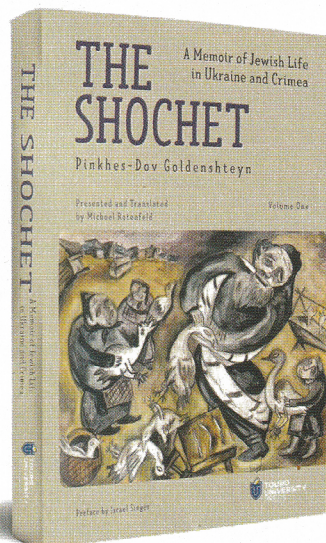


The Shochet (Vol. 1):

A Memoir of Jewish Life in Ukraine and Crimea



By Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn,
translated by Michael Rotenfeld
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418 pages

Reviewed by Faigy Grunfeld

Meet the *shochet*, Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn (1848–1930), a product of Eastern European Jewish life in the nineteenth century, a tragic hero if ever there was one, dogged by difficulty yet visited by enough strokes of adventure to soften the blow of poverty, orphanhood and general oppression.

The Shochet is a strange mash-up of the prototypical *shtetl* Jew, the product of a Tevye-and-Golde union no doubt, yet so weirdly and shockingly colorful that at times you almost long for a dull entry of cows needing milking and laundry

needing scrubbing. And yes, there is enough real romance to go around, a fair rival to Shalom Aleichem's fictional rendition. Surprisingly relevant and rife with familiarity, albeit not always relatable throughout, the book is an engaging read, fast-paced, plot heavy and laden with suspense: will tragedy ever move on to seize a different victim?

Goldenshteyn began penning his memoir in the early 1900s, and he continued the project until he published the unedited Yiddish version in Petach Tikva in 1928, shortly before his death. Masterfully translated and annotated for the English-speaking public by Michael Rotenfeld, a historical researcher and director of Touro University Library's *Project Zikaron*, the memoir, full of gawdy descriptions and hyperbolic phrases, suggests Rotenfeld's careful dedication to preserving the original flavor as much as possible. (This first edition, Volume 1, covers the author's childhood and early adulthood in Eastern Europe, while Volume 2 promises a cultural and circumstantial shift as Goldenshteyn relocates to Palestine).

The Shochet is unique within the genre of nineteenth-century memoir and autobiography because the field is dominated by secular writers, typical for Haskalah literature. Most parallel works tend to either bemoan the fanaticisms and idiosyncrasies of *shtetl* life, like *The Autobiography of Solomon Maimon*, which is searing in its condemnation of Talmudic scholarly society, or romanticize the idyllic period of untainted Jewish innocence, like Pauline Wengeroff's *Rememberings*, which dresses up a long-abandoned religious childhood in rhapsodies. *The Shochet* stands almost alone as an authentic work, guileless and lacking in agenda, making it of particular interest

to those exploring the period.

The granular specifics of this memoir are a windfall for historians, who often do the work of reconstructing nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish life through a hodgepodge of primary documents, particularly when it comes to the day-to-day life of religious Jewry, which is more shrouded than its less religious counterpart. Goldenshteyn—whom Dr. Israel Singer of Touro University describes as “the Glückel of Hameln of Ukraine”—comes along with a breakthrough autobiography, dropping, through its robust portrait of *shtetl* happenings, delicious tidbits for historians to seize on.

Goldenshteyn exhibits some humor but leans into the drama as a dominant mood for his work. He gets a bit weepy regarding his hardships, and readers may come to suspect he amplifies his woes from time to time, although one can allow him a good kvetch. While he does a thorough job exploring the religious and financial realities of men like him during the period, all is mostly murky on the female front; his sisters' and wife's daily happenings are hardly explored, and neither is his relationship with his children, although perhaps there is more on that later (Volume 2).

Another glaring gap in the story is the impact of assimilationist thinking on the social fabric. He makes no mention of the forces of Haskalah, which is strange, given the depth of its inroads in the region by the second half of the nineteenth century.

Historical Treasure Trove

It's all in the details for students of history, and Goldenshteyn doesn't disappoint on that account.

The memoir is a Lemony Snicket series of unfortunate events in the Russian-



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Ukrainian *shtetls* of the 1850s. Dead parents, dead siblings, dead children . . . it's hard not to shed a tear or two along the way as young Pinye-Ber is shuffled among a network of poverty-stricken relatives in an informal foster care system of sorts. And things don't get much better once he comes into adulthood.

It's a particular treat to overlay bits of nineteenth-century living onto that of the twenty-first. The same-but-different-ness of various historical periods is always a point of surprise. While circumstances change, human nature and emotion often do not. In a beautifully believable moment of illustration, shortly after his parents' death, as his sisters are mourning, young Pinye-Ber describes himself as "happy and laughing at them," being that the thrill of "traveling was greater than anything else." The key excitement—sitting next to the wagon driver and being able to "touch the reins and the whip." It seems little boys have always loved their trucks.

Managing mischievous boys (and the occasional phone call home from the *rebbe*) is another diachronic theme illustrated in the memoir. Pinye-Ber's sisters would twist their hands in exasperation at his school pranks, which he isn't shy to own. "I was still the same rambunctious kid and the leader of a whole pack of boys, especially on Shobes [sic] when we turned the world upside down."

And in a nod of reassurance for those of us who have spent too much time shuttling our youngsters around to learning specialists, it seems the greatest barrier for Pinye-Ber during his school years was a familiar malady—inability to sit still during class, a condition he says "was not my fault, rather it was the result of my little mind racing nonstop," making our contemporary fixation with ADHD seem almost archaic.

Dropping a lot of gossipy tidbits about *shidduchim*, Goldenshteyn gives readers some insight into the romantic aspect of *shtetl* living. It's more different than "same but different" in our nineteenth century to twenty-first century juxtaposition, but it has its familiarity as well.

Shidduchim then, as today, were heavy with what Chaim Shapiro, author of *Once Upon a Shtetl*, calls *guzma*, exaggeration. All of Goldenshteyn's relatives seemed

to marry excellent matches (although a whole lot of unflattering portraits emerged after the weddings). In describing his own parents' match, he notes how his grandfather chose his father, Reb Itsye, as a son-in-law because he was "worthy and virtuous," as well as "devout . . . and respectable." Most importantly, he was "handsome," as every *tzigekimener* must be.

Snobbery is also afoot among the nuanced social classes of poverty-stricken Jewry. Goldenshteyn's own wife was from "country stock," and he clearly looked down on his in-laws for their rough manners. Although he, too, was born in a small town, which he acknowledges more than once was a place most people did not recognize, he writes, "I, who was raised as a city boy, found the entire atmosphere and their coarse lifestyle unfamiliar and abhorrent," suggesting that matchmaking across the tracks even back then was no easy feat.

A Smorgasbord of Shtetl Characters

Perhaps most stark of the various themes that emerge from the memoir is the complexity and dynamism of our religious communities, both then and now.

All was not pious and perfect in the *shtetl*, as some narratives would have us believe. During one stint at what can only be called a "gimmel yeshivah" by today's standards, the young scholars held it together during prayers for the benefit of outsiders who joined the minyan, but once they trickled out, "the fun started," in the form of hitting "each other with wet towels," while others "roasted potatoes and others turned over lecterns. It was lively and joyful," if not very academically inclined.

Yet piety in the *shtetl* was not dead either. In a testament to the primacy of Torah study above all else, even the poor members of a local village or town would do everything possible to support yeshivah boys. The practice of *essen teg* was prevalent in the 1860s, and "the poorest, even the water carrier and the woodchopper, would also have a yeshivah student eat at his home once a week. If you had seen with what type of honor the poor man took a yeshivah student, you would say, 'and who is like Your people, like the people of Israel?'"

Throughout his storytelling, Goldenshteyn paints a splashy portrait of the locals with whom he shares his life. For those looking to revisit the *shtetl* classics, you'll find everyone from the *shadchan* to the *shlemiel* to the *shlemazel* in his recounting. One brother-in-law, who was all the rave before marrying into the family, turned out to be a slob who liked "little work, a lot of money, and good food and drink." Another brother-in-law from a reputable Chassidic family, but with no real signs of greatness himself, became a "*falche-Rebbe*," like the subject in a popular Baruch Levine song; however, his story has no happy ending as his petitioners quickly uncovered his true identity. And of course, the *shtetl* had its share of "*le'khaim* sayers," as Goldenshteyn describes them, a cohort of benchwarmers who hung out in the nineteenth-century version of a coffee room, only with stronger spirits, and so on and so forth. A colorful cast of devout and slovenly figures appears throughout, as well as a mix of everything in between, making this memoir familiar, human and resonant, a rethinking of the *shtetl* personalities and perhaps a more honest rendition than any before it.

Why did he write all this? To what end?

Goldenshteyn tells us directly. It is a narrative for his "children and relatives," so they can understand "what their father endured during his lifetime and how G-d always helped him and never abandoned him." In essence, it is a book of *chizuk* and *emunah*. When recounting the deaths of his beloved parents, the author segues directly into a fundamental point of faith: "who can ask G-d, 'What are You doing?' G-d certainly knows what He is doing for He is always right!" This is the motto of the *pashute Yid* of our collective romantic memory, which is alive and well in *The Shochet*. Occasionally his step falters. When describing one of his sisters' crushing circumstances, he bemoans, "unfortunate souls, why did you have to be born?" but as his own difficulties continuously arise, he resorts to a familiar mantra—he is in the Creator's hands, and all will be well.

The *Shochet* is a fundamental piece of beautifully simple moralizing: historic, timeless, and relevant as ever. ■