

RESPONSA

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Q. I would like some information on the rabbi from Mayence (whose name I cannot recall) who was mentioned in the Sidur for his sacrifice “al kidush hashem.” He was offered an opportunity to convert to Christianity, but rejected it and died the death of a saint.

This was a telephone inquiry received by YIVO librarian Dina Abramowicz, who recognized the legend and soon found the answer by checking the index of Micha Joseph Bin Gorion’s collection of Jewish folktales, *Mimekor Yisrael*, under the heading “Mayence” (a city in the Rhineland, called Mainz in German). Specifically, what she found was “The Story of Rabbi Amnon (Unetaneh Tokef)” (Bin Gorion, 1976, vol. 1, pp. 416–417, story no. 213). In this tale, the essentially accurate details of the telephone caller are fleshed out, with the obvious correction that Rabbi Amnon’s prayer is to be found in the Maḥzor (during the Musaf services of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kipur—though the prayer is not used in all rites), and not the Sidur.

As Bin Gorion relates, the story was received “from the copy of the manuscript written by our Rabbi Isaac of Vienna who wrote the work *Or Zarua* (Light is Sown), who testifies that he found this story in the very handwriting of Rabbi Ephraim, the son of Rabbi Jacob of Bonn.” (We shall have more to say about these personages in due course.) The story goes as follows: After repeated entreaties by the “lord and princes of Mayence” that he convert to Christianity, the eminent Rabbi Amnon requested three days to consider the matter. But on the third day, having in the meanwhile suffered second thoughts about his earlier response, he refused the town magnate’s summons and was brought to the palace by force. Attempting to set matters right in the lord’s eyes, he urged, “Since my tongue spoke falsehood, let it be sentenced to be cut out!” But instead, the magnate had Rabbi Amnon’s hands and feet amputated for his refusal to come to the court. As Rosh Hashanah approached, the crippled Rabbi Amnon ordered that he be taken to the synagogue, “and during the Kedushah . . . he said to the prayer leader: ‘Wait for me a little while,

and I shall hallow the Name’”—at which point he recited the prayer that has since become known as *Unetaneh tokef* (“Let us declare this day’s mighty sanctity, for it is of dread anxiety”), and then expired. “But on the third day he came in a vision of the night to our Rabbi Kalonymus son of our Rabbi Meshullam and taught him the entire hymn. And he ordered him to send it throughout the Dispersion of Israel.”

The story of Rabbi Amnon was a very popular one among the harassed and persecuted Jews of medieval and Renaissance Europe, and was told with occasional flourishes and embellishments. As related in Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s *Days of Awe*, for example, it is specifically the *archbishop* of Mainz who pressed Rabbi Amnon to convert (Agnon, 1948, pp. 83–85), a detail that is repeated in the articles on Amnon of Mainz in both the *Jewish Encyclopedia* and the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

According to Gotthard Deutsch, writing in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*:

The oldest mention of this story seems to be found in the notes on Asheri, written by Israel of Krems or Kremsier, about 1400 . . . He gives Isaac of Vienna’s work, ‘Or Zarua,’ as his source. The story . . . is found in the Maḥzor of the Roman rite for the New-year’s day, published 1541. From it Gedaliah ibn Yahya took it; and the other historians followed him. The Maḥzor editions reprinted it; and so the story became very popular . . .

The story is a legend without any historical value, based on the reminiscences of the persecutions during the Crusades, and inspired by the veneration for the ‘Unetaneh Tokef.’ . . .

The material for the story is taken partly from the legend of St. Emmeram of Regensburg . . . who, having been accused by Uta, daughter of Thedo, Duke of Bavaria, of being her seducer, was tied to a ladder, where his limbs were cut off, one by one. He was then brought to the castle of Ascheim, where he expired, praying and blessing his murderers . . .

(Deutsch, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, pp. 525–526).

Ephraim ben Jacob of Bonn, who is cited by Isaac ben Moses of Vienna in *Or zarua* as the source for the story about Rabbi Amnon, is placed by the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* in the 12th century; according to the *EJ*, Rabbi Amnon himself is supposed to have lived during the 10th century, though logically he must have been a contemporary of the *paytan* Kalonymus ben Meshullam, who flourished circa 1100 C.E., i.e., around the time of the First Crusade, which took place in 1096.

As for the *Unetaneh tokef* prayer itself, Philip Birnbaum attributes its initial publication—though not necessarily its authorship—to Kalonymus ben Meshullam (*High Holyday Prayer Book*, 1951, pp. 359–364, 789–792). But, as Abraham Meir Habermann notes, in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: “*U-Netanneh Tokef* is actually older; for it is found in old liturgical manuscripts and in *genizah* fragments. It apparently derives from a very early Palestinian prayer which was later attributed to Amnon” (Habermann, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 2, col. 861). Reference is also made to the legend of Rabbi Amnon and *Unetaneh tokef* in Israel Davidson’s *Thesaurus of Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry* (1970, vol. 2, pp. 199–200, entry no. 451).

The questionable historical accuracy of this moving legend, with its apparent melding of details from medieval Jewish and Christian lore, in the service of explaining the origins of a beautiful and antique prayer, is perhaps of lesser significance to the librarian. What matters more for us is the method used to ferret out the story’s essential details, on the basis of skeletal information provided over the telephone. Recognizing a medieval Jewish folktale when she heard one, YIVO’s knowledgeable librarian consulted one of the most authoritative existing collections of such literature, a three-volume compendium that fortunately possesses a detailed index, thereby enabling the librarian armed with nothing more than the keyword “Mayence” to get to the bottom of the matter in short order. All the other sources cited follow directly from that initial and correct hunch.

Q. Where are Kasrilevke, Boiberik, and Yehupetz located?

This question was asked by a literary scholar who encountered these three place names in an article on the Yiddish author Sholom Aleichem, written by the distinguished Anglo-Jewish Canadian poet Abraham Moses (A.M.) Klein. Our researcher was aware that Kasrilevke, Boiberik, and Yehupetz are all part of Sholom Aleichem's fictional landscape; what he wanted to know was whether these were also the names of *real* places or, if not, whether they were based on concrete locations.

The simple answer is that two of these three places will not be found in any gazetteer yet compiled, and as for the third, the existence of a Galician *shtetl* coincidentally bearing that very name does not necessarily mean that it served as a model for Sholom Aleichem's Boiberik. One may pore over maps of Mississippi till the cows come home, in a vain quest after the Yoknapatawpha County celebrated in the works of William Faulkner; researchers will be similarly frustrated in their search for the "real" Kasrilevke, Boiberik, and Yehupetz. That does not mean, however, that Sholom Aleichem invented these places purely by force of a hyperactive imagination; like his older contemporary Mendele Moykher Sforim, who depicted the Jews of Glupsk, Kabtsansk, and Tuneyadevka (and like Faulkner), his "geo-literary" creations were based on real places with which he was intimately acquainted. And like Mendele and Faulkner, Sholom Aleichem chose names for these towns that fit their locations and inhabitants to a "t."

Let us turn now to the question of what Sholom Aleichem might have had in mind in inventing Kasrilevke, Boiberik and Yehupetz. But before we proceed, it might be worthwhile to pause and take note of a few highly pertinent biographical details: Sholom Aleichem, whose actual name was Sholom Rabinovitch, was born in 1859, in the city of Pereyaslav, Poltava *guberniia*. He spent his childhood in the nearby *shtetl* Voronkov (also: Voronko, Voronov), and later attended the Jewish Teachers' Institute in the Podolian city of Zhitomir, where he studied to become a Crown Rabbi. He served as a tutor to the Loyeff family in the village of Sofievka, Kiev *guberniia*, where he met his future wife, Olga. Thereafter, he acted as Crown Rabbi in several other towns in the region of Kiev, the city in which he finally settled in 1888, where he embarked upon his literary career and lost a tidy sum at the Bourse (in 1890). In 1891 he moved to Odessa, returning to Kiev shortly thereafter, where he remained until 1905. To sum up, then, Sholom Aleichem's world was the Russian Pale of Settlement, in particular,

portions of the Pale that now belong to the Soviet Ukraine. It can safely be argued that, whatever else one may say of Kasrilevke, Boiberik, and Yehupetz, they are definitely located in the area of the Pale that Sholom Aleichem knew best.

Kasrilevke. "Sholom, the hero of this autobiographical novel," writes the author in his memoir, *From the Fair*, "grew up in Kasrilevke, which has achieved a degree of renown. In case you want to know, Kasrilevke is in Little Russia, in the province of Poltava, near the historic old town of Pereyaslav. Actually, it's not called Kasrilevke but Voronko. Write it down!" (Sholom Aleichem, 1985, p. 4). He then proceeds to describe the enchantments of "the blessed Kasrilevke-Voronko," filtered through the nostalgic memories of five bygone decades. "Voronko is small but beautiful and full of charm. With strong legs, you can traverse the entire village in half an hour. It has no railroad, no sea, no tumult . . . Although it's a small village, the many fine stories and legends about it could fill a book" (Sholom Aleichem, 1985, p. 6). Kasrilevke was, in fact, the subject of more than just one of Sholom Aleichem's books.

Maurice Samuel, to whom we are indebted for his explanation of why Sholom Aleichem chose to dub his archetypal *shtetl* "Kasrilevke," also accepts at face value the humorist's assertion that Kasrilevke is identical with Voronko. Matters are not so simple, however. What are readers to make of Sholom Aleichem's sardonic description of "modern" (*alt-nay*) Kasrilevke, for example, with its daily press and its horse-drawn trams—neither of which would have existed in a hamlet the size of Voronko. For the answer, we might turn to a book by Sholom Aleichem's brother, Volf Rabinovitch, entitled *Mayn bruder Sholem-Aleykhem* [My brother Sholom Aleichem]. It contains a chapter entitled "Sholem-Aleykhem antdekt Kasrilevke" [Sholom Aleichem discovers Kasrilevke], wherein he describes an 1897 visit to Berdichev by Sholom Aleichem, during the course of which the latter combed the city's back alleys and courtyards for "material" (Rabinovitch, 1939, pp. 118–123). Now, among Berdichev's outstanding attractions (as in modern Kasrilevke) were its *konkes*, or horsecars. So, if the original inspiration for Kasrilevke was Voronko, the author clearly drew on various sources to fill out the canvas, including the urban center of Berdichev, which was, in some ways, little more than an overgrown *shtetl*, after all.

"Kasrilevke" derives from the personal name Kasriel, which Maurice Samuel (basing himself on Sholom Aleichem's explanation in the story "Di shtot fun di Kleyne ment-shelekh") describes as:

a special type of pauper . . . the jolly pauper . . . [who] meets his poverty like a man and a hero . . . The Kasriel is a home body, deeply attached to his faithful and fecund wife. He is concerned with the education of his sons and the marrying off of his daughters. He obeys scrupulously all the six hundred and thirteen regulations of the Jewish code, carries the ritual fringes next to his body, kisses the *mezuzah* on the lintel every time he leaves or enters the house, chants a loud Amen in the synagogue from his standing-place near the door, and defies the rich man to have a larger portion in God. To do all these things on any of the levels of pauperdom above classified, and to remain uncrushed and unabashed, calls for spirit, ingenuity, and a special sense of humour; the Kasriel has them.

Kasrilevky, then, is the town of the Kasriels (Samuel, 1943, pp. 24–25).

To the personal name Kasriel, Sholom Aleichem attached the Slavic suffix *-ovka* (found in geographic names throughout Poland and the Ukraine), in order, as Max Weinreich points out, to "create a tragicomic or comic effect" (Weinreich, 1980, p. 531). As an aside, the musical score "A Kasrilik Tantz" appears in *Melech Grafstein's Sholom Aleichem Panorama* (1948, p. 300).

Boiberik. Notwithstanding the existence of a real Galician *shtetl* near Lvov (Lwow/Lemberg) named Boiberik (also: Boiberke; Polish: Bobrka)—for which a memorial book exists (*Le-zekher* . . . , 1964)—the village that Tevye the Dairyman made famous was actually based on the dacha colony of Boyarka, which was frequented by the urban bourgeoisie of nearby Kiev, seeking to escape the summertime heat and congestion of that large city. The Rabinovitch family, too, sought refuge in Boyarka, as various sources attest (Waife-Goldberg, 1968, pp. 132–148; Rabinovitch, 1939, pp. 154–158). There they made acquaintance with a real-life milkman named Tevye, who had no daughters, but who did supply the *datshnikes* from Kiev with milk, butter, and cheese (Waife-Goldberg, 1968, pp. 143–145)—just as his fictional namesake marketed his goods to the vacationing citizens of the city of Yehupetz, at the suggestion of a distant relative of his named Menakhem Mendl. It is possible that Sholom Aleichem knew of the Galician Boiberik, and simply applied its name to the summer colony Boyarka. Incidentally, *Melech Grafstein's Sholom Aleichem Panorama* (1948, p. 301) includes the music to a "Boiberiker Kapelye."

Yehupetz. The city that provided Tevye with his customers, and where Menakhem Mendl bankrupted himself at the stock exchange

in a frantic effort to turn a fast ruble (based on Sholom Aleichem's own unfortunate experiences at the Bourse) is obviously based on Kiev, with perhaps a pinch or two of Odessa thrown in for good measure. Yehupetz is the quintessential Russian metropolis, of which there were only very few in the Pale of Settlement. (Only Warsaw and Odessa could compare with Kiev in size, bustle, and cosmopolitanism among cities of the Pale and Crown Poland.) As Maurice Samuel notes, however, while Sholom Aleichem "had a special reason for renaming Voronov Kasrievky . . . he does not tell us why he calls Kiev Yehupetz" (Samuel, 1943, p. 24). Still, "Yehupetz" is definitely *not* a Russian name; the soft Ukrainian *h* (which Russian lacks) and the Slavic *-etz* suffix place Yehupetz squarely in that corner of the Pale from which Sholom Aleichem drew his daily inspiration: Greater Kiev and its hinterland.

This by no means exhausts the toponymy of Sholom Aleichem's works. We shall postpone for another occasion discussion of Anatevka and Mazepovka. Likewise, we shall not dwell on comparisons between the affectionate humor of Sholom Aleichem's Kasrievke, Boiberik, and Yehupetz, and the sledge-hammer irony of Mendele's Kabtsansk (Paupertown), Glupsk (Foolsburgh), and Tuneyadevka (Parasiteville).¹ The existence of such places in imaginative literature—and their occasional confusion with existing cities and towns—merely underscores the degree to which the major Yiddish authors were rooted in the landscape of Eastern Europe, and the extent to which that landscape possessed a folklore all its own. "The geographic map of Jewishness is unique," wrote Max Weinreich. "*Khelem* and *Linsk* have no interest for us as real cities Chelm and Lesko, but as the homes of Jewish simpletons. *Hotseplots* and *Boiberik* have real non-Jewish equivalents in Silesia and eastern Galicia, but among Yiddish speakers they are places in the world of fantasy" (Weinreich, 1980, p. 202). Out of such fantasy, great literature is created.

For a fascinating and lucid discussion of the topography of the *shtetl* in Yiddish literature, see the title essay of Dan Miron's book *Der imazh fun shtetl* (1981).

Note

¹A.A. Roback, in his article "The Humor of Sholom Aleichem," translates Glupsk as "Sotburgh," Kabtsansk as "Pauperville," and Tuneyadevka as "Parasiteville." (*Melech Grafstein's* . . . , 1948, p. 23) I have chosen to translate Glupsk as "Foolsburgh," in order to be more faithful to the Russian root.

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