

Shtetl Society

By DAVID C. ROSKIES

EASTERN EUROPE, for all its cultural diversity, was a static medieval society. The peasants were enslaved to the land. The burghers fought to maintain their monopolistic privileges. The clergy sided with whomever it was profitable, sometimes even with the Jews. The nobles lived off the fat of the land and were only too happy to let the Jews run their estates, collect the taxes and dispense the vodka. And the Jews themselves, their lives protected and their activities carefully circumscribed, were outwardly mobile and inwardly stable. They functioned as intermediaries between nobleman and peasant, village and town but maintained a rigid societal structure that remained virtually unchanged until the Russian revolution. The secret of their strength, as formulated so succinctly by the late Max Weinreich, was in achieving not isolation from the Christians but insulation from Christianity. It is worth dwelling at some length on each part of this formula to achieve a proper understanding of East European Jewry.

Jews were predominantly urban and often constituted a majority of the population of small towns. The basic unit was the market town, better known as the *shtetl*, with its Jewish population concentrated in and around the market and with the Polish Roman Catholics and/or Greek Orthodox Ukrainians inhabiting the outer limits and the surrounding villages. No *shtetl* was complete without churches of each denomination, a fact that is often overlooked. The Jews knew the churches, they even transmitted legends about them, such as the following story of a small church standing at the crossroads on the way to the Jewish cemetery:

It's a little old church. The walls are covered with moss. Once, though, it was taller than the old synagogue and its bells would peal when a Jewish funeral passed by. Until, one day, a disguised saintly man cursed the church and caused it to sink deeper and deeper into the ground. However the bell still rings. Hoarse and creaking though it sounds, it still manages to drown out the cries of the women mourners. That is why the pallbearers always hurry by as if fleeing the plague.

Dr. Roskies, co-author with Diane Roskies of *The Shtetl Book*, teaches Yiddish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Christian ritual and pageantry were far more visible in Eastern Europe than they are in the modern American city. In the course of the year Jews witnessed various Christian festivals, pilgrimages and processions. They tended to react with fear and resentment:

All winter long the cross stands alone and barely braves the fierce winds. But with the coming of spring the hill attracts long rows of gaily dressed, slim girls in white bonnets. The icons they carry sway to the melancholy tune they sing. They wear brightly colored pleated skirts embroidered with gold and silver threads and bright purple. The Catholic priest, dressed in white satin, walks under a white silk canopy with a red covering and gold tassels. The pungent odors of the meadow mix with the incense that rises out of copper pans. The chorus of young female voices grows louder and louder.

A shiver runs through the entire *shtetl* on the other side of the bridge. Shutters close with a bang. Children playing out of doors stop short in the middle of their game and block their ears with their thumbs. "The *goyim* are bleating again." The correct formula for just such a time is: "The Lord will answer you in time of stress." Anyone who can't remember this time-tested remedy mutters any old passage from Psalms he can remember. Then he hurries into a Jewish home to be under the protection of a *mezuzah* and a holy book.

Essentially, Christian ritual—icons, incense and pilgrimage to the cross—was seen by the Jews as idolatry. Nevertheless, Eastern Europe synagogue architecture reveals distinct Christian influences both in internal and external design. A picture postcard of the Roman Catholic church and synagogue in the pre-World War I *shtetl* of Cieszowa (Tsheshev in Yiddish) shows two wooden edifices with the same pagoda-style roof that might even have been built by the same hand.

OBSERVING ONE another's religious practices was only the most superficial contact between Jews and Christians in Eastern Europe. The real arena of interaction was in the economic sphere. Jews were indispensable to every facet of the Polish economy and constituted almost the entire middle class. The Polish mayor of an East Galician village,

"I am suffering as a Jew. I almost feel proud that we suffered. This extends to other relationships as well. Nothing is meaningful unless there's pain."

Religion plays a minor role in Ann's life but Jewish history and traditions are important.

"I went to a Jewish film festival and I suffered. I sit there and I want to cry. I want to suffer. I want to identify. I want to feel as if I was there. It's something I'm trying to come to terms with because I don't think it's healthy. Yet anything about what happened in Europe to Jews I want to read."

She is very much involved with Israel. "I wanted to die for Israel. I was going to be a soldier and die for Israel, die for the Jewish name and give myself to the Jewish people. I felt like I had to be a martyr. My father was a resistance fighter and my mother was almost gassed. They're martyrs. But now I don't feel I have to die for the Jewish people."

Ann stressed the difficulty in getting to this point. It has taken much time and effort to cope with the image of her "heroic" parents. Yet she is still obsessed with "I-feel-like-I-was-there." What else could explain why Ann, a woman of 25 years of age, has dreams of Nazis dragging her out of her house, shoving her onto a truck and shipping her off to a concentration camp?

THROUGHOUT this exploration, I found six problems plaguing the young people interviewed.

A feeling of loss in terms of a diminished family circle. All feel drawn toward films and books about the holocaust and Judaism.

There is a sense of guilt. The children of holocaust survivors have inherited their parents' feelings of shame about being alive when so many have died. Another kind of guilt stems from acting in a way which upsets the parents. They realize how much the parents have suffered and they do not wish to add to the unhealed wounds.

Answering the question of "What is a Jew?", those interviewed emphasized Jews as the "persecuted." Suffering and pain as the prerequisite for being Jewish was mentioned again and again.

All those interviewed have a strong affinity with immigrant Jews. Feelings toward American Jews vary. Some feel very alienated among second and third generation American Jews, even though they had grown up in suburbs among them.

Whether Jewishly active or not, the children of survivors see a very special threat when the existence of Israel is questioned. One young woman said: "Israel is as much a political necessity as a psychological need for all of us."

Finally, there is what some call a "ghetto mentality" and some a "European mentality." The label doesn't really matter. What is important is that it is special to this group and it isn't the mentality of other Jews their age.

The horrors of the holocaust have deeply scarred them.

Synagogue

By MARTIN ROBBINS

Hands

That turn the years like pages
Of silent devotion,

Hands

That hold the Torah open,
Showing a way of life,

Hands

That light memorial candles
Against all destruction,

Hands

Held against public breakdown,
Or clasped in shared joys;

And fingers

That hang autumn fruit with stars,
Bless and break Sabbath bread,

Fingers

That turn the pages of study,
From generation to generation.

writing his memoirs in 1912 posited the following explanation for this unique state of affairs:

Peasants had nothing to do with trade, holding it to be a Jewish enterprise, for which only Jews (the saying was) were fit. They (the peasants) were ashamed of it, and made fun of anyone of their number who would begin it. They would bring their produce to the market—grain, potatoes, buckwheat, fowls, eggs, butter and cheese, as well as home-made articles, and dispose of it all to the Jews. These then did the business and got the profits. Often the peasant would pay dearly in the spring for grain he had sold the autumn before for a song. One must remember that we had no schools, and the peasant was not trained to do business—he couldn't reckon at all.

The author, obviously influenced by incipient Polish nationalism, made a point of singling out every occupation that had Christian practitioners, but for the most part he had to admit to a Jewish monopoly in such essential areas as tailoring for both men and women, leather work, the lumber trade, dry goods, iron goods, smuggling and most important—vodka. The Jewish tavern keeper subsisted solely from his peasant clientele—with the tavern doubling as dance hall on Sundays and Christian holidays. A mere 10 percent of the Jewish labor force serviced Jews exclusively. These included rabbis, teachers, slaughterers, scribes, bathhouse keepers, synagogue attendants and cemetery watchmen. All the rest—butchers, candlemakers, bookbinders, weavers, bricklayers, glaziers, carpenters, watchmakers, locksmiths, and the wide variety of merchants—served both Jews and Christians. On market day, the peasants came to sell their produce and livestock and the Jews sold finished goods. There were another two Jewish occupations besides that of tavern keeper, that catered only to the peasants: the *dorfsgeyer* or wandering peddler and the patchwork tailor. Both would leave town on Sunday morning and return before nightfall on Friday, thus spending the entire week among the local peasantry. No wonder they ranked lowest on the *shtetl's* social scale.

Thanks to the Polish mayor cited before we know how these Jews were treated in the Christian villages. Shaya was the best tailor in the region, nonetheless, the peasants called him Shaya the Thief and watched his every movement, lest he steal any remainders. Shaya was careful to eat only kosher food, the author comments. He ate baked potatoes, fresh milk and bread given to him by the peasants but nothing more. Before he left, he allowed himself to be subjected to a thorough body search. Women's tailors made fur coats to order, on the

premises, sometimes staying for a week in a single cottage.

Another familiar figure was the Jew who appeared each spring buying up old sheepskin coats from house to house. The transaction was accompanied by the following ritual:

Jew (all the while shaking and beating the sheepskin with a stick): Whadya want for this louse-trap?

Peasant: You've got plenty of time to delouse it!

The coats would sell for about one guilder, the tailor would then spend the summer patching them up and would resell them in autumn for five or six guilders.

In this way, a small segment of the Jewish population learned about peasant society. Conversely, the Jewish home stood open to two groups of Christians: the many peasant girls who served as domestic help in Jewish households and the *shabes-goyim*. The girls learned to speak Yiddish and grew accustomed to many aspects of Jewish life, while introducing their own lullabies and patterns of infant care, such as swaddling. The *shabes-goyim* took down the candlesticks, heated the ovens and chopped firewood for the more well-to-do Jewish households on the Sabbath when Jews are not permitted to light a match or to work. I. J. Singer described one such *shabes-goy* as follows:

The Jews preferred the elder Schmidt because he did not speak Swabian, as did the other settlers, but Yiddish, like any Jew. He knew all the Jewish customs and holidays and would recite the Jewish prayer over every glass of whiskey offered him. He was also aware of the law that forbids Jews from drinking wine that has been touched by a Gentile, and would inform housewives of his presence so that they might remove the kiddush wine before he made it impure.

"Put the wine away, women," he would warn them from the other side of the door, "A *goy* is coming. . . ."

The extensive interaction between Jews and their Christian neighbors is attested by the Slavic impact upon Yiddish which influenced its phonology, morphology, word-order, and vocabulary. It transformed Yiddish and gave it a "new quality," according to Uriel Weinreich.

The myth that would see the Jews of Eastern Europe sequestered off from the Christian world can thus safely be dispensed with. However, Yiddish-speaking Jews developed a way of differentiating their world from that of the Gentiles. The basic device was to say *lehavdl* (to distinguish be-

tween one and the other) when mentioning the two spheres in one breath, as in the sentence, "The ceremony was attended by the rabbi and the governor, *lehavdl*."

This would be nothing but a word-game if it did not reflect the fact that Jews had a semi-autonomous society in Eastern Europe. They enjoyed protection under the kings and noblemen but had their own institutions of law, education, health and welfare, banking and civil affairs. Add to that their Yiddish vernacular and sacred Hebrew tongue, their religion and even geography—and the totality of this civilization becomes manifest. Many of these institutions, of course, had evolved since the Babylonian exile and were adapted to the East European reality. Much more research has yet to be done before we can determine the continuity and change within Ashkenazic (European) Jewry in general and East European Jewry in particular. It may be useful, however, to focus upon Hasidism, a movement characteristic of East European Jewry.

Hasidism, a religious revival movement, originated in a small Ukrainian *shtetl* in the mid-eighteenth century and within a hundred years had encompassed all of Jewish Eastern Europe. A more indigenous Jewish movement could hardly be imagined. Operating with the concepts of Lurianic mysticism; responding to the ossification of rabbinic Judaism on the one hand and to the threat of Jewish antinomianism on the other; transmitting their teachings by word of mouth in Yiddish and by the printed word in Hebrew, the *Hasidic rebbes* drew their strength mostly from the poor and from the unsanctioned intelligentsia who were free of European influence and who also renounced Jewish secular and rationalistic trends. As for Christians, they knew only the debauched squire and the enslaved peasant, who commanded no respect whatsoever, but who, given the dualistic world view of the *Hasidim*, were often seen as the embodiment of evil. All this would seem to leave very little room for cultural synthesis. And yet. . . .

THE SAME Lurianic teaching that revived the fear of satanic powers among the Jewish masses influenced by Hasidism allowed for the possibility of discovering sparks of holiness within the profane world of the everyday—in eating, talking and in the culture of the peasants. This, in turn, gave rise to a mystical curiosity about the peasant. The *Hasidim* articulated this view in their saying, *a goyish vertl iz lehavdl a toyre*, (a peasant proverb, *lehavdl*, is like a quote from the Torah), meaning, there is profound morality concealed in peasant

proverbs. The folksongs of the peasant, no matter how differently they functioned in the source culture, were also subjected to an allegorical interpretation. Some *Hasidic* songs incorporate whole stanzas in Ukrainian or Polish. The crowning achievement, however, was in the realm of folk narrative. Towards the end of his life, Rabbi Nahman of Braslav, the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, chose the folktale, as his preferred literary form. The stories of the princess in the tower and of the clever and simple son, became vehicles whereby he could express his messianic longing and his esoteric teaching. "People say that stories put you to sleep," he said to his *Hasidim*, "and I say that stories awaken you from your sleep."

In return for this inspiration, *Hasidism* exerted some influence on peasant culture. The Baal Shem Tov appears not infrequently as a Ukrainian folk hero, as does his Christian wagon driver Alexi. Sh. Anski, the renowned ethnographer, reported that in many Ukrainian villages the peasants believed in the powers of the *Hasidic* rabbi and would often consult him in times of stress.

What, then, were the forms of Jewish-Christian relations in Eastern Europe? There was no ecumenism and no theological dialogue, but in the realm of folk religion, that is, in the songs, stories, dances and popular beliefs there was a significant cross-fertilization. There was no real social interaction either. Instead there were functional relationships—in the marketplace, in the tavern, in the home. There was certainly no mutual admiration. Jews were the Christ killers. Christians were idol worshipers. But in a peculiar dialectical fashion one group reluctantly admitted the strengths of the other. The Jewish child knew that pinky was the little Jew and thumb was the hefty Gentile. It was clear to child and adult alike who was boss and who was merely tolerated. The peasants knew that any Jew could outsmart them, hence the many anecdotes about Jewish stupidity. Furthermore, the Jew never drank, at least not in their presence, whereas they were enslaved to vodka. Reciprocal need, mutual vulnerability and basic human curiosity for the other kept the system going.

When industrialization rendered the Jewish middleman superfluous, when jingoism and repressive governmental measures tipped the power balance and when diversity became a burden rather than an asset—then the fate of East European Jewry was sealed. Pinky was not merely squashed; he was severed from the hand.