

The 100th Birthday Celebration of Sholem Aleichem in Kiev

By Simon Swirsky

In 1959, the Soviet Union marked Sholem Aleichem's 100th birthday by publishing all his works in Russian translation. They were not, however, available for purchase in Soviet bookstores – only in the satellite countries.

I left Kiev for Poland in February 1960, and I was able to buy the entire edition of his books in a Polish bookstore.

In the Yiddish Day School I had attended in the 1920's in Poland, we had access to many of Sholem Aleichem's books, including "Tevye the Dairyman", "Motl, the Cantors Son", "The Fair" (Funem Yarid), and others. But the Russian collection contained stories I hadn't seen before, including his biography. There was also a wedding photo of Sholem Aleichem and his wife (1883).

Sholem Aleichem was born near the city of Kiev, nicknamed "Yehupetz" in his books. As a young Yiddish writer, he couldn't make a living (so what else is new?). So he supported himself by teaching Russian to the children of wealthy Jews. One of his students was a pretty young daughter of a rich family. In time they fell in love and wanted to marry, but her father objected. He didn't want his daughter to marry a poor Yiddish writer.

Some years later they did marry and lived happily with her parents. After her father's death they inherited his wealth and lived the good life. But Sholem Aleichem was a gambler, and in a few years, he lost all the money in the stock market. To support his family, he returned to teaching Russian.

Sholem Aleichem lived in the heart of Kiev. On the day of his 100th birthday, the authorities in Kiev attached a plaque to his residence, engraved in Ukrainian: "Here lived and worked the famous Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916)."

I lived in Kiev since 1944 and I often walked by this building and liked to stop and read the plaque. Once, at the end of 1959, I noticed something was different. The plaque had been replaced, and the new plaque read only "Famous writer" – no more "Jewish". This was during the height of Soviet Anti-Semitism.

Editor's note: Mr. Swirsky was the recipient of the International Association of Yiddish Clubs Second Lifetime Yiddish Service Award.



Sholem Aleichem Photo

Editor's note: Simon Swirsky is a long-time friend. Fishl first met Simon, Annabelle Weiss and Marilyn Cagin when all were on the Workmen's Circle National Executive Board. Together we attended Board meetings in the Manhattan office and at the Circle Lodge camp.

This group was the backbone of the Eleventh IAYC Conference in Cleveland. Along with Chairman and IAYC board member Harold Ticktin, Pauline Leber did the registration and much more. This was a great team at a conference.

Simon and his wife Myra, in their 90's, regularly still go out to dances. He is a dynamo on behalf of Yiddish and on the committee that annually puts on the Concert in the Park. IAYC purposely scheduled our Cleveland conference so that we could attend the performance.