebrew essays, *The Well of Judgment* (*'Ein mishpat*), and edited the second volume of the *Book of Natural History* in Hebrew translation.
1867	Published an expanded Russian version of his Hebrew work *Learn to Do Well* as *Fathers and Children*, alluding to Turgenev's 1862 work bearing the same name.

TABLE 1. (*Continued*)

1868	Published *Fathers and Children (Ha-'avot ve-ha-banim)* in Hebrew.
1869	Published *The Tax (Di takse)* and *Fishke the Lame (Fishke der krumer)*; moved from Berditchev to Zhitomir, where he studied at the Rabbinical Institute but was refused ordination because of a radical sermon he delivered.
1872	Edited the third volume of the *Book of Natural History* in Hebrew translation.
1873	Published *The Nag* (or *The Mare; Di klyatshe*) in Yiddish.
1878	Published *Travels of Benjamin the Third (Kitser masoes Binyomin hashlishi)*.
1879	Published the expanded second edition of *The Little Man*.
1881	Moved to Odessa, where he became Director of the Jewish school (Talmud Torah), a position he retained until the end of his life (except 1906–8); pogroms after the assassination of Alexander II shook his confidence in reform.
ca. 1882	Suffered from a long period of depression and literary inactivity. His daughter Rashel died at the age of 19; his son Meir (Mikhail), a Russian-language poet, was exiled for political activities and later converted to Christianity.
1884	Published *The Tax* (1869) in Russian translation; celebrated his first 25 years of literary activity; honored in a biographical essay by L. Binshtok in the Russian-Jewish journal *Voskhod*.
1885	*Travels of Benjamin the Third* (1878) published in Polish translation.
1886	*The Nag* (1873) published in Polish translation and then suppressed by the censors.
1886–87	Returned to writing Hebrew fiction with "In the Secret Place of Thunder" ("Be-seter ra'am"; title from Psalms 81:8).
1888	Published expanded Yiddish versions of *Fishke the Lame* and *The Magic Ring*.
1889	Published the expanded Yiddish version of *The Nag* and printed an autobiographical essay in Hebrew.

TABLE 1. *(Continued)*

1890–97	Published new Hebrew stories and Hebrew versions of the Yiddish novels *Travels of Benjamin the Third* and *The Magic Ring*.
1899	Serialized the beginning of his autobiographical novel in Yiddish as *Solomon, Son of Chaim (Shloyme reb Khaim's)*, which first appeared in Hebrew under the title *In Those Days (Ba-yamim ha-hem*, 1894–).
1901–5	Revised his Yiddish and Hebrew works; deeply distressed by pogroms in 1903 and 1905.
1906	Moved to Geneva, Switzerland, following the Odessa pogrom of 1905.
1908	Returned to Odessa.
1909–13	Publication of Jubilee editions of his collected works in Hebrew and Yiddish.
1917	Death on 8 December.

Sources: Leon Binshtok, "A Celebration of Yiddish Literature," in *Voskhod*, 1884; S. Y. Abramovitsh, autobiographical essay in Nachum Sokolov's *Sefer zikharon*, 1889; Zalman Reyzen, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, presse un filologie*, vol. 1, 1928; YIVO Pamphlet, "Di vikhtikste faktn un dates fun Mendeles lebn un shafn," 1936; *Mendele Moykher Sforim: reshimat ketavav ve-'iggrotav le-hatkanat mahaduratam ha-akademit*, 1965; Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised*, 1973; *Guide to Yiddish Classics on Microfiche*, ed. Chone Shmeruk, 1980.

CHAPTER 1

The Grandfather of Yiddish Literature

Modern Yiddish literature has its origins in the life and work of Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1836–1917). A follower of Abramovitsh once found him working at his desk and asked what he was writing. "I'm not writing, I'm driving away flies," he answered, and then explained his metaphor: "When I write Hebrew, all the prophets fall upon me: Isaiah, Jeremiah, the writers of the Song of Songs and Psalms, and each one of them proposes that I take a ready-made verse or an established phrase from him alone, for this expression. In order not to write in ready-made clichés, I first have to drive away all those flies."[1] This story illustrates the basic problem that confronted modern Yiddish and Hebrew writers. Abramovitsh required the literary models of the Bible and post-biblical Hebrew writing, but he was also compelled to resist their influence. While he appropriated prophetic and rabbinic modes, he retained a critical distance.

Abramovitsh himself wrote three accounts of his life: an essay in Nachum Sokolov's *Memorial Book* (*Sefer zikharon*, 1889); the two-part autobiographical novel *Solomon, Son of Chaim* (*Shloyme reb Khaim's*, 1894–1917), also known as *In Those Days* (*In yener tsayt* in Yiddish or *Ba-yamim ha-hem* in Hebrew); and his serialized memoirs entitled "From My Book of Memories" ("Fun mayn seyfer hazikhroynes," 1913–16). While these narratives should not be read as if they contained indisputable facts, they do command a privileged place in Abramovitsh's lifework. Numerous essayists have written about Abramovitsh in Yiddish and Hebrew, and his friend Lev Binshtok printed a significant memoir of his early years in Russian (1884).

Abramovitsh offered advice to those who interpret his work. After he read Y. H. Ravnitzky's introduction to a collection of his

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[1] Simon Dubnov, *Fun "zhargon" tsu yidish un andere artiklen: literarishe zikhroynes* (Vilna: Kletzkin, 1929), p. 113; henceforth cited as "FZ" by page alone.

Hebrew stories in 1900, Abramovitsh objected: "you, as the edi-
tor, should have given an historical overview and an explanation of
many issues and matters in the book, such as explaining the rela-
tionship of each story to the events of the time in which it was
written."[2] By stressing the pertinence of historical background,
Abramovitsh indicates that social contexts are essential to the
meaning of his fiction.

Abramovitsh's first Yiddish novel (serialized in 1864–65) marked
both the beginning of modern Yiddish fiction and a continuation
of former trends. His work responds to three powerful movements
that preceded him: Haskalah, Chassidism, and (for lack of a better
term) Mitnagdism. The Haskalah, or the Jewish Enlightenment,
was prominent in Western Europe roughly from 1750–1830, in-
spired by the rationalistic movement of the eighteenth century that
was associated with Denis Diderot, François Voltaire, Gotthold Les-
sing, and Immanuel Kant. The leading Jewish member of the En-
lightenment and founder of the Haskalah was Moses Mendelssohn
(1729–86), who sought to educate Jews by translating the Bible
into a German version written in Hebrew characters. Mendelssohn
hoped that this Bible edition would assist Yiddish speakers in
learning German. In Berlin at the end of the eighteenth century,
proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment such as Aharon Wolfson
(1754–1835) and Isaac Euchel (1756–1804) produced satiric
plays. The modernizing influence of the Berlin Enlightenment pre-
vailed over the Jews of Western Europe, and it then made inroads
into Eastern Europe (ca. 1820–80). Abramovitsh took his first
steps as a writer under the aegis of the Enlightenment and through-
out his life shared its goals of education and progress. From 1881
until his death, Abramovitsh was employed as the principal of a
Jewish school in Odessa.

Chassidism and Mitnagdism were equal and opposite forces
that arose from the chassidic innovations of Israel Baal Shem Tov
(1699–1761) and his disciples in Volin (Volhynia) and Podolia.
Chassidic leaders emphasized the primacy of prayer, whereas their
opponents placed greater weight on study. Mystical practices drawn

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[2]Letter of 10 August 1900; translated from *Reshumot* 2 (1927), 428. A Yiddish
translation is contained in *Dos Mendele bukh,* ed. Nachman Mayzel (New York:
YKUF, 1959), p. 180; this volume is henceforth cited as "MB" by page alone.

from the esoteric *Book of Splendor* (*Sefer ha-zohar,* thirteenth century) were especially influential in chassidic circles. The mitnagdim (literally "opponents") rallied forcefully against the chassidim after the Vilna Gaon, Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, placed a ban on the chassidim in 1772. In the nineteenth century the chassidic strongholds stretched from Poland and Galicia to the Ukraine, while the mitnagdic center lay to the north in Lithuania. The exaggerated dichotomy between Polish Jews and Lithuanian Jews (or "Litvaks") derives from this religious split. According to the simplistic polarity, chassidim were known for their spiritual fervor and devotion to the mystical kabbalah, while mitnagdim distinguished themselves as rigorous talmudic scholars. Abramovitsh was familiar with both communities since he was raised in greater Lithuania and traveled south through Volin and Podolia, later settling in the strongly chassidic city of Berditchev. His early work was in part motivated by a wish to spread the Haskalah to Jews in both groups.

Among the chassidim, Rabbi Nachman's inspirational tales were printed in Hebrew and Yiddish (1815) after his death. At the same time, secular Jewish authors—influenced by the Enlightenment—fought what they saw as misguided enthusiasts and worked to improve the material conditions of Jewish life and education. For example, Joseph Perl (1774–1839) and Isaac Ber Levinsohn (1788–1860) used satire to oppose the chassidim (1819–30).[3] Another precursor from the mid-nineteenth century was Isaac Meir Dik (1814–93), whose story books, "in contrast to other Enlightenment works, did not frighten the pious readership."[4] Incorporating aspects of all these prior trends, Abramovitsh initially experimented with didactic essays and novels in Hebrew (1857–68). But his first genuine success came in Yiddish, with his synthesis of everyday scenes, traditional motifs, and subtle irony.

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[3]See Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1907), pp. 61–73, for an early discussion, in English, of Perl's *Revealer of Secrets* (*Megale temirin*) and Levinsohn's *Words of the Righteous* (*Divrei tzadikim*).

[4]Shmuel Niger [Charney], "Yiddish Literature From the Mid-Eighteenth Century Until 1942" ("Yidishe literatur fun mitn 18-tn yorhundert biz 1942"), in the *Algemeyne entsiklopedie,* vol. 3: *Yidn* (New York: CYCO, 1942), p. 101; henceforth cited as "YL" by page alone.

EARLY EDUCATION

Sholem Yankev Broyde, later Abramovitsh, was born in Kapolia
(Kopyl, Minsk province) in 1836.[5] Jews called this region Lith-
uania (*Lite*), although it was then part of Czarist Russia (and now
lies within the borders of Belarus). His father Chaim Moyshe
Broyde was respected in the town and known for his linguistic
talents. According to Abramovitsh, his father perceived a gen-
eral weakness in Hebrew learning and "wanted to make an excep-
tion of Shloyme [the name denoting Sholem Yankev in his auto-
biographical novel *Shloyme reb Khaim's*], to try to teach him the
entire Tanakh [Hebrew Bible] together with the translation, from
beginning to end. Reb Chaim himself knew the Tanakh and wrote
Hebrew. People used to delight in his letters."[6]

As a child Abramovitsh's perceptions of the world were, in
large part, guided by biblical verses. Between the ages of about
seven and ten, he was taught by a private tutor, Yosi Rubens, who
placed special emphasis on the Hebrew language. During that time
Abramovitsh memorized portions of the Bible, establishing the
basis for his literary career in Hebrew. Since the revival of Hebrew
as a spoken language did not begin until late in the nineteenth
century, the Bible and Mishna were the main primers for Hebrew
writers; in his youth Abramovitsh knew nothing of Enlightenment
Hebrew literature.[7]

Yosi Rubens made a lasting impression on the boy. He was "a
remarkable Hebraist and Talmudist . . . who was exceptionally
skillful in carpentry, worked expertly in wood and stone and, in

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[5]According to some sources, Abramovitsh was born in 1835. See also Max
Weinreich, "Mendeles ershte 25 yor," *YIVO bleter* 10 (1936), 167–80. Weinreich
reexamines the biographical information, gives Abramovitsh's birthdate as
1 January 1834, and contests a number of other established dates in Abramo-
vitsh's life.

[6]*Solomon, Son of Chaim (Shloyme reb Khaim's)*, in *Ale verk fun Mendele
Moykher Sforim (S. Y. Abramovitsh)* (Cracow: Farlag Mendele, 1911), vol. 2,
p. 26; henceforth cited as "SRK" by page alone.

[7]See Abramovitsh's autobiographical essay in *Sefer zikharon le-sofrei yisra'el ha-
chaim 'itanu ka-yom*, ed. Nachum Sokolov (Warsaw: Halter, 1889), p. 118,
henceforth cited as "SZ" by page alone. Lev Binshtok also recalls that, as a boy,
Abramovitsh had little conception of European literature, which differentiates
him from both Sholem Aleichem and Peretz.

addition, had an understanding of painting."[8] Apart from educat-
ing him in the Bible and Talmud, this teacher with his diverse
talents made the young Abramovitsh aware of art, "awakened the
boy's curiosity and drew him toward another, as yet unknown,
dreamlike faraway place, a calling that was beyond the limits of the
Talmud" (ibid.). Yosi Rubens specialized in making ceremonial art,
but his artistry gave Abramovitsh an introduction to secular artis-
tic pursuits.

Abramovitsh's description of his first talmudic studies echoes
the multivoiced character of his fiction. He employs vivid imagery
to describe his childhood encounters with the Talmud and Mid-
rash, and he represents the textual world as a landscape. While
studying the Hebrew Bible, "my teacher took me to the threshold
of the Talmud, the primeval giant Og and Magog in the literature
of all the inhabitants of the world. When I arrived there I was like a
man who has come for the first time to a great market, astonished
at the sight of all kinds of merchandise, business, and the many
and various desirable objects, and I was struck mute by hearing the
din, commotion, and shrieking from every side and corner. Buyers
and sellers, agents and merchants, all running and pressing and
rushing loudly, hastily, gripped by the lust for trade" (SZ 117).
Abramovitsh's depiction elaborates on the folk saying, "Torah is
the best merchandise." In contrast to the Talmud, which resembled
a marketplace—with its exchanges between hundreds of rabbis
across centuries—*aggadah* or legend seemed to him an orchard, an
expansive field without an orderly plan. Abramovitsh remembered
having been awakened on winter mornings and walking to the
House of Study while it was still dark. The beauty of nature in-
spired him "to learn with all my heart. . . . My soul longed for
God's Torah, to know all the secrets of the Talmud" (SZ 118). This
sentimental, spiritualized recollection is at odds with the underly-
ing thrust of Abramovitsh's fictional descriptions, in which he ob-

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[8]Lev Binshtok, "A Celebration of Yiddish Literature: Solomon Moiseevitsh
Abramovitsh and His Twenty-Fifth Year of Literary Activity," unpublished trans-
lation from the Russian by Jack Blanshei, p. 3. Modified slightly in consultation
with Amy Mandelker and Nancy M. Frieden; henceforth cited as "CYL." The
original essay is contained in *Voskhod* 12 (1884), 1–32; the cited passage occurs
on page 2. Abramovitsh refers to his tutor as "Lippe" in his fictionalized auto-
biography, *Shloyme reb Khaim's*.

serves that nature enables Jewish children to counterbalance stifling rabbinic customs.

Following his father's death in 1850, Abramovitsh studied in traditional yeshivot in Timkovitz (Timkovichi), Slutsk, and Vilna (Vilnius). He then lived for some time with his mother and stepfather in an isolated forest in Melnik (Mielnik), where he recalls having felt the powerful attraction of nature. At the beginning of his fictional autobiography, his mother indicates the change that has come over him: no longer immersed in talmudic studies, he has begun to occupy himself with scribbling and wandering through the forest all day (SRK 7–8). As a mature writer, Abramovitsh contributed to the development of Yiddish fiction with his representations of nature. In *Fishke the Lame* (*Fishke der krumer,* 1869), his persona Mendele the Bookseller mocks the Jewish habit of going into mourning just as summer begins, on the seventeenth of Tammuz, in preparation for Tish'ah b'Av. Stories such as "The Calf" ("Dos toysefes-yontev-kelbl") express his childhood love of the outdoors, but they also show the tension caused by his elders' disapproval of what they viewed as a temptation of "the evil impulse."⁹ Experiences of nature stood in direct contrast to rabbinic textual study, and Abramovitsh's emphasis on natural beauty was a threat to those who wished to maintain the insularity of "the People of the Book." Everyday Yiddish contained limited vocabulary in which to discuss natural objects, as if the words "flower" and "rose," "tree" and "oak" sufficed to name most local flora. Influenced by the Jewish Enlightenment, Abramovitsh sought to enhance Jewish awareness of the natural world both by including vivid descriptions in his fiction and by printing a three-volume Hebrew edition called the *Book of Natural History* (*Sefer toldot ha-teva',* 1862–72). This was Abramovitsh's reworking and translation of a German study by Harald Othmar Lenz; Abramovitsh edited the preexisting book much as he later had his character Mendele pretend to do. While he made no original contributions to the natural sciences, Abramovitsh's depictions of nature set his novels off from most prior Hebrew and Yiddish fiction.

⁹See *Seyfer habeheymes,* in MMS, vol. 1. The Hebrew version was published during the same year in *Ha-'olam* 5 (1911), numbers 18–19, 23, 26, and 33. For an English translation of "The Calf" by Jacob Sloan, see *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories,* 2d ed., ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Penguin, 1990), pp. 97–111.

Abramovitsh recalls that he began to write poetry while surrounded by nature during the early 1850s. As a child in the small town of Kapolia (Kopyl), he had never read secular literature, and so when he experienced poetic feelings he thought, "this is Satan's work; the evil impulse is endangering me and through evil thoughts is leading me away from learning Torah" (SZ 119). According to his own account, Abramovitsh's first literary endeavors anticipated his later satiric style: "as soon as I began to write words of song, and the first fruits of my pen consecrated hymns to God, along came Satan—the angel of derision, who now rules over me in the figure of Mendele the Bookseller—and provoked me to mock human beings, to destroy their veils and tear their masks from them" (SZ 120). Thus Abramovitsh traces his use of satire to his earliest writing, and links it to "the figure of Mendele the Bookseller." Later, in the 1869–78 prefaces ascribed to Mendele, Abramovitsh mimics a traditional religious form—hymns in praise of God (*hillulim le-adonai*)—and enacts its parodic transformation. While Satan is known as "the angel of death" in the Talmud (Baba Batra 16a), Abramovitsh uses one of his typical literary devices and modifies this ancient phrase to "the angel of derision."

Abramovitsh possessed a precocious talent for impersonation, as was later true of Sholem Aleichem. As a child, Abramovitsh was "very popular because of his liveliness, his habit of asking foolish questions, and even more, for his mimes. By nature he had the ability to pick up, at first glance, a person's mannerisms and verbal peculiarities. He would imitate beautifully how any person spoke, stood, walked, until everyone held their sides, bursting with laughter" (SRK 24–25). This imitative gift advanced Abramovitsh's ability as a novelist with affinities to French and Russian realism. The example Abramovitsh gives, referring to himself in the third person, is relevant to his literary portraits of provincial Jews: "He especially liked to imitate *Gitel,* the prayer-leader [in the women's section], how she kissed the mezuzah on entering the house . . . ; how she pulled back her lips and said, 'God be with you!'" (SRK 25). This simple, pious woman always affirmed, in the language of the women's prayers, "Praised and revered be the Almighty, blessed be He and His name, who protects the People of Israel." Such blind faith later became the central object of Abramovitsh's satires, when he wrote in a manner that simultaneously "encourages and demasks" (MB 132). His example also shows how he combined

satire of social forms with parody of textual precursors, in this case a prayer formula.

In the midst of creative work, when Abramovitsh wanted to capture the right word or expression for a folk character, he would address the common Jew within himself: "What do you say, little Jew?"[10] Thus he invoked the muse within, the everyday speech of typical Jews, which was far more accessible in Yiddish than in Hebrew. According to Y. D. Berkovitsh, Abramovitsh once commented on the difference between writing in Yiddish and Hebrew: with the former he could always consult his wife when he needed help with an elusive word, but with Hebrew he could only consult the Bible, Talmud, and Midrash.[11] In the term employed by Mikhail Bakhtin, the double reference to speech and literary exemplars facilitated his *dialogism,* his multivoiced fictions that convey diverse perspectives and linguistic levels through personae and narratives within narratives.

Much has been written about the persona of Mendele the Bookseller (Mendele Moykher Sforim), sometimes erroneously called Abramovitsh's pseudonym.[12] "Abramovitsh" was itself a fictitious name, since his father's name was Chaim Moyshe Broyde. Name changes were then a common ploy among Jews, as one means to avoid being impressed into a twenty-five-year military service in the Czar's army. To avoid falling prey to this system, Abramovitsh may have posed as the (exempt) eldest son of a (fictitious) family. Beyond such pragmatic considerations, Sholem Yankev possibly chose his alias to indicate that he was, figuratively speaking, "son of Abraham." The patriarch Abraham was not his role model, for he had a more immediate prototype.

TRAVELS

At the age of seventeen, three years after his father's death, Sholem Yankev wandered extensively through Eastern Europe together

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[10]David Eynhorn, "Mendele at Work" ("Mendele bay der arbet"), in *Zikhroynes vegn Mendelen,* in *Ale verk fun Mendele Moykher-Sforim,* ed. Nachman Maysel (Warsaw: Farlag Mendele, 1928), vol. 20, p. 59.

[11]Y. D. Berkovitsh, *Ha-rish'onim ki-vnei-adam: sippurei zikharonot 'al Sholem-Aleichem u-vnei-doro,* 3d ed. (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1976), p. 363.

[12]For a critique of this practice, see Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schocken, 1973), chapter 5; henceforth cited as "TD" by page alone.

with a beggar named Abraham (or, in the diminutive, Avreml).
Avreml Khromoy—which means Abraham the Lame—had re-
turned from travels "with his wonderful tales and novelties about
the fortunate Volin and Southern Russia, 'flowing with milk and
honey.'" Evoking this biblical phrase, he "excited the imagination
of the seventeen-year-old Abramovitsh, who decided to go out into
the world with this Avreml."[13] These travels extended Abramo-
vitsh's horizons far beyond the Lithuanian and Belorussian towns
he had formerly seen.

More than a decade later, Avreml's makeshift horse-drawn cart
found a literary counterpart in fictional renditions of Mendele the
Bookseller's wagon. Moreover, Avreml inspired characterizations
in Abramovitsh's seminal novels *Fishke the Lame* (*Fishke der
krumer,* 1869) and *The Travels of Benjamin the Third* (*Kitser mas-
oes Binyomin ha-shlishi,* 1878): "the memorable trip in the com-
pany of Avreml Khromoy subsequently provided our gifted folk
writer with considerable material for his stories about everyday
Jewish life. In these stories, replete with humor and good-natured
sarcasm, and infused with truthful and unusual powers of observa-
tion, one meets places and scenes snatched directly from life, since
he had the opportunity to scrutinize folk life closely with all its joys
and sorrows, without any embellishment or disguise."[14] Their
travels took them from Kapolia to Lutsk (Volin Province), and
thence to Komenitz (Kamenets-Podolsk, Podolia). Along the way,
Avreml tried to arrange for the marriage of Sholem Yankev so that
he could pocket the matchmaker's fee, but Abramovitsh foiled this
mercenary attempt. The journey became increasingly difficult as
Avreml became resentful of his fellow traveler and threatened to
confiscate his passport and abandon him. A choir boy introduced
Abramovitsh to a cantor in Komenitz, who rescued him from
Avreml and helped him become a yeshiva student at the House of
Study. His strong biblical and talmudic training made a favorable
impression in the community, and Abramovitsh was able to sup-
port himself as the private tutor for children in a number of

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[13]Zalman Reyzn, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, presse un filologie,* vol. 1
(Vilna: Kletzkin, 1926), p. 11. The ostensible reason for the trip, Binshtok
recalls, was to help Abramovitsh's aunt find her long-lost husband. But Avreml
had other ideas, and took his ward on a circuitous route.

[14]See Lev Binshtok's biographical essay, CYL, trans. Jack Blanshei, pp. 14–15; in
the Russian original, p. 10.

wealthy families. In the mid-1850s Abramovitsh married and lived with his first wife in Komenitz, but they were divorced soon after.

Until this time, Abramovitsh had received a traditional Jewish education. In Komenitz he first encountered another kind of scholar, the Hebrew and Yiddish writer Avraham-Ber Gottlober (1810–99), who taught at the local government school for Jewish boys from 1852–54. This decisive encounter with a secular intellectual exposed Abramovitsh to the methods and contents of modern learning. Lev Binshtok recounts that he

> went over to Gottlober's apartment taking with him his single literary production—a drama already written during his childhood but left without a title—with the intention of hearing the opinion of the great poet and to receive his advice and direction for the future. Gottlober, as Sholem Yankev himself told me, could not keep from laughing as he read this work of childhood fantasy. He praised him anyway for his noble effort and predicted a brilliant literary future. From the very first, Gottlober recognized an uncommon talent hidden in this young Lithuanian, and therefore without waiting for Sholem Yankev's request, he offered his assistance and the use of his carefully selected library.[15]

Gottlober, with his "completely unfamiliar opinions," served as a new model for the aspiring author; Abramovitsh's first Yiddish novel presents a fictionalized representation of him in the character of Gutman. Under the tutelage of Gottlober's eldest daughter, Abramovitsh studied Russian, German, mathematics, and then passed a teacher's examination in 1854. His first publication, which Gottlober submitted to the Hebrew journal *The Preacher* (*Ha-maggid*) without the author's knowledge in 1857, was entitled "A Letter on Education" ("Mikhtav 'al dvar ha-chinukh").

Abramovitsh taught in Komenitz from 1856–58, then moved with his second wife to Berditchev, where he continued his literary endeavors while supported by his new father-in-law. His earliest publications were in Hebrew. He wrote fiction, essays on scholarly issues, and his work of natural history designed to introduce Jewish readers to science. During the period of the "Great Reforms" in the 1860s, Abramovitsh was influenced by Russian liberal trends; in the 1870s his focus gradually broadened from efforts on behalf of social and educational reform among the Jews to a striving for

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[15]Ibid., p. 24; in the Russian original, p. 16.