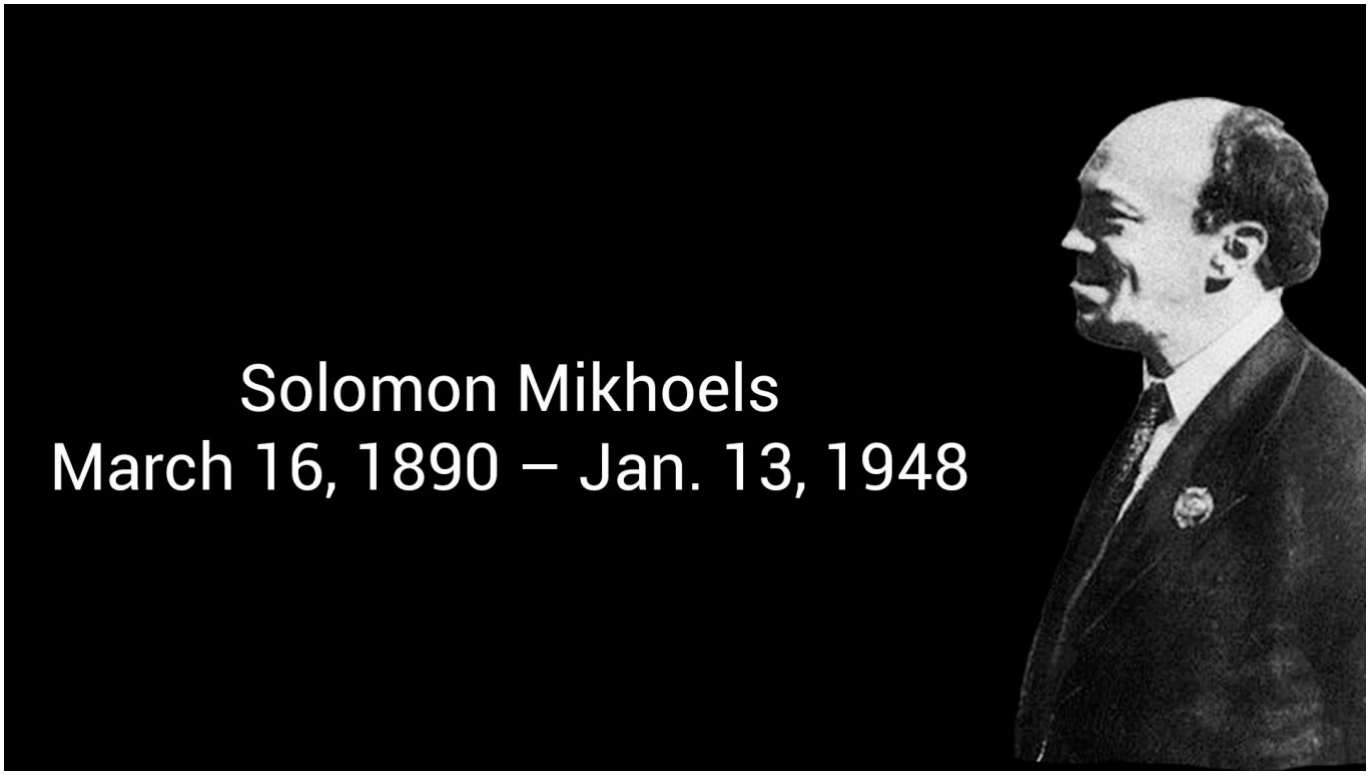
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On This Day in 1890 Solomon Mikhoels Was Born

The life of this legendary actor and director was ended by state assassination

March 16, 2020



On this day in 1890, Solomon Mikhoels, ne Shloyme Vovsi, was born in a small town in Lithuania. After studying in a Jewish religious school, he went to a secular school in Riga and then moved to Kiev to study at the Kiev Commercial Institute. After his expulsion for political activity, he moved north to St. Petersburg where he studied in the law department of the university. Throughout his education he had always taken part in amateur theatrics, and finally gave in to his passion in 1918, when he quit the university and joined the Alexei Granovsky Jewish School of Theater Arts.

In 1920 the Jewish theater that grew out of the school moved to Moscow and was eventually transformed into the Moscow State Jewish Theater, with a rich repertory performed in Yiddish. By the end of the decade, when the theater director Granovsky failed to return to the Soviet Union after a European tour, Mikhoels became the general manager and the theater's main director, as well as its most popular performer. Under Mikhoels, the theater put on

dozens of plays, including an adaptation of a Sholom Aleichem novel called “Tevye the Milkman,” which foreign audience now know as “Fiddler on the Roof.” He was as renowned as an actor as a director, with “King Lear” one of his most popular roles.

During the war Mikhoels headed the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and traveled around the world to plead the case for the Soviet battle against Nazi Germany among Jewish communities. However, after the war the Soviet Union ended its support for Jewish organizations and their contacts with other organizations. The theater was closed, the committee shut down, and most of the members jailed and then executed. It is believed that since Mikhoels was a prominent and very well-known figure in the Soviet Jewish community, Stalin did not want the publicity of a trial. So instead, he ordered his assassination. In 1948, Mikhoels was killed at a government dacha not far from Minsk and then run over by a truck on a highway to conceal the cause of death.

He was given a state funeral and buried at the New Donskoi Cemetery in Moscow.

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