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Sholem Asch

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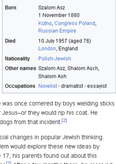
Sholem Asch (Yiddish: שלום אש, *Shalom Ash*, Polish: *Szalom Asz*, 1 November 1880 – 10 July 1957), also written **Shalom Ash**, was a Polish-Jewish novelist, dramatist, and essayist in the Yiddish language who settled in the United States.

Sholem Asch



Sholem Asch, 1940

Born	Shalom Asz 1 November 1880 Kutno, Congress Poland, Russian Empire
Died	10 July 1957 (aged 76) London, England
Nationality	Polish-Jewish
Other names	Szalom Asz, Shalom Asch, Sholem Ash
Occupations	Novelist · dramatist · essayist

Life and work [edit]

Asch was born Szalom Asz in Kutno, Congress Poland to Moszek Asz (1825, Gąbin – 1905, Kutno), a cattle-dealer and innkeeper, and Frajda Malka, née Widawska (born 1850, Łęczyca). Frajda was Moszek's second wife; he had married his first wife Rude Shmit died in 1873, leaving him with either six or seven children (the exact number is unknown). Sholem was the fourth of the ten children that Moszek and Frajda Malka had together.[1] Moszek would spend all week on the road and return home every Friday in time for the Sabbath. He was known to be a very charitable man who would dispense money to the poor.[1][2]

In his adolescence, after moving from the *cheder* to the House of Study, Sholem became aware of major social changes in popular Jewish thinking. New ideas and the Enlightenment were asserting themselves in the Jewish world. At his friend's house, Sholem would explore these new ideas by secretly reading many secular books, which led him to believe himself too worldly to become a rabbi. At age 17, he began studying secular texts that his "profane" literature and sent him to live with relatives in a nearby village, where he became a Hebrew teacher.[2] After a few months there, he received a more liberal education at Włocławek, where he supported himself as a writer for the illiterate townspeople.[1] It is in Włocławek that he became enamored with the work of another Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz. It is also where he began writing. He wrote the short story and wrote in Hebrew. What he wrote there would later be revised, translated into Yiddish, and ultimately, launch his career.[2]

Upbringing [edit]

Born into a Hasidic family, Sholem Asch received a traditional Jewish education. Considered the designated scholar of his siblings, his parents dreamed of him becoming a rabbi and sent him to the town's best religious school (*or cheder*), where the wealthy families sent their children. There, he spent most of his childhood studying the Talmud, and would later study the Bible and the Haggadah on his own time. Asch grew up in a majority Jewish town, so he grew up believing Jews were the majority in the rest of the world as well. In Kutno, Jews and gentiles mostly got along, barring some tension around religious holidays. He had his troubles through a majority gentile area to get to a lake where he loved to swim, where he was once cornered by boys wielding sticks and dogs, who demanded he admit to killing "Christ"–which Asch did not, at the time, know to be a name for Jesus–or they would rip his coat. He admitted to killing Christ out of fear, but they beat him and tore his coat anyway. Asch never lost his fear of dogs from that incident.[2]

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Young adulthood [edit]

In 1899, he moved to Warsaw where he met I. L. Peretz and other young writers under Peretz's mentorship such as David Pinski, Abraham Reisen, and Hersh Dovid Nomberg. Influenced by the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), Asch initially wrote in Hebrew, but Peretz convinced him to switch to Yiddish. Asch's reputation was established in 1902 with his first book of stories, *In a shtetelner tsayt* (*In a Bad Time*).[1] In 1903, he married Mathilde Shapiro, the daughter of the Polish-Jewish teacher and poet Menahem Mendel Shapiro.[3]

In 1904, Asch released one of his most well-known works, *A shtetl*, an idyllic portrait of traditional Polish-Jewish life. In January 1905, he released the first play of his incredibly successful play-writing career, *Tsunkgekumen* (*Coming Back*).[1]

Asch wrote the drama *Got fun nekome* (*God of Vengeance*) in the winter of 1906 in Cologne, Germany[4] It is about a Jewish brothel owner who attempts to become respectable by commissioning a Torah scroll and marrying off his daughter to a yeshiva student. Set in a brothel, the play includes a passionate and a lesbian scene.[5] I. L. Peretz famously said of the play after reading it, "Burn it, Asch, burn it! Yankl Dymshitz read it, and went to Berlin to pitch it to director Max Reinhardt and actor Rudolph Schildkraut, who produced it at the Deutsches Theater. *God of Vengeance* opened on March 19, 1907 and ran for six months, and soon was translated and performed in a dozen European languages.

The play was first brought to New York City, United States by David Kessler in 1907. The audience mostly came for Kessler, and they booed the rest of the cast. The New York production sparked a major press war between local Yiddish papers, led by the Orthodox *Tageblatt* and even the socialist *Forverts*.[6] Orthodox papers referred to *God of Vengeance* as "filthy," "immoral," and "indecent," while radical papers described it as "moral," "artistic," and "beautiful". Some of the more provocative scenes in the production were changed, but it wasn't enough for the Orthodox papers. Even Yiddish intellectuals and the pro-Yiddish supporters had problems with the play's inauthentic portrayal of Jewish tradition, especially Yankl's use of the Torah, which they said Asch seemed to be using mostly for cheap effects; they also expressed concern over how it might stigmatize Jewish people who already faced much anti-Semitism. The association with Jews and sex won a popular crowd to the show's side. Other intellectuals criticized the writing itself, claiming that the second act was beautifully written but both the first and third acts failed to support it.[7]

God of Vengeance was published in English-language translation in 1918.[7] In 1922, it was staged in New York City at the Provincetown Theatre in Greenwich Village, and moved to the Apollo Theatre on Broadway on February 19, 1923, with a cast that included the acclaimed Jewish immigrant actor Rudolph Schildkraut.[8] Its run was cut short on March 6, when the entire cast, producer Harry Weinberger, and one of the owners of the theater were indicted for violating the state's Penal Code, and later convicted on charges of obscenity.[9][10] Weinberger, who was also a prominent attorney, represented the group at the trial. The chief witness against the play was Rabbi Joseph Silberman, who declared in an interview with *Forverts*: "This play libels the Jewish religion. The present anti-Semite could not have written such a thing".[7] After a protracted battle, the conviction was successfully appealed.[10] In Europe, the play was popular with Jews from German, Russian, Polish, Hebrew, Italian, Czech, Romanian and Norwegian.

Indecent is a 2015 play written by Paula Vogel that recounts the controversy of *God of Vengeance*.[11] It opened on Broadway at the Cort Theater in April 2017, directed by Rebecca Taichman.[12][13]

Asch attended the Czernowitz Yiddish Language Conference of 1908, which declared Yiddish to be "a national language of the Jewish people." He traveled to Palestine in 1908 and the United States in 1910, a place about which he felt deeply ambivalent.

Later adult career [edit]

In the pursuit of a safe haven from the violence in Europe, he and his family moved to the United States in 1914, moving around New York City for a while before settling in Staten Island. In New York, he began to write for *Forverts*, the mass-circulation Yiddish daily that had also covered his plays, a job provided both income and an intellectual circle.

Asch became increasingly active in public life and played a prominent role in the American Jewish's relief efforts in Europe for Jewish war victims. He was a founding member of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. After a series of pogroms in Lithuania in 1919, Asch visited the country as representative of the Joint Committee,[14] and he suffered a nervous breakdown due to the shock of the horrors he witnessed.[15] His trip inspired *Ba-Shem* (1919), chronicling the anti-Jewish and anti-Polish Chmielnicki Uprising in mid-17th century Ukraine and Poland, is one of the earliest historical novels in modern Yiddish literature. In 1920, he became a naturalized citizen of the United States.

Asch returned to Poland in 1923, visiting Germany frequently. The Yiddish literary circle hoped he would stay in Poland, because I. L. Peretz's death in 1915 had left them devoid of a head figure. Asch had no desire to take Peretz's place, moving to Bellevue, France after years and continuing to write regularly for Yiddish papers in the US and Poland. In Bellevue, he wrote his 1929–31 trilogy *Farn Mabul* (*Before the Flood*, translated as *Three Cities*) describes early 20th century Jewish life in Saint Petersburg, Warsaw, and Moscow. Ever the traveller, Asch took many trips to the Soviet Union, Palestine and the United States. He always held painters in high regard and formed close friendships with the like of Isaac Lichtenstein[4], Marc Chagall, Emil Orlik, and Jules Pascin. He spoke to the hundreds of mourners at Pascin's funeral after the painter died by suicide.[5]

Sholem Asch as a young man

Asch was a celebrated writer in his own lifetime. In 1920, in honor of his 40th birthday, a committee headed by Judah L. Magnes published a 12-volume set of his collected works.[5] In 1932 he was awarded the Polish Republic's Polonia Restituta decoration and was elected honorary president of the Yiddish PEN Club.

In 1930, when Asch was at the height of his fame and popularity, he moved to Nice, then almost immediately moved back to Poland and spent months touring the countryside to do research for his next novel: *Der brilyant* (*Salvation*). He then moved into a house outside of Nice and rebuilt it as the "Villa Shalom," with luxuries such as a study facing the sea, a swimming pool, a bowling green, and an orchard. In 1935, he visited America at the joint Committee's request to raise funds for Jewish relief in Europe.[7]

Asch's next work, *Bayrn Opgrunt* (1937, translated as *The Precipice*), is set in Germany during the hyperinflation of the 1920s. *Dos Gezang fun Tol* (*The Song of the Valley*) is about the *halutzim* (Jewish-Zionist pioneers in Palestine), and reflects his 1936 visit to that region. Asch visited Palestine again in 1936. Then, in 1939, he returned to Villa Shalom for the last time. He delayed leaving Europe until the last possible moment, then reluctantly returned to the United States.

On his second sojourn in the US, Asch first lived in Stamford, Connecticut, then moved to Miami Beach, where he stayed until the early 1950s. He offended Jewish sensibilities with his 1939–1949 trilogy, *The Nazarene*, *The Apostle*, and *Mary*, which dealt with New Testament subjects. Despite accusations of conversion, Asch remained proudly Jewish, he had written the trilogy not as a promotion of Christianity but as an attempt to bridge the gap between the Jewish and Christian faiths. Much of his readership and the Jewish literary community, however, did not see it that way. His long-standing employer, New York Yiddish newspaper *Forverts*, not only dropped him as a writer but also openly attacked him for promoting Christianity. He subsequently started writing for a communist paper, *Morgen fraybayt*, leading to repeated questioning by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. In 1953, Chaim Lieberman published *The Christianity of Sholem Asch*, a scathing criticism of Asch and his Christological trilogy that disgusted even some of Asch's strongest critics. Lieberman's book, and the McCarthy Hearings, led Asch and his wife to leave the US in 1953, whereafter they split their time between London (where their daughter lived), continental Europe, and Israel.

Death and legacy [edit]

Asch spent most of his last two years in Bat Yam near Tel Aviv, Israel, in a house that the mayor had invited him to build, but died in London at his desk writing. Due to his controversies, his funeral in London was small. His house in Bat Yam is now the Sholem Asch Museum and part of the MobY-Museums of Bat Yam complex of three museums.[16] The bulk of his library, containing rare Yiddish books and manuscripts, as well as the manuscripts of some of his own works, is held at Yale University. Although many of his works are no longer read today, his best works have proven to be standards of Jewish and Yiddish literature. His sons were Moszek Asz[Moses "Moe" Asch (2 December 1905, Warsaw – 19 October 1986, United States), the founder and head of Folkways Records, and Natan Asz[Nathan Asch (1902, Warsaw – 1964, United States), also a writer. His grandson Michael Asch is an anthropologist, and his great-grandson, David Mazower, is a writer and a BBC Journalist.[17][18][19]

Inspirations and major themes [edit]

Many of Asch's father figures are inspired by his own father. Sholem was believed to have adopted much of his own philosophies from his father, such as his love for humanity and his concern for Jewish-Christian reconciliation. He summed up his father's faith as "love of God and love of neighbor".[20] Asch often wrote two kinds of characters: the poor Jew and the burly worker. This was inspired by his family, as he both interacted with peasants and butchers and fit in with the hardy outdoor Jews of *kutno*, which Asch had much pride in. His older half-brothers, on the other hand, were pious Hasidim.[2]

One of Asch's major goals in his writing was to articulate Jewish life, past and present. He placed the Jew at the center of his every work, along with an awareness of the Jewish relationship with the outside world. Some of his most frequent recurring themes were: man's faith, goodness, and generosity. He was repeated and intrigued by Christian violence, and inspired by Jewish martyrdom and survival.[2]

Asch reflected on cosmopolitan interests and concern for the people and conditions he encountered. His fiction can mostly be put into three categories: tales, novels and plays of Eastern European Jewish life (Polish mostly); tales and novels of Jewish life in America; five biblical novels: two on figures in the Hebrew Bible and three on New Testament figures. Smaller groupings included works on the Holocaust and modern Israel. His work was not easily categorized, and straddled the lines between romanticism and realism, naturalism and idealism.[2]

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- *Got fun Nekomeh* (*God of Vengeance*), 1907, play
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- Asch Wednesday 2021: A Celebration of the Life and Work of Sholem Asch Congress for Jewish Culture. Feature-length (1:49) video on various aspects of his life and work.

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