

Lost and Found in The Podolian Shtetl: An analysis of Anna
Sokolova's "The Podolian Shtetl as Architectural Phenomenon"

By choosing the Podolian *shtetl* as her subject, Anna Sokolova follows directly in the footsteps of the great pioneer of Yiddish folklore Sh. Ansky. While they share the same object of inquiry these folklorist differ tellingly in their approaches to this far-flung corner of Ashkenazic settlement. Departing on his ethnographic expedition in 1912, Ansky saw in Podolia the core of Ashkenazic folk creativity. Removed from “old centers of Jewish culture”, whose influence limited oral culture, Podolia was certainly the perfect setting for Ansky to record “[t]he finest examples of [Jewish] traditional lives” which he saw teetering on the brink of extinction. (67, Ansky [in Roskies])

Launching a late twentieth century expedition to Podolia, Sokolova is also undertaking a “rescue mission” of sorts. But unlike Ansky who will continue his attempt to capture the *folksgayst* on future expeditions throughout the Pale of Settlement for the next four years, Sokolova limits herself to Podolia not for its strong folk traditions but for its survival as a location for observing folk culture in the wake of the Holocaust. Whereas Ansky is tireless in his effort to amass the full range of folklore – both material art and oral traditions – Sokolova focuses almost exclusively on one feature of folklore – architecture. For Sokolova the architecture of the Podolian *shtetl* reflects much more than the “folk” spirit of Ashkenazic Jewry; it embodies the spirit of Ashkenazic life in its entirety. In the opening paragraph of her essay, Sokolova makes clear that she approaches the Podolian *shtetl* as nothing less than a holy remnant of a lost culture that, Providence, it seems, has spared from complete annihilation:

Thanks to the *mercies* of history, Jews in many shtetlekh of Eastern Podolia, which during World War II was occupied by Romanian rather than German troops, escaped total extermination. In . . . and some other Podolian towns and townlets, one can find elderly people still living in the houses built by their grandfathers or even great-grandfathers. It is still possible to hear living memories about shtetl life from the *last representatives of that traditional culture* and see the imprint left by its customs and festivals on architecture. Well preserved Jewish houses, streets and quarters, as well as the synagogue buildings of historic Podolian towns, offer us one of the *last remaining opportunities* to study the phenomenon of the architecture of *the shtetl* in connection with the lifestyle of its inhabitants. (Sokolova 36, italics mine)

While we can find no factual error in Sokolova's presentation, we cannot overlook her overt sanctification of the Podolian shtetl and its fate beyond the bounds of empirical fact. This region's Jews, in Sokolova's view, were not simply saved from extinction; they were granted mercy by history. As such, these Jews who represent the 'surviving remnant' of this lost world achieve a level of holiness which infuses their extant architectural structures with heightened sanctity. This clearly spiritual appreciation of folk art would certainly not have been foreign to Ansky. But unlike Ansky who attempts to capture the authentic *folksgayst* through a comprehensive examination of all forms of artistic representation, Sokolova uses only the architectural remnants of the Podolian *shtetl* for this purpose. Sokolova makes no pretense of objectively recording her observations for future posterity; she is clearly using this small fragment of this lost world as a tool for reconstructing "The *Shtetl*" as a trope encompassing Ashkenazic Jewish life in its entirety. While she makes perfectly clear that her object is only the Podolian *shtetl* she visits and describes, Sokolova suggests in the above passage that this purely regional phenomenon serves as a memorial to Ashkenaz as a whole.

This effort to reconstruct the world of Ashkenazic culture from remaining fragments is by no means absent from other post-Holocaust folkloristic endeavors. The

awareness of imminent oblivion evoked by Ansky is replaced by an acknowledgement of complete loss in the late twentieth century works of U. Weinreich, Kossover, and Rivkind. Weinreich especially clarifies the necessity and urgency of documenting the testimonies of survivors before it is too late: "What was too obvious for study only yesterday has suddenly become precious. . . The opportunity for direct linguistic and ethnographic study of European Jewry is thus rapidly slipping from us. This opportunity is now bound to the remaining lifetime of surviving emigrants from that area. What we do not collect in the coming decade or so will be lost forever."(Weinreich, 27). Unlike Sokolova, who collects only architectural data from the Podolian shtetl which she then presents as a reflection of the essentialized shtetl, Weinreich uses his informants – all be they emigrants and refugees – to testify to the boundless regional diversity of shtetl life.

Weinreich by no means denies that Eastern European Jewish life, insofar as it was governed by religious stricture, could lend itself to broad generalizations. It is important to note here that Weinreich applies this principle of religious conformity specifically to the area which concerns Sokolova – architecture. While Weinreich affirms that shtetl dwellers faithfully complied with halakhic requirements in building their homes, he recognizes that beyond these fundamental strictures there existed a level of freedom for creativity in the realm of decoration. The diversity in these aesthetic choices, Weinreich argues, can best be accounted for and codified on a regional basis. From this standpoint, the Podolian shtetl, with all of the architectural details Sokolova documents, does not represent the *ur-shtetl* as Sokolova would have us believe, but rather as a regional variation. For Weinreich, moreover, this regional variety is interesting not just for its own

sake, but as a suggestion of the influence of and borrowing from neighboring non-Jewish sources.

To be sure, Weinreich's analysis is not based on compelling eye-witness field work like Sokolova's. Rooted exclusively in linguistic data culled at a distance, Weinreich's observations may strike us as somewhat less persuasive. Noting the relative prevalence of slavisms to denote a ceiling chiefly among Jews of the Ukraine, Weinreich still inspires a more grounded speculation about regional phenomena which Sokolova excludes. Faced with the variety of facades of shtetl houses, Sokolova only considers the possibility of intercultural influence blithely at best:

The stylistic features of the facades of ordinary shtetl houses followed the spirit of the time. Renaissance and Baroque influences were replaced by a light touch of the Neo-Classical style. The orientation towards local tradition, which is characteristic of folk architecture intermingled with a pluralistic attitude to architectural forms, typical of urban culture. As a consequence shtetl architecture developed an amazing degree of heterogeneity. A certain *indifference* to the decoration of houses, rooted probably in the medieval mentality, found its expression in the distinctive anti-aestheticism of shtetl architecture. (Sokolova, 53 italics mine)

Though Sokolova concedes that the design of facades was influenced by local tradition, she omits, in contrast with Weinreich, any discussion of this local phenomenon. These decorative choices, which she recognizes as the result of a relationship with the non-Jewish population, are for Sokolova merely a typical characteristic of folk architecture generally. Moreover, Sokolova attributes this heterogeneity in style not to any local dynamic – Jewish or otherwise – but to a conserved medieval mentality which ⁶supercedes any local or contemporary force. n u !

These facades are not the only feature of the *shtetl* in which Sokolova sees this medieval mentality preserved. In fact, the bulk of Sokolova's analysis focuses on the shtetl as an architectural anachronism in so far as it evokes the medieval urban

settlements of the Ashkenazic past. Sokolova expresses her thesis as follows: “The orientation of the Ashkenazic culture towards the traditional values of the past determined the character of its artistic creativity” (Sokolova, 37-8). Supporting her claim with a sound historical analysis of the shtetl’s unfailing loyalty to this medieval model and strong resistance to change despite a succession of administrative zoning decrees, Sokolova presents a compelling argument.

Her position would be even more persuasive were it not for the moments where she deliberately imposes on these buildings an aura of antiquity which she personally acknowledges as imagined and not real. The description of the synagogue in Ozarintsi is particularly telling in this regard:

the ruined building of the early nineteenth century stone synagogue. This was a modest structure. . . Today this once unprepossessing synagogue makes quite a different impression . . . its massive yellow limestone walls look like the ruins of an ancient citadel. Towering over the road which runs along the border of the shtetl, the synagogue suddenly comes into view as it approached, heightening the experience of entering the shtetl. (Sokolova, 43)

Although Sokolova is willing to admit the synagogue is, in reality, nothing more than a building which dates only to the nineteenth century, she does not refrain from sharing the impression of antiquity which the structure evokes. Given her insistence on the *shtetl*’s unwavering compliance with medieval tradition, it is difficult to dismiss this description as an isolated statement of awe. On the contrary, this embellishment is clearly one feature of a deliberate program *to force a subjective and unsubstantiated reading of the shtetl as medieval market town*. Sokolova goes to such lengths to fulfill this mission that she will even claim to feel the crowded character of the *shtetl* even when all traces of its built environment have been erased. Depicting the town of Tomashpol where recent residents have expanded the once crowded lots, Sokolova notes: “As a result, the once

densely built town blocks become sparser, but *one can still feel the special shtetl character of the former Jewish streets and quarters.*"(Sokolova, 42 italics mine). It is plain to see here that Sokolova presents the shtetl not in terms of what she sees, but of what she wants to see and feel. And, in the absence of raw data gleaned from the Podolian shtetl to support her argument, she substitutes her own imagining of the shtetl as a cramped medieval market town.

This Pan-Ashkenazic approach to Yiddish folk culture resembles Kossover's work on Jewish cuisine insofar as it reveals the traditional core of medieval Ashkenazic culture preserved after centuries of displacement from its western European source. Like Sokolova, Kossover maintains that there is a deep layer of culture informed by *halacha* which remains "static" despite historical and geographic changes. But unlike Sokolova, Kossover is willing to accept that alongside this "vertical" and static pan-Ashkenazic dynamic there exists an influential "horizontal" dynamic in which time and place play a considerable role. All the while upholding the unity and rootedness of this "vertical" tradition, Kossover, in contrast with Sokolova, assigns the horizontal element a role in interpreting this tradition according to changing circumstances:

די הלכה און דער דין- דער סטאטישער עלעמענט – האָבן זיך נישט געביטן, אָבער זיי זיינען אויסגעטייטשט געוואָרן; מנהגים און תקנות – דער דינאַמישער עלעמענט – האָבן זיך כסדר געהאַלטן אין איין בײַטן לויט דער צײַט און לויטן אָרט. דאָ לאָזט זיך איינשטעלן דער ווייטערדיקער פּלל: די סטאַטיק האָט געגעבן דעם ייִדישן לעבן אַ ווערטיקאַלע איינקײַט, בעת די דינאַמיק האָט אַרײַנגעבראַכט אַ האָרײַזאָנטאַלע פֿאַרשיידנקײַט. (Kossover 4)

In articulating this thesis, Kossover sounds strikingly similar to a researcher who, ironically, seeks to highlight not the unity but the diversity of Ashkenaz – Uriel Weinreich. Kossover seems to support Weinreich's assertion that *halacha* served to standardize many aspects of Eastern European Jewish life. The two thinkers, however, diverge in the journeys they take away from this shared axiom. Examining regional

linguistic differences, Weinreich demonstrates the possible variety of encounters between neighboring cultures and Jews in their “interpretation” of *halachic* requirements. While fully accepting the creativity and diversity of Jewish folk culture in this interpretive act, Kossover demonstrates – also with linguistic sources – the oldest layer of Ashkenazic culture as reflected in culinary terminology.

Following in the path of these folklorists, Sokolova is clearly justified in asserting the conservative instinct of Ashkenazic Jewry in their architectural activity. Differing from both Weinreich and Kossover, however, Sokolova seems to ignore the local creativity of the Podolian Jews in translating this tradition according to surrounding conditions. It is important to observe here that it is precisely in the field of architecture that Kossover, the pan-Ashkenazist, affirms this cross-cultural influence and local creativity:

”יידישע היימן האָבן זיך לכתחילה מיט זייער אַרכיטעקטור, מעבל און אינעווייניקסטן בוי און איינאַרדענונג

ווייניק וואָס אונטערגעשיידט פֿון דער אַרומיקער הייזער (Kossover,5)

Despite empirical evidence to the contrary, Sokolova insists on the essentially Jewish character of the shtetl in complete isolation, both spatially and symbolically from its non-Jewish surroundings. Though nineteenth century woodcuts attest to non-Jewish settlement within the תחום שבת in Satanov and Shargorod, potential non-Jewish influence on Jewish life does not concern Sokolova, who prefers to cling to the erroneous image of the exclusively Jewish town in her informants’ memory:

It seems that that our informants, perhaps unconsciously, replace the real picture with symbolic generalizations reflecting their traditional ideas about a comfortable living space. . . this reality [non-Jewish presence] did not fit the ideal image of the exclusively Jewish *shtetl* and has disappeared from people's memories. The notion of the *shtetl* as a self-contained, homogenously Jewish space is held by some contemporary anthropologists as well.

In her endnote on the above passage, Sokolova agrees with Kirshenblatt-Gimblet's criticism of this idea of the exclusively Jewish *shtetl* as more imaginary than real. Nevertheless, Sokolova insists that this image of the hermetically Jewish *shtetl*, albeit objectively inaccurate, embodies "key notions for describing and ~~and~~ understanding the architectural arrangement of Jewish settlements in Podolia from the late 18th to the early nineteenth century." (Sokolova, 62, emphasis mine)

This "key notion" of the *shtetl* as medieval fortress, shielded from all outside influence is, unfortunately, the only analytical tool Sokolova uses to understand the architecture of the *shtetl*. Were she not exclusively dependent on this assumption (which is so clearly called into question by the wood-cuts she mentions), Sokolova would be able to at least appreciate the noteworthy influence of non-Jewish surroundings. Instead, her interpretation strikes us more as a polemic for the *shtetl*'s traditional character as an entity than as an attempt to identify specific elements of its architecture which resonate most with medieval antecedents.

To be sure, Kossover would not find fault with this backward looking approach. His aim, after all, is merely to penetrate Yiddish language and Ashkenazic culture to unearth its deepest stratum. Sokolova, however, does not appreciate – as Kossover does – that this medieval component is *only one layer* of this complex cultural pastiche which has been formed over time and space by a whole series of outside influences. As both Kossover and Weinreich demonstrate, the Yiddish language and its culture can only be

appreciated as a work of boundless fusion. While medieval origins can be detected in this fusion, it is only through very careful and painstaking unraveling of every thread of what Loewenstein aptly names a “tapestry” of Jewish folk life.

In all fairness, Sokolova is to be lauded for her unprecedented and truly groundbreaking work. Researching the *shtetl* not “at a distance”, but actually on site, Sokolova ~~actually~~ implements what generations of folklorists either theorized or approached indirectly through linguistic research. What is ironic is that this pioneering fieldwork is not informed by what current American politicians would euphemistically call the “facts on the ground” but by a cherished myth which finds little basis in truth. In other words, we learn from Sokolova not what she sees, but what she wants to see; not the facts at hand, but how these facts may support an idea, namely that the Podolian *shtetl* testifies to the essentially backward looking impulse of Eastern European Jewry. We learn more not about what Sokolova observes, but about the narrow gaze of the researcher which excludes from its focus the reality of intercultural exchange, a reality which might undermine her thesis. ~~which may contradict her thesis.~~

Are we to conclude then that her thesis is invalid? That the Podolian *shtetl* was not a fortification modeled after a medieval antecedent? That the Podolian *shtetl* was rather a regional interpretation of halchic architectural requirements likely inherited but not copied from a former medieval model? The response to all of these questions is simple – we do not know. And we will only know when we pick up where Sokolova has left off, as it were. That is to say, we must appreciate the analysis that she has offered and understand that it is limited in its method. In our way forward we need to ask the

questions and implement the methods absent from Sokolova's work – namely, the intercultural dynamic which both Kossover and Weinreich affirm.

There is still one more lesson to learn from Sokolova before we resume our folkloric enterprise: Imagination, myth and nostalgia are powerful forces of which we must be wary in approaching this all but fragmented culture. Since the remaining sources of information on the Ashkenazic folk world are so limited, it is hard not to impose on this documentary evidence nostalgia and mythology which has achieved the status of "truth" in the popular imagination. Compared to the paucity of disparate and conflicting sources, this mythology is undeniably clearer and more coherent; it is not difficult to understand why it would eclipse our understanding of what few facts we still have before us. Therefore, it is not only our challenge but our responsibility to resist the impulse in future folkloric research the seductive lure of this mythology in favor of a more comprehensive and objective understanding of this culture.

ה'תשס"ד
בראשית

A