Demythologizing the Shtetl

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It is both perplexing and ironic to find so many clichés about Eastern European Jewry, the "world of our forefathers," frozen in so much contemporary writing.

One commonly finds a sentence like this in many books or articles: "Jews came to the shores of this country from the ghettos of the shtetlekh as a result of the pogroms." Each phrase in this sentence is untrue or oversimplified to the point of untruth. There were no ghettos in 19th-century Eastern Europe (except in a metaphorical sense, like the old Lower East Side of New York). By no means had all Jews come to the U.S. from shtetlekh; many came from large towns like Warsaw, Lodz, Odessa. And the pogroms were not the principal reason for emigration: proportionately more Jews came to the U.S. from Austrian-ruled Galicia — where there were no pogroms — than from Tsarist Russia.

Among such clichés special prominence is given to the alleged fact that the shtetl had disintegrated even before Jewish life was almost wiped out in World War II. Some trace this disintegration to the beginnings of modernization at the turn of this century, others to the interbellum 1918–39 period.

We must be clear what we mean by "shtetl" and "shtetl culture." Does shtetl mean what it meant in Eastern Europe, a little town, often predominantly Jewish, or is it a metaphor for Eastern European Jewish life in its totality? Is shtetl culture, a term so frequently used, so rarely defined, synonymous with "the traditional Jewish way of life," a culture of unchanging patterns and values, from which any change is almost by definition "disintegration"? And does shtetl culture also apply to the Jews of Warsaw, Lodz, Odessa, and Vilna?

The impression one gets from the writings of authors who discussed the shtetl is of an Orthodox, pious, pastoral Jewish community, battered from without but stable within, frozen in time and space until the end of the 19th century, when the winds of modernity began to shatter the established order, when it all began to crumble and the shtetl disintegrated, never to recover.

For example, Ruth Wisse states in the introduction to *A Shtetl and Other Yiddish Novels*: "with the disintegration of the shtetl the writer fell with a thud into the twentieth century" and "the breakup of the shtetl thrust the writer into the modern predicament," which "drained the traditional society of its inner resources and of the strength to resist."[1]

And Irving Howe in his *World of Our Fathers* notes in passing, as though it were an established fact: "Once the shtetl began to crumble under alien pressures. . . ."[2]

In Israeli writing, especially of the period preceding the Yom Kippur War, one finds repeatedly the terms *hitporrut* and *hitnavnut* (disintegration and degeneration) applied to the shtetl.

Views that the shtetl disintegrated before its total destruction in World War II are found both in literary works and historical literature. The writers are so confident of their premise that they don't even try to tell us what exactly this "disintegration," "crumbling," "breakup," or "death of a culture" means, and how it was manifested. Neither is it made clear when the shtetl is treated metaphorically and when as one of several types of Jewish habitation.

A definition of the term shtetl is therefore mandatory before a discussion of its disintegration is possible.

In Eastern Europe a shtetl was entirely different from a village; in this country the terms are used interchangeably. The historian Bernard Weinryb makes the following distinction:

> A village in Eastern Europe differs from its namesake in the U.S. In the U.S. the village serves as a center (shopping, post office, etc.) for the surrounding population, which lives spread out on the farms. In Eastern Europe the agricultural population lives in houses concentrated together in villages, with the fields lying beyond the dwelling area, while a neighboring town serves as the center (shopping, post office, etc.).[3]

Some villages had among their population one or two Jewish families (e.g., Sholem Aleichem's Tevye), others had none. A shtetl was a small town, servicing the surrounding villages, where the Jewish population was of a size permitting everyone to know everyone.

Eastern European Jews clearly distinguished not only between a *dorf* (village) and shtetl, but also between a shtetl and a *shtot* (large town, city), and between the way of life and social relationships in each of them. The contrast between shtetl and *shtot* is reflected in the respective Yiddish adjectives *kleinshtetldik* (small-townish, provincial) and *groisshtotish* (large-townish, cosmopolitan). When people living in Warsaw or Odessa were characterized as *kleinshtetldik*, everyone understood what attitudes were meant.

Historically, Jews displayed a preference for living not in small but in large towns (in the context of the

given period). In Central and Western Europe of the Middle Ages the large towns were the centers of Jewish life and culture (Rome, Venice, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Vienna, Prague). In the 15th and 16th centuries, when Jews moved in great numbers to Poland and Lithuania, the larger towns — Poznan (Posen), Cracow, Lvov, Lublin, and Vilna became the centers of Jewish culture from which the smaller Jewish communities received their cultural nourishment. The historian Moses Schulvass notes that just as Poles came from the provinces to study at the Yagellonian University in Cracow, so "young Jews from small towns and villages were going in large numbers to yeshivahs in large cities."[4] For study on a higher level one went from the shtetl to the large town.

In the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries, large numbers of Jews settled in the existing small towns of Eastern Europe or founded new ones, and the role of the shtetl increased. In the second half of the 19th century the trend changed again, and concurrent with the process of industrialization, emigration from small to large towns gained momentum.

By 1897, more than half the Jewish population of the Tsarist empire lived not in shtetlekh but in larger towns. And half a million Jews, almost one-tenth of the total Jewish population of over five million, lived in only three cities — Warsaw, Odessa and Lodz.

Jews residing in shtetlekh assumed a role similar in some respects to the role played by peasant populations in their respective national groups. The shtetl Jews constituted the habitat and reservoir from which the urban centers continually received strength and biological rejuvenation. But there was one substantial difference between the non-Jewish and Jewish groups: whereas the non-Jewish peasant population was predominantly illiterate and their participation in the cultural life of the country was very limited, the shtetl's level of education, at least of the traditional kind, was similar to the one existing in larger towns. The reservoir was of a high quality.

I am, of course, suggesting that the larger Jewish communities and not the shtetlekh were in all periods the real centers of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe. It is relatively simple to classify the Jewish communities which became centers of Jewish culture: they were called *Ir vo-Eim Be-Yisroel* (Town and Mother in Israel), and were so designated in documents and writings of the respective periods of history. The term "shtetl culture" is therefore used incorrectly; the correct term should be "Eastern European Jewish culture."

There were indeed some characteristics common to all shtetlekh, and for that matter, in differing degrees to all Jewish communities, but there were also quite pronounced differences among shtetlekh in the different provinces of Eastern Europe, and even in the same province, not unlike the similarities and differences among small towns in the United States. There were shtetlekh where the overwhelming majority of the Jewish population was engaged in industry, such as Bzhezhin near Lodz, where 80 percent of the Jewish population, including women and children, produced cheap pants for half the Russian empire. Understandably, social conflicts and class struggle, later led by the socialist parties, were much more pronounced in such a shtetl than in one servicing the surrounding peasant villages.

I.M. Weisenberg, a noted Yiddish novelist and a native of an industrial shtetl, portrays one sizzling with class conflicts and brutality. On the other hand, Sholem Asch, a native of Kutno in the most fertile part of Poland, where the peasants, and consequently the Jews, were not so poor as in other parts of Poland, portrays a peaceful shtetl. It is therefore not coincidental that Sholom Asch gave a pastoral view of his native town (in his work *A Shtetl*) which substantially contributed to the stereotyping of the shtetl. But in another novel *Reb Shloime Nogid* Asch described Jews who came to his shtetl on the market day; they are of a quite different kind: "in the late afternoon the bunch from Gombin came. These are the Jews who tend orchards and also deal in fish from the great rivers. These are the kind of Jews who are not afraid of a goy and have never been in *goles* [exile]; all their life they were brought up and lived with the soil."[5]

Daniel Charny depicts his shtetl Dukor (in his book *Dukor*) in an entirely different light: "The one hundred Jewish households were tightly knit one with the other, as if all were of one family. There were no divisions between rich and poor, high and low station, learned men and working-men: all were ardent Lubavich Hasidim."[6]

Charny and Weisenberg were writing about two shtetlekh in the same country and of the same period.

Another writer, A. Litwin, in his travelogue *In Der Polisher Shtetl* (*In the Polish Shtetl*) marvels:

> . . . from Biala to Mezrich is only a half-hour's ride by train — and what a difference between the two shtetlekh. Mezrich chose an occupation — manufacturing and selling pig-hair and brushes — that makes it entirely independent from the surrounding communities, from all of Poland. As long as the Leipzig Fairs exist Mezrich fears neither for its source of income nor anti-Semitism. When you arrive in Biala you forget you live in the twentieth century. The Biala Hasidim and their rebbe govern here. There is a difference of at least a century between the two shtetlekh.[7]

Still another type are the Bessarabian shtetlekh and their Jews. (Bessarabia was part of the Russian empire from the beginning of the 19th century until 1918, then part of Rumania until World War II, when it was incorporated into the Soviet Union.) The Bessarabian writer Yankel Yakir (who recently died) characterizes the Bessarabian Jews in these words: "We, the Bessaraber, the jesters, derived more pleasure from a good (*trask*) blow than from a profound verse in the sacred books. We were enthusiastic lovers of a good drink and a pretty song."

Demonstrably, Jewish life in the shtetl between World Wars I and II was culturally and economically more developed than ever before; the shtetl enjoyed more democracy and community control, and less corruption and highhandedness than in the preceding periods of

Eastern European Jewish history; the "traditional life" had not "crumbled."

Demographically, one cannot speak of decay of the Eastern European Jewish community. Although some two million Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe in the span of 35 years (1881-1914), the size of the Jewish population did not decrease. The natural increase of the Jewish population was higher than in any other period of Jewish history, reaching 2 percent annually. Most illuminating is the fact that the natural increase among Jews was not principally due to a high birth rate, as is the case in the undeveloped countries, but to a low mortality rate. In 1904, the Jewish birthrate was 30.2 per 1,000, the lowest among the main population groups in Russia (51.7 for Russian Orthodox, 35.8 for Catholics, 44.0 for Muslims). But the mortality rate among Jews was the lowest (14.2 per 1,000, as against 31.8 for Russian Orthodox, 21.9 for Catholics, 30.6 for Muslims).[8]

Indeed, in spite of the cumulative ravages of World War I, the Civil War in Russia after 1917, and the widespread pogroms, the combined Jewish population of the Soviet Union, Poland, the Baltic republics and Bessarabia, i.e., the territories of the former Russian Empire, steadily increased and in the early 1920s was estimated to number approximately 6,500,000. In Poland, whence we have reliable statistics taken in two censuses, the Jewish population grew from 2,855,000 in 1921 to 3,114,000 in 1931, a growth of 8.9 percent.[9] At the outbreak of World War II, the Jewish population of Poland was estimated to number between 3,300,000 and 3,500,000.

Communal life in traditional Jewish society had been organized by and around the *Kehilah* (Jewish community council) and the many voluntary organizations of a principally social welfare character. Prior to World War I, the Kehilahs were ruled, in most cases, by an oligarchy of the rich and the clergy. Their excesses, especially in the area of indirect taxation (kosher meat, etc.), and the silencing of the protesting voices of the poor, are well-known and documented. The Kehilahs remained a source of bitter complaint for the majority of the Jewish population, which had no say in the conduct of their own community affairs.

The governments of the newly established republics in Poland and the Baltic countries recognized the Kehilahs as self-ruling bodies with unprecedented prerogatives in the fields of religion, education, and social welfare. In Poland, the Kehilahs were granted the right to levy taxes on their members for their own needs (all Jews, with very few exceptions, belonged to the Kehilahs) and to use the power of the state and courts to collect the taxes. Although women were not enfranchised and the voting age for males was raised to 25, elections to the Kehilah were now in all other respects democratic, and all Jewish political parties, ultimately including the anti-religious (they would say areligious and anticlerical) Bund participated. The ruling majority of the Kehilahs, of whatever political leanings, was tightly checked by the opposition and by public opinion, which had now acquired added political clout, in stark contrast to the situation that prevailed before World War I.

The traditional divisions among Misnagdim and Hasidim, and among the followers of the respective Hasidic rebbes remained side by side with the modern political parties — Zionist, Socialist Zionist, Bundist, etc. — that had emerged at the end of the 19th century. These modern parties did not replace the traditional infrastructure. Rather, a significant segment of traditional Jewry embarked on an effort to organize themselves into political parties, the most important of them, Agudas Yisroel, in 1912. Conversely, the non-traditional parties participated in "traditional" activities of the Jewish communal structure through the Kehilah and the multitude of voluntary organizations.

In the economic field, the resistance of Eastern European Jewry was not less remarkable, both by modern and traditionalist Jews, in both the cities and shtetlekh. Immediately after the end of World War I, the Jewish communities set out to rebuild their shattered economies.

These efforts to rebuild the economy on sounder grounds than before the war, moved in many directions. One area exemplifies these efforts. Credit was a vital necessity for merchants, especially for the great mass of small merchants, and for the large class of artisans. Denied credit by the government-financed credit institutions, Jews had to resort to their own devices.

Interest-free loan associations, the traditional *Gemilas Hasodim*, had been part and parcel of the Jewish landscape in Europe, but were not adequate for the modern period. In 1896, the first modern credit cooperative was founded in Russia. These cooperatives were virtually destroyed during World War I. But after the war, Poland, with less than half the Jewish population of the former Tsarist empire, had already, in 1928, more than doubled the pre-war peak number of Jewish credit cooperatives, with 680 credit institutions and 220,000 members. There was hardly a town or shtetl without a credit cooperative.

The Central Union of Jewish cooperatives was expertly run by an ideologically committed leadership which viewed the cooperatives not only in economic terms, but as a powerful social and political movement dedicated to counteracting the officially supported "economic war" against the Jews, and to ensuring Jewish survival in reconstituted Poland. In spite of the deepening economic crisis in the country and an increase in restrictive regulations, the number of the Union's cooperatives reached its peak in 1937, only two years before the outbreak of World War II.[10] In the tiny Lithuanian republic where the Jewish population numbered no more than 160,000 souls, 17,000 Jewish families, more than half the Jewish population, were members of the credit cooperatives.

The Jewish peasants and farmers who in 1931 constituted 4.6 percent of the Jewish population of Poland (a proportion, incidentally, comparable to the farming population of the U.S. today) established not only credit but also market cooperatives, as one way of combating competition and the anti-Semitic regulations directed against them. The marketing cooperative *Hemah* (butter in Hebrew) in southeastern Poland had

2,500 members and 30 cooperatives.

The theory of "unproductive occupations" is not in great vogue anymore, but at the time it was riding high among Jews and non-Jews alike. Commerce was considered to be the typical Jewish occupation, an indication of the unhealthy occupational distribution among Jews. However, the percentage of Polish Jews engaged in commerce dropped significantly, from 41.3 percent in 1921 to 36.6 percent in 1931, and conversely the percentage of Jews engaged in manufacturing increased from 36.7 percent to 42.2 percent in the same period. A more significant increase transpired in the proportion of Jews engaged in transportation, from 3.4 percent in 1921 to 4.5 percent in 1931, a one-third increase. The old-time Jewish coachman (*balegole*) and porter (*treger*) still dominated the field of transportation in Poland as they had for generations. In spite of the many obstacles and discrimination, the proportion and the number of Jews in professions increased substantially, from 4.2 percent to 6.3 percent.

The somber and unsentimental economist Jacob Lestchinsky noted: "The fight of Polish Jewry for sheer economic survival in this period forms one of the most fascinating and proudest chapters in its history."[11]

In discussions of the alleged "decay of the shtetl," cultural disintegration is at the head of the list of symptoms of the diseased organism. The "death of a culture" phrase is frequently used but rarely defined — hardly anyone ventures to do so. We have to presume from hints that what is meant is the death of the "traditional" culture, and we have to presume that this term broadens to include also a specific way of life emanating from this culture.

It would be insulting to imply — yet a suspicion lingers — that by "traditional" are principally meant external distinctions, such as a specific "Jewish" garb, beard, and sidelocks. But if the term "traditional" has any real meaning, it is first and foremost the sum total of the norms, beliefs, and conduct expressed in Jewish religious law, in the Talmud and *Shulkhan Arukh* (Code of Law) and the customs emanating from them. By contrast, secular Judaism or secular Jewish culture is not guided by religious law. (Since the religious and secular are interwoven in Judaism, a strict separation of the two is indeed very difficult.)

Keeping these notions of Jewish culture in mind, we can state that in no other historical period did the Jewries of Poland and the Baltic countries experience such an upsurge of cultural activity of all kinds as in the interbellum period, the period preceding the Holocaust. The cultural scene was, however, not geographically uniform; thus the picture is blurred. Therefore opinions based on observations or on data taken from one community or even one province have to be critically analyzed (e.g., the measure of linguistic assimilation among Polish Jews or literacy among women).

The traditional educational institutions had lost their near-monopoly, but still retained a great deal of power. They had some changes in their external features, but little or none in their basic principles. A case in point is the creation, for the first time, of a school system for girls, the Beis Yaakov under the sponsorship of the Orthodox Agudas Yisroel. These schools were strictly Orthodox but they were housed in airy rooms.

On the eve of World War II the traditional school system was still the predominant type of education for Jewish youth. Data for the years 1935–38 indicate that a total of 160,000 children attended the Horev schools of Agudas Yisroel, the Beis Yaakov schools for girls, the private *hedorim* (religious elementary schools), and the schools of the religious Zionist Mizrachi. By contrast, 45,000 students attended the secular Hebrew Zionist Tarbut schools, 15,500 the Yiddish Cysho schools, and another 2,500 the Yiddish-Hebrew Shul-Kult schools — a total of 63,000 students. A large number of Jewish children, 481,000, attended Polish primary schools (seven years of primary schooling in an accredited school was compulsory), but the majority of these children attended the public school in the morning and a *heder* or other Jewish school in the afternoon. Most others acquired at least a rudimentary Jewish religious education from private tutors (a widespread form of education in Eastern Europe, especially for girls).

At higher levels the preponderance of religious education was less explicit. Nevertheless, traditonal yeshivahs where teaching was a dawn-to-late-night enterprise dotted the map of Poland and Lithuania. Perhaps nothing can better illustrate the vitality and staying power of traditional Judaism than the establishment in 1925 of a central yeshivah for advanced Talmud students in Lublin, Poland. This yeshivah was modern in one respect — it was located in an imposing new building, with modern dormitories for the students. But the curriculum and the methods of study in this yeshivah were no different from those used for centuries in the yeshivahs of Eastern Europe — "old wine in a new vessel," as they emphasized.

Underlying this upsurge of educational and cultural activity of Eastern European Jewry was the extraordinary passion for knowledge. This was true for both the traditionally oriented and for their opposites, for the shtetl and the large town, for the extreme Left and extreme Right.

Let us glance at two shtetlekh in pre-war Poland. Since critics often question the credibility of Memorial Books, — survivors are said to idealize the places of their birth and youth — I have chosen, in order to obviate the possibility of any "embellishment," to review the Memorial Books of two shtetlekh I knew personally.

(It must be remembered that before the war a large proportion of Polish Jews were still living in shtetlekh. The inner emigration from shtetl to town did not proceed as fast as generally claimed. In the three decades preceeding 1931 the Jewish population in towns of over 20,000 Jews grew by only 13 percent.)

Opatov — "Apt," was a "typical" shtetl: it was an old Jewish community founded in the 15th century, with a synagogue known in Poland

for its antiquity and beautiful inner decorations. 5,200 Jews lived in Apt at the outbreak of World War II (out of a total population of 8,000).[12]

The Jews of Apt prided themselves on their town's having been the seat of one of the most famous Hasidic rebbes, the Apter Rov, Abraham Joshua Heschel (1745–1825), as well as for generations the home of the best bands of *klezmorim* (musicians) in that part of the country.

The occupational distribution of the Jewish population of Apt was anything but "abnormal." It ran the full gamut from heavy manual laborers to the rich owner of a soap factory. Nearly all carriers, porters, and coachmen in Apt were Jewish, as in most Polish towns and shtetlekh. Their economic role in Apt was particularly important because Apt was further removed from a railroad station (30 kilometers) than most shtetlekh of that size; the coachmen transported merchandise and passengers to and from the railroad station, as well as to the neighboring towns. Some of them went into modes of transportation that were still new in pre-war Poland: "The family Rumianek, coachmen, mastered the art of driving, bought trucks, and transported passengers and merchandise to and from the station in Ostrovetz."

In Apt, untypically, some Jews engaged in occupations which in other towns and shtetlekh were in non-Jewish hands — cobblestone pavers, bricklayers, and woodcutters. Few Jews were employed in services. The remainder of the Jewish population was about evenly divided between artisans and merchants. They were helped with credit by the Interest-Free Loan Association, the People's Bank (under Agudas Yisroel sponsorship), and the Kredit-Kasse (under Zionist sponsorship).

The traditional type of Jewish schooling was represented by several private *hedorim*, later supplemented by a more efficiently managed *heder* supported by Agudas Yisroel, and a *heder* sponsored by the religious-Zionist Mizrachi, where secular subjects were also taught.

The non-religious political parties established schools of their own. The General Zionists had two schools, one with an emphasis on traditional subjects and the other, a Tarbut school, with emphasis on modern Hebrew and Hebrew literature. They sponsored also a Hebrew kindergarten (*Gan*) and Hebrew evening courses. The leftist parties, among whom the Poale Zion predominated for a long time, founded an evening school for the working young.

The houses of prayer, we read, "were always crowded with praying Jews" and the "clubs," the meeting places of the political organizations, were equally crowded with their adherents: "all organizations that the Jewish people in the Diaspora possessed existed in Apt. The Zionist organization with all its youth groups (Hashomer Hatzair, Hashomer Haleumi, Hehalutz), Mizrachi with its youth groups (Tseirei M., Hashomer Hadati, and the women's group Bruria), Agudas Yisroel with its youth groups (Tseirei A.Y., Pirhei A.Y., Bnot A.Y.), Revisionists and Betar, Left Poale Zion and Communists."[13]

In Apt, as in all other towns and shtetlekh, political activity peaked before elections: "the town became stormy when elections came, whether to the Polish Seym [Parliament] or to the City Council or to the Jewish Kehilah. At that time, several weeks before elections, the shtetl was on its feet. People forgot about everything. Who worried at that time? Who remembered about parnose [making a living]?"[14]

The shtetl Przytyk (pronounced Pzhitik) was smaller than Apt. It numbered by last count 400 Jewish families, or about 2,000 Jews out of a total population of 2,500. For generations — Przytyk was a 600-year-old Jewish community — Jews had traded with the surrounding Polish peasant population, selling them kerchiefs, salt, liquor, and matches; making and repairing their boots, clothes, barrels, and horses' collars; putting window panes in their houses before the winter; and buying their produce.

> Between the Jewish toiling people and the surrounding Polish population good relations existed for years. Jewish artisans sold their products on market days; if someone could not pay at once, he was trusted to pay later. Jewish village traders spent most of their days among peasants, coming home only for the Sabbath, and on Sunday again on the road. It did not occur to anyone to expect any trouble or wrongdoing from the peasant population.[15]

Contrary to prevailing opinion, anti-Semitism in Poland was least pronounced among the peasant class. The peasants were not in economic competition with the Jews; on the contrary, the Jews and peasants complemented each other economically. In spite of religious prejudice fed by the Catholic Church and what historian Salo Baron called the inevitable "dislike of the unlike" by both groups, a kind of benevolent coexistence, and on a personal level often trust and friendship, developed between Jews and peasants ("even our fathers and grandfathers knew each other").

The contributors to the Przytyk Memorial Book describe their hometown as a "typical" Jewish shtetl because "all [Jewish] political parties were active here. . . . Excited discussions were held on the street, in homes and in the Prayer Houses." The shtetl's Hasidim went by the name of their Rebbe, Aleksander, Ger, Vurke. Przytyk did not have its own yeshivah, but many young people studied in the *shtiblekh* (small prayer houses) and in the synagogue. "There was a religious girls organization, Bnot, and the Beis Yaakov provided a traditional religious education for the girls (main subjects: The Five Books of Moses, religious laws, writing, Jewish history)."

On the other side of the spectrum were several Jewish trade unions, an underground Communist organization composed mostly of Jews, and modern Zionist organizations. Notwithstanding the "onslaught of modernity," the religious traditionalists were holding their own: "Although our shtetl was small, there were many Hasidic shtiblekh, in addition to the town's Prayer House and synagogue. People came to the shtiblekh not only to pray; they were open all day, and whoever had a little free time came there to study Talmud or to leaf through a [religious] book. . . ."[16]

There was in Przytyk, Apt, and hundreds of other shtetlekh competition and tension between the "old" and the "new," between the traditional Jews and their organizations and the modern Jewish political parties and their organizations. But the "modern" did not destroy or take over the "traditional." The "modern" galvanized the great mass of the hitherto inactive, and forced the traditional segment of the community to increase its efforts to compete with the new forms of Jewishness.

Characteristic of the interbellum period was an unprecedented level of involvement in the life of their country and community. For example, when the Gerer Rebbe, the spiritual leader of Agudas Yisroel, visited Warsaw, Poland's center of modern Judaism, which had a Jewish population of 350,000, 50,000 enthusiastic followers welcomed him at the railroad station. When the General-Zionist leader Itshak Grynbaum spoke at pre-election meetings in Warsaw, tens of thousands of his followers came to applaud. At the First of May demonstration of the Bund in Warsaw, some 20,000 people marched, protected by their own militia against outside interference. It was also known that the illegal Communist Party had in Warsaw many thousands of Jewish followers.

On a smaller scale, such diverse activity was characteristic of the shtetlekh as well, creating a whole spectrum of action and opinion from extreme Left to extreme Right. There were fewer passive Jews than ever before. From the ranks of the previously non-engaged came many of the committed activists of both the modern and traditional camps. That's what made it possible for Przytyk with its 2,000 Jews to have a sufficient number of engaged individuals to establish so many organizations.

The two camps were, however, in constant contact and communication, both worked in the framework of a common community and fate, of many values both shared, sometimes involuntarily. "Great is the God of my disbelief," wrote the noted "secular" Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein.

The theme of decline, even decay, of the shtetl is not new; it is part of the theme of the decline and decay of Jewish life and Jewish existence in the Diaspora. It was a favored theme of innumerable writers in every generation; its application was not limited to the turn of the century. It has become an even more constant theme since the beginnings of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature. There is no more biting portrayal of the decaying shtetl — even before it was touched by modernism — than in the works of the "Grandfather" of Yiddish and Hebrew literature, Mendele Mocher Seforim, in his satires of Glupsk (Foolstown) and Tuneiadevke (Idletown). It is difficult to find a sadder picture of the God-forsaken shtetlekh of the Polish provinces than in Peretz's *Bilder Fun a Provintz Reise* (*Pictures from a Journey through the Provinces*) written a generation later. And the Jewish writers of interbellum Poland have drawn a grim picture of desolation, poverty, and despair.

Jewish life in Eastern Europe, not only in the shtetlekh but in the larger towns as well, was in a state of permanent crisis, both political and economic, of social uncertainty and cultural conflicts. In what seems to have been a pastoral society, there were always paradoxical contradictions and tensions. As in nature, a simultaneous process of decay and rebirth had been going on for generations; it was probably more visible and easier to grasp in the microcosm that the shtetl represented than in the large town.

The "shtetl community," by any definition of the term, was a unique type of a civilization, creative and vibrant until its very end. It was not disintegrating nor drained of its inner resources; its culture was neither dead nor dying. It died, in its habitat, only with the physical death of its creators and practitioners.

What created the notion of the "disintegration" of the shtetl and of Jewish traditional life? Why the stereotyping? We can offer here only a few hints towards understanding this problem.

With respect to Israel, the reasons are relatively clear. Zionism, especially in Palestine and later in the State of Israel, aimed at "starting from the beginning" in the land of the Forefathers. The new generation was destined to create a new type of Jew, without the "Diaspora baggage" and "Diaspora deformities." Great sacrifices, including of blood, were demanded of the young generation. But throughout the formative years of the Yishuv, the Diaspora — with its millions of Jews and its claims, expressed in various ideological movements, of the possibility and feasibility of a meaningful Jewish life in the Diaspora — loomed dangerously close. It was therefore necessary to demonstrate the repulsive nature of the Diaspora alternative. The Israeli writer Moshe Shamir, after becoming acquainted with the realities of Jewish life in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust, complained: "All those years they painted for us a distorted portrait, intentionally down-graded and knowingly blackened, of the Jewish shtetl. For years, up to the present day, they have been teaching our young people that all that had been destroyed in Eastern Europe deserved to be destroyed."[17]

In recent years, especially after the Yom Kippur War, there has been a tendency to revise somewhat the "anti-shtetl" indoctrination of the young generation in Israel.

But not only Zionism — practically all Jewish ideological movements had an axe to grind. The aim of Jewish socialists of various shades was to alter drastically the existing order; therefore they, too, had a stake in painting as black a picture as possible of existing conditions.

Yiddish and Hebrew literature also contributed to the negative stereotyping. They were to a considerable degree didactic; most writers viewed art not as an end in itself but as a tool — the better the art the sharper the tool — to achieve political, social, or cultural aims. Only very guardedly, with a great measure of factual historical knowledge can these writings serve as a portrayal of reality.

The bizarre, the conspicuous, the colorful, the downtrodden, naturally attract the attention of visitor, writer, and reader alike. Not surprisingly, the Hasidic rebbe in his exotic attire and the poor beggar in the shtetl market, not the average Jew, are so copiously represented in all

those albums of the "old country" published here.

Often children of the immigrants deduced from the remains of a civilization transplanted to the new country their own conclusions. But their parents' home was *not* a replica of the home in Eastern Europe.

In America, sentimentalization and nostalgia were directed at a pristine image of the shtetl — "before the Fall," so to speak. This Fall allegedly coincided with modernism, with the period during which the grandparents of most American Jews came to this country. As long as his old culture remained "unspoiled," "original," "pastoral," the American Jew looked at it with understanding, although somewhat condescending, eyes. But when the exotic begins to move closer to Western patterns, it shatters the myth — and it is comprehended as "disintegration."

And finally there is the Holocaust. The shtetl was considered to be the original creation of Eastern European Jewish civilization, as was the kibbutz of a Jewish civilization in another time and place. If the period immediately preceding the Holocaust is conceived as a period of disintegration, already after the "Fall of the shtetl," the loss of the destroyed culture becomes easier to take. ■

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Notes

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3. Bernard Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland* (Jewish Publication Society, Phila., 1973), p. 117.
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5. Sholom Asch, *Reb Shloime Nogid* (Vilna, Kletzkin, n.d.), p. 50.
6. Daniel Charny, *Dukor* (Toronto, Tint un Feder, 1951), p. 240.
7. A Litwin, *Yidishe Neshomes* V. 4 "Bialer Antikn,"(N.Y., Folksbildung, 1917), p. 2.
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9. S. Bronsztejn, "The Jewish Population of Poland in 1931," *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* V. 6 (1964), p. 5.
10. The statistical data on the credit cooperatives are based on the article "Jewish Cooperatives," by J. Yashunski in volume Yidn-Alef of the *Algemeine Entsiklopedia* (Cyco, New York, 1951). J. Yashunski was one of the leaders of the Jewish cooperative movement in Poland.
11. Jacob Lestchinsky, "The Industrial and Social Structure of the Jewish Population of Interbellum Poland," *Yivo Annual* V. 11, p. 224.
12. The data included here about Apt are taken from *Apt. Sefer Zikaron* (Tel Aviv, Yotsei Apt Be-Yisroel, 1966).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
15. *Sefer Przhitik*, ed. by David Shtokfish (Tel Aviv, 1973).
16. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
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