

Bontshe Shvayg in Lethbridge

Teaching Yiddish
Literature in the
Canadian Bible Belt

by Goldie Morgentaler



I teach Jewish literature to non-Jews. That statement may not seem very remarkable; after all, I also teach Victorian literature to non-Victorians and nineteenth-century literature to students born in the late twentieth century. From a pedagogical point of view, how much difference is there?

Let me try to answer this in a roundabout way, beginning with two histories: my own and that of Lethbridge, Alberta. Lethbridge is a small city of 80,000, spectacularly located within sight of the Rockies in the

I. L. Peretz, *Far kleyn un groys* (For Small and Large). Vol. 6 of *Ale verk* (Complete Works). Vilne: Kletskin, [1925?]

southern part of what has been, until the recent economic downturn, the richest

province in Canada. I came to Lethbridge in 1997, armed with a Ph.D. on Dickens, to teach nineteenth-century British and American literature. I also had an M.A. in Jewish studies and had taught Yiddish and published on Yiddish literature, but my background in Jewish studies seemed to have no relevance to my work at the University of Lethbridge. My courses focused solely on canonical British and American literature, never anything Jewish.

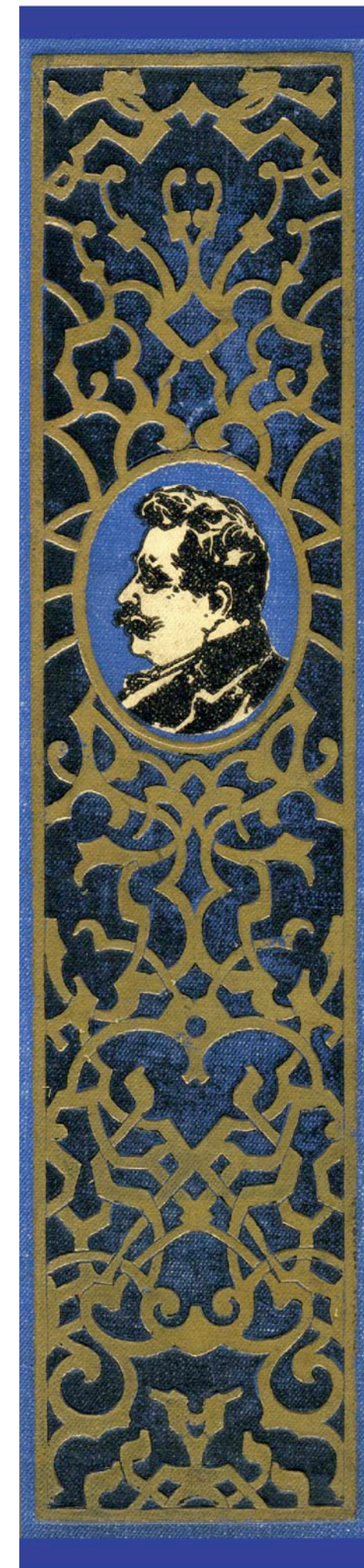
This was my fault. I was afraid.

In eastern Canada, Albertans are often stereotyped as red-necks, partly perhaps out of jealousy at their oil wealth and partly because agriculture – especially cattle farming – is the major source, next to oil, of the province's wealth. Alberta is also by far the most conservative Canadian province, as well as the most religious. And southern Alberta is the Canadian Bible belt, home to a large variety of denominations and sects: the Hutterites, the Mennonites, the Seventh-Day Adventists. The Catholic Church and the Dutch Reform Church are strong presences in Lethbridge, and even stronger is the Mormon Church. The University of Lethbridge began life as a Mormon institution.

I am a Montrealer. My understanding of Alberta had been shaped by the province's election of several Social Credit governments in the 1970s and by the Keegstra case of the 1980s. Social Credit was a political and economic movement that was ideologically hostile to Jews; the Keegstra case concerned Jim Keegstra, a high school teacher in Eckville, Alberta, who was convicted of a hate crime after teaching, among other things, that the Holocaust was a fabrication. The case caused an uproar and left eastern Canadian Jews like me with the impression that Alberta was a rural no-man's land of anti-Jewish hostility.

So when I arrived in Lethbridge in the late 1990s I was convinced that Jewish culture was unwelcome, or at best not of great interest, to the vast majority of Albertans, and hence to the majority of students at the University of Lethbridge. This conviction was reinforced by the small number of Jews in Lethbridge itself: even in the university, the Jewish professors could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Lethbridge has, in fact, been my first experience of living in a community where there are hardly any Jews.

It was not always so. Lethbridge was once home to quite a large Jewish community. Michael Wex, the best-selling author of several books on Yiddish, grew up in Lethbridge and wrote about the experience in a book called *Shlepping the Exile*. But from the 1970s on the Jewish community declined precipitously, leaving the city with a minuscule Jewish



presence and a synagogue that barely has a congregation.

For all these reasons, I thought a full-term course on Jewish literature would not draw students or would draw the wrong kind of students. Still, I was tempted.

I tested the waters by teaching I. L. Peretz's classic story "Bontshe Shvayg" to my first-year introductory literature class. Set in the nineteenth century during tsarist times, "Bontshe Shvayg" is the story of a man whose life is one long narrative of suffering and injustice, from the moment the mohel's hand slips during his circumcision to the day that he dies unknown and unmourned in the workhouse and is buried in an unmarked pauper's grave. Bontshe's work as a porter carrying heavy loads often goes unpaid. His only child dies, his wife runs off with another man. Spat upon and despised, he suffers endless injury, humiliation, and injustice – yet he never complains, never raises his voice against God or man. On

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Earth nobody notices his passing. But in Heaven there is a joyful to-do when Bontshe's soul ascends after his death, because here is that rare thing: a genuinely saintly soul. During the obligatory trial to see if he should be allowed into Heaven, the prosecuting angel has nothing to say against Bontshe; not even the smallest sin can be laid to his account. Therefore the voice of God decrees that Bontshe's soul should have whatever it desires; he has only to ask and it will be given. With all the vast resources of Heaven his for the asking, what is Bontshe's request? Nothing but a roll with butter every morning. The story ends with the heavenly prosecutor laughing.

The students understood the story well enough, but many understood it in Christian terms. Certainly the story is a kind of parable, and a number of interpretations are possible. But what is not open to interpretation is the fact that Bontshe is Jewish. The story mentions his circumcision, his bar mitsva, and the fact that he is forced by anti-Semitic regulations to walk in the gutter while carrying his loads rather than on the sidewalks. Yet time and again when I have given students this story to read, some have told me that Bontshe is literally the figure of Jesus, or that he is a symbol of Christ. One student even decided that Bontshe Shvayg is simply a Russian version of the name Jesus Christ.

The connection between submission and sanctity, which is at the heart of this story, also caused dissent and confusion among my students. Peretz's story clearly questions the religious assumption that a life lived without complaint will be rewarded in Heaven. This concept is common to both Judaism and Christianity. But if I suggested to my students that there is a saintly aspect to Bontshe's passivity they resisted the notion, because in Christianity saintliness is often attached to performing miracles and Bontshe performs none. Even the term "Christian" caused problems, because, as I quickly learned, certain branches of Protestantism do not recognize Catholics as Christians.

These kinds of confusions and misapprehensions – my own and my students' – gave me pause. If I taught an entire course on this material, I would have to start from scratch, explaining the most basic differences between Judaism and Christianity. When, in 2006, I finally decided to give it a try – first having to persuade the curriculum committee to allow Yiddish literature in translation to be taught in the English department, given that no one in any other department had the expertise – compiling the syllabus proved far more complex than preparing a Victorian literature course.

How does one teach Yiddish literature without teaching something about the history of the countries in which it was created – mainly Poland, Ukraine, Russia – and the history of the Jews in those countries? How does one teach Jewish literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without teaching about anti-Semitism, which was pervasive throughout this region at this time and sanctioned by the government? How many references to the persecution of the Jews in Eastern Europe are too many references? There is no way to avoid the topic of suffering. But how much gloom is too much gloom? How many pogrom stories should one teach? How many novels about the Holocaust?

Yiddish literature is permeated by unexplained references to Jewish practices and rituals, to biblical liturgy, and to Ashkenazic folk beliefs, references that are never explained because the authors assumed that their readers knew what they meant. Thus Bontshe Shvayg is never directly identified as Jewish: references to circumcision and bar mitsva make his nationality and religion clear, but only if a reader knows that these are Jewish practices. Similarly in Lamed Shapiro's pogrom story "The Cross," it is crucially important that the female protagonist Minna is *not* Jewish, but the text never overtly states that she is a Russian gentile. To Yiddish

readers Minna's blue eyes and light-colored hair would have given this fact away. Also, Minna's father is a commissar in the tsarist government, and in an anti-Semitic society like prerevolutionary Russia no Jew would ever have held so high a position. But in order to know this, one would need to know the history of the Jews in Russia.

When I finally did start teaching the class, I was in for a few surprises. Not only had most of my students never heard the word "pogrom," they were also unaware of the long history of Jewish persecution in Europe. Most

of them thought that anti-Semitism began and ended with the Holocaust. My assumption that this history was widely known – gleaned from my early years as a student at the Jewish People's School in Montreal and from having lived much of my life in large Jewish communities – proved to be totally unfounded. Most non-Jews, I have come to realize – and not just my young Albertan students – know little about the history of the Jews. Nor are they necessarily aware of anti-Semitism's roots in Christianity. From Sholem Aleichem to Peretz and beyond, canonical Yiddish literature does not mince words when it comes to identifying the tormentors of Jews as Christians.

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Richard Shiloh, "Anatevka."
Collection of the Yiddish
Book Center, donated
by Dr. Eli Porth.

with them from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Some of the problems I had anticipated solved themselves. I had worried that the many biblical and Hebraic allusions in the text might put off the students and that I would have to spend most of the class time explaining these. To my delight, Sholem Aleichem and Tevye proved that good literature is good literature: despite being unsure of the meaning of certain words and customs, the students related well to the stories' generational conflicts. The most interesting snag revolved around an issue of cultural specificity.

Sholem Aleichem's Tevye stories are set in the Ukraine during tsarist times. Each one of Tevye's three eldest daughters rebels against her father in a different way, and all the rebellions revolve around marriage. The rebellion of the first two daughters is relatively mild, and Tevye forgives them with only minor qualms. But the third daughter, Chava, marries a gentile. In order to do this, she is forced by Russian law to convert to Christianity. This Tevye cannot forgive.

The fact that he cannot forgive her, that in accordance with Jewish law he pronounces her dead and forbids his wife and children to mention her name again, goes against the grain of every modern liberal impulse. Why should Chava not marry the man she loves? Why must she sacrifice her father's love and the love of her family in order to do so? When I ask my students if Tevye is right not to forgive Chava, they invariably say no. In arguing with her father, Chava in fact makes a very strong case for loving someone without regard to their ethnic or religious origin. It is hard not to agree with her, especially from the perspective of tolerant, liberal-minded, multi-racial, twenty-first-century Canada.

But in tsarist Russia, marrying outside the faith meant literally throwing in your lot with the oppressor. The American-Jewish writers who transmuted Sholem Aleichem's Tevye stories into *Fiddler on the Roof* changed the plot in order to make the Christians in this episode more sympathetic: Chava's gentile husband accompanies her and her family into exile. But in Sholem Aleichem's original, Chava leaves her husband when her family is thrown out of their home, choosing to follow her family into exile rather than stay in her marriage. Only then does her father forgive her. The implication is clear: intermarriage, in a setting in which Jews are persecuted, constitutes betrayal.

Even without the complication of anti-Semitism, Chava's story raises troubling questions for a minority group that worries constantly about the dangers posed by assimilation. How does a minority culture maintain itself if it tolerates intermarriage? Will intermarriage with members of the dominant culture lead to the eventual extinction of the group as a whole? Are both the religion and the culture more secure, ironically, in countries where Jews are persecuted or isolated, because there they are less likely to merge with the mainstream?

What makes Jewish literature universal is the fact that these kinds of questions can be generalized to non-Jewish minority literatures as well.

Studying what is specific to one culture is often the first step toward understanding many cultures. And that, finally, is the best reason, I think, for studying literature altogether.

The first time I taught the Jewish literature course was at the second-year level and it drew 14 students, not one of whom was Jewish. I soon realized that the course needed to be taught at a more advanced level and offered it as a third-year course. To my great surprise and delight, it drew 30 students – again, not one was Jewish. Both times the students were curious and wished to expand their horizons rather than simply fulfill their credit requirements. Some were seeking to supplement their Religious Studies classes at the university and had a little previous knowledge. Some came from strongly Christian backgrounds and were not confused by references in the texts to biblical figures; others had no religious education whatsoever. I only once had a student who seemed to enjoy baiting me with anti-Jewish remarks, but he seldom came to class and eventually dropped out. For the most part, all the students seemed interested and engaged, with the result that these became my favorite classes to teach.

I did occasionally get strange comments and questions. For instance: if a man is already circumcised and he wants to convert to Judaism, must he be circumcised a little more? One student wrote in a paper that in Judaism death is an unknown part of the religion. Another, writing on I. B. Singer's "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," formulated the plot complication this way: "Unfortunately, Yentl's sex prevents her from openly studying the sacred texts with trained professionals." The term "trained professionals" for learned rabbis and yeshiva scholars seems very funny to me, although, of course, the statement is not inaccurate.

But these kinds of bloopers and misunderstandings are common to undergraduates of all backgrounds. I don't think it mattered that my students were not Jewish. Yes, I did spend a great deal of class time explaining details I might have been tempted to pass over with Jewish students. And I occasionally passed over things I should have explained because I assumed they were widely known – such as what matzo is. Yet I was constantly impressed that many of my advanced students knew *more* than I expected.

In the end it does not matter whether students are Jewish or not Jewish. What matters is that they be sympathetic to another point of view, that they be open to a reality radically different from their own. And it is the function of literature – and of teaching – to bridge the gap between realities. ♦

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