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## **Ukrainians and Poles in Jewish Collective Memory**

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In January 1990, on a trip to Kiev, my Jewish friends showed me a statue of Samson fighting the lion that had been restored in the historic Podol area of town. Local Ukrainians, they added with a smile, call it "The Zhid Torturing the Dog." This already says a great deal about how monuments function in the public domain. Being in the public eye, they are open to multiple and mutually exclusive meanings. This is especially true in a setting of competing nationalisms, such as the Ukraine has been since the seventeenth century. Monuments are also a highly mediated form of memory. They operate through symbol, selection and stylization. Of all Samson's exploits, tearing a grown lion apart with his bare hands (Judges 14:6) is more universally accessible than his climactic death pulling the Philistine temple down upon himself and his enemies (Judges 16:26-30). If Samson's heroic death had ever been memorialized in Kiev or anywhere else in the Soviet Union, the Communist rulers would surely have ordered it destroyed. And of all the biblical judges, why was Samson chosen, and not Gideon, Jephthah or Deborah? Samson presumably speaks to all men, religious or secular, Jewish or Gentile, whereas the others do not. A monument, moreover, exists at the intersection of time and space. Whatever mythic or historic event it is designed to commemorate, it also occupies a particular place in an ever changing human landscape. Of the once thriving Jewish community in Podol, for instance, the only visible remains were the

Samson statue and one small synagogue. That is why young Jewish activists reasserting their national presence in the Ukraine endowed the statue with so much significance. Finally, because this particular statute is about struggle and heroism, and because some Ukrainians would deny the Jews even their biblical heroes -- transforming the lion into a mere dog -- it reminds us that memory is an aggressive act.<sup>1</sup>

Memorials, then, are Lieux de Mémoire, as Pierre Nora has so aptly called them.<sup>2</sup> How they are read has much to teach us about the transformation of history into collective memory. Each memorial turns a discrete and time-bound occurrence into a timeless and tenacious presence. My concern, however, is not with physical memorials per se but with their **literary** surrogates. I am fascinated by the role that works of literature can play in preserving the collective memory of a people in hostile surroundings. I find the analogy between memorials and literature particularly apposite in the case of the Jews. As a religious civilization theologically prohibited from hewing graven images and as a national minority politically powerless to erect statues and other heroic memorials, the Jews have become expert in the art of collective memory. The Jews of eastern Europe were in addition very new to the business of literature. Thrust into fierce competition with native Ukrainians and Poles who had to assert their own collective consciousness in the face of Greater Russian hegemony, secular Jewish writers and intellectuals were faced with a formidable challenge. What they erected, I shall argue, in their works of Yiddish and Hebrew fiction, was a written memorial to the Jewish collective presence in exile. The literary code word for that collective presence became the shtetl, the Jewish market town, and within that shtetl the presence or absence of goyim would be the measure, the acid test, of each literary generation.

All monuments are built to commemorate the past, but the only past that premodern Jews preserved was archetypal: those places, people and events that resonated with the foundation myths of Judaism. Creation and revelation, exodus and exile, destruction and restoration,

were not discrete, one-time phenomena recorded in the sacred texts but the recurrent drama that Jews rehearsed three times daily in their prayers. To the extent that the Jewish God remained the God of History, all meaningful data was preserved in the liturgy, or not at all.<sup>3</sup> Thus the Jews of eastern Europe were notoriously ignorant about their own history and notoriously lax about preserving any historical documentation. Like true medievals, they were concerned solely with the ongoing life of their community. That community, so far as they were concerned, did not exist on a geographical plane, somewhere on the map of Poland or Russia or Galicia, but on a temporal axis that connected each city and town with Jerusalem.

The shtetl, where for five hundred years or more the Jews of eastern Europe had managed to preserve and enrich their millennial-old traditional culture, defined itself as a kehillah kedoshah, a covenantal community. Its sacred institutions of shul (synagogue), besmedresh (studyhouse), shtibl (hasidic house of prayer), khadorim (elementary schools), mikve (ritual bath) and besoylem (cemetery) secured the bond between Jews and God, just as the various voluntary societies and professional guilds called khevres organized the social interaction among the Jews themselves.<sup>4</sup> Like Jerusalem, the shtetl could be threatened with destruction, and then its inhabitants would bear witness to God's presence by submitting to martyrdom, as had occurred during the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648-49, known in Jewish code as gzeyres takh vetat.<sup>5</sup>

The shtetl as archetype of the covenantal community, as a latter-day Jerusalem, was further strengthened by the role of the goyim. The most important of them was the local Polish squire (called porits in Yiddish) to whom the town belonged. Jews settled there upon his invitation and under his personal protection. But by the time the shtetl entered literature, the Polish nobility had long been stripped of its powers. The porits remained only as legend, either of the benign ruler such as Graf Potocki, or of the sadistic and dissolute nobleman who signalled the collapse of all moral authority.<sup>6</sup> Thus the porits, like the Roman Emperor before him, was merely a player in the divine scheme of things.

The role of the peasants was similarly bifurcated. When the market economy was still viable, the Ukrainian- Belorussian- and Polish-speaking peasants would "invade" the shtetl with their open wagons loaded with livestock and produce. By nightfall, they were gone, except for the goyim who drank away their earnings in the local Jewish tavern. Should the peasants appear other than on market days, however, trouble was surely in the air. The only one who could save the Jews then was the local Russian constable or sherrif, and that, only for a price.

This political and ethnic hierarchy was also honored in Jewish linguistic practice. The Jews spoke Yiddish but prayed and studied in the Holy Tongue, Hebrew. When they negotiated with the outside world they did so either in High Goyish or Low Goyish. High Goyish was the language of nachaltsvo, of officialdom: in the old days, before the Partitions, in Polish; since then, and especially since the Insurrection of 1863 -- in Russian. Low Goyish was the language spoken by the peasants and the local priest: Ukrainian in the south, Belorussian in the north.<sup>7</sup>

So rich an historical, social, and linguistic landscape cried out to be exploited in works of literature. And so it was, in six distinct and successive periods of Jewish literary creativity: the Enlightenment, the period of national revival, followed by the pogroms and a period of revolutionary upheaval, the interwar years, the Holocaust, and finally, the aftermath of the Great Destruction. It was through Yiddish and Hebrew literature, itself the child of a cultural revolution, that the image of the shtetl would enter into Jewish consciousness. But not all at once, and in a dialectical, rather than a linear, cumulative manner.

The first generations of secular Jewish intellectuals hated the shtetl and everything it stood for. Those from the Ukraine, like Yisroel Aksenfeld and I. J. Linetski; those from Lithuania, like Isaac Meir Dik, Moyshe Aaron Shatzkes, and Sholem Yankev Abramovitch; those from Congress Poland, like Shloyme Ettinger; and those from Galicia, like Mordecai David Brandstetter, used their formidable talents to laugh the shtetl off the stage of history.

They looked ahead to the emancipation of the Jews as individual citizens in a neutral society, and when they looked back, what they saw was a feudal, ossified, and grotesquely self-involved society that made the Jews look ludicrous in the eyes of the civilized world. Except for the writings of Abramovitsh, better known under his pen-name of Mendele the Book Peddler, none of these works is read today.

That is because, late in the nineteenth century, the Enlightenment vision collapsed and was replaced by the one ideology that would henceforth shape the destiny of Europe: nationalism. As Eric Hobsbawm and the Cambridge School of historians have shown, the years 1870-1914 were the highwater mark for the mass production of national rites and memorials. Modern nation states from Europe to the Americas were busy erecting monuments, establishing public places, and creating civic rituals that would bestow a sense of "tradition" on a national entity that had just been invented. With a time-lag of only 10 years, Jewish intellectuals in Eastern Europe also took up the cause of self-emancipation, and along with the establishment of the first Jewish political parties, they began to cast about for a usable past, an heroic landscape, a gallery of legendary heroes that were consistent with the demands of European secular culture. Since they could erect no real monuments; since their theaters were banned almost the moment they got off the ground; and since their newspapers in Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, and Polish were subject to strict governmental control, channeling their creativity into a literary image of the past was about the only route open to them.

The past they ended up choosing, in the typical dialectic of cultural change, was the very past they had just discarded. The shtetl was reclaimed as the repository of national values. Precisely because the real, historical, shtetl was presumed dead, its literary image was that much easier to fashion.

But a funny thing happened on the way back to the shtetl: the goyim suddenly disappeared from the scene. For opposite reasons, and in response to two competing

nationalisms, both Sholem Aleichem, the Russian Jew, and I. L. Peretz, the Polish Jew, eliminated most of the gentile population from their respective field of vision.

At first, in the 1880's, trying to become the Yiddish Turgenev, young Sholem Aleichem expended a great deal of energy writing realistic novels about Jewish middle class life. His attitude to the shtetl was understandably negative. But in the 1890's, when he became a card-carrying Zionist, he dusted off the old, satiric image of the isolated, provincial Jewish backwater, and reclaimed it as a mock-mythical community of "little people."

The only evidence that the Jews of Kasrilevke, Zlodoyevke, and Kozodoyevke; of Khmielnitsk, Mazepevke, and Gontoyarsk, belonged somewhere in the Ukraine were the place names themselves and the Ukrainian phrases and proverbs with which the Jews from these shtetlekh peppered their speech. In this Jewish mini-empire, the few token Ukrainians, like Hapke the Maid and Khvedor the Shabes-goy, conversed freely in Yiddish. Though Kasrilevke was certainly not immune to the winds of change or even to the fires of destruction, the K.er were safe -- so long as they stayed home. When they did venture forth by train to Yehupetz or even further afield, to London and New York, their souls went up for grabs. This is what happened, for example, to Sholme Shachna of Kasrilevke, the hero of SA's "On Account of a Hat" (1913), who mistakenly exchanged caps with a high-ranking Russian official. Poor SS nearly lost his head.<sup>8</sup>

Peretz became a professional writer after moving to Warsaw and coming under the spell of Polish Positivism, one of whose major tenets was critical self-analysis in the cause of social reform. His first masterpiece, the fruits of a fact-finding mission underwritten by the wealthy industrialist Jan Bloch, was "Impressions of a Trip Through the Tomaszow Region," a stark panorama of the shtetl's moral and physical collapse. This was followed by a nightmarish allegory whose title, "The Dead Town," summed up Peretz's verdict. "Our poor folk live on hope," a shtetl Jew is reported as saying, "our merchants on air, and our gravedigger makes a living from the soil...."

Polish Positivism gave way and coexisted with an opposite literary-cultural movement -- Neoromanticism. The effect on Peretz was immediate and profound. Instead of focussing relentlessly on the internal decay of Polish Jewry in the present; instead of demythologizing the shtetl and all that it stood for, Peretz returned to the preindustrial past, to a shtetl life where each beggar might be Elijah the Prophet in disguise, and where the Hasidim danced under the open sky. It was a polarized, legendary landscape in which the spirit battled it out with the flesh, the mystical soul struggled against the rational soul, and the Jew faced off against his age-old enemy, the Gentile. Except for an occasional Polish peasant or old debauched porits, the landscape of this imagined past was Goyimrein.<sup>9</sup>

In response to revivalist trends in Russian and Polish culture, then, SA and Peretz provided the increasingly urban and secular Jews of EE with a useful myth of origins: In the beginning was the shtetl, home and haven for all. This universe-in-miniature represented the new covenant of Jewish self-sufficiency and moral coherence. Ukrainians had their Wild East of Hetman and Cossacks; Poles had their valiant kings and noblemen of the old Respublica, and the Jews now had a collective hero in the shtetl. Resurrected as a national landmark and moral reference point, the shtetl of literature was designed to withstand the forces of dissolution from within and the forces of destruction from without.

The all-but-total elimination of Poles and Ukrainians from the neoromantic image of the shtetl reflected the naive phase of east European Jewish nationalism. The Revolution of 1905 with its heightenend messianic hopes and its devastating repercussions changed all that. Two Polish-Yiddish writers who came of age in the immediate wake of these events made a demonstrative point of reintroducing Gentiles into the same shtetl landscape in order to signal the new political reality. As before, in the case of Sholem Aleichem and Peretz, they did so for opposite reasons.

Sholem Asch, who, from first to last would be the chief architect of Yiddish popular taste, and would eventually enjoy a larger following among Gentiles than among Jews,

signalled his ecumenical direction in a novella titled The Shtetl.<sup>10</sup> Published on the eve of the revolution, in 1904, this fictional portrait of Kuzmir/Kazimierz na Dolny in the mid-19th century was as close to an earthly paradise as Jews were ever likely to inhabit. The prayers that emanated from its synagogue and the prayers that echoed from the Catholic church ascended to a single God. Its only resident Goyim were the contented servants of the equally contented Jewish balebos.

Far more programmatic was Asch's "Kola Street," written about 2 years later, which told the story of the shtetl in crisis. Never before had a writer situated the shtetl so firmly within the Polish landscape. In a lush descriptive passage of the kind that would later win him a prize from the Polish government, Asch situated the shtetl within a triangular area that derived its uniqueness from what appeared at first to be its utter lack of individuality.<sup>11</sup>

[QUOTE]

So, too, the Jew native to this region, who partook "more of the flavor of wheat and of apples than of the synagogue and the ritual bath." And so, while other towns would have boasted of their rabbis and Judaic scholars, what made this town so unique was Kola Street, wherein lived the horse traders and tough Jews. They were salt of the Polish earth, and they knew how to fight. Reb Israel Zychliner was the Godfather, a man both pious and fearless. Notte, the hot-blooded son, loved his horse and his pigeons even more than he loved the Polish shiksa, Josephine. It was Notte who provoked the local Goyim to stage a pogrom; it was Josephine who helped him break out of jail and enter the fray; and it was the slaughter of Notte's beloved pigeons that helped restore the moral order at story's end.

Sholem Asch's ecumenicism was immediately challenged by I. M. Weissenberg, who introduced class warfare into shtetl fiction.<sup>12</sup> In Weissenberg's nameless shtetl, probably modelled on his native Zelechow, the presence of Poles was equally pervasive, but they came to town either as Marxist agitators from Warsaw or as devout Catholic peasants asserting their claim to a Poland without Jews. The detailed description of the Polish procession on the



outskirts of town, complete with Christian icons and Polish banners, comes at a strategic point in Weissenberg's story. The Jewish Labor Bund has just fired its first shot, signalling a new level of violence between the striking workers and the more conservative elements of shtetl society. The procession was the first reminder that the whole revolution was taking place in a glass of water; that "there, beyond the shtetl, lay such a vast multitude, and here everything was so small, so puny, held together just a dab of spit." Itchele the bootmaker whose insight this was went on to imagine the worst case scenario:

It occurred to him that if the thousands out there suddenly decided to have a bit of fun -- just a simple bit of peasant fun -- if each of them took from the houses of the Jews no more than a couple of rotting floor boards apiece and carried them off under his arm, nothing would remain of the shtetl but an empty plot of land."

What happened instead, against the backdrop of the revolution and counterrevolution of 1905, was an explosion of violence within the shtetl proper, followed by the intervention of the army. The shtetl survived intact; the revolutionaries were hauled away under armed guard.

Weissenberg, then, countered Asch's attempt to remythologize the shtetl by repudiating the archetype of a morally cohesive and socially self-reliant Holy Community of Jews. Riven by deep class animosities, the Jews were no better, if not worse, than the Goyim. But the story's ending pointed to an even more ominous conclusion. What if the Jewish observer stepped away for a moment from the global context of class warfare and began to examine the specific contours of the shtetl, read: the Jewish body politic? What if the millennial-old hatred and suspicion of the Jew were linked in deadly alliance with Polish patriotism? No amount of internal Jewish reform would alter that scenario. Once the shtetl became a symbol of Jewish collective destiny, Weissenberg and other writers of shtetl fiction were forced to see the violence as cyclical and predictable. Thus, willy-nilly, they returned to the archetype of the shtetl as Jerusalem.

By the eve of World War I, Yiddish and Hebrew writers were going their separate ways, the former committed to an ideology of doikayt, to a Jewish autonomous culture in the east European diaspora, and the latter pinning all their hopes on a socialist utopia in the ancient Land of Israel. Following the triple upheavals of World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution and the Ukrainian Civil War, the two positions became mutually exclusive. For those who continued writing about the shtetl, the only choices left were either to mourn the recent slaughter or to steel themselves for the struggle for self-determination that lay ahead. Whatever position they took, the fate of Jewish-Gentile relations in the shtetl assumed critical importance once again.

The first major work of shtetl fiction to appear after the War was Oyzer Warshawski's Shmuglares (Smugglers, 1920), which described the effects of the German occupation on a Polish shtetl near Warsaw.<sup>13</sup> As a disciple of Weissenberg, Warshawski was intent on having his shtetl Jews break every taboo, including open liasons with Polish prostitutes in their very own homes. The only lyrical reprieve in this naturalistic exposé of human depravity was the love affair between Mendl, the middle son of the family of smugglers, and Nacia, the youngest of the three Polish whores. Both were misfits demoralized by the war and both discovered hidden reservoirs of emotion through their love. But with the German retreat, the counterculture of smuggling came to an abrupt end and the newly empowered Polish inhabitants of the shtetl promptly showed the Jewish smugglers who was really in charge.

What would destroy the shtetl first: the internal dynamic of class warfare and moral corruption or the intervention of armed goyim who represented the authority of the state? What was worse: that Polish prostitutes formed liasons with Jewish smugglers or that Polish patriots now wielded arms? The dual nature of World War I, fought both in the trenches and in the heavily populated areas along the Eastern Front, gave these questions an additional thrust. Was the fate of the Jewish civilian population in the cities and especially in the towns

an omen of the apocalypse or was the destruction of the shtetl a latter-day khurbn, likened unto the Destructions of the Temple in Jerusalem?

In the increasingly politicized world of postwar Jewish culture, the choice of a universal or particular approach to the recent carnage was determined on ideological grounds. Writers on the left, like Leyb Olitzky in In an okupirt shtetl (In an Occupied Shtetl, 1924) and In shayn fun flamen (In the Glow of Flames, 1927) underscored the pornography of war and shed no tears for the kehillah kedoshah. Writers of a more nationalistic bent, like S. Ansky, invoked the archetype of khurbn in the very title of his multi-volume chronicle: Khurbn Galitsye, "The Jewish catastrophe in Poland, Galicia and Bukovina, from a Diary, 1914-1917." Sholem Asch did much the same in his collection of stories Dos bukh fun tsar (The Book of Anguish, 1923) as did Sholem Aleichem in "Mayses fun toyznt eyn nakht" (Tales of 1001 Nights, 1915).<sup>14</sup> What these writers preserved for Jewish collective memory was the record of the shtetl's destruction at the hands of brutalized Russian soldiers and the record of betrayal at the hands of their Polish and Ukrainian neighbors.

The war on the Eastern Front did not end on Armistice Day, for the long-awaited revolution began even before the Germans and Austrians retreated. Never were Jewish universalist hopes raised so high as in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution and never were Jewish fears so validated as in the Ukrainian Civil War that followed. For novelist David Bergelson, who left Kiev in 1921 but soon harnessed himself to the revolutionary cause, the historical upheaval meant pushing his impressionist style to its outermost limits. For the first time, Bergelson introduced Ukrainians into his ever-decaying shtetl landscape and in "Birgerkrig" (Civil War, 1922), even went so far as to tell the story of the Civil War through the uncultivated mind of a Ukrainian peasant named Botshko.<sup>15</sup> The full effect of this exercise in defamiliarization only became apparent when Botshko's battalion entered the shtetl of Alexandrovke. From Botshko's perspective, the personal rivalries between local Jewish Bolsheviks, Socialists and bourgeois sycophants carried no weight whatsoever.

For those who witnessed the Ukrainian pogroms first-hand, such a cosmopolitan posture was out of the question. Their first obligation was to the victims. In Itsik Kipnis's first novel, the shtetl Sloveshne was the measure of human kindness and human madness; of time itself, as indicated in the title, Khadoshim un teg (Months and Days, 1926).<sup>16</sup> In this day-by-day, hour-by-hour chronicle of the pogrom, Kipnis detailed the precise trajectory of the violence that Ukrainians perpetrated against the Jews. The roots of that violence ran so deep as to appear timeless and archetypal, as when the pogrom committee called the surviving Jews to a trial.

It was a strange trial. It was a day that was neither a working day nor a holiday. A little like a fair in the center of the marketplace, and yet no business was conducted. The priest and the rabbi stood at the center of the crowd. The rabbi was bloodstained, but he neither wept nor groaned. He did not wince, but it was clear from the way that he sweated that his strength had been sapped. There was no trial here of equal strengths where, at some point, one could call a halt and an authority would say, "Right. That's right. Right. That's right."

The priest spoke first. "We have to persuade the people to restrain themselves. To stop its turbulence; or the Jews will have to be careful (about what?). The Jews will have to (what?)..." The priest spoke guardedly, ambiguously. He was still in his right mind and knew that power was not with the church now. In church he could speak quite differently. Here, he had to be a bit careful.

Not only was local time out of kilter -- neither a working day nor a holiday -- but historical time, too. The forced debate between the priest and the rabbi might be a scene out of the hoary Middle Ages. The argument against the Jews, however, was only just beginning.

Now it was Stodot's turn to talk. The name Stodot may not mean anything to those who are not acquainted with that bumpy-featured murderous bastard with the gray, protruding

eyes. A huge man in his forties.... Jews, he said, were foreigners; they were harmful. Jewish cattle devoured the pastures. Jews cut down whole forests in order to make brooms. Jewish geese spoiled the wheat fields, so that the community was put to the trouble of rounding up Jewish livestock every year. And, if Stodot was in charge of the roundup, any Jewish woman who owned a cow had a hard time of it. Now it was Stodot who spoke. And, as far as Jews were concerned, there were things that he loved to say loud and clear. And he was saying them.

"And Jews have always been like this. They even sent ammunition to the Germans during the war. Now we don't want them to be communists."<sup>17</sup>

Stodot identified all Jews as the enemy, all the time. And these Ukrainians, each one named and described, made good their threat. It was only the Red Army's eleventh-hour intervention that stopped the slaughter and Soviet might that avenged the deed measure for measure.

Kipnis went as far as a Soviet Yiddish writer could go to erect a memorial for the shtetl, branded by official policy as a hotbed of bourgeois nationalism.<sup>18</sup> After 1929, when the Communist Party assumed total control over literature, literary works published inside the Soviet Union no longer drew on the collective experience of the folk nor fed back back into it.<sup>19</sup> All mention of the word "goyim" was excised retroactively as well. In the socialist worker's utopia there was room only for poyerim, pešants, and horepashne arbeter, the laboring masses.

Across the Soviet-Polish border, meanwhile, Yiddish writers and readers experienced a profound sense of déjà-vu: were not these Ukrainian pogroms an exact replay of the Chmielnicki massacres 270 years before? It was Sholem Asch, as before, who first elaborated on the historical analogy, in his novel Kiddush Hashem (1919).<sup>20</sup> The pogromists in Kipnis's novella indicted all Jews as exploiters, traitors and communists. In Jewish collective memory,

the indictment was reversed. Jewish survivors saw no appreciable difference between seventeenth-century Cossacks and twentieth-century Ukrainian nationalists.

Several factors have been mentioned thus far that determined how Ukrainians and Poles figured in works of shtetl fiction and, by extension, in Jewish collective memory. The first was the world at large -- what was going on either within the majority culture that might have stimulated Jewish writers to erect their own literary memorials or what world events kept forcing the fate of the Jewish collective into the center of Jewish consciousness. The second was the genre of shtetl fiction itself, which required a symbolic landscape. The presence or absence of Goyim was determined by the specific locus of the author's attention. Writers concerned with the crisis of faith centered the action in the synagogue and studyhouse where goyim never set foot. Writers concerned with the socio-economic collapse of the shtetl plotted the action in the marketplace where peasants, Polish noblemen and Russian policemen were much more likely to appear. In the home, where the servant girl or Shabes-goy spoke Low Goyish and Yiddish, they stood for peaceful coexistence. The choice of shtetl locale was determined, in turn, by the writer's politics. So long as writers still believed in a brave new world, the image of the shtetl as a small, homogeneous and self-sufficient community could be very inviting. ("The Jew native to this region partakes more of the flavor of wheat and of apples than of the synagogue and the ritual bath.") But once the political horizons began to contract and to split, the very same image underscored how powerless the Jews had become. ("Here evrything was so small, so puny, held together by just a dab of spit.") Finally, there was the intended reader who looked to literature as a source of self-understanding. Yiddish literature was notoriously weak when it came to supplying a positive individual hero, but it more than compensated with its rich variety of collective heroes. The rise and fall of the shtetl provided readers with an objective correlative of their own emotional state as Jews. They could laugh at the foibles of the Kasrilevker; thrill to the heroism of Kola Street; protest the

internecine violence and internal corruption portrayed so vividly by Weissenberg and Warshawski or mourn and vicariously avenge the slaughter in Sloveshne.

Meanwhile, the actual, historical shtetl was changing as well. In Poland and the Baltic republics the medieval shtetl was finally catching up -- on its own terms and in its own way -- to the profound social and cultural upheaval wrought by industrialization and secularization. It was no easy task for writers to chronicle this internal transformation even as they tried to rescue the folklore and folkways of the shtetl before they vanished forever. That Yiddish writers, all of whom lived in the large industrial cities and most of whom were affiliated with the Left, should evince any interest at all in shtetl folklore was a measure of their response to parallel trends in Polish culture. When Galician-born Rokhl Korn began exploring the life of village Jews in their intricate relationship with the land and with all the local inhabitants thereof, she was not replying belatedly to the chlopomania made so popular by the novels of Wladyslaw Reymont, but joining her talents to a contemporary movement called landkentenish in Yiddish and krajoznawstwo in Polish. Founded in 1926, the Jewish Society for Exploring the Countryside (a rather cumbersome translation, I admit), brought together two disparate ideological strands: the old Enlightenment ideal of being close to nature and the new nationalism that laid exclusive claim to the land and its historic landmarks. Because Jewish membership to the Polish Society was severely restricted and because the Poles made no effort to preserve Jewish landmarks, Jewish historians, ethnographers, novelists, poets and other committed intellectuals formed their own society and issued their own publications.<sup>21</sup> In the 1930s, novelist Mikhoel Burshtin became its major spokesman (both in Yiddish and in Polish). Studying and touring the historic Polish shtetlkeh, he argued, would bring urban Jews back to nature, would close the gap between the intellectuals and the folk, would counteract the geographical fragmentation of the Jews and would even offer a secular alternative to the old religious faith.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the upbeat program that looked ahead to a permanent Jewish presence in the Polish republic, the literary monuments these committed writers erected to Polish-Jewish life were emblems of loss. Rokhl Korn's volume of short stories called Erd (Earth, 1936), was an exquisitely poignant record of shared loss by Jews, Polish and Ukrainian peasants and German colonists in the immediate aftermath of World War I.<sup>23</sup> Because, however, her focus was on the earth, on the soil they had tilled and that never really would be theirs, the shtetl did not figure here at all. It was left to Burshtin to write a jeremiad for the old and new shtetl way of life. Two of his three novels, Iber di khurves fun Ployne (Over the Ruins of Ployne, 1931) and Bay di taykhn fun Mazovye (By the Rivers of Mazowsze, 1937), refracted the recent events in Poland through the prism of the shtetl. The more real and pervasive the presence of Poles and Polish culture in these novels, the more the physical and spiritual horizons of the shtetl population were seen to contract. In the face of economic boycotts, social discrimination and pogroms, a Jewish rescue operation was the best that could be hoped for.<sup>24</sup>

This sense of desperation, this telescoping of all possibilities into one, was immortalized by Mordecai Gebirtig in his stirring hymn, "Es Brent," written in direct response to the pogrom in Przytyk.

Fire, brothers, fire!

It all turns to you.

If you love your town,

Take pails, put out the fire,

Quench it with your own blood too.

Show what you can do!

Don't look and stand

with folded hand

Brothers, don't stand round, put out the fire!



## Our shtetl burns!

Gebirtig's song became a rallying cry and prophecy during the long years of Nazi occupation. It was if the destruction of the shtetl, which is to say, the Jews of Poland, was preordained in heaven, in which case the folk bard had done well to eliminate all mention of a specific time, or place, or gentile presence.

Looking ahead to the future transformation of the shtetl into the realm of pure myth was another great poet named Itzik Manger. In his fanciful autobiography, The Wonderful Adventures of Shmuel-Aba Abervo, or The Book of Paradise, the shtetl was depicted literally as a paradise lost. There was still room in Manger's fantasy for Pisherl, the Jewish boy angel, to fall in love with Anyella, the blond-haired shiksa angel, but the brief sojourn in the Christian paradise ended with a beating and a humiliating Mayofes Dance. The year was 1939, and only a few copies of Manger's book made it out of Poland.

The penultimate chapter of my story, when the shtetl was absorbed into the Nazi-occupied ghetto, and the ghetto population was consumed in the flames of the death camps, cannot as yet be written. The surviving evidence has yet to be collected and published. But from what is available thus far, it is clear that Ukrainians and Poles figure in the story either as willing, named, collaborators, or as faceless bystanders. One needs to look long and hard through the reportages of the Warsaw and Lodz ghettos to find specific mention of Jewish-Gentile collaboration, mostly in the areas of trade and smuggling. Emanuel Ringelblum's detailed and controversial study of Jewish-Polish relations during the Nazi occupation is known only to experts. In Jewish collective memory, the Jews suffered alone, perished alone, and mourn alone.

An amazing thing happens after the war, however. For the first time in history, the Jews of the shtetl assume responsibility for recording that history. They do it piecemeal, town by

town, with little professional help, and from the geographical remove of North and South America, Israel, and France. There are by now some 1200 such yizker-bikher, and they have become the central repository of EE Jewish collective memories. While this vast body of grass roots documentation awaits its own historian, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions.

1. The crowded pages of Jewish memorial books are dedicated primarily to the memory of the Jewish life that was destroyed.

2. There is an occasional portrait of the Polish nobility to liven things up. Otherwise, the gentiles are depicted as an undifferentiated mass of peasants who appear and disappear on market day.

3. Specific recollections of named gentiles generally appear only in the context of strikes, pogroms, anti-Jewish boycotts, murders, and the final liquidation.

This is understandable, given that the primary function of these communal histories is to work through the collective trauma of the Holocaust.

There is little, moreover, in postwar Yiddish literature that would contradict the dual process of legendarization and demonization. The contributors to these yizker-bikher are also the reading public for the shtetl fictions of Isaac Bashevis Singer, which are similarly populated by debauched Polish squires, the witch Kuniegunda, and rapacious peasants. Singer's sole addition to the gallery of shtetl types is the figure of Wanda, alias Sarah, alias Jadwiga, the righteous shiksa, the true guardian of the Jewish past. She is the stuff of fantasy and wish-fulfilment, not of life.<sup>25</sup>

And so what Jews are left with is a world of pure myth:

In the beginning was the peasant. And she spoke Yiddish and recited the Jewish blessings with the children and learned all the ritual laws and Jewish men lusted after her and sometimes, she even converted, to make it all kosher.

And in the beginning was the Catholic or Eastern Orthodox priest who always tried to convert the Jews and when that failed he taught his credulous flock that the Jews had killed Christ.

And in the beginning was the porits who had a dog and a horse and who beat the peasants and when very drunk, he made his Jew dance the mayofes dance.

And in the beginning was the shtetl where the Jews all lived in harmony with God and with one another, until the peasants, urged on by the priest, came to settle their accounts. And the Cossacks came too, to pillage, murder and rape, but who exactly these Cossacks were and where they came from is no longer clear. Those Jews who were lucky fled to America or to the Land of Israel. Those who stayed behind in the shtetl were later gassed and their bodies were burned in crematoria.

As for those who committed the crime, it is all the same who they were, whether Germans, Ukrainians, Poles, or Belorussians, and it is all the same what crime they committed, whether they murdered the Jews or desecrated their houses of prayer or merely inherited their property. Their memory is blotted out. For this is what Jews have always done with the names of their persecutors -- from Amalek and Haman to Chmielnicki and Gonta to Hitler and Stalin. A little vicarious aggression goes a long way to heal the wounds of a bereaved people.

So long as the Jews of the east European diaspora had access to a language (or two) of their own, they could at least be in charge of the means of literary production. Yiddish literature, as we have <sup>e</sup>se<sub>n</sub>, kept alive the dialectic of myth and anti-myth, absence of Goyim and presence of Goyim, hope and fear. With the loss of Yiddish there is little likelihood that Jewish life in eastern Europe will be remembered in any meaningful way. Only the destruction will be commemorated. All complexity, diversity, and particularity will be wiped away by such public spectacles as the Demjanuk Trial, the March of the Living, and the debate over the Kielce pogrom.

I can see but on remote possibility for change. Since Jewish writers learned to erect literary monuments from Russian, Polish and other coterritorial cultures; and since it was always the outside world that stimulated Jewish writers into becoming more Jewish, to look inward and backward for models of heroism and endurance; and since the new shtetl covenant was itself a measure of the profound break with the past, there is much that present-day Ukrainians and Poles can do to help the Jews. If Jewish landmarks in their lands are reclaimed and Jewish monuments are rebuilt, and Jewish archives are reopened, then the story of Jewish life will become incomparably richer. The physical monuments and real historical documents will then stimulate the heirs of east European Jewry to reexamine their own naive assumptions. If and when that happens, the record preserved in Yiddish literature will become a primary source of Jewish self-discovery and the memory of the shtetl will reopen the lost dialogue between Jews, Ukrainians and Poles.

1. Even the most culturally specific monument can meet a similar fate. See James E. Young, "The Biography of a Memorial Icon: Nathan Rapoport's Warsaw Ghetto Monument," Representations 26 (1989): 69-106.
2. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," trans. Marc Roudebush, Representations 26 (1989): 7-25.
3. See on this, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982) and David G. Roskies, Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), chap. 2.
4. For a convenient sourcebook, see The Shtetl Book: An Introduction to East European Jewish Life and Lore, ed. Diane K. Roskies & David G. Roskies, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Ktav, 1979).
5. See Khone Shmeruk, "Gezeirot TaKh VeTaT: Sifrut yidish vezikkaron kolektivi," Zion 53 (1988): 371-84. For a selection of relevant sources in English, see David G. Roskies, The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), secs. 35-36.
6. See Israel Bartal, "The Porets and the Arendar: The Depiction of Poles in Jewish Literature," The Polish Review 32 (1987): 357-69.
7. Roskies, Against the Apocalypse, pp. 163-72.
8. This story has been anthologized numerous times, most accessibly in A Treasury of Yiddish Stories, ed. Irving Howe & Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Viking, 1954), pp. 111-18. The first-rate translation is by Isaac Rosenfeld.
9. Bartal, pp. 368-69; Miron, 102-16.
10. Translated by Meyer Levin as "The Little Town," in Sholem Asch, Tales of My People (New York, 1970), pp. 3-143.
11. Sholem Asch, "Kola Street," trans. Norbert Guterman, A Treasury of Yiddish

Stories, p. 261.

12. Translated by Ruth R. Wisse in A Shtetl and Other Yiddish Novellas, ed. Ruth R. Wisse, 2nd rev. ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), pp. 29-78.

13. Reprinted in Unter okupatsye, vol. 39 of Musterverk fun der yidisher literatur (Buenos Aires, 1969) and excerpted in The Literature of Destruction, sec. 61.

14. Excerpts from Ansky and Sholem Aleichem appear in The Literature of Destruction, secs. 53-54.

15. The first three chapters of "Birgerkrig" appeared in Shtrom (Moscow), no. 3 (1922); the complete version in Shturemteg, vol. 5 of his Geklibene verk (Vilna: Kletskin, 1928), pp. 9-64. An English translation by Seth Wolitz appears in Ashes Out of Hope: Fiction by Soviet-Yiddish Writers, ed. Irving Howe & Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Schocken, 1977), pp. 85-123. Other stories in Shturemteg that involve Ukrainians are "Oyf der hundert un eynster vyorst" (On the 101st Viorst, 1923) and the monologue "Tsvishn emigrantn" (Among Emigrés, 1924).

16. Reprinted in vol. 3 of Kipnis's Geklibene verk (Tel Aviv: I. L. Peretz, 1973).

17. Quoted from an excerpt of the novel trans. by Leonard Wolf in The Literature of Destruction, pp. 334-35. Wolf translates the word kneydlekh in the penultimate sentence as "noodles." It now occurs to me that bullets or bombs were probably meant.

18. See Esther Rosenthal-Schneiderman, "Itsik Kipnis, azoy vi ikh ken im," Di goldene keyt 61 (1967): 123-36.

19. Note the qualification: "published inside the Soviet Union." The writings of Soviet Yiddish émigrés living in Berlin or Hamburg or Warsaw were full of lamentation and national pathos. Once they returned to the fold, however, these writings were either expunged entirely or drastically censored. The censorship was briefly lifted during the Common Front of 1941-45, but then again, only for export. All this is amply documented in the landmark anthology of Soviet-Yiddish literature A shpigl oyf a shteyn (A Mirror on a Stone: Anthology of Poetry and Prose by Twelve Murdered Soviet-Yiddish Writers), ed. Benjamin Hrushovski, Abraham

Sutzkever & Khone Shmeruk (Tel Aviv: Di goldene keyt & I. L Peretz, 1964).

20. Sholem Ash, Kiddush Ha-Shem: An Epic of 1648, trans. Rufus Lears (Phila.: The Jewish Publication Society, 1926). "Kiddish Hashem" is the Jewish term for martyrdom.

21. No history of this important movement has ever been written. The YIVO Library in New York possesses an almost complete run of the two major publications, Land un lebn, ed. by Dr. I. Lejpuner (1927-28) and Landkentenish/Krajoznawstwo, ed. Emanuel Ringelblum (1933-38).

22. See M. Burshtin, "A nayer faktor in yidishn lebn," Landkentenish no. 1 (1933): 9-13. For other significant statements by Burshtin, see "Vilner reministsentsn," no. 2 (1934): 63-67; "Der mehus fun regyonalizm," *ibid.*, pp. 25-33; "Araynfir tsu der metodik fun landkentenish," no. 1(19) (1935): 1-2; and "Landkenerishe arbet oyf di kolonyes un vanderlagern," no. 2(20) (1935): 3-5

23. Reprinted in Rokhl H. Korn, 9 dertseylungen (Montreal, 1957).

24. The gap between theory and practice in Burshtin's Bay di taykhn fun Mazovye is discussed by Khone Shmeruk in "Jews and Poles in Yiddish Literature in Poland Between the Two World Wars," Polin: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies 1 (1986): 185-87.

25. This is demonstrated by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska in her unpublished manuscript "Poles and Poland in I. B. Singer's Fiction."