

Acceptance Speech for the Sydney Taylor Award 2006 Younger Readers Category for
Sholom's Treasure : How Sholom Aleichem Became a Writer

by Erica Silverman

Good evening! Sholom aleichem! A shaynem dank – a heartfelt thank you to the Association of Jewish Libraries, to the many who labored to bring this conference into being, and to the Sydney Taylor Awards committee for this thrilling and unexpected honor that adds Sholom's Treasure to the impressive list of Sydney Taylor recipients. Thank you to Mordicai Gerstein for portraying Sholom and his world so vividly that they seem to dance off the page. What an extraordinary and unexpected honor this is! During the four years I spent researching and revising Sholom's Treasure, I was not thinking about awards. Mostly I was wondering if there would be any audience at all for such a book beyond a handful of old Yiddishists. And feeling guilty for not knowing Yiddish, I was sure any true Yiddishist would reject the book because it is not written in Yiddish.

So who would read this book? When I told people I was writing about Sholom Aleichem, I was often met with vague smiles and glazed eyes. This would lead me to say something about, “you know, the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*... maybe you saw the movie?” That usually - but not always - met with better results. It was disheartening. But it made me resolve to introduce Sholom Aleichem to a new generation of children.

Sholom Aleichem captured the voice of East European Jewry at a crucial historical moment, when there was still, despite the usual religious, economic, and partisan divides, a cohesive voice to be captured. His was the voice of Yiddishkeit, a

culture that would later be cut off in the midst of an incredible flowering, a culture murdered along with the millions who spoke its language.

Jewish children growing up today are three or four or five generations removed from the immigrant bubbes and zaydes for whom Sholom Aleichem was a cultural hero. Assimilation has been more successful than anyone could have imagined. I've spoken to groups of Jewish children who don't know what I mean when I refer to "the old country." And as the generation of immigrants and survivors leaves us, the loss of Yiddishkeit is more imminent. At the turn of the century, Sholom Aleichem was widely known and celebrated in the United States and throughout the world. Jewish families typically read his stories aloud Friday evenings. It is rumored that when Samuel Clemens met him, he introduced himself as the American Sholom Aleichem. When Sholom Aleichem died in 1916, more than 100,000 mourners lined the sidewalks of New York for his funeral, the largest funeral at that time in the city's history. During the Holocaust, Yiddish actors recited from Sholom Aleichem's works for concentration camp inmates. Professor David G. Roskies said, "If you turn the writings of Sholom Aleichem into an integrated curriculum, you've given your students a lifelong foundation in Jewish folklore, history, language, and culture."

Of course, I am neither alone nor unique in wanting to see a continuity of Yiddish culture. This concern is best embodied in the inspiring work of Aaron Lansky and his dedicated colleagues at the National Yiddish Book Center. Lansky speaks of Yiddish literature as "the last and best bridge we have between two great epochs of Jewish history." Librarians preserve history, thereby maintaining the bridge between past and future. As a novice librarian with a newly minted MLIS, I have greater respect and

appreciation for this important work than ever before. The librarians at the New York Public Library made it possible for me to access a book written by one of Sholom Aleichem's brothers, a book published in the Soviet Union in 1939. Access to this rare book was a dream come true. (As an aside, it was my mother, who copied the entire book and mailed it to me – a shaynem dank to Mom!).

Every year, hundreds of great, good, and not-so-good books are published, and it's easy for individual works to get lost in the shuffle. Librarians play a pivotal role in rescuing from potential obscurity those books that might be overlooked because their subject matter is foreign, challenging, or not in keeping with current trends. Jewish librarians do this specifically for books of Jewish content, sifting yearly through a vast array of offerings. Clearly, it is a labor of love. And it makes all the difference in the world to a writer. Will parents and teachers discover my work? Will they share it with children and tell others about it? Will they be able to find it in their library? Librarians make all that happen...and more. That is why this award from librarians - from Jewish librarians - is such an honor. And more than an honor, it represents an opportunity... for it ensures that this book will get into the hands of readers who in all likelihood would have passed it by. It is an opportunity to bring Sholom Aleichem back into our collective consciousness and to bring Sholom Aleichem's work to a new generation of readers. Sholom Aleichem's writing, culturally specific, but universal in its wisdom, is a treasure. The Sydney Taylor award is a gift and an honor that I will treasure forever. Thank you. A shaynem dank. Sholom aleichem.