**PUTTING *FIDDLER ON THE ROOF* IN ITS**

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

To fully appreciate *Fiddler on the Roof* and to recognize its authenticity, actors and audiences alike need to understand *Fiddler on the* *Roof* within its historical context. The historical context of *Fiddler on the Roof* has two components, exploring the life and writings of Sholem Aleichem and focusing on the decades of history that preceded 1905, the year in which the fictional *Fiddler on the Roof* is set.

Sholem Aleichem (1859 - 1916) - -born Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich **- -** was an author and playwright who has often been called the Yiddish Mark Twain. Early in his career while serving as "a state-appointed clerical functionary" in a small community in the Ukraine, Rabinovich published a satirical account of politics in St. Petersburg and signed it "Sholem Aleichem." which translated means "Hello There." Sholem Aleichem was one of many pseudonyms that he used over the years until 1894, the year that he published *Tevye, the Dairyman*, which is the source material for *Fiddler on the Roof*. After this publication, Sholem Aleichem became his exclusive pen name.

Since peasants in villages all across the country did not have the means to purchase the magazines and books in which Sholem Aleichem's writings appeared, he traveled the countryside stopping in village after village to read his stories. His village visits were events much anticipated by the villagers who would have "rolled out the red carpet" to welcome him had there been one.

Sholem Aleichem's humor demanded that his readers take their lives seriously. "The laughter his work evoked was not that of contempt, embarrassment,, ...relief, or even of sympathy, but rather of identification and acceptance." Addressing his readers, Sholem Aleichem said "'You who have been through all this...and who know that such are our lives and that no amount of self-delusion can make them less so -- you who have experienced fear, ...humiliation, despair and defeat and are aware that there is more yet to come...you to whom all this has happened and who still have been able to laugh...you need no consolation, because you have already prevailed..."

To focus on the history of the period, we need to start at the beginning of the 19th century. Russia did not develop a "Jewish problem" as some would have you believe. During the first half of the 19th century as the Russian military moved West taking over huge swaths of land, Russia inherited hundreds of thousands of Jews living in this new territory. Russia had no experience governing this heretofore unknown population.

To administer this area, Russia created what has come to be known as the Pale of Settlement (lines of demarcation). The Pale of Settlement included "all of what is today Belarus and [Moldova](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moldova), much of Lithuania, [Ukraine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukraine), east-central [Poland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poland), relatively small parts of [Latvia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latvia) and what is now the western [Russian Federation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russia). It extended from the eastern...demarcation line inside the country, westward to the Imperial Russian border with the [Kingdom of Prussia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Prussia) (later the [German Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Empire)) and [Austria-Hungary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austria-Hungary). Furthermore, it comprised about 20% of the territory of European Russia and largely corresponded to the historical lands of the former [Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish%E2%80%93Lithuanian_Commonwealth), [Cossack Hetmanate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cossack_Hetmanate), the [Ottoman Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottoman_Empire) (with [Yedisan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yedisan" \o "Yedisan)), [Crimean Khanate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crimean_Khanate), and the eastern [Principality of Moldavia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Principality_of_Moldavia) ([Bessarabia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bessarabia))."

Through a variety of policies, successive Russian Tsars required Jews living in areas Russia controlled but not within the Pale of Settlement to live within the Pale of Settlement. Jews living outside of the Pale of Settlement in Russian-controlled territories were forcibly made to move to the Pale of Settlement in the same way that the Nazi regime forced Jews to move into ghettos during the late 1930s and 1940s. The fictional shtetl or village of Anatevka in *Fiddler on the Roof* is located in the center of the Pale of Settlement in what is now Ukraine.

During the second half of the 19th century, the severity of the treatment of the Jews in the Pale of Settlement waxed and waned. Following the 1881 assassination of Tsar Alexander II, his son, Alexander III, reinstated the harsh treatment of the Jews that his father had somewhat eased.

Among Tsar Alexander III's policies were the following:

* Jews were excluded from local councils and trade guilds, even in towns where they were the majority of inhabitants;
* Jews were forced to pay a variety of humiliating taxes, such as a head tax, a property tax, a tax on kosher meat, a tax on Sabbath candles and a tax on wearing their traditional clothes;
* Jews were banned from undertaking a variety of occupations, such as the law, farming, tavern keeping, production and sale of liquor and retail vending of manufactured goods;
* Jews were forced to attend schools to be Russianized, but such schools had quotas leaving most Jews to educate their own for which they were harassed;
* The sons in Jewish families other than the first born son were subject to the military draft from age 12. From age 12 to age 18, these youths received military training. They were then drafted for a tour of 25 years. In the Russo-Caucasian military conflict and later in the Russo-Japanese war, Jewish conscripts in overwhelming numbers were sent to the front as cannon fodder.

Further, under Tsar Alexander III, Jews were blamed for the growing revolutionary movement. This "simultaneously discredited the revolutionaries painting them as Jewish conspirators and deflected grievances of the...peasantry and working class from the government to the Jews."

Nicholas II, Russia's last Tsar, doubled down on the harsh treatment of the Jews. The tip of the spear for Tsar Nicholas II's "Jewish policies" was a series of pograms. A pogram is "an organized massacre of a particular ethnic group, in particular that of Jewish people in Russia or eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries." The pogram depicted in *Fiddler on the Roof* was milder than those that actually took place resulting in significant loss of Jewish lives.

From 1900 - 1905, the worst pograms during Tsar Nicholas II's reign took place. Fueling the severity of these pograms was Russia's embarrassment over its loss in the Russo-Japanese War and the 1905 Russian Revolution. The 1905 Russian Revolution was a wave of mass political and social unrest that spread through vast areas of the Russian Empire, which included worker strikes, peasant unrest, and military mutinies. Tsar Nicholas II needed scapegoats for these events that might reinforce his diminishing power, and of course, that role fell to the Jews.

Thus, we see the reason for the final scene of *Fiddler on the Roof* depicting the emigration from Anatevka to Europe, the United States and Israel. It is interesting to note that in 1905, Sholem Aleichem also fled the Ukraine arriving in New York City in early 1906. His family established residence in Geneva, Switzerland. When it became apparent that he could note maintain two households, Sholem Aleichem joined his family in Switzerland.

To make ends meet, Sholem Aleichem scheduled exhaustive lecture tours. In 1908, while on one of his lecture tours, he collapsed on a train and was diagnosed with acute hemorrhagic tuberculosis from which he never fully recovered. In 1914, he and his family returned to New York City where he remained until the end of his days, much of which was spent as a semi-invalid. Sholem Aleichem died in 1916 and is buried in the Mount Caramel Cemetery in Queens, New York.