

SESSION THREE



As Seen by Sholem Aleichem: *Tevye der milkhiker*

Feature film, 1939
 Director/Screenwriter: Maurice Schwartz
 Tevye: Maurice Schwartz
 Khave: Miriam Riselle
 Golde: Rebecca Weintraub
 Fedye: Leon Liebgold
 Priest: Julius Adler

Language: Yiddish (with English subtitles)

Length: 96 minutes

Although the landscape has the feel of the Ukraine – the setting for Sholem Aleichem’s stories – this film version was actually shot on a potato farm on Long Island; the interior scenes were shot in a Bronx studio. But Maurice Schwartz, one of the leading actors of the Yiddish theatre, is the real thing.

For more than fifty years, *Tevye der milkhiker* (“*Tevye the Dairyman*”) has been among the most admired of all Yiddish films. It was made in 1939, when Yiddish cinema was at an artistic zenith, by Schwartz, founder and director of the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York. The Ukrainian-born actor-impresario not only recreated the title role he had played on the stage but produced and directed the film, and adapted the screenplay. As J. Hoberman writes in *Bridge of Light*, “Like the characters he favored, Schwartz was larger than life – a powerful performer, a charming supplicant, an overbearing director.”

Tevye, the film’s protagonist, is perhaps the best-known character from all of Yiddish literature. His creator, Sholem Aleichem, was one of the most widely read Jewish writers of the modern age. A pioneer of modern Yiddish literature and culture, Sholem Aleichem was a prolific writer of stories, plays, novels, and essays in Yiddish.

Tevye der milkhiker focuses on two stories from the series Sholem Aleichem introduced to readers in 1894, about the Jewish dairyman who lives with his wife and seven daughters in the village of Anatevke. In each story, Tevye’s love of his family and his good-hearted nature (the name Tevye is derived from the Hebrew word *tov*, which means “good”) are challenged by such modern problems as independent-minded children, revolutionaries, intermarriage, antisemitic violence, and forced expulsion.

The film tells the story of Tevye’s third-eldest daughter,

Khave: *Maxime Gorky! You know Fedye, you look just like Gorky.*

Fedye: *You're so beautiful, my little girl, like the dreamy skies of our Ukraine.*

Khave: *You speak so beautifully, Fedye, just like in the novels.*

Golde: *Tzeytl, I knew you were coming. A voice in my sleep told me you were coming. May it tell of the Messiah's arrival.*

Khave, who falls in love with a non-Jew, a Ukrainian peasant named Fedye. Their relationship begins with their mutual admiration for the Russian revolutionary author Maxim Gorky and his vision of a new Russia, free from class strife and ethnic prejudice. Over the protests of Tevye and his wife, Golde, Khave is married to Fedye by the local priest. Tevye, Golde, and their eldest daughter, Tseytl, mourn Khave as if she were dead, according to Jewish tradition. Soon afterward, Golde becomes ill and dies. The film concludes with one of the final stories of the series, in which Tevye and his family are expelled from their home, a fate many Jews living in Russian villages experienced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Khave, stricken with remorse and unhappy over her life with Fedye and his family, returns to her father. She pleads with him for forgiveness and joins her family as they leave Anatevke.

Of all the author's works, the Tevye stories have been the most popular with Yiddish readers. Sholem Aleichem attempted to capitalize on this by dramatizing part of the series. His play *Tevye der milkbiker*, written in 1915, was never performed during his lifetime, but Maurice Schwartz staged its American premiere at his Yiddish Art Theatre in 1919, which approached Yiddish drama as a serious, modern art form as well as a modern Jewish cultural treasure. That same year a silent film entitled *Khave* appeared. Twenty years later, after the play had become a staple of the classic Yiddish repertoire in America and Europe, Schwartz filmed *Tevye der milkbiker*. When it opened, a critic in the *Forward* described it as "one of the best Yiddish films made to date."

Fiddler on the Roof, a musical adaptation of the *Tevye* stories, began its record-breaking Broadway run in 1964; the Hollywood film version appeared in 1971, while the stage show continued to play in New York and tour the world.

The Background of Anatevke: Tevye's Roots

In the early nineteenth century, Poland was partitioned among Russia, Austria, and Prussia, and hundreds of thousands of Jews living in eastern Poland became subjects of the tsar. At first, the newly Russian Jews were able

Tevye: *I've been robbed of my most precious possession.*

to continue living much as they did under Polish rule. Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, their situation worsened. The general economic welfare of Russian Jewry declined as new laws restricted where Jews could live and barred some from their traditional occupations. Conscription of Jewish boys into the Russian army was instituted as a means of undermining Jewish communal life; community leaders were forced to select draftees to fill military quotas imposed by Russian authorities. This practice, along with the establishment of government-appointed rabbis, seriously undermined the authority of Jewish communities to handle their own internal affairs.

During the 1880s, a socially and politically reactionary period in Russia, Jews were victimized by a new series of restrictive laws and by pogroms, outbreaks of antisemitic violence. Despite an international outcry against these attacks, Russian authorities often did little to protect Jewish communities.

Many Russian Jews emigrated, most of them to America. Others were caught up in the rapid growth of new social, political, and cultural ideas that arose throughout Eastern Europe during the final decades of the nineteenth century. While some Russian Jews, mostly Zionists, championed Hebrew as a modern language and others advocated that Jews speak Russian to be better integrated into the general culture, many promoted Yiddish as the one language that could unite the Jewish masses. Writers like Sholem Aleichem hailed Yiddish as a Jewish national language, a cultural treasure to be preserved and cultivated. In his stories, he explored the tension between modern and traditional forces in Russian Jewish life during those turbulent years. Thus, modern Yiddish literature flourished during the years leading up to World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, and many Yiddish educational, political, and cultural institutions were established. The story of *Tevye der milkbiker* is not only a product of this revolution in modern Jewish culture, but it describes the conflicts that it generated between Jews and non-Jews, parents and children, males and females.

Tevye (to priest): *Go khap*
[catch] *fish from your own*
pond.

About Sholem Aleichem

Born Sholem Rabinovitch in Pereyaslav in the Ukraine in 1859, the writer received his early religious education in the nearby town of Voronkov, which became the model for his fictional Kasrilevke, the site of many of his tales. From the age of fourteen on, he attended a Russian gymnasium and studied secular subjects. In 1883, while working as a government rabbi, he took on the pen name Sholem Aleichem (a popular Yiddish greeting, literally “Peace be unto you”) to camouflage his identity as he began publishing stories.

The most popular of the triumvirate of “grandfathers” of Yiddish literature (Peretz and Mendele were the other two), he wrote for newspapers and magazines in both Yiddish and Hebrew, and he founded a Yiddish annual, *Die yiddishe folksbibliotek (The Popular Yiddish Library)*. In 1894, he wrote the first monologue of the *Tevye* series. The story of *Khava*, one of the tales on which the film is based, was published in 1905. Shmuel Niger, a prolific and authoritative critic of Yiddish literature, wrote that “To *Tevye the dairyman*, the author entrusted his own role, the role of humorous story-teller, psychologist, portraitist, jokester, master of language – in short, the role of the writer.” For this reason, Niger continued, “*Tevye der milkbiker* is not only the most moving and most likeable, but also the most intimate of Sholem Aleichem’s books.”

Frequently called the “Yiddish Mark Twain,” Sholem Aleichem wrote about everyday people – their dreams, their worries, and the details of their lives. Through his highly praised stories, he taught a people steeped in tragedy to laugh at its troubles. Even when he faced economic and health problems in his own life, he wrote with humor.

He came to New York twice, in 1906 and 1914. He died in 1916, and more than 125,000 people lined the streets of the Lower East Side to pay their respects. In his will, he left instructions for his family to gather on the anniversary of his death and read his humorous stories. Although many Yiddish films have been made from his work, none were produced during his lifetime.

Tevye: *Khava is no more. She's dead. The Lord gives and the Lord takes.*

From the Book to the Screen

There are several Tevyes: The dairyman is portrayed in different ways in the original stories, in the Schwartz film, and in the later *Fiddler on the Roof*.

In the stories, each of Tevye's daughters represent a different kind of conflict between modernity and traditional life, and each meets personally with a tragic fate. Sholem Aleichem's Tevye is neither a pietist nor a scholar, but he is deeply devoted to the Jewish people and the Jewish faith, carefully observing the laws. He argues with his horse, with himself, and with God, frequently quoting from the Bible and other sources, although sometimes he doesn't get it quite right. Ever resilient, Tevye has an overflowing generosity of spirit.

Schwartz focuses only on the stories of Tseytl and Khava. The film version of Tevye is more somber than the original, influenced by the mood of the 1930s, when it was produced. In Europe, there was the threat of war and Nazi conquest, and in the United States, the realities of assimilation and intermarriage. As Hoberman explains, the tensions between Jews and gentiles are heightened in Schwartz's film. Although Fedye is portrayed sympathetically, the other non-Jews are presented as ignorant, dishonest, and cruel – they are “pig breeders,” “potato peelers,” boorish brutes, and drunkards (although they all speak perfect Yiddish). A reporter for the *Morgn Freiheit* praised Schwartz's acting but complained that the production, far from the spirit of Sholem Aleichem, “reeks of Jewish chauvinism.” Hoberman also points out that halfway through the production, Hitler seized Danzig.

Some of the film's most powerful moments relate to the wedding of Khava and Fedye – which occurs “offstage” in the stories. In the church prior to the ceremony, Khava cries for her parents, but she is held captive. Trying to reclaim their daughter, Tevye and Golde walk to the church on the Sabbath but they are rebuffed by the priest, who seems to delight in capturing the daughter Tevye described as his tender lamb. Returning home, Tevye recites the Havdalah prayer, the ceremony separating the Sabbath from the rest of the week. As he says the line praising God's separation of Jews from non-Jews, his

pain seems unbearable. Caught between loyalty to God and love of his daughter, he has no choice but to mourn her loss as though she were dead. Even with all his questioning, his faith is steadfast.

In the Broadway musical and movie version, *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye's gentile neighbors are seen in a more positive light. The musical's authors emphasize not the outside enemies of the Jews but inner conflicts. Also, in the musical, religion is not necessarily seen as God-given law but as "tradition"; the source of authority is "the papa." And the papa, Tevye, is feisty; he's a bit more coarse and less religious than the original. Schwartz's Tevye and his wife are seen as aging Old World grandparents, as opposed to the younger, more energetic characters in the stories and in the musical. Perhaps this latest version is closer to Sholem Aleichem's Tevye than Maurice Schwartz's.

The endings of the two films differ from each other as well as from the stories. Sholem Aleichem left the questions of Khave's marriage and Tevye's expulsion from Anatevke unresolved. In Schwartz's film, Tevye and his two daughters and grandchildren make their way to Israel. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Khave stays with her husband, although they leave Anatevke. In a noble gesture, Fedye says he doesn't want to stay in a place of such inhumanity. Tevye and Golde plan to emigrate to America, a place that Tevye rejects outright in the original story.

Schwartz's film is an example of interwar Yiddish culture, which values Yiddish literature as part of the heritage of the modern, cultured Jew. As a film made on the eve of World War II, it reflects a concern on the part of American Jews for their fellow Jews, as well as their traditions, which are seen as imperiled. In contrast, *Fiddler on the Roof* reflects a postwar interpretation rooted in American culture (as opposed to Yiddish culture) and made for general American audiences by a later, more Americanized generation of Jews.

Both *Tevye der milkbiker* and *East and West* have as their themes the encounter of tradition and modernity. Their approaches are quite different, both because they are different genres – one a serious drama, the other satirical comedy – and were made at different times. Between 1923, when *East and West* was made, and 1939, when

Khave (to Tzeytl): *My body was there but my soul was here with you.*

Tevye: *Tseytl, we'll go to the Holy Land.*

Tseytl: *Why the Holy Land?*

Tevye: *Where else can I go? To America? What would I do there? They don't know my language and I don't know theirs.*

Tevye der milkbiker was filmed, much changed for the Jews of Eastern Europe. Antisemitic violence and the threat of war grew. Significantly, in *East and West*, there are no signs of danger or conflict with non-Jews; in fact, the only gentiles featured are the peasants who work in Brownstein's house. Unlike some of the other films in this series, this one can be quite painful to watch.

While you watch, consider:

- ◆ When does Tevye seem happiest?
- ◆ What is Tevye's attitude toward the priest and the other villagers?
- ◆ How does Khave's perspective change?
- ◆ Is Tevye a good father, a good husband?
- ◆ What drives Tevye?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ Can you imagine Tevye speaking any language other than Yiddish? What is it about the language that seems so appropriate for him?
- ◆ What do we mean when we say that Tevye has a “Jewish heart”?
- ◆ Is Tevye’s life made more simple – because he has few choices to make – or more difficult – because of the pain that ensues – by his unwavering faith?
- ◆ In the film, no other Jewish families are present. Does Tevye have a sense of Jewish community? Is it possible to live apart from other Jews and still be part of the community, part of the culture?
- ◆ How does Tevye’s relationship with his daughters compare with Morris Brown’s relationship to Molly in *East and West*?
- ◆ Could Tevye have stopped the marriage? Can parents in contemporary times prevent their sons and daughters from intermarriage?
- ◆ What aspects of Tevye’s beliefs, lifestyle, values have we preserved? What has been lost?

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING**Books and stories**

- ◆ Butwin, Julius and Frances. Favorite Tales of Sholem Aleichem. New York: Avanel, 1983.
- ◆ Halkin, Hillel. Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories. New York: Schocken Books, 1987.
- ◆ Lis, Abraham. Sholem Aleichem: His Life in Pictures. Tel Aviv: Beit Shalom Aleichem/Dvir, 1988.
- ◆ Kaufman, Mervyn. The Making of a Musical: Fiddler on the Roof. New York: Crown, 1971.
- ◆ Perl, Arnold. Tevye and His Daughters. New York: Dramatist Play Service, 1958.
- ◆ Waife-Goldberg, Marie. My Father, Sholom Aleichem. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.

Films

Fiddler on the Roof

Mirele Efros