Introduction

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During the past thirty years the shtetl has attracted a growing amount of serious scholarly attention. Gross generalizations and romanticized nostalgia still affect discussions of the subject; indeed few terms conjure up as many stereotypes as “the shtetl.” Nonetheless, serious students of history, anthropology, architecture, and literature have begun to apply their multidisciplinary insights to describing and understanding this most important facet of East European Jewish life. This volume is just one example of this new scholarship on the shtetl. Included within it, however, are chapters that encompass a variety of approaches—political history, religious history, demographic and literary studies—as well as substantial contributions to many traditional areas of research.

In Yiddish shtetl (plural: shetlekh) means a “small town.” There were hundreds of them, and no two were alike. The term “shtetl” connoted a Jewish settlement with a large and compact Jewish population who differed from their gentile, mostly peasant, neighbors in religion, occupation, language, and culture. Although strictly speaking the shtetl grew out of the private market towns of the Polish nobility in the old Commonwealth, over time “shtetl” became a common term for any small town in Eastern Europe with a large Jewish population: These included non-noble towns in Poland, as well as towns in Ukraine, Hungary, Bessarabia, Bukovina and the Sub-Carpathian region that attracted sizeable Jewish immigration during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Underlying the social framework of the shtetl were interlocking networks of economic and social relationships: the interaction of Jews and peasants in the market, the coming together of Jews for essential communal and religious functions, and, in the twentieth century, the increasingly
vital relationship between the shtetl and its emigrants (organized in landsmanshaftn). No shtetl stood alone. Each was part of a local and regional economic system that embraced other shtetlekh, provincial towns, and cities.

For all their diversity, shtetlekh differed in many important respects from previous forms of Jewish Diaspora communities in Babylonia, France, Spain, or Germany. In these other countries Jews rarely formed a majority of the town. This was not true of the shtetl, where Jews sometimes comprised 80 percent or more of the population.

Two aspects of the shtetl experience, besides religion, were especially important in shaping the character of East European Jewry. One was demographic concentration, the impact of living in a community where Jews often formed a majority. The other was the language of the shtetl, Yiddish. In Germany or Spain, Jews basically spoke the same language as their neighbors, albeit with Hebrew expressions and idiomatic and syntactical peculiarities. But in Eastern Europe, the Yiddish speech of the shtetl was markedly different from the languages used by the mostly Slavic peasantry. (Obviously in some regions, such as Lithuania, Rumania, and Hungary, peasants were also non-Slavs.) To see the shtetl as an entirely Jewish world is wrong, and many of the chapters in this book stress that point. Nonetheless, Yiddish strengthened the Jews’ conviction that they were profoundly different from their neighbors.

Occupational diversity also set off the shtetl off from previous forms of Diaspora settlement. While in other lands, Jews often clustered in a few occupations, often determined by legal constraints, in the shtetl, Jewish occupations ran the gamut from wealthy contractors and entrepreneurs to shopkeepers, carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, teamsters, and water carriers. Scattered in the surrounding countryside were Jewish farmers and villagers. Much of the vitality of shtetl society stemmed from this striking occupational diversity, which also helped nurture a rich folk culture—and sharpened social tensions.

The Origins of the Shtetl

Shtetlekh originated in the lands of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, where the nobility, having become quite powerful by the middle of the sixteenth century, invited Jews to settle their estates and stimulate economic development. After the union of Poland and Lithuania in 1569, the
Commonwealth expanded eastward just as export markets flourished for timber, grain, amber, furs, and honey. Eager for economic gain and anxious to raise cash to buy foreign luxury goods, the Polish nobles needed competent managers and entrepreneurs—as well as regular markets and fairs on their estates. They found that the Jews were ideal partners, especially because their pariah status in Christian Europe ensured that they could never become dangerous political rivals. This symbiosis of nobles and Jews produced the arenda (leasing) system, wherein landlords leased key economic functions to a Jewish agent (arendar), who in turn engaged other Jews in a varied and complicated network of sub-leases.

One particularly important aspect of the arenda system was the sale and manufacture of alcoholic beverages. Largely in Jewish hands, the liquor trade generated much needed cash and gave landlords an important hedge against falling grain prices in export markets. In time, the Jewish tavern keeper would become a stock figure of the East European countryside, a link between the Jewish world and the local peasantry, a source of news and rumors, someone whom the peasants would regard—depending on the circumstances—both as a familiar confidant and as a despised exploiter. In the Ukraine, especially, the Jews would find themselves resented as the agents of the hated Polish nobility.

In order to persuade Jews to settle on their estates, the nobility established private market towns, called miasteczko in Polish and shtetlekh in Yiddish. Faced with growing competition from Christian guilds in the cities and towns of western Poland, many Jews preferred to go to these new towns that were sprouting in the eastern regions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (today’s eastern Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania). As Gershon David Hundert shows in his contribution to this volume, by the mid-eighteenth century, more than 70 percent of the Polish Jewish population lived in the eastern half of the Commonwealth.

These shtetlekh—all built around a central market square—reflected an emerging socio-economic microsphere that brought together nobles, Jews, and the surrounding peasantry. One important contribution of Israel Bartal’s chapter, “Imagined Geography: The Shtetl, Myth, and Reality,” is to remind us that both in terms of physical space and in terms of population, the shtetl was far from the exclusive Jewish world portrayed by many important Yiddish writers. Usually one side of the market square would feature a Catholic church, built by the local landlord as a symbol of primacy and ownership. Once a week, the bustling market day would bring together Jews and peasants in a web of ties that were both economic and
personal. As the Jews settled in these new towns, they received charters from the landlords that promised them protection and that precluded markets on the Sabbath or on Jewish holidays. With their synagogues, Jewish schools, mikvaot (ritual baths), cemeteries, and inns, the shtetlekh also became bases for the numerous Jews who would fan out to the surrounding villages as carpenters, shoemakers, and agents. Many Jews who lived lonely lives in the countryside as tavern keepers or leaseholders could come to the shtetl for major holidays and important family occasions.

While many shtetlekh date from the sixteenth century, recent scholarship (the work of Adam Teller, for example) has shown that their establishment in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became especially marked in the second half of the seventeenth century, following the ravages of the Cossack insurrection and the Swedish invasion. Battered by these economic and political shocks, the Polish nobles tried to regain their standing through even greater economic cooperation with the Jews. The new shtetlekh indeed helped the Polish economy recover from the shocks of the mid-seventeenth century—even though in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries some anti-Semitic Polish historians would argue that the extensive network of shtetlekh retarded the growth of Polish cities and acted as a brake on the overall economy.

Significantly enough, this new upsurge of shtetl development took place just as Polish Jewry experienced a marked increase in numbers, from 175,000 in the late sixteenth century to more than 750,000 by the mid-1700s. In his chapter on “The Importance of Demography and Patterns of Settlement for an Understanding of the Jewish Experience in East–Central Europe,” Professor Gershon David Hundert properly stresses the political and psychological implications of this impressive numerical increase. It was hardly accurate, Hundert contends, to see Jews as a tiny minority when they comprised such a large percentage of the settlements in which they lived. Furthermore, Hundert argues, the Jewish population was expanding faster than the Christian. Hundert believes that multiple causes explained this: better systems of social support in the Jewish community; the relative stability of the Jewish family; lower rates of alcoholism and sexually transmitted diseases; and the custom of early marriage.

After the partitions of Poland between 1772 and 1795, Russia, Hapsburg Austria, and Prussia took over the world’s largest Jewish community. Created and nurtured in the specific socio-economic and political realities of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Jewish shtetl now faced entirely new challenges. With the Polish nobility severely weakened by the
unsuccessful anti-Russian uprisings of 1830–31 and 1863, their Jewish part-
ners—a mainstay of the shtetl economy—also suffered. A further blow to
the economic power of the Polish nobility was the abolition of serfdom.
Railroads and urban development fostered new regional and national
markets that undercut the economic base of many shtetlekh. As peasants
became more politically conscious and assertive, they often created coop-
erative movements that damaged the shtetlekh economy. A salient feature
in many shtetlekh was the steady growth of the non-Jewish population; in
many towns Jews lost their majority status.

Prussian Poland had had few shtetlekh to begin with, and over time,
most Jews there emigrated westward. In Hapsburg Galicia, Jews suffered
from a harsh economy but benefited from the relatively liberal political
regime established after 1867.

In the Russian Empire, on the other hand, Jews suffered from severe
political restrictions. A creature of the old Polish-Lithuanian Common-
wealth, the shtetl was foreign to Russian experience and to Russian law.
After all, the Jews did not come to Russia: Russia came to the Jews when it
took over much of Poland. In Russia proper, smaller towns had been pri-
marily administrative centers rather than market towns, which many
Russian officials regarded as a sinister bridgehead of Jewish corruption in
the countryside.

The policy of the Russian government toward the Jews alternated
between a desire to assimilate them on the one hand and to limit their
contact with the non-Jewish population on the other. The Tsarist govern-
ment was especially determined to keep Jews away from the Great Russian
peasantry. In 1791 the Empress Catherine decided to limit Russia’s Jewish
population largely to the former Polish provinces, and in April of 1835 the
Pale of Settlement was formalized by a decree of Tsar Nicholas I. (Con-
gress Poland would have a separate legal status.) While certain categories
of Jews would eventually receive permission to live in the Russian interior,
the earlier Russian residence laws remained in force until 1917. Therefore,
on the eve of World War I, well over 90 percent of Russian Jewry was still
living in the Pale.

While many observers stressed the ongoing decline of the shtetl during
the course of the nineteenth century, residence restrictions and population
growth both ensured that in absolute terms, the shtetl population
increased. This happened even in the face of massive migration to new
urban centers (Odessa, Warsaw, Lodz, Vienna) and emigration to the
United States and other countries. Many shtetlekh even showed surprising
economic resilience. The shtetl suffered terribly during World War I and during the waves of pogroms that swept the Ukraine in 1905 and in 1918–1921. Nevertheless, it was only the Holocaust that finally destroyed it.

*Defining the Shtetl*

What was a shtetl? Yiddish distinguishes between a *shtetl* (a small town), a *shtetele* (a tiny town), a *shtot* (a city), a *dorf* (a village), and a *yishev* (a tiny rural settlement). But these terms are obviously quite vague.

Scholars have been hard pressed to agree on an acceptable definition. John Klier compared the task of defining a shtetl to Hamlet’s discussion with Polonius on the shape of a cloud in the sky: now a camel, now a weasel, now a whale.\(^5\) In his essay in this volume on “Agnon’s Synthetic Shtetl,” Arnold Band regards the shtetl as a “problematic term, open to a host of interpretations”:

More often than not, the “shtetl” is an imagined construct based on literary description either in Hebrew or in Yiddish, and even when treated by historians, it is the product of historiographic reconstruction, by no means free of imagining. As such, the “shtetl” is less a specific place than a shorthand way of referring to the life of Jews in Eastern Europe in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this sense the “shtetl” is always a synthesis of facts, memory, and imagination.

For Elie Wiesel the problem of definition is only slightly less troublesome. In his essay “The World of the Shtetl,” he asks:

What makes a place inhabited by Jews . . . a shtetl? Literally the word means “a small city.” So it may be accurate to call a city of ten or fifteen thousand Jews a shtetl. But what about a locality of only two thousand? Or a village numbering no more than 120?

In my chapter in this volume, I offer my own, admittedly imprecise definition, which differs somewhat from Wiesel’s:

In defining a shtetl, the following clumsy rule probably holds true: a shtetl was big enough to support the basic network of institutions that was essential to Jewish communal life—at least one synagogue, a *mikveh* [a ritual
bath], a cemetery, schools, and a framework of voluntary associations that performed basic religious and communal functions. This was a key difference between the shtetl and even smaller villages, and the perceived cultural gap between shtetl Jews and village Jews (yishuvniks) was a prominent staple of folk humor. On the other hand, what made a shtetl different from a provincial city was that the shtetl was a face-to-face community. It was small enough for almost everyone to be known by name and nickname. Nicknames could be brutal and perpetuated a system that one observer called the “power of the shtetl” to assign everyone a role and a place in the communal universe.

That the shtetl was a face to face community also underscored how it differed from a provincial city. In Yisroel Oksenfeld’s cutting satire of shtetl life, The Headband (Shterntikhl), a city is distinguished from a shtetl by the fact that “everyone boasts that he greeted someone from the next street because he mistook him for an out-of-towner.” Of course a new railroad could quickly turn a sleepy shtetl into a bustling provincial city—while a major city like Berdichev could become “an overgrown shtetl” (to quote the Yiddish writer Mendele Moykher Sforim), largely because the rail network bypassed it.

Legally and politically, there was no such thing as a shtetl. Jews had no say in establishing the legal status of localities, and the term “shtetl” meant nothing to non-Jews. What Jews called a shtetl might be a city, a town, a settlement, or a village in Polish, Russian, or Austrian law. In the Commonwealth, Polish law defined a miasteczko (small town), but not every miasteczko had enough Jews to earn the unofficial sobriquet of a shtetl. In Tsarist Russia, the ruling senate established the “small town” (mestechko) as a legal category in 1875. A mestechko lacked the legal status of a city but also differed from a village in that it had a legal body of small-town dwellers (meshchanskoe obshchestvo). Such legal distinctions assumed vital importance for Russian Jewry after the 1882 May Laws forbade Jews to settle in villages, even in the Pale of Settlement. The Jews’ right to stay in the shtetlekh where they had lived for generations depended on whether their home was classified as a town or as a village. Handsome bribes often influenced the outcome, and lawsuits that contested these legal classifications flooded the Russian senate. According to the 1897 Russian census, 33.5 percent of the Jewish population lived in these “small towns,” but the shtetl population was probably much higher since many legal cities were actually shtetlekh.
Even when Jews formed a majority of the population, they hardly ever controlled local government. In the Commonwealth the nobles were usually the local masters, although Jews had many ways to protect their interests. The Tsars were never prepared to tolerate Jewish control of either urban or town government, unlike the post-1867 Hapsburg Empire, where many Galician towns were headed by Jewish mayors (who often did the bidding of the local Polish nobility). In interwar Poland it was often the case that even where Jews formed a majority of the voting population, the local authorities found ways to guarantee—by annexing surrounding areas or by subtle pressure—a Jewish minority in the local town councils.

In the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, internal Jewish government was in the hands of the kehilla, a legally recognized local Jewish community with its own kahal (community board) ruled by an oligarchy based on wealth and learning. A kehilla, which collected taxes, supervised basic communal responsibilities; linked to a wider network of Jewish institutions, it was not necessarily a shtetl. For financial reasons a kehilla might include several shtetlekh; conversely, new shtetlekh would try to end their subordinate status and set up their own local kehilla. A key mark of independence became the right to establish a separate cemetery, which ensured that burial fees stayed within the shtetl.

Whatever the legal status of the kehilles under Russian and Hapsburg rule happened to be (and this is a complicated question), some type of internal Jewish communal government remained—even after the formal abolition of the kahal in Russia in 1844—and these bodies, whatever they were called, continued to perform important communal functions. In interwar Poland, a 1928 law established popularly elected kehilles in both small towns and larger cities. These elections, however, often led to bitter disagreements and outside interference by the Polish authorities.

The World of the Shtetl

One common stereotype of the shtetl—especially popular with those who never lived there—was that it was a warm and cozy community, steeped in a common tradition that linked rich and poor. Stereotypes often possess a grain of truth but this one ignores many negative features of shtetl life. The shtetl could be a cruel place, especially to those who lacked status: the poor, those with little education, and those who performed menial jobs. Those at the bottom of the pecking order—shoemakers, water carriers, or
girls from very poor families—were constantly reminded of their humble position. Sanitary standards were low, and living conditions could be dirty and squalid. Foreign travelers who toured the Pale in the nineteenth century pointed out the ugly and wretched physical appearance of the shtetlekh they passed. Spring and fall were the seasons when the rains turned the unpaved streets into seas of blote (mud). A hot summer’s day in the shtetl would bring a rich admixture of fragrances from raw sewage, outhouses, and the leavings of hundreds of horses that graced the central square on market days. Educational facilities, especially for poorer children, could be shockingly bad. The whole system of nicknames served as a reminder that the shtetl was a community quick to judge and often harsh and merciless in its collective humor.

In both travelers’ accounts and in Yiddish literature, descriptions of the physical layout of the shtetl stressed how houses seemed neglected and crowded together, perhaps a reflection of the fact that in many shtetlekh, gentile farms constricted the space available for possible expansion. Building codes were often non-existent and at any rate could be easily bypassed through bribes, especially in the Russian Empire. Shtetl buildings were usually wooden, although the local gvir (rich man) might occupy a moyer (brick building) on the market square.11 Fires were common and became a major theme of shtetl folklore and Yiddish literature. Perhaps, as Israel Bartal’s provocative chapter implies, many shtetlekh belied this stereotype of the ugly jumble and were in fact well planned and well laid out by their Polish founders. But it could also be that the physical deterioration of many shtetlekh, noted by travelers, reflected the declining power of the Polish nobility in the last half of the nineteenth century.

During the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a whole array of disparate critics—maskilim (proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment), Zionists, Bundists, Soviet Jewish Communists—all subjected the shtetl to scathing criticism and predicted its demise.12 The shtetl, they charged, was a dying community, trapped in the grip of stultifying tradition and doomed to economic collapse. These criticisms, while not entirely untrue, revealed as much about the ideology of their authors as they did about the reality of the shtetl. The reality was more complex, and to understand it one has to consider both historical context and critical regional variations.

When one looks at the shtetl without sentimental nostalgia or ideological prejudice, it is clear that for all its weaknesses, the shtetl also had many strengths—as Elie Wiesel reminds us in “The World of the Shtetl.” Even on
the eve of World War II, after a century of economic and cultural change, religious tradition remained the single most important factor that determined the culture of the shtetl. (The Soviet Union is a separate case.)° To be sure, religious culture reflected important regional variations. Shtetlekh with a strong Hasidic presence were quite different from shtetlekh in Lithuania with few if any Hasidim. Shtetlekh with a major yeshiva—Volozhin (in the nineteenth century), Mir, or Kleck—were far better situated to resist secularization than those that did not attract rabbis and students from far and wide.

During the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the religious world of East European Jewry was affected by two major revolutionary developments: the Hasidic movement, commonly associated with the Baal Shem Tov, and the rise of a new ethos of learning, linked to the legacy of the Vilna Gaon and his disciple Khaim Volozhiner. It was Khaim Volozhiner who founded the Volozhin yeshiva, a prototype for a new kind of Lithuanian yeshiva.° Despite its major impact on Jewish life, the history and development of the Hasidic movement raises many issues that still await further scholarly research. One of the most significant findings of recent scholarship has been a revision of the view that had regarded early Hasidism as a protest movement linked largely to the poorer strata of Jewish society.° Another major development has been the intersection of research into the history of the shtetl and of the Hasidic movement to demonstrate the organizational and the socio-political as well as the ideological reasons for the movement’s success.°

The rise of the two movements, Hasidism and the new ethos of Lithuanian Jewish learning, heightened regional differences between Lithuanian Jewry, where Hasidism was weak, and the Jews of Galicia, Podolia, Volhynia, and Congress Poland, where Hasidism established a strong base. While it is beyond the purview of this introduction to discuss the actual nature of Hasidism or the world of the Lithuanian yeshivas, it should be noted that both movements served to integrate shtetl Jews into the wider Jewish community. Hasidic Jews in the shtetl would leave their families on major holidays and journey to distant towns to be with their rebbe. There, they would pass their time with other Hasidism from different regions and establish personal bonds that would result in marriages and business deals.

By the same token, the establishment of yeshivas in a small shtetl would bring in new influences, a new ethos, and, often, marked tensions. In his
chapter on “A Shtetl with a Yeshiva: The Case of Volozhin,” Immanuel Etkes examines the “town-gown” tensions between the shtetl Jews of Volozhin and the outside students who came to study at this elite yeshiva. The Volozhin yeshiva differed from previous yeshivas in that it enjoyed financial independence from the local community, did not answer to local leaders, and had a great deal more prestige. (In short, it was a national “Ivy-league” university rather than a local community college.) Etkes shows that on the whole, during the heyday of the Volozhin yeshiva, the yeshiva students regarded the shtetl Jews with arrogance and condescension. Etkes uses the example of Volozhin to argue that the new Lithuanian Jewish scholarly elite, unlike other Jewish elites that developed during the course of the nineteenth century (maskilim, Zionists, socialists), was much more inward looking and less interested in reaching out to and affecting the wider Jewish community. Nevertheless, the townspeople seem to have accepted the slights as an unavoidable price of hosting such a prestigious center of learning.

The rise of new political parties and ideologies also promoted the integration of the shtetl with the wider Jewish world. In his chapter on “Two Jews, Three Opinions: Politics in the Shtetl at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” Henry Abramson traces the course of Jewish political mobilization in Tsarist Russia, a process that began after the pogroms of 1881 and reached a peak in the years of the 1905 Revolution. Abramson sees five major responses of shtetl Jews to a perceived crisis of East European Jewry: emigrationism, Zionism, Jewish Socialism, Autonomism, and Renewed Traditionalism. Russian Jews did not only look to new ideologies of salvation that promised national renewal, either do (here, in Eastern Europe) or dort (there, in Palestine). Millions of Jews also voted with their feet and searched for personal rather than collective solutions: a better life in the United States and other countries. Jews emigrated from the Russian Empire in proportionally greater numbers than non-Jews, and theirs was more an emigration of entire families that were less likely to return. The wave of emigration would have a profound effect on the shtetl psychology, as more and more families now had relatives abroad. Remittances from other lands would play a steadily increasing role in the shtetl economy, especially in the interwar period, and buttress its ability to withstand economic setbacks.

Yet, as Elie Wiesel reminds us in his chapter, even in the face of the secularization and mobilization described by Abramson and other authors, the sense of time and space, as well as the moral culture of shtetl life, were
still heavily influenced by a Jewish religion which in Eastern Europe was inseparable from a distinct sense of Jewish peoplehood. Whatever shtetl a religious Jew happened to live in, he prayed to return to Jerusalem and studied a Talmud that had originated in Palestine and Babylonia. He was “here” and “there” at the same time.

In the shtetl it was the religion—the holidays and the weekly Bible portions—that marked off the resonance of the different seasons. The Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur would give way to the rainy weeks of autumn, of Sukkot and the Bible readings of Genesis. The winter snows were associated with Hannukah and the Bible readings of Exodus. Spring was the time of Purim and Passover. Shavuot marked the beginning of the summer. Late in the summer, during the month of Elul, the blast of the shofar at morning services would confirm the message of the shorter days and the cooler nights—that a new year was coming. Each holiday had its own customs, and many shtetlekh would observe individual fast days or memorial days to commemorate a past massacre or a miraculous deliverance.

The Jewish religion dictated certain communal obligations that in turn helped determine the public space and public life of the shtetl. The chevre kadisha, the burial society, exerted major power and helped enforce the community’s code of mutual responsibility. If a rich person shirked his obligations, then the chevre might well redress the balance through a hefty funeral bill presented to his heirs. Other chevres (associations) also served to meet the community’s religious obligations: helping poor girls marry; providing all Jews with a basic minimum to keep the Sabbath and celebrate Passover; caring for the sick; educating children; receiving guests and strangers; providing interest-free loans. Every community had chevres that studied holy texts and that catered to the different levels of ability and learning in the Jewish community. Tsedaka, or charity, was a basic obligation. In interwar Poland, more than one critical outsider remarked on the greater readiness of shtetl Jews to give to charity and to help each other.

Until the advent of growing secularization, and even beyond, the chevres formed the basis of the shtetl’s communal life. As the historian Jacob Katz has pointed out, traditional Jewish society frowned on social activities, parties, or banquets that were not connected to an ostensible religious purpose. So each chevre would often have a traditional banquet that was linked to the week when a particular portion of the Bible was read. In one Jewish town, as David Roskies reminds us in his Shtetl Book, the water carriers would meet on Saturday afternoons to study Talmudic
legends (*Eyn Yaakov*). Their yearly banquet took place during the week when the Bible portion of *Emor* was read. This was because *Emor* resembled *emer*, the Yiddish word for “water pail.” This pun might have seemed forced. But it reflected the determination to anchor life in religious tradition.

While religious tradition dictated a strict code of public and private behavior, the shtetl Jews also knew how to amuse themselves. Purim, which usually fell in February and March, not only commemorated the deliverance of the Jews in Persia but also provided many opportunities for fun. Purim took place in a carnival atmosphere, with drinking and singing. Adults and children would dress up in costumes, and wandering troupes of amateur actors would go from house to house playing out Purim *shpils*, or skits and parodies loosely based on the story of the holiday. As in other carnivals, the merriment and the relaxation of rules also served as a subtle reminder that the rules, in fact, remained very much in force.\(^{38}\)

Gender roles in the shtetl were, at first sight, fairly straightforward. Men held the positions of power. They controlled the *kehilla* and, of course, the synagogue, where women sat separately and could not be counted towards a prayer quorum. Nonetheless, any generalizations about the place of women in the shtetl require caution.\(^{39}\) Girls from poor families indeed faced bleak prospects, especially if they could not find a husband. But women were not totally powerless and helpless.

Behind the scenes, women—especially from well-off families—often played key roles in the communal and economic life of the shtetl. As Nehemia Polen reminds us, women could even wield major influence in the Hasidic movement, a milieu not known for its feminist ethos. His chapter on “Rebbetzins, Wonder-Children, and the Emergence of the Dynastic Principle in Hasidism” discusses a key question that has long intrigued scholars: the origins of the dynastic principle in Hasidism. Of all the important innovations of the Hasidic movement, perhaps the most revolutionary was the rise of a new model of leadership based on the *tsad-dik*, whose spiritual powers could bring the ordinary Jew closer to God. Not only could the *tsaddik* make spiritual experiences more accessible to the ordinary Jew, but he could also serve as a new kind of leader, an alternative to communal rabbis or oligarchs. What Polen suggests is that in the development of the dynastic principle to determine succession, women played a key role by furthering the interests of the *yenukah*, the young son or “wonder child” of the departed *tsaddik*. Polen’s article notwithstanding,
however, many scholars would argue that by and large, it is still hard to made a general case that Hasidism raised the status of women in Jewish society.\textsuperscript{20}

Women clearly had opportunities to learn how to read and write.\textsuperscript{21} A popular culture that developed alongside the high culture of Talmud study reflected the resourcefulness and the curiosity of generations of Jewish women. A religious and secular literature in Yiddish for women (and poorer, less educated men) included such mainstays as the \textit{Tsenerene} (adapted translations of and legends based on the Five Books of Moses), the \textit{Bove Bukh} (adapted from a medieval romance), and private, individual prayers called \textit{tkhines}.\textsuperscript{22} A best selling Jewish writer in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe was Isaac Meyer Dik, who wrote popular Yiddish novels that were largely read by women—and uneducated men.\textsuperscript{23}

The rhythms of shtetl life reflected the interplay of the sacred and the profane, of the Sabbath and the week, of the marketplace and the synagogue. On the market day peasants would start streaming into the shtetl early in the morning. Hundreds of wagons would arrive, and the Jews would surround them and buy the products that the peasants had to sell. With money in their pockets, the peasants then went into the Jewish shops. The market day was a noisy cacophony of shouting, bargaining, and hustling.\textsuperscript{24} Often, after the sale of a horse or a cow, peasants and Jews would do a version of a “high five” and share a drink. Sometimes fights would break out, and everyone would run for cover. Especially on a hot summer day, the presence of hundreds of horses standing around would lend the shtetl an unforgettable odor. But the market day was the lifeblood of the shtetl.

The market day further underscored the complex nature of relations between Jews and gentiles. In these hundreds of small Jewish communities surrounded by a Slavic rural hinterland, many customs—cooking, clothing, proverbs—reflected the impact of the non-Jewish world. While Jews and gentiles belonged to different religious and cultural universes, they were also drawn together by personal bonds that were often lacking in the big cities. Even as each side held many negative stereotypes about the other, these stereotypes were tempered by the reality of concrete neighborly ties.\textsuperscript{25}

If the market day was noise and bustle, the Sabbath (\textit{Shabes}) was the holy time when the Jews in the traditional shtetl would drop all work and turn to God. The exhausted carpenters and tailors who had spent the previous week walking around the countryside, sleeping in barns, and doing
odd jobs for the peasants, now returned home. A Jew, they believed, received a neshome yeseire, an extra soul, with the coming of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was the only real leisure time that the shtetl Jew had.

In the interwar years in Poland, the shtetl Sabbath began to reflect the major changes coming in from the outside world, and synagogue attendance began to slip. A visiting Yiddish writer from a big city might lecture to a large audience at the fireman’s hall. Young people from Zionist or Bundist youth movements would go on hikes or perform amateur theater—much to the dismay of their religious parents who saw this as a desecration of the holy day. Yet these secular Sabbaths continued the concept of a special day as a break in time and as a period dedicated to the spirit.

The Transformation of the Shtetl: Poland and the Soviet Union

World War I marked a major turning point in the history of East European Jewry and in the history of the shtetl. As Konrad Zieliński shows us, the war had a profound impact on the shtetl, a bloody reminder that the shtetlekh were not half-real, half-imagined Jewish worlds but actual towns that were exposed to the assaults of history and the hideous violence of rampaging armies. Congress Poland, Galicia, and the Pale—the core of East European Jewish settlement—saw the fiercest fighting. The Russian army brutally expelled more than half a million Jews from their homes. Shtetl Jews preferred the Austrians and the Germans to the Russians. For the Jews who had been under Russian rule, the Germans and the Austrians brought a modicum of liberty; the war years saw an unprecedented surge of political organization and cultural mobilization, of new schools and libraries. On the other hand, the Germans proved to be experts in economic exploitation. As they requisitioned food supplies and raw materials, shtetl Jews had to turn into smugglers in order to live. In his 1920 novel Smugglers, Oyzer Varshavsky coldly dissected what he saw as the social and moral collapse of the wartime shtetl, as long-held ethical norms gave way to greed and ruthless egotism. The lawless clawed their way to the top of the social scale and even the sheyne Yidn, the “fine Jews” who had been the shtetl elite, demonstrated that they had few moral scruples.36

The breakup of the Hapsburg and the Russian empires after World War I divided the bulk of the Jewish shtetl population between the new Soviet Union and several successor states, the largest being the reborn Polish Republic.
As I show in my chapter in this volume, “The Shtetl in Interwar Poland,” the Jewish experience in the Polish Second Republic saw a continuation and an acceleration of a many trends that had begun before World War I. While the cities—especially Warsaw—became the center of political and cultural life, the shtetlekh did not disappear. In 1939 about half of all Polish Jews were still living in these small towns whose Jewish communities were also undergoing far-reaching changes.

The interwar shtetl was influenced as never before by outside cultural influences coming from the city. During the course of the nineteenth century many factors had linked the shtetl to the wider world: yeshivas, Hasidism, the press, and emigration. These contacts now intensified. Dances, sporting events, movies, and even beauty contests all became common features of shtetl life. As road and railroad transport improved, many shtetlekh were on their way to becoming suburbs of larger cities. But in the shtetl, outside forces and modern influences were often filtered and modified through the impact of traditional institutions and established values. A major feature of the interwar shtetl was an intensive development of new organizations that embraced an ever greater proportion of the Jewish community. The 1930s saw a sharp deterioration in Polish-Jewish relations that affected shtetlekh and cities alike. Nonetheless, in some ways, mutual relations were better in the shtetlekh. Relationships that went back for decades were not easily sundered, and many peasants ignored economic boycotts and continued to patronize their familiar Jewish merchants.

The shtetl in the interwar Soviet Union underwent a very different experience from its Polish counterpart. In the early years of Soviet power the Communist Party’s policy towards Jews and towards the Jewish shtetl was a work in progress. Since most Communists had inherited a hostile view of the shtetl, the new Soviet state explored various options to provide alternatives to it and to solve the Jewish problem. But while emigration to the big cities, agricultural colonies, and a Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan all provided new possibilities, a large proportion of Soviet Jewry still remained in the shtetlekh, and the regime could not ignore it.

Although hundreds of shtetlekh in Poland had suffered severe war damage, relatively few had to endure the savage pogroms that ravaged the Ukraine in 1919–1921 and that killed more than 60,000 Jews. The Civil War and the introduction of War Communism dealt a major blow to the traditional role of the shtetl as a market town. While some recovery occurred between 1921–1928, heavy taxation and political discrimination weighed
heavily on the shtetl. A large percentage of shtetl Jews suffered from Soviet legislation that deprived former members of the “bourgeoisie,” petty shop keepers, and religious functionaries of many legal rights. The advent of collectivization in 1928–1929 ended what was left of the traditional market relationship between the shtetl and the surrounding countryside.

The Soviet state gave its Jews very little liberty, and the Soviet shtetl knew none of the rich political and associational life that developed in interwar Poland or in the Baltic states. But despite persecution, many shtetlekh still preserved a large measure of their Jewish character. In the Ukraine and Belarus local Communist authorities supported the Evsektsia’s policy of promoting Yiddish schools for Jewish children, and right through the mid-1930s Jewish children in these small towns were not only speaking Yiddish at home but also receiving their primary education in that language. Whatever the shortcomings of the Communist Yiddish schools, they did provide some reinforcement against assimilation. On the other hand Jewish parents understood all too well that the path to higher education and advancement favored graduates of Russian schools. There were no Yiddish universities.

By the mid-1930s many former shtetlekh had begun to adapt to the new socio-economic reality created by collectivization and the Five Year Plans. They became centers for local artisan production, or they served nearby collective farms. Despite the momentous changes that transformed these shtetlekh, their Jewish population exhibited strikingly different characteristics from their brethren in the big cities. They were, for example, more likely to speak Yiddish and much less likely to intermarry than their urban counterparts. It was only the Holocaust that finally destroyed the Soviet shtetl. Unlike Jews in the big cities of the Russian Republic, shtetl Jews in the Ukraine and Belarus had a very difficult time escaping the Wehrmacht. Their destruction changed the entire character of Soviet Jewry by eliminating its most nationally conscious and least assimilated elements.

The “Imagined Shtetl”

During the course of the nineteenth century the shtetl also became a cultural and a literary construct. This “imagined shtetl,” unlike the real shtetl, was often exclusively Jewish, a face-to-face community that lived in Jewish space and that preserved a traditional Jewish life. In literature and in political and cultural discourse the “imagined shtetl” evoked many different
reactions that ranged from parody and contempt to praise for a supposed bastion of pure Yidishkayt (Jewishness). As a shorthand symbol, the “imagined shtetl” provoked reactions that were a revealing litmus test of the Jewish encounter with the dilemmas and traumas of modernity, revolution, and catastrophe. After the annihilation of East European Jewry, the shtetl also became a frequent, if inaccurate, metonym for the entire lost world of East European Jewry.\textsuperscript{29}

As a new Yiddish and Hebrew literature developed in the nineteenth century, the portrayal of the shtetl closely followed the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) and its critique of Jewish traditional society. While writers such as Isaac Meyer Dik, Yisroel Aksenfeld, and Yitshok Yoel Linetsky became extremely popular with their parodies and criticisms of shtetl life, it was Shalom Abramovitch (Mendele Moykher Sforim) who developed a literary shtetl—especially in The Magic Ring, Fishke the Lame, The Nag, and The Journeys of Benjamin the Third—that would have enormous influence on future writers. Abramovitch had been a maskil, and the names he assigned his fictional shtetlekh and towns—Tuniyadevka-Betalon (Donothingburg), Kapsansk-Kabtsiel (Beggartown), and Glupsk-Kesalon (Stupidville)—speak for themselves.

In a well-known essay, the literary critic David Frischmann wrote that if some day the shtetl were to entirely disappear, future historians would only have to consult Mendele’s stories to reconstruct a reliable and accurate picture of shtetl life. Yet as Dan Miron, a prominent Israeli literary critic and also on the faculty of Columbia University, pointed out, Frischman completely missed the significant discrepancies between the literary shtetl, as constructed in the works of Mendele and Sholom Aleichem, and the actual shtetlekh that these giants of Yiddish literature knew first hand. Insofar as these works were realistic, their mimetic realism was only a part of a complex aesthetic structure that many critics erroneously mistook for an accurate ethnographic description of the shtetl. Miron pointed out that the shtetl of the classical Yiddish writers was shaped by a system of metaphors and motifs that turned the shtetl into Jewish space and linked it to recurring themes of Jewish history: the destruction of Jerusalem, exodus, and exile, as well as final redemption. Myths of shtetl origin, fires, and the appearance of mysterious strangers created a rich overarching metaphor that tied the shtetl to the wider destinies of the Jewish people.

Through this structure, a Judaized shtetl served as a Jerusalem shel mata, an earthly Jerusalem set down in Eastern Europe. In this “imagined
shtetl,” myths of origin, legends, and customs could be parodied and satirized—but nonetheless fused to a collective consciousness shaped by Jewish tradition and messianic hopes.\(^3\)

Israel Bartal shows that in this literary construct, the “imagined shtetl” was described in such a way as to emphasize the differences between the Jewish and the Christian spheres:

The literary map deliberately obliterates the presence of the Christian urban population from the Jewish heart of the shtetl. It identifies the non-Jewish world with the countryside, thereby intensifying the distinctly urban identity of Eastern European Jewry. This representation of urban experience, the legacy of hundreds of years of colonization in the heart of a foreign and hostile population, did not reflect the demographic and geographic truth. It did, however, express the profound internal truth of alienation from the countryside outside the town. This alienation was very familiar to Mendele and Sholom Aleichem. They gave it expression in the imaginary geography of Kabtzansk and Kasrilevke.

Through the mediation of a brilliant character, Mendele the Bookseller, Abramovitch transcended well-worn Haskalah criticism of the shtetl and fashioned a persona to negotiate the space that separated the Jewish intelligentsia (including the author himself) from the ordinary shtetl Jews. Torn between his pungent criticism of Jewish society and his deep attachment to the Jewish masses, quicker to discern problems than to suggest solutions, Abramovitch let Mendele pass through the shtetl, an outsider and insider at the same time. He could thus skewer the common Jews and the Jewish intelligentsia with equal finesse.

Sholem Aleichem created one of the most important literary shtetlekh, Kasrilevke, which serves as a partial corrective to Mendele’s Stupidvilles and Beggartowns. The “Little Jews” (Kleyne Menshelekh) who live in Kasrilevke meet misfortune with dignity, humor, and an inner strength imparted by their folk culture and their language. As the Kasrilevke Jews hear the ominous tidings of an encroaching outside world—tidings of pogroms and anti-Semitism—they nonetheless stubbornly refuse to give up their faith in the eventual triumph of yoysher (justice). An even more positive treatment of the shtetl appeared in Sholem Asch’s 1904 novella, A Shtetl. Asch portrayed a shtetl deeply rooted in the age-old Polish landscape. It has its share of squabbles and natural calamities, such as fires. Nonetheless, Asch’s shtetl is an organic community, where natural leaders
enjoy moral authority and where the economy is based on a natural order undisturbed by railroads and industrialization.31

The chapters of Naomi Seidman, Jeremy Dauber, and Michael Krutikov demonstrate, as did Miron, just how rich and complex a topic the “imagined shtetl” is and how changing strategies of representation and aesthetic presentation of the shtetl theme served as key markers of cultural evolution. While the scholarly consensus has located the beginning of the shtetl theme in Yiddish and Hebrew literature in the *Haskalah*, Dauber’s chapter—while discussing the *Haskalah*—actually begins with the earlier literature of Hasidism, the *Haskalah*’s major polemical target. In his discussion of such seminal Hasidic works as *Shivkhei HaBesht* (Tales in Praise of the *Ba’al Shem Tov*), Dauber stresses the lack of concrete, mimetic representation, the absence of description of the physical or social aspects of the shtetl. This eschewal of mimetic representation was closely bound up with the ethos and ideology of the emerging Hasidic movement. The *Shivkhei HaBesht*, Dauber argues, attempts to replace traditional representation with a new kind of “seeing” that focuses on the tsaddik rather than on one’s own observations.

Indeed, if the *Shivkhei* is seen as a foundational text for the Zaddikist movement, such marginalization serves an even deeper polemic purpose: it suggests that representation, description at a distance, mediated texts, is no substitute for direct contact with the Zaddik (the mystical master), who is able to perceive “the real truth.”

But in their polemics against the Hasidim, maskilic (“enlightened”) opponents like Joseph Perl and Yisroel Aksenfeld had to confront their own ambivalence, not only with regard to Yiddish but also with regard to the very strategies of literary representation that they employed to discredit their opponents. Dauber sees Aksenfeld’s *Headband* as a “seminal maskilic text not in its certainty but in its doubt: about itself and about its methods.” Dauber examines the same marginalization of direct representation in Mendele’s *Fishke the Lame* (*Fishke der Krumer*). The complex negotiations among Fishke, Mendele, and Shalom Abramovich reflected the uncertainties and anxieties of a maskilic author at once a part of and yet distanced from the society he is trying to describe.

Naomi Seidman’s “Gender and the Disintegration of the Shtetl in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature” not only provides new analyses that complement Miron’s examination of the image of the shtetl in Yiddish lit-
erature but also serves as a case study of how the insights and tools of gender studies can enrich and enhance our understanding of Jewish culture. Focusing on the image of the agunah, the abandoned woman who cannot remarry, Seidman notes that the agunah “functions both as a metonym for nineteenth-century social upheaval and as a metaphor in a national-religious epic.” Surveying the themes of exile and abandonment in Yiddish literature, Seidman argues that “in the literature that describes the departure from the shtetl, what is left behind is gendered as feminine and emblematized by the figure of a woman.” But as Seidman also perceptively points out through the example of the writer Dvora Baron, Jewish women could in fact subvert established cultural tropes and metaphors. Baron’s short story “Fedka” describes a shtetl inhabited by women whose men have all emigrated. But the shtetl women find comfort with the gentile mailman Fedka.

In “Fedka,” Baron reverses the perspective, near universal, that privileges the masculine journey over the experiences of the women left behind, uncovering a store of hidden pleasures in a shtetl emptied of Jewish men. “Fedka” both mobilizes and undoes the metaphorical structure that, in the classic shtetl literature, views the shtetl as a fallen Jerusalem.

As revolutions and total war ravaged Jewish Eastern Europe, the treatment of the shtetl in Yiddish literature increasingly diverged from the models of Mendele, Sholom Aleichem, or Asch. Paraphrasing Miron, Michael Krutikov, in his chapter on “Rediscovering the Shtetl as a New Reality: David Bergelson and Itsik Kipnis,” notes that new writers abandoned the metaphorical vision of the shtetl crafted by the classical writers and forged a new “metonymic deflation” of the shtetl myth. Itche Meier Weissenberg’s 1906 masterpiece, also entitled A Shtetl, had portrayed a community torn apart by an internal Jewish class conflict. Yet, Weissenberg asked, what was the ultimate importance of these internecine Jewish struggles in a fragile shtetl, a negligible dot in an enormous gentile world lying just beyond its muddy streets? In his 1913 classic Nokh Alemen (the title essentially means “when all is said and done”) and in many shorter stories, the gifted writer David Bergelson presented a picture of a shtetl marked by banality and emptiness. Like Weissenberg, Bergelson too denied the shtetl any redemptive meaning.

Krutikov’s chapter, in showing how two major Soviet Yiddish writers dealt with the theme of the shtetl in war and revolution, offers a suggestive
and illuminating look at the complex attitudes of shtetl Jews towards the Bolshevik Revolution. The revolution shattered the market economy that had been the shtetl’s lifeblood, stifled traditional Jewish culture, and sparked pogroms that took tens of thousands of Jewish lives. But the Bolsheviks also emerged as protectors against anti-Semitism, and they promised a new world that would replace the old shtetl with wider vistas, education, and social mobility.

Kipnis and Bergelson were only two of the many important Yiddish writers who believed that the Soviet system, while far from perfect, nonetheless represented the best hope for Yiddish mass culture. Krutikov’s incisive analysis of how these writers dealt with the shtetl theme also complements and to some degree modifies Miron’s thesis. Miron saw the metonymic countervision of the shtetl in the works of Weissenberg, Bergelson, and others as a “mere foil, a contrasting backdrop against which the contours of the richer and more complex vision of the klassiker stands out.” What Krutikov argues is that the best of the post-classical writers such as Bergelson and Kipnis achieved a new metaphorization of the shtetl based not on its special position as Jerusalem in exile, but on its relationships with the real world around it. For Bergelson the underlying metaphor is midas-hadin (stern justice), a world devoid of midas-harakhamim (mercy). Kipnis, drawing upon Sholom Aleichem’s archetype of Jewish character, creates a new figure of a folks-mentsh (an ordinary Jew), an eternal and indestructible hero capable of overcoming obstacles and surviving disasters without losing his Jewish soul.

Apart from the “imagined shtetl,” the real world of the shtetl ended only with the Holocaust. But the subject of the shtetl in the Holocaust has received relatively little attention from scholars; the memorial books (yizker bikher) compiled by survivors after the war have remained the single most important source on the final days of hundreds of shtetlekh. Yet as historical sources, these books have their obvious limitations. Yehuda Bauer’s chapter, “Sarny and Rokitno in the Holocaust: A Case Study of Two Townships in Wolyn,” goes beyond the memorial books and uncovers little used archival sources and testimonies in Yad Vashem to chart the experiences of two shtetlekh during the war. Bauer traces the impact of the Soviet occupation on inter-ethnic relations and on the Jewish community, and he examines basic differences between Jewish responses in big ghettos like Warsaw and in smaller towns.
What has elsewhere been called *amidah* (standing up against German policies, armed and unarmed) took a completely different form from what we have learnt in large centers such as Warsaw, Lodz, Bialystok, Vilna, etc. If one considers hiding and/or escaping into the forest as an active Jewish reaction—and this is what is proposed here—then the individual initiatives to do so were an expression of the refusal to surrender. Such initiatives were fairly massive in both communities [of Sarny and Rokitno].

Bauer adds that the proximity of dense forests, the presence of a Soviet partisan movement, and the willingness of a few gentiles—Polish peasants, Baptists, Old Believers, and some Ukrainians—enabled a small minority of Jews to survive.

*After the Holocaust*

For an American Jewry just beginning to come to terms with the Holocaust, the shtetl—reviled and forgotten before the war—came to represent a lost world that was brutally destroyed. It became a symbol of the integral Jewishness and the supportive community that many American Jews—economically secure in their new suburban homes—now began to miss.\(^{34}\) In 1952 the publication of Mark Zborowski’s and Elizabeth Herzog’s *Life Is with People* presented American readers with a composite portrait of a Jewish shtetl that was the quintessential “home”: culturally self-sufficient, isolated from gentiles, and timeless. The 1964 Broadway production of *Fiddler on the Roof* transformed Sholom Aleichem’s village Jew, Tevyé, into a shtetl dweller. Tevyé’s genuine conflicts with his wife and daughters—expressions of the growing religious, class, and inter-ethnic tensions of Jewish society—found a resolution on the Broadway stage that harmonized Jewish and American values. The shtetl had become a way station to America.\(^{35}\)

In Poland, as we read in Katarzyna Więcławaska’s chapter on “The Image of the Shtetl in Contemporary Polish Fiction,” a small but important number of Polish writers tried to describe a community that had been brutally exterminated and about which they had little first-hand knowledge. Yet, aware that they were dealing with a critical part of their nation’s history, they began the difficult and artistically risky project of constructing a literary shtetl. In Piotr Szewc’s 1993 novel *Zagłada* (*Annihilation*), the story focuses on one boring summer day in 1934 in his home.
town of Zamosc. It is precisely this portrayal of quotidian routine that underscored the sheer horror of the destruction that was to come. Andrzej Kuniewicz’s *Nawrócenie* (*Turning Back*, 1987) takes another tack, laying out how the traces and impressions of the shtetl affect his imagination and memory—the memory of a Pole who realizes that he will never be able to penetrate the Jewish world that he can only observe as an outsider. “Too late” is how Więcław ska describes this attempt by gifted Polish authors to engage with the Jewish world that at one time had been so much a part of the Polish landscape.

If Poles could still imagine the former shtetlekh in the streets and squares of their provincial towns, in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, the shtetl mainly served as a negative symbol, a reminder of the narrow, doomed world that Zionism had transcended. For Israelis the “shtetl mentality” represented everything that the new state had to avoid. By the 1970s, however, there were some signs of a renewed interest in Yiddish culture and in the shtetl, and prominent Israeli scholars published much valuable material. It was mainly in Israel that survivors joined with older emigrants to publish hundreds of *yizker bikher*, or memorial books. These *yizker bikher* often contained hundreds of pages with pictures and personal reminiscences. For understandable reasons, many of these books were largely eulogies and elegies, and the committees that compiled them avoided including unflattering details on the shtetl and its inhabitants. Some, however, were edited by professional historians and have great historical value.

As Arnold J. Band reminds us in “Agnon’s Synthetic Shtetl,” one of the greatest *yizker* projects of all—the large number of stories that Shai Agnon wrote about his shtetl, Buczacz—went largely unnoticed. Both before and after the Holocaust, Agnon crafted an “imagined shtetl” that differed significantly from both the classical image described by Miron and the deflation of the shtetl myth that marked the writings of Weissenberg, Bergelson, and others. Band describes Agnon as an author who “negotiated” with Jewish history. Unlike Mendele, whose portrayal of shtetl life was mainly satiric and whose style, Band believes, was fundamentally European, Agnon engaged with traditional Jewish sources in ways that both recognized their authority and subverted them. Above all, Agnon made great demands of his readers: like him, they had to know the tradition in order to understand its ongoing confrontation with the Jewish present. Band compares Agnon’s literary shtetl with *Fiddler on the Roof*, which, in contrast, required very little of the audience:
[Agnon] challenges the reader, requires both erudition and work, and thus operates in the intellectual milieu of the “shtetl,” as he conceives it, a world of dense Jewish life, where even his simplest characters have significant Jewish literacy. If, as we have argued, what we call the “shtetl” today is primarily the product of literary representations of all sorts and levels, these sources determine the image of the “shtetl” we present and, indeed, cherish. And to the extent that they are memorials, they, like all memorials, generate and shape memory. The differences we have cited are not merely academic, but ultimately existential and fateful. And the stakes are high.

Vulnerable as it was, the shtetl for many Jews continued to symbolize the distinct Jewish peoplehood in Eastern Europe that had evolved over the course of centuries. It long influenced the contours of Jewish collective memory, and its spaces, streets, and wooden buildings remained etched in the collective imagination. Both the real shtetl and the “imagined shtetl” are an integral part of East European Jewish history and of the Jewish cultural heritage. But it is far from certain that the shtetl will be studied for what it was. This volume is certainly a start.

Notes


6. This “face-to-face community” engendered a different sense of belonging to a place than one found in a big city. As Annamaria Orla-Bukowska points out, “a strongly emotional and psychological bond with a specific place (something eliminated by modern mobility) is founded upon the significance with which a
specific natural landscape is endowed, the edifices built by its residents or their forefathers, and, above all, the people who are born, live, work and die there and all the extraordinary and ordinary events they experience individually and together. Of such a connection is made a Heimat a mała ojczyzna (small homeland) or ojczyzna prywatna (private fatherland).” See Annamaria Orla-Bukowska, “Maintaining Borders, Crossing Borders: Social Relationships in the Shtetl,” Polin, Vol. 1 (Oxford, 2004), pp. 173–174.


8. For Adam Teller, the working definition of a shtetl was a Jewish population of at least 40 percent in a settlement defined by Polish law as a miasteczko: a place that engaged in agriculture and that possessed under “300 chimneys” or a population of under 2,000 inhabitants. See his “The Shtetl as an Arena for Polish-Jewish Integration in the Eighteenth Century,” pp. 28–29.


12. The Bundists were members of the Jewish Labor Bund, the leading Jewish socialist organization in Eastern Europe. It was anti-Communist and anti-Zionist. There is a large literature on the subject of the severe criticism of the shtetl. See for example Dan Miron, The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination (Syracuse, NY, 2000); Dan Miron, A Traveler Disguised (New York, 1973); Mikhail Krutikov, “Imagining the Image: Interpretations of the Shtetl in Soviet Literary Criticism,” Polin, Vol. 17 (Oxford, 2004), pp. 243–258; and David Roskies, “The Shtetl in Jewish Collective Memory,” in his The Jewish Search for a Usable Past (Bloomington, 1999), pp. 41–46.


14. The best work on the Lithuanian yeshivas is Shaul Stampfer, Ha-yeshiva ha-litait be’hithayuta (Jerusalem, 1995).
15. Moshe Rosman has shown, for instance, that far from being a marginal figure, the Ba’al Shem Tov was a respected pillar of the Miedzyboz community. See his *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba’al Shem Tov* (Berkeley, 1996).


22. On these women’s prayers, see the excellent study by Chava Weissler, *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women* (Boston, 1998).


26. See the illuminating discussion of this novel in David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* (Cambridge, MA, 1984), pp. 118–121.

27. Evsektsiia were the Jewish sections of the Communist Party, established in Soviet Russia in 1918 and disbanded in 1930. Their main function was to conduct Communist propaganda in Yiddish, to fight religion, and to promote Soviet Yiddish culture.


30. In addition to Miron, see also David Roskies’ article, “The Shtetl in Jewish Collective Memory,” in his *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington, 1999), pp. 41–67.

31. See Mikhail Krutikov, *Yiddish Culture and the Crisis of Modernity* (Stanford, 2001), as well as his previously cited article “Imagining the Image: Interpretations of the Shtetl in Soviet Literary Criticism.”

32. On this, see also Gennady Estraikh, *In Harness: Yiddish Writers’ Romance with Communism* (Syracuse, 2005).

33. On these memorial books, see *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry*, edited and translated by Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin; with geographical index and bibliography by Zachary M. Baker (Bloomington, 1999).

34. Steven Zipperstein, “Shtetls There and Here: Imagining Russia in America,” in his *Imagining Russian Jewry: Memory, History and Identity* (Seattle, 1999), pp. 37–38.
