

Moscow Journal

Putting Sholom Aleichem on a Belated Pedestal

By ALISON SMALE

MOSCOW, Jan. 4 — In a city where big and brash are the preferred order of the day, it is a small bijou of a monument, tucked away in a snowy courtyard just off one of old Moscow's most picturesque streets.

Peering over his glasses, with his hair and coat seemingly flapping in the wind, stands Sholom Aleichem, chronicler of 19th-century Jewish life in the Pale and long something of a nonperson in his native land.

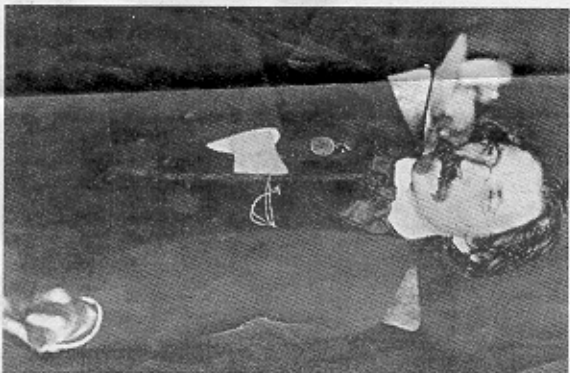
This holiday season, on Dec. 26, it was finally time to honor the man hailed by Moscow's evening newspaper that day as "the great Russian Jew" and a "sagacious writer."

With the ambassador of Israel, Nathan Meron, in attendance, the monument was unveiled, revealing the writer atop a pedestal in the shape of a Torah embellished with bas-reliefs of some of his most famous characters: Teyve the Dairyman, with his dreams of being a rich man, the irrepressible orphan Mott, and Rosa and Leo, artists from the tales "The Wandering Stars."

The monument stands not far from what, decades ago, was the Jewish Theater, where the Soviet Union's most beloved Jewish actor, Solomon Mikhoels, played Teyve before dying in what is widely believed to be a carefully arranged car accident during Stalin's post-World War II campaign against the Jews.

Just down the street from the statue there is what was for Soviet decades a school and is now a Hassidic synagogue.

Although the monument itself has a graceful simplicity, and at the unveiling Ambassador Meron spoke of



Sholom Aleichem in 1908, six years before he left for New York.

how the fine humor and vivid narrative of Sholom Aleichem had touched generations of readers around the world, there was nothing straightforward about honoring this Jewish writer in a country where anything is complicated and anti-Semitism has deep roots.

Sholom Aleichem was born Solomon Rabinovich in 1859 in the town of Pereyaslavl in the Poltava area of what is now Ukraine. He started writing at the age of 20, publishing his first short stories under his pen name in 1883. In 1914 he emigrated to New York, where he died in 1916.

His work, translated into English and several other languages, captured the humor, wisdom, humiliation, pride and poverty of the Jewish Pale much as the early work of Marc Chagall depicted the same

world in painting. Known as the "bard of the poor," Sholom Aleichem always took their side, and begged to be buried among them when he died. "Life is a dream for the wise," he wrote, "a game for the fool, a comedy for the rich, a tragedy for the poor."

There is a monument to Sholom Aleichem in Ukraine's capital, Kiev. But Yuri Chernov, the 66-year-old sculptor who created the new bronze statue, said that despite swift support from the mayor of Moscow, Yuri M. Luzhkov, it had taken him seven years to realize his long-cherished dream of erecting a statue in the Russian capital.

"I've sculpted 29 monuments," he said in an interview, "but I never encountered anything like this." He emphasized that there was no outright resistance, but not much backing either. "Many people supported me," he said, "but few helped."

Mr. Chernov, who is Jewish, said he believed that Moscow simply needed the monument, particularly on a spot that is close to cherished statues of Pushkin and other writers and which seemed to him and the architect, Garry Kopans, to be "somehow connected to Jewish culture."

Mr. Chernov, like many Jews here, sounded simultaneously proud and circumspect about Jewish identity. "I emphasize always he is not a Jewish writer, but a Russian writer who wrote about Jews," he said of Sholom Aleichem, who wrote in Yiddish. "After all, we don't call Gogol a Ukrainian writer."

According to the Moscow news media, a police unit has been tasked with guarding the monument against vandalism, although the sculptor philosophically told the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* that if the statue was de-

stroyed, "I will simply cast a second one and put that up instead."

Such stoicism, bred of centuries of repression and unpredictability, is particularly pronounced among those who, like Mr. Chernov, survived Stalinism. His father was shot in 1939, and his mother died of blood poisoning. He called the monument something of "a family affair."

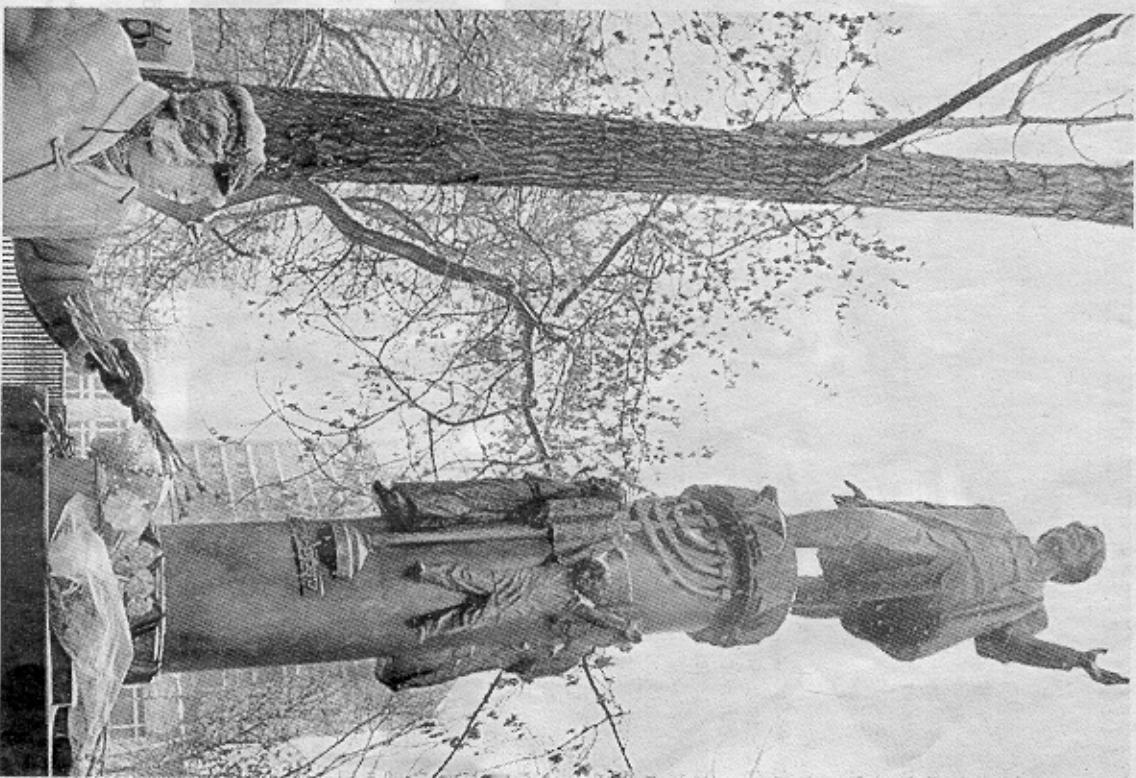
Orphaned like Mott, he said he identified with the fictional character and adopted as his own Mott's slogan that it was good to be an orphan. Eventually Mr. Chernov and his two brothers were adopted by a family friend who he said was the model for his Teyve.

Sholom Aleichem's granddaughter, Bel Kaufman, a writer who lives in Manhattan, gave rare photographs of her grandfather to help the sculptor create a good likeness.

Eager to complete the monument but lacking clout and money, Mr. Chernov turned to a well-known variety singer, Iosif Kobzon, to help find a sponsor. As the back of the round pedestal now proclaims, his patron turned out to be Aleksandr Tarantsev, a Russian businessman whose sudden wealth and shady reputation do not bother the sculptor but apparently have added to the monument's cool reception among some Muscovites.

On a recent bitter afternoon, as winter dusk lowered and the hour for a holiday drink thus neared, two men scuttled past the statue, their jacket pockets stuffed with beer bottles.

One, a 32-year-old who would identify himself only as Zhenya, jerked his head in the direction of the statue. "He's a good writer, but I'm really irritated by the sponsor," he said. "I don't think he has anything to do with culture. I hope the monument stays, but that with time



Oleg Buldakov/Tar-Tass

After the unveiling of a statue of Sholom Aleichem in Moscow on Dec. 26, the sculptor, Yuri Chernov, laid flowers at its base.

the name of the sponsor will somehow disappear."

Even that mixed blessing, it seems, was not universally shared, at least not by two well-dressed elderly women who passed by. Approached for their opinion, one said simply, "It's a Jewish monument." "And we really don't need it," added her companion. As the first woman tugged at her sleeve to end the conversation, the second made her message plain. "We don't love them," she said.