



(Volhynia, 1925. YIVO, NYC, 1976)

The Bittersweet Life of the Shtetl

The Shtetl Book
by Diane and David Roskies
(KTAV, 1975) paperback, \$5.95
Reviewed by Ira Robinson

In this Bicentennial year, the descendants of the major American ethnic groups are extending their quest for roots to the other side of the Atlantic. They are in search of a past which will give their lives a meaning which America's all-too homogenized culture cannot provide. Jews in par-

ticular are engaged in the search for their predominantly Eastern European past, a past symbolized by the *Shtetl*, the small town whose Jews constituted a majority of the population, which provided the stage for the development of an organically Jewish civilization in which Judaism (or *Yiddishkeit*) meant much more than religion—it was life itself.

While the *Shtetl* is tantalizingly close to us in time, it is worlds apart from modern, urban Jewish life in the lands to which the

Eastern European Jews migrated. To evoke that quintessentially Jewish civilization which was the *Shtetl*, built up over centuries of life and toil, is a difficult task indeed.

In order to make the *Shtetl* live in our minds, the Roskies have provided us an invaluable tool in their book, which enables the reader to experience, as it were, a lost civilization, which received its mortal wound in the late nineteenth century, with the entry of Western culture and ideology into the Eastern European Jewish consciousness, and its death-blow at the hand of Hitler's death machine.

As with other civilizations which are no more, *Shtetl* life has been romanticised no end. But such presentations as *Fiddler on the Roof*, for example, leave us with an incomplete, sugar-coated image of the *Shtetl*. It is to the Roskies' credit that they have avoided this pitfall and portrayed the *Shtetl* Jews living lives in which the beauty of their *Yiddishkeit* was tempered by grinding poverty for most, communal squabbling, class differences and ambivalent relations with the neighboring *goyim*. They thus succeeded in presenting a real-life picture of the *Shtetl* in its workaday clothes as well as its Sabbath attire. In doing so, they have enabled us to see the genuine beauty of *Shtetl* life in proper perspective.

They have succeeded so well in their task by keeping themselves carefully in the background and letting the *Shtetl* speak for itself in selections drawn from the widest variety of sources. Another wise decision they made was to avoid the danger of over-generalization, which is inherent in any attempt to describe a civilization replete with spatial and temporal variations, by concen-

trating on the description of one *Shtetl* in particular, Tishevits, while weaving the other sources around the Tishevits material to form a unified whole. Thus does the *Shtetl* come alive to us with all its tragedies and joys, its pathos and, above all, its humor.

Another way in which the book comes alive is in the abundance of photographs of *Shtetl* scenes which give a reality and immediacy to the readings which they might otherwise lack. The historical and linguistic background of the *Shtetl* is generally well done and includes such delights as the linguistic significance of the Eastern European "gefilte fish line" (p. 36).

One objection to the book is the authors' decision to transliterate all Yiddish names and expressions using the system devised by Uriel Weinreich in his *English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary*. In the transcription of Yiddish phrases and songs the method may be of value. But while the reader familiar with Yiddish will agree that *Yankev* is much more expressive and evocative than Jacob could ever be, the system is liable to create confusion for those readers whose knowledge of Yiddish is minimal.

The authors state in their introduction that theirs is an attempt, by people who never had the opportunity to see a living *Shtetl*, to evoke the *Shtetl* and its life for the modern reader. That they have succeeded in so large a measure is a tribute to their good sense in letting the *Shtetl* and its inhabitants speak for themselves.

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