



# Honest Memories of a Vanished World

THE SHOCHET: A MEMOIR OF JEWISH LIFE  
IN UKRAINE AND CRIMEA, VOLUME I

by **Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn**,  
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Touro University Press, 2023

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What personal stories do we share with our children and grandchildren? What life events have we crystallized into a narrative, colored by our joys, our sorrows, our sense of outrage and righteous indignation? And what do we reveal of ourselves in the narrative we craft?

“When Mother died, I was elated, delighted, and jumped in the air,” confesses Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn in his autobiography. It was not her passing that caused the joy, he quickly explains, but the temporary reprieve it earned him from his studies: “It was impossible for it not to be so in those times when a child was locked in *khyeder* as in prison and the rebbe was no better than a Spanish inquisitor.”

This startling candor is characteristic of *The Shochet*, an unusual and fascinating account of Chasidic life in nineteenth-century Ukraine, then part of Tsarist Russia. Goldenshteyn lived through the tumultuous times that have been chronicled by Yiddish writers of the era—the shtetl with its peddlers, farmers, and inns; the subsistence living; the communities of friends, neighbors, ruffians, and rogues. Neither mawkishly sentimental nor critically rejecting of the past, his story offers an original glimpse into that experience.

A kosher slaughterer (*shochet*) and cantor, Goldenshteyn was a traditional Jew, virtually unaffected by modernity. Thus his account offers a different perspective from memoirs written by followers of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) who abandoned the communities of their

youth. Choosing to write in the Yiddish vernacular rather than the bookish classical Hebrew that would have been the more standard option for men of his education, he has at his disposal a rich vocabulary of evocative words. (Hebrew, before its modern revival, was hobbled by not having been a spoken language for over a thousand years.) Undoubtedly, this was a choice made in order to more effectively transmit his stories to his descendants. And what stories he has to tell!

Shortly after his mother’s death, Goldenshteyn loses his father as well, sending him on an orphan’s odyssey through a series of temporary homes. He first lives with his married brother in another town, until his brother dies, too. His older sisters then find a rich, childless couple to take him in—so well off that they own a

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samovar!—but he is unhappy there and decides to leave.

Arrangement after arrangement falls through, and Goldenshteyn returns to his sisters just before the High Holidays of 1857, offering us a glimpse of how those days loomed in the consciousness of even the community's youngest members:

Very soon would be Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and you needed to recall your transgressions. But no matter how hard I tried, I could not find any. Missing praying—no. . . . Missing the Hebrew blessings recited after a meal—no. Even in the midst of playing a game, if thunder rolled or lightning struck, all of us would shout in a loud voice the blessing of “whose power and might fill the world.”

Eventually, Goldenshteyn's sisters pull him out of school. But, miracle of miracles, he realizes that he misses studying. Despite imperfect educational methodology—and a good deal of youthful rebelliousness—Goldenshteyn has developed a taste for Talmud. So he sets out to be admitted into a new Talmud Torah in Odessa, and it is there that he finally embarks seriously on his education.

Goldenshteyn's honesty about his struggles allows us to believe him when he describes the beauties of shtetl life. Love and respect for tradition shine throughout the book. But perhaps most compelling are the values that undergird the vanished world he describes. It is hard not to be moved by the fact that, despite an astounding series of unfortunate events, his sisters are always able to find another neighbor or towns person who agrees to take in an orphan child. These are communities that take care of their own. Likewise, despite the shortage of qualified teachers and absence of appropriate pedagogy, there existed a profound respect for scholarship and a determination at all costs to have their children learn what they could.

By narrative's end, the reader comes to understand how life for Jews in the Ukraine was deficient in the most basic amenities, but rich in the respect for Torah study, the sense of communal responsibility, the impulse to share with those who had less, and the bonds of family. It is hard to read this book without realizing that with all our modern advantages, there is much that we have lost.

In describing the shtetl, Chasidic storytellers often skim over the grimmer details to convey the spirituality of a world untouched by freethinkers and revolutionaries. The implicit message of Yiddishists like Isaac Bashevis Singer and Sholem Aleichem, on the other hand, is to trumpet the inevitable arrival of modernity despite their nostalgia for a simpler time. Goldenshteyn's account avoids both of these well-worn tropes. Instead, he simply tells the story of his life with great detail and with an attention to his inner world that feels quite modern.

And while he is faithful to his emotions, he also takes responsibility for his choices, rather than simply blaming others for his circumstances. One senses this is likely his motive in telling his life story: without moralizing, he hopes to inspire his children and grandchildren to own their decisions and live with greater spiritual purpose.

Goldenshteyn understands well that “happiness writes in white ink on a white page” and that stories need tension to come to life. He captures the petulance, the egocentrism, as well as the innocent trust and hopefulness of his childhood. Following him as he matures, we come to appreciate his honesty, kindness, and compassion in the face of betrayals and misfortune. His account is a page-turner, gripping and compelling. For anyone who wants an unvarnished insider view of the Chasidic life of yesteryear, its travails and its glories, *The Shochet* is a rare treasure. ❶

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