

Allegories of Exile in a World Gone Mad: Mendele, Sholem Aleichem and Tsvetkov

16 Nov. 1987

I. Meditation on the Role of Ships, Trains & Airplanes in the Modern Jew. Experience

A. Ships, planes = vehicles of redemption

St. Louis
Altalena -
Saul Friedlander's
When Memory Comes

1. Parents (my own), grandparents, great grandparents came over here by boat

those left behind dreamt of a Yisroel to America much later - the Yisroel carried out mostly by boat
Remember The Good Ship Exodus!

2. In our own day & age: airplanes

- a) Operation Magic Carpet in early 60s
- b) Operation Moses 1980s →

B. Trains = vehicles of dislocation, exile, genocide

1. In the Holocaust

- a) the oslojole - the woman on W 77th who jumped

- b) the Hungarian transport turned back by a cable to Eichmann from Mayor of Vienna

- c) the trains in Shoah: ~~preparing~~ Beast & Apocalypse

2. In tsarist Russia

- a) harbinger of change - belated industrial rev. collapse of shetl economy

- b) even the seats were 4...6! (linen/wool)

- c) new form of segregation - most Jews travelled 3rd class

- d) made popovs exportable

Thus the images of cattle cars crammed w/ human transports obviously eclipse everything that came before

Let us try, nonetheless, to recapture the initial shock thru 2 classics of mod. Jew. fiction -

- a) ~~re-experience~~ reexperience the terror of exile w/ warning & trains
- b) discover ~~how~~ brilliant ways in /w/ challenge was met

Between Abram / SA

- A. Mendele = a deliberately anachronism
off the beaten track
faced w/ new sociopolitical reality - lit / fig "Outside the Pole"
∴ must leave most of the talking to Reb Moshe
old strategies of survival look grotesque when seen from within
look courageous when viewed from without

VII A's legacy

- A. How to cut hist down to size: everything anchored in biblical past
1. train = vehicle of history
 2. flood = evil unleashed by mod. anti-S
 - 3. Torah = survival mechanism in a world gone mad
 - 4. Shem / Japheth = fate of persecuted minorities

B. 3rd-class train compartment

1. The Jew Pole of settlement in microcosm miniature
2. Where old world (Mendele) meets New
3. Where Jew. intimacy can still yield useful insights into group survival
4. Train = portable ghetto <165, 170>

VIII SA's or Grevé - / 12 Nov

A. His bleakest work

1. written mostly 1909-10
 - a) near-fatal attitude of TB Personal crisis
 - b) himself in exile
2. period of political reaction
 - a) failure of 1905 rev.
 - b) Russia lost war w/ Japan
 - c) new wave of pogroms 1905/1906
3. vast panorama of decay
 - a) blackmail, suicide, bankruptcy
 - b) police raids, draft exemptions, draft quotas

B. Tales of the "ש"ג"ר" <184-86>

1. a "Jew" train: Strzygler spends or sharpshooter experience
2. cuts thru ghetto heartland
3. haven of safety in a dangerous world

The Slowpoke Express:
Technology Gone Amok in Sholem Aleichem's World
14 September 1997

I. Meditation on Ship, Trains, and Airplanes in Modern Jewish Experience

As part of a larger retrospective on the role of technology in 20th century:
most turbulent, tragic of any since the 1st century CE

A. THESIS: Ships and more recently airplanes have been kind to the Jews.

Unlike Blacks, Jews were never bound & shackled & shipped as slaves from the Old World to the New.

The search for Jewish ROOTS does not have the back hole of a slave ship lying at its center.

We immigrated from poverty and discrimination to opportunity and freedom aboard steerage that brought millions of others to these shores.

Those millions left behind dreamt of nothing more fervently than being sent a shifskarte, a boat ticket to America.

Yiddish vaudeville repertoire included a few numbers about the sinking of the **Titanic**, but in Jewish collective memory, the ships that never made it were forever upstaged by those that did.

When Katherine Ann Porter immortalized the infamous voyage of the St. Louis of 193_ she borrowed the Ship of Fools from German, not from Jewish literary history.

And while the sinking of the Altalena off the coast of Tel Aviv on Ben Gurion's orders remains for Saul Friedlander the climax of his personal odyssey in When Memory Comes,

Leon Uris's good ship Exodus remains the beacon for Soviet Jews who are now flocking to the ancient homeland in unprecedented numbers.

Since **Operation Magic Carpet** airlifted Yemenite Jews to Israel in the early 1950s, immigrants have been coming almost exclusively by plane.

As the Ethiopian Jews were brought on **Operation Moses** thirty years later.

Even **Operation Jonathan** at Entebbe airport had a happy end on July 4, 1976 for everyone but its commanding officer, thirty-year-old Jonathan Netanyahu.

For the sorely tested Jews, ships and airplanes continue to be vehicles of redemption.

B. Trains = vehicles of dislocation, exile, genocide

1. In the Holocaust

a) Beasts of the Apocalypse

in Katzenelson [QUOTE]

n Claude Lanzmann's SHOAH

b) שפרינגערס legendary exploits

Appelfeld

the lady from 77th Street who jumped

c) the Hungarian transport turned back by a cable to Eichmann from the

Mayor of Vienna

2. In Tsarist Russia

a) harbingers of change; belated industrial rev.

collapse of shtetl economy

b) even the seats were treyf (linen/wool)

c) new form of segregation; most Jews traveled 3rd class

d) made pogroms exportable

The images of cattle cars crammed w/human cargo obviously eclipse everything that came before

We must try, nonetheless, to recapture the initial shock

As we look ahead with fear/trembling toward a new millennium, sure to bring even greater upheavals

As we watch the profound changes that technology has wrought in our lives even in the past decade alone

we must try to relive, revisit, re-experience both the terrors of exile with the coming of the trains

and the extraordinary range of human response that met the challenge of technology head-on

How? Through the classics of modern Jewish writing.

RAILROAD STORIES

I. The Train as a Vehicle for History

A. SHEM AND JAPETH ON THE TRAIN (1890)

his 1st trip other than on horse and buggy
 frightening encounter w/political anti-S.
 because this lies outside his ken
 therefore leaves the speaking to "Reb Moshe"
 his guide to modernity

B. 3rd-class compartment = microcosm of Russian-Jewish exile

Abram. still trying to wrest ironic consolation
 searching for a political solution on the scale of Jewish-gentile relations
 Japheth studying the Torah of Survival from Shem
 Jews = expert in exilic life

II. Sholem Aleichem's Unique Twist

A. Train as storytelling setting

all-male subculture
 replaces the besmedresh
 dozens of chance encounters
 no long-term relationships
 master raconteurs -- and tricksters -- can thrive here

B. Train tale as special genre

structure tied to travel: interruptions, interlocutions

truncated plots; stories-without-an-end

ea train favors its own kind of story

Slowpoke vs. commercial train

subject matter [QUOTE 61] litany of Jewish woes

SA himself in exile

[QUOTE xxxiv] letter to Noah Zabludovski, Sept. 1909

געשיכטע: "history" and story

cutting History down to size

III. The Railroad Stories

A. The original series of "Railroad Stories," 1909-10

serialized in NY and Russian-Yiddish press

the heart of darkness

far removed from the shtetl

breakdown of communication

his very bleakest work

Schocken Library combines it w/Tevye

B. Tales of the **Slowpoke Express** (3/20)

this line serves an exclusively Jewish clientele

cf. LI RR

does not link any imp. commercial centers

off the beaten track (184)

Jewish hopes shattered once more (185)

much slower pace that allows for...

2 "miracle tales"

IV. Miracle of Hoshana Rabba

A. Introduction

domestication + Judaization of technology
 comic use of Russian terminology; the platzform
 all the breakdowns & mix-ups still result from human error
 oasis of safety
 Jews with plenty of time on their hands
 more traditional tale can therefore be told
 thesis: no catastrophe can happen here!
 narrator stretched out "vi baym tatn in vayngortn"

B. ACT I:

Scene 1: Prologue, time & place; bewtixt & between
 לוי in ironic synch w/train schedule
 Scene 2: Exposition of conflict, characters

ACT II: The Confrontation

Scene 1: Berl Vinegar;
 Scene 2: Panic & pandemonium;
 how 2 telegrams turn it into cosmic disaster

ACT III: Jew vs. Priest (Berl takes over narration; on board)

elemental confrontation
 Man vs. Man
 Scene 1: 1st dialogue w/priest on value of life
 Scene 2: 2nd dialogue on fate & divine providence
 Jew emerges as moral victor
 Scene 3: dénouement: train slows down; Berl gets the last word
 priest about to acknowledge something

Scene 4: happy end

COMMENTARY:

Berl's position: mixture of fatalism + optimism

very close to SA's own

you are forbidden to take your own life

no matter how desperate the situation

doing God's will = בעל כורחך אתה חי

miracle: frame tale = parody of a train crash

complete w/telegrams, wild rumors, near rioting

slapstick quality

imbedded tale: serious, serious moral-theological parable

in which the Jew is victorious

Berl's verbal victory precedes his discovery that he possessed the technical know-how to rescue them both from death

C. The Wedding that Came in without its Band

V. Jews, Trains, and History

A. The Good News

some of the trains can still be domesticated

"miracles" can still be wrested from the inexorable forces of history

these stories can still become part of Jewish collective memory

B. The Bad News

once History is harnessed to technology, it is bound to run out of control

then mass communication will spread the panic still faster, further

leveling effect: priest refuses to treat him as an individual

C. Resolution: helpless in the face of history

human beings are still unlimited in their ability to respond

faith & fatalism can help maintain one's sense of self

history CAN be cut down to size

"So why, you ask, did we recite Kedusha before trying to make the getaway? Why Kedusha, you ask, and not a chapter from Psalms? The answer is simple! In the Kedusha, when you get to the Holy, Holy, Holy, you ~~get~~ lift up on your toes and you jump three times, and that's ~~what's~~ called shpringen kedusha. So in order to better jump from the ~~train~~^{train}, do you see what I mean, we jumped Kedusha first, and with God's help, I'm here to tell the tale. And that's where the ~~x~~ name shpringers comes from, too!"

Adapted from Seyfer Bilgorzy p. 262

Quoted by Nachman Blumental Myical Thinking ^{Among the Jews} During the Nazi Occupation
Yiddish Studies 5 (1963), 230-31 Also Shmuel 78-9

A gift to my students in Lit. 5217x from

David J. Runkles

The rush hour regulars on the 5:07 to Great Neck -- with me in the middle -- were really being pushed to the limit. "Due to mechanical failure" the train had pulled out of Penn Station ten minutes late, then the air conditioning went, and then the lights. The poker game played on attaché cases behind me never got off the ground. The argument about Arabs and Jews coming from two seats in front of me got lowered almost to a whisper. It was so hot and dark that we were already at Bayside before the bundle of sweat with his battered satchel squeezed in next to me finally managed to get my attention.

"I'd know you anywhere," he said as his face lit up a tired smile. "I read your English column now in the Forward, though I liked the old one, in Yiddish, so much better. Too bad about Yiddish, isn't it? Anyway, I'm jumping down at the next station and I want you to remember me, Berl Esikmakher is my name, and what I went through in the war.

"I want to tell you, Mr. Sholem Aleichem, where the name shpringer comes from, because I may be the only one alive who knows. It happened to me, Berl Esikmakher -- my grandfather, may his spilled blood be avenged -- made vinegar for the whole town -- when they rounded us up, the Jews of Bilgoray, and loaded us unto a convoy bound for Belzec. (That was the place for killing Jews, you know, not far from Lublin.) The door of the cattle car was locked and sealed. The only fanlight was covered with iron bars. So the people crowded in the car broke the grating and some of them prepared to jump. It was very risky. Those

trying to escape could easily fall under the wheels or be shot by the Germans positioned on the roof. Then, just as the group of us was getting ready to jump, Yosl Yunever says, 'Jews, its time to davn Minha!' and those of us, he says, who were going to jump, should first recite the Kedusha prayer. (It was early for afternoon prayers but the car was so dark we had lost track of time.) And so, are you listening, we all said the Kedusha together and then went into a huddle to decide who should be the first to jump."

The air conditioning went on but the main set of lights continued to falter. My neighbor moved his battered satchel a little closer to the aisle.

"So why, you ask, did we recite Kedusha before trying to make the getaway? Why Kedusha, you ask, and not a chapter from Psalms? The answer is simple! In the Kedusha, when you get to the 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' what do you do? You get on your toes and jump three times, and that's called shpringen kedusha. So in order to better jump from the train, do you see what I mean, we jumped the Kedusha first, and with God's help, I'm here to tell the tale. And that's where the name shpringer comes from too!"

9. The Train

I Abramovitch

- a) extended cf of carriage $\leftrightarrow$ train travel
- b) train as exile : trans temporal
- c) vehicle of history
- d) moving community - on - wheels : creating gemeinschaft in the midst of dislocation
- e) equilibrium reestablished thru Torah of Survival

II SA

- a) try old strategies : bribing the Police Inspector
- b) hooligans by train vs Cossacks on horseback - ^{no longer localized} violence can be ^{imported}
- c) equilibrium reestablished by a "miracle" — human error
will we be as lucky next time?

III Katzenbach

- a) trains of the Great Deportation
 - b) devouring beasts : vehicle of mass murder
 - c) only witness to the End
- use of personification heightens the terror — we know they can't talk $\rightarrow$ new Holocaust archetype : systematic, blind, deaf, metal monsters working inexorably

* MS Analogy: ref to smuggling [r/s...]
Grodowski: ref to luring