

Ghetto Boyhood

"The Great Fair," by Sholom Aleichem (translated by Tamara Kahana. Noonday Press. 306 pp. \$3.75), is an autobiographical account of his boyhood and youth, spent in the ghettos of Czarist Russia, by a man who grew up to be a great Yiddish writer. Here it is reviewed by Professor Ludwig Lewisohn of Brandeis University.

By Ludwig Lewisohn

IT IS an immense pity that Sholom Aleichem (Rabinowitz), the most admired and most admirable of the classical trio of Yiddish writers, did not live to finish his autobiography. It would, at the rate of the account of his childhood and early boyhood given in "The Great Fair," have run to many volumes. And they would all have been precious volumes. For this is a new kind of autobiography. The subject is the center and at the center. But his chief concern is with the life that surrounded him and with the people who influenced him and he tells of himself through the medium of the life and the people—in terms of that life and those who made it up.

Now that life and those people are different, fundamentally different, from any other in history. Even in the early years of Sholom Aleichem, when the so-called enlightenment was beginning to break in and corrupt the traditional sanctities, these Jews of Eastern Europe constituted a unique society. There were rogues enough. But these were individuals with a perfect realization that they were rogues, breakers of laws, defilers of sanctities which they never dreamed of not acknowledging. As nearly all the other societies of man have been unredeemed societies, sprinkled with saints, so this was a redeemed society sprinkled with rogues. The boy Sholom Rabinowitz and his playmates slighted the three daily devotions and even occasionally desecrated the Sabbath. But they never really dropped out of the consecrated framework or dreamed of doing so and at every moment of heightened emotion and heightened responsibility instantly reallocated themselves joyously with that sanctification of life, of the whole of life, by which their community lived.

SUCH was the character of the community delineated here. The method is by way of anecdote and characterization. A large group of boys and of men and women emerges

clearly and definitely. And nearly all the characterizations have edge and definiteness. The poverty of the people was great and cruel. But since the confessed aim of life was suprasensual and beyond the material, the struggle with this prevalent poverty was as unique as the entire society. Dreams and legends figured forth an easier and a richer world. The actual efforts made toward any practical improvement were feeble and eccentric and nearly everyone lapsed back into resignation and the fervors of piety. Thence arose, of course, many "bitter hearts," especially among the women, and bitter tongues. Yet these serve only to heighten the edge and sharpness of all that is described.

Sholom Aleichem's stock of people and stories, moreover, gives the impression of the inexhaustible. One story leads him to another; one especially strange and gnarled character reminds him of others. He sees them all quite starkly, yet with an endless kindness, with a compassion which avoids softness. He himself became, as did all the men of his generation, an "enlightener," a Westerner, so to speak, one who intellectually could no longer wholly consent to the society of his early years. But deep within him was an endless tenderness for these people and this society and an innermost conviction that these oppressed and humiliated Jews of the old Czarist times were the bearers of incomparable and immortal values. It is this conviction which shines through the text. It gives seriousness to the humor, illumination to physical sordidness, epic depth to the anecdotal method.

It is a pity that the translation is so awkward. Sholom Aleichem's Yiddish is, doubtless, a folk tongue. English dialect terms or even judiciously used archaisms might be employed in translation. But, of all things, not mere vulgarisms, like "dumbbell," "measly," or such locutions as "knock on wood" or "drink hearty," which come from wholly different moral and linguistic atmospheres.



—From "It's Me O Lord."

A Full Life

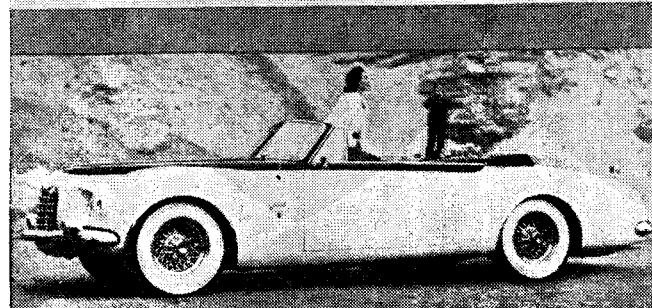
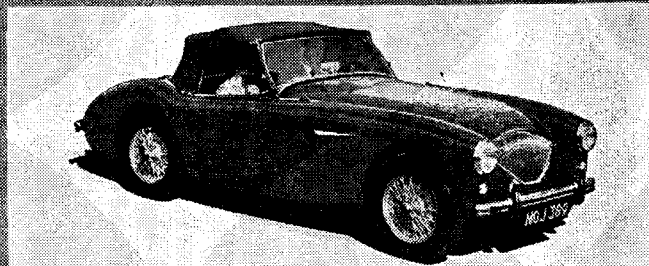
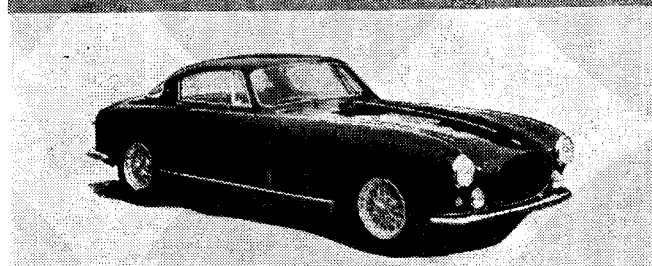
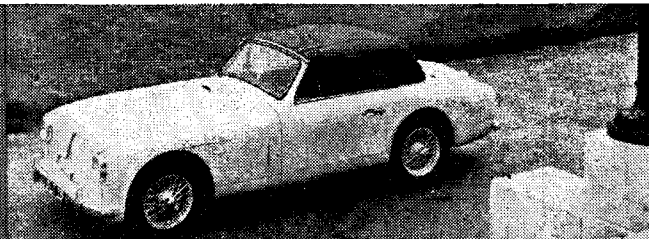
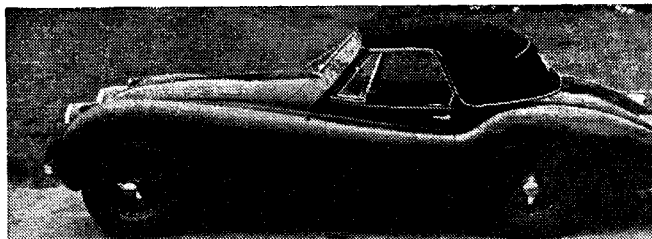
"It's Me O Lord," by Rockwell Kent (Dodd, Mead. 617 pp. \$10), is the autobiography of a man who has achieved distinction as an illustrator and painter, and has had careers also as explorer, farmer, sailor, etc. Virgil Barker, our reviewer, is the author of "American Painting: History and Interpretation."

By Virgil Barker

ROCKWELL KENT'S self-termed autobiography, "It's Me O Lord," is the detailed but far from complete account of a great many episodes in the very full life of a very romantic person. Since the episodes frequently involve his important contemporaries his narrative is also a spirited chronicle of a very romantic half-century of life in the United States. Mr. Kent's immense zest for different and sometimes competing activities gives the book an air of confusion as well as of bustle; compared to the usual double-strand existence of earning and spending, Mr. Kent's career wears a look of almost renaissance richness and excitement. Apparently he is gifted (or burdened) with total recall. Apparently, too, he is willing to write it all out. But he is doomed to incompleteness by two things: regard for the feeling of a few persons still alive and the expressed unwillingness of his publisher to make a long book even longer.

Outsiders who can be at least theoretically indifferent to such considerations might well wish for more. Though this book has flaws in the telling—a few dull patches, unnecessary changes of tense which do not actually enliven, rather frequent changes of pronoun, marking awkward resumptions after breaks in composition—the literary virtue of liveliness dominates the whole. The changes of occupation, the often convulsive relations with others, work and play, men and women and landscapes—these things whip past like vivid train glimpses. Total recall and an animated manner are certainly effective for reminiscences, but how about autobiography?

After reading this book and all of its predecessors except one I still ask myself: Who is Rockwell Kent? There seems to be plenty of material on which a speculative amateur in psychology could construct his own answer. I don't find the answer convincingly spelled out in Mr. Kent's own words. I think it is quite likely that he doesn't really know. At several points



HOW'S YOUR SPORTS CAR I.Q.? Few new national pastimes have become more conspicuous in the past few years than the national pastime of owning and driving a sports car. And even for ordinary citizens who drive nothing sportier than a '49 Ford the new craze has provided a pleasant and interesting by-product, for no Sunday drive is complete these days unless you come across at least one foreign

model whose name and origin you have never heard of. Now Random House, taking note of the trend, has published a handsome volume, by John Wheelock Freeman, called "Sports Cars" (\$12.50) and containing more than 250 illustrations of a great variety of sports cars, six of which are shown here. Can you guess their nationalities and their names? For answers turn page upside down.

in this book he pauses for a brief but formal analysis or description of the person to whom the events have been happening. Each time the gist of the passage is a simple affirmation of unchanging identity—loyalty to love in changing beloveds, loyalty to art in *not* changing either manner or concept, and again on the other hand loyalty to Socialism in accepting its Russian transformation as being still Socialism. It seems to me a highly romantic idea to think of oneself as the same yesterday and today and forever.

The fourth Book, consisting of two hundred pages, best demonstrates what seems to me Mr. Kent's refusal to submit to the "autobiographical" process of life. It recounts the last thirty years with emphasis upon his personally courageous but personally disastrous political activities. He proudly calls his concern with injustice to others a "weakness of character"; this is consistent with his frequent use of humorously tinged self-deprecation as a more tolerable form of self-justification. The basic

generosity of Mr. Kent's motives is so clear and strong that one doesn't mind Mr. Kent himself saying so. But in a mixed world the same kind of act may be good or bad according to circumstances, though the motive may be the same.

In picture-making Mr. Kent has contributed an extremely influential personalized manner in the field of black-and-white illustration; in this he has developed his basic skill as an architectural draftsman into fluency, even suppleness, of line and into boldness, even impressiveness, of contrasted light-and-dark. In this book 170 examples are repeated from the past and ninety-six new ones added. On inset pages three lithographs and two sets of tableware are given, and fifty-six reproductions of oil paintings, which suffer from a weakening grayness of tone. But there are also eight good color reproductions of oils from Monhegan and the more remote regions visited by the painter in his search for what he once called "the rhythms of eternity." If these are successfully communicated in visual

terms, they can give the imagination the conviction of reality in the art. But is this aim compatible with the visual realism which Mr. Kent thinks is the distinguishing characteristic of his painting? For my part, I don't see in his oils either reality or realism. I see only the mannerism of a vision imposed by the painter upon all his material—a mannerism quite as obvious as that in black-and-white, but much less appropriate to the medium. The earlier a painting is in Mr. Kent's career the better it is likely to be; he was then more willing for the physical substance of pigment to remain visible and pleasure-giving in impasto and brushwork.

The sports cars shown here are:
 British Jaguar (upper left);
 Italian Ferrari (left center);
 U.S. experimental Chrysler (lower left);
 British Aston-Martin (upper right);
 British Austin-Healey (right center);
 Italian Alfa-Romeo Type 2500-C (lower right).