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The Remarkable Life of Sholem Aleichem on Show at Moscow's Jewish Museum

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A staggering 100,000 mourners lined the streets for Sholem Aleichem's New York funeral when he died in 1916. In the instructions he left regarding his burial, he asked "let my name be recalled with laughter or not at all."

The colorful life of Aleichem, characterized by more than one rise and fall from the clutches of poverty, is celebrated by a new exhibition at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center to mark the centenary of his death.

Born in central Ukraine — then part of the Russian empire — Aleichem is widely considered to have redefined the structure of modern Yiddish literary culture. While best known for his "Tevye the Dairyman" story, on which the film and theater production "Fiddler on the Roof"

is based, Aleichem produced a vast array of plays, novels and screenplays during his lifetime.

He also had a remarkable life: after a childhood marked by poverty he and his wife married against the wishes of her wealthy landowner father. They went on to lose their entire fortune in stock speculation and left Ukraine, fearful of the pogroms sweeping the Russian empire.

This new exhibition gives a panoramic view of the writer and his legacy: from in depth biographical information to photographs of his life and rare primary documents including the writer's original manuscripts and his letters to Tolstoy and Chekhov.

"The unique nature and the volume of documentary and art materials — many of which have never been seen by the public before — make this the first ever exhibition to captures the large-scale legacy of the great Jewish writer," said Grigory Kazovsky, the curator of the exhibition, in an interview with The Moscow Times.

Other exhibits display the various editions of Aleichem's works in Yiddish, alongside their translations into Russian, English and dozens of other world languages. Included in this section are some exceedingly rare first editions dating from the 19th century as well as the two volumes of the "the Yiddish People's Library" almanac which Aleichem published to encourage other Yiddish writers in spite of his dire financial straits.

Aleichem drew on the richness of the Yiddish language — the vernacular used by most Eastern European jews of the time — to bring extraordinary warmth and realism to his stories. It was this skill which drew the inspiration of many other artists, represented in the illustrations made to accompany his books by Anatoly Kaplan, Meyer Akselrod, Nathan Altman and Mane-Katz.

Visitors can also enjoy the costumes, playbills, rare posters, and photographs of scenes from the often spectacular performances of his plays as well as the film realizations of Aleichem's works on film. There's even an opportunity to immerse yourself in Aleichem's world by watching the rarely screened film "Jewish Happiness" (1925), based on Aleichem's writings and starring legendary stage actor Solomon Mikhoels.

Aleichem popularity only grew after his death, and he is now remembered and revered for his work, which often explored humanity's ability to respond to adversity. This exhibition offers visitors a rare chance to see how his life and his work intertwined. As Aleichem said, "life is a dream for the wise, a game for the fool, a comedy for the rich and a tragedy for the poor."

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