

The Shochet: A Memoir of Jewish Life in Ukraine and Crimea, Vol. 1

Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn

Michael Rotenfeld, Translator

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A historically insightful memoir, The Shochet trades between humorous and grave descriptions of rural Jewish life in nineteenth-century Ukraine.

The engrossing memoir of a Hasidic Jew living under the yoke of Tsarist Russia, volume one of Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn's *The Shochet* delves into the joys and struggles of Jewish life over 150 years ago.

"If he had been lucky, he would have been born to rich parents. Having no luck, [Goldenshteyn] was born to poor parents surrounded by naked, barefoot siblings, large and small" in 1848 in rural Ukraine. Orphaned by the age of seven, Goldenshteyn grew from an inauspicious, unregistered child passed between members of his poverty-stricken family to a holder of a clandestine Romanian passport, a Torah scholar, and a certified shochet (or kosher slaughterer—a person who, in some communities, is even more essential than a rabbi). Setting out to prove the existence of God with its stories of enduring and overcoming various forms of suffering, the book is dense with the lives and lore that animated his world. There are anecdotes as of being chased through the mountains by a mystical fire alongside vibrant descriptions of village life.

Translator Michael Rotenfeld contributes extensive commentary and annotations on the cultural and historical background of the book. Imparting contextual information in accessible, if exhaustive, terms, the book includes an extensive introduction and lengthy footnotes on subjects ranging from linguistic choices to geography. Often, its footnotes take up half of a given page; in spite of their insights, in their heft, they often pull attention from the narrative. Further, these parts of the book are geared toward academic interests first and foremost, whereas the frank central narration stands to captivate all.

Goldenshteyn trades between being humorous and grave, punctuating his memories with idiosyncratic descriptions that have the flavor of local gossip. Goldenshteyn's sister's layabout husband is recalled for his outrageous excuses for not bringing home money from his teaching job; elsewhere, two singing Cossack soldiers ride past Goldenshteyn while he's hidden in a ditch. Goldenshteyn's irresistible narrative energy draws these people and events into a tapestry of stories enlivened by colorful details of everyday life. Further, he takes care to clarify details, as of why being unregistered at birth was an issue for him. Historical photographs flesh out the period further with their depictions of the people and places mentioned throughout.

The Shochet is an impoverished Ukrainian Jew's bustling historical memoir, capturing nineteenth-century life in terms that are amusing and candid.

WILLEM MARX (March 14, 2024)

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