

Stempenyu

by Sholem Aleichem

TRANSLATED BY DANIEL KENNEDY

In honor of my dear, kind grandfather, Reb Mendele Moykher-Sforim.

My dearest, faithful grandfather! My first Jewish novel, Stempenyu, which was written in honor of your dear self—is yours. It’s yours not just because I wrote it for you, but because you instilled in me the desire to write just such a novel in the first place.

In one of your letters, you said to me: “I would advise you not to write any novels, as your taste, your style is something else entirely, and above all, if there are novels to be found in the lives of our people, they are entirely different from those of other nations. One needs a firm grasp of this and must write accordingly.”

Your words bore deep into my brain, and I began to understand how different a Jewish love story needs to be from all other novels, because Jewish life in general, and the circumstances under which a Jew can love, are in no way similar to how they are for other nations. On top of which, the Jewish people has its own character, its own Jewish spirit with particular customs and habits that diverge significantly from other nations’. And it is precisely those national traits of ours, which remain always authentically Jewish, that must come to the fore in a Jewish novel if it is truly inspired by real life. I have learned this from you, and I wanted to express it through Rokhele, the pretty Jewish girl who plays the largest role in this novel, and through all the other characters who surround her. To what extent I succeeded, that’s another question, but my intention was to produce a Jewish novel the likes of which you rightly demand of every Jewish novelist.

Stempenyu is also yours, dear Grandfather, because the name is

yours and the idea was yours: while reading one of your recent works, I came across Stempenyu in passing, selling his love potion in little bottles to all the servants and maids . . . That was enough to stir memories of all the wonderful stories about Stempenyu I'd heard as a schoolboy. My imagination supplied the rest, spurring me on to write this novel.

In many places, in Lithuania for example, they have perhaps never heard of Stempenyu, and the very name may seem to them outlandish, but he is well known around here and all over the Glupsk region: from Mazepevke to Yehupets, not to mention in your villages of Gnilopyatsk, Tsviatshits, and Tuneyadevke—there every child knows who Stempenyu was, where he came from, and what his origins were.¹

But Stempenyu himself is not the most important thing. My intention with this novel was to create three characters, or protagonists, as they call them: the Jewish artist, Stempenyu, with his fiddle; the honest Jewish girl, Rokhele; and the Jewish wife, Freydl, with her enterprising spirit and her preoccupation with pennies—each with his or her own little world. Stempenyu, Rokhele, and Freydl: these are my illustrious heroes who take center stage, while all the others are but minor characters, who appear now and then but are mostly kept on the sidelines. Therefore I have only sketched them with a handful of words each, conserving all of my energy for the three heroes.

I believe that Jewish musicians, that is to say our klezmerim, represent a world unto themselves, and it would be worthwhile delving deeper into their lives than I have done in this present novel. But one would need your eye for that, dear Grandfather, your pen and your zeal.

Oh, where does one get such zeal, such deliberation? Where does one get such patience?

“Over a work”—you told me in another letter—“over a work, dear Grandson, one needs to sweat, one needs to labor, carving out each word individually; mark my words, you must keep carving, keep carving!”

Carving! That is precisely the problem with the youth of today: we never have any time, and we rush the entire work in one single breath, standing, as the saying goes, on one foot without stopping to ponder each thought, each separate word, without working on it and filing it

down, as you do. I know, dear Grandfather, I feel how necessary it was to rinse *Stempenyu* down numerous times. Of course, it wouldn't have been the same if you had written *Stempenyu*: in your hands he would have turned out quite differently. If you'd written it, dearest Grandfather, there would have been a story within the story, a subplot within a subplot.

You said in another letter, "I love when a canvas contains more than a pretty face—when it has life, ideas, and intelligence, like a living person. Besides florid language, a story should also have something to say."

You alone have uncovered the secret of creating images that contain two forms, a right side and a left, an upper part and a lower, so that out in the open there should also lie some hidden, inner core—it's for this reason, dear Grandfather, that you alone are the only true artist in our literature. Who could hope to compare himself to you? We, the youth, thank God whenever we manage to carry the story itself to term, without complications or deformities, and with all the necessary limbs of a literary creature.

Accept this gift, kindhearted Grandfather: my first Jewish novel, and may it be God's will that my *Stempenyu* should find favor in your eyes, and that you should take as much pride as you could wish for in your devoted grandson.

The author
Kiev, 1886

I. *Stempenyu's* Lineage

S*tempenyu* was a nickname of sorts he'd inherited from his father. His old man, God rest him, was a klezmer known as Berl Bass or Berl Stempener, after the village of Stempeni, not far from Mazepevke. He played the double bass and was also a decent *badkhn*, with a gift for rhymes. He was an inveterate swindler, who disguised himself as a beggar at every wedding. He would roll his eyes, could dance like a bear or imitate a woman in childbirth, screaming: "Granny, I swear on a pair of tefillin that it'll never happen again!" He was known to unexpectedly flood a house so that the men would be forced to roll up their trousers and the women would lift their skirts, or to play a hoax on the mother of

the bride, and all manner of other such pranks and japes.

Klezmer music had been in Stempenyu's family going back several generations. Berl Bass or Berl Stempener, as we already know, played the bass; his father, Reb Shmulik Trumpet, played the trumpet; his grandfather, Reb Fayvush Cymbaler, played the cymbalon, and his great-grandfather, Reb Ephraim Violin, well . . . In short, Stempenyu was the result of ten generations of klezmorim—and he was not in the least ashamed of it, as the simple laborer is sometimes ashamed of his lot. And was it any wonder? His name rang out in Mazepevke, as it did all over the world. It was no small thing to utter the name—Stempenyu!

Jews considered it a great privilege to hear Nisi Belzer sing, Gadik the Badkhn recite, and Stempenyu perform. You can be sure that Stempenyu was no simple musician; he wasn't just anybody, and no doubt it was with good reason that he had earned his reputation. We Jews are fond of listening to music and have a good grasp of melody—even our enemies would be the first to admit that—and yet on the other hand, we don't often get the opportunity to hear it. What do we have to celebrate, after all, for us to suddenly break into song and dance? Say what you will, though, we are still connoisseurs, experts in both singing and playing music, and in all manner of other things to boot. When a cantor comes to town we rush out to buy tickets, and what would a wedding be without klezmorim? And for that feeling when the time comes to drink the golden broth, and the band plays a song, usually not a happy one (the happy one comes later)—for that we'd give up a whole sackful of borscht. The audience sits in rapt awe while the band plays a sad song, a dirgeful *morlane*. The fiddle weeps, sinking to the lower strings, and the other musicians follow, in mournful accord. The audience grows melancholic, feeling preoccupied, quite pleasantly so, but preoccupied nonetheless. They are plunged deep in thought, eyes downcast, rubbing their fingers on their plates or absentmindedly rolling little crumbs of fresh challah in their hands, buried in their own sad thoughts, as no doubt everyone has worries—a Jew does not need to go looking for trouble. And the gloomy music mingles with the sad thoughts, and the sighing *tyokh-tyokh-tyokh* of the fiddle calls out to,

touches and finds an echo in the heart of each wedding guest. The heart itself, and particularly the Jewish heart, is a violin: you pluck the strings, teasing out various generally sad and gloomy songs . . . you just need to have a real musician on hand, a skilled klezmer, like Stempenyu was.

And oh, was Stempenyu skilled! He would grab his fiddle and with one pass of his bow—just one, mind you—the fiddle would begin to speak. What do I mean by “speak”? I mean literally, with words, with a tongue like, excuse the comparison, a living human being. Talking, arguing, singing mournfully in the Jewish fashion with such a wild cry from deep inside, from the very soul. Stempenyu would throw his head back to one side, his long, black locks of hair strewn over his broad shoulders. He would raise his dark, burning eyes, and that handsome, radiant face of his would suddenly grow deathly pale; another minute and—Stempenyu was no longer! You’d see nothing but a hand darting back and forth and hear various sounds. All manner of song flowed and all such sad, melancholy tones that they would touch you to the quick, tugging at the soul and causing untold damage to your health. The audience members were sapped of all energy, their limbs hanging limply. Jews sighed, moaned, and cried as their hearts filled up with emotion and their eyes welled up with tears. And Stempenyu? What about him? There’s no point in asking where he was in the world; he did his thing: *tyokh-tyokh-tyokh!* and that’s it! And once he’d finished playing, he would fling the fiddle to the ground and grab his chest, his eyes burning like a pair of havdalah candles, his handsome face as radiant as could be. The audience would rouse as though from a sweetly melancholic slumber and begin to express their enthusiasm with one voice. There would be a chorus of gasps as they applauded, chirped, and marveled, unable to praise him highly enough.

“Stempenyu! Oh, Stempenyu!”

And the women? What is there to say about the women? It’s doubtful if as many tears are shed on Yom Kippur as would be shed during one of Stempenyu’s performances. Even the destruction of the Temple itself does not warrant the amount of weeping the women indulged in while Stempenyu played.

“May God grant that I’ll be able to hire Stempenyu for my youngest daughter’s wedding, Lord above!”

So implored the women, wiping their swollen red eyes and blowing their noses, and as they did so, their pearls, gold earrings, rings, brooches, chains, and other Jewish adornments shone and sparkled like fire.

But let’s not forget about the girls, the demoiselles, who were struck quite motionless, pinned like mannequins to their seats, gazing at Stempenyu and his fiddle, unable to move a muscle, unable to blink, while here and there—somewhere beneath their corsets—little hearts beat: *tick-tock-tick*, oftentimes letting slip a hidden sigh . . .

¹. These are all fictional places from the works of Sholem Aleichem and Mendele Moykher-Sforim. *Yehupets* refers to Kiev.

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