

THE ETERNAL LIGHT

A SHTETL PASSOVER

with

PROFESSOR DAVID G. ROSKIES  
Associate Professor in Jewish Literature  
The Jewish Theological Seminary of America

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(SINGING & MUSIC)

DAVID ROSKIES:

Mimitsrayim ge'altanu umibet avadim  
peditanu.

You have redeemed us from Egypt, you have  
liberated us from the house of bondage.

Each year, as the Passover season approached,  
the Jews of Eastern Europe might have been  
expected to say, "No more city life for us.  
After Pharaoh made us build the cities of  
Pithom and Raamese, we'll never go back again!"  
Instead, the Jews of Poland, Lithuania, White  
Russia and the Ukraine, were those countries'  
first true urbanites. They were the settlers,  
and also the builders, of countless market  
towns known as shtetlekh. Here, their talents  
their energy, their enthusiasm for city life  
reached its zenith in the 600 years of mass  
Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe.

ANNOUNCER:

NBC News, in association with the Jewish  
Theological Seminary of America, presents this  
ETERNAL LIGHT special program.

SINGING & MUSIC

ROSKIES:

My name is David Roskies. And, together,  
we'll be making a trip back to a home that no  
longer exists. We'll be following two, among  
many, travelers, who made good in America, and  
returned home over half-a-century ago, to record  
the sights, if not the sounds, of the home  
they left behind. We can see what they saw, be-  
cause we're lucky enough to have found some rare  
film footage of their visit, to create a compos-  
ite picture of the shtetlekh of Eastern Europe.

MUSIC

As our two visitors approached their native  
towns, they passed through farmlands and forests,  
rivers and lakes. Here the non-Jewish popula-  
tion lived: Poles, Ukrainians, White Russians  
and colonial Germans.

MUSIC

But once the travelers crossed into town, by  
primitive highways, or by bridge, they found  
themselves surrounded mostly by Jews.

SINGING

ROSKIES: (CONT)

Jews who spoke their own language... dressed in their own fashion... ate their own foods ... served God in their own way, and ran their own institutions.

#### SINGING & MUSIC

To be home for Passover -- every Jew's dream since time immemorial. Up until 40 years ago, home for the majority of Jews in the world was Eastern Europe. And though most of them, by that time, lived in big cities, the historic focal point was still the shtetlekh. Since the mid-14th century, when the mass Jewish settlement of Eastern Europe began, the shtetl Jews were precariously located between the Christian world of squire and peasant, the Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, and made themselves indispensable to all.

#### MUSIC

They engaged in all forms of trade, worked in all forms of crafts... blacksmiths, tailors, seamstresses, cobblers, tanners, peddlers, all forms of crafts.

#### MUSIC

At the heart of this activity was the market town, the place where city and village, Jew and Gentile, the agrarian and mercantile economies, the old and the new could meet.

"On market days," proclaimed King Jan Sobieski in 1690,

"it will be possible forevermore, without distinguishing between sex or status, condition, occupation or position, rule or faith, in this city of Koibuszowa, containing all kinds of merchandise -- wheat, barley, fodder and other produces and seeds, as well as horses, cattle and sheep, lumber and wood products, liquors and all salable goods -- to come in order to buy sell, barter and negotiate, whiskey, mead and other liquors, and in security and peace buy and sell merchandise in barter, and to negotiate all kinds of fair and permitted deals."

240 years later in 1930, the shtetl market worked exactly the same way.

When Philip Zuckerman arrived in the Polish

ROSKIES: (CONT)

shtetl of Kolbushov on Tuesday, the place was swarming with peasant wagons and peasant women, all dressed in identical kerchiefs, carrying with them the livestock and produce from their farms.

#### MUSIC

By noon they had sold all their milk, vegetables, eggs, grains, hides, horses and chickens to the Jews, and by late afternoon, the Jewish merchants had sold to the peasants their finished goods and products.

Deals were clinched, as always, with a slap of the hands, followed by a stiff drink in a nearby tavern. Kolbushov had been known for its fine, handcrafted furniture and violins, which were exported throughout Europe. But once furniture was mass-produced elsewhere, and the demand for violins couldn't have been that great, this specialized industry went down the drain. Now, only lumber and wooden sieves were left.

Jews were the linchpin of the shtetl, of the whole market economy which was still based on the exchange of goods and services. In Kolbushov, this Jewish-Gentile reciprocity was displayed for all to see.

Here is the Christian mayor with his secretary posing in front of town hall. Behind them, you can just make out the seal, or town emblem. On closer inspection, what you see is truly remarkable: two hands clasped in friendship, with a cross on top, a Star of David on the bottom, while the white wings of an eagle are spread out over the tip of the shield.

#### SINGING

In another shtetl, Navaredok, hundreds of miles to the north, market day took place every Monday and Thursday, yet another sign of Jewish influence.

#### SINGING

For on those days, the Torah is read in the synagogue at morning prayers. And Jewish men are able to fulfill their religious obligation by being assured of a minyan, or a full assembly. What better way to combine labor and matters of the spirit than to organize the workaday life around their liturgical calendar.

ROSKIES: (CONT)

That, indeed, was one of the central functions of the shtetl, to bring Jews and God into close and intimate contact, while enabling Jews and Gentiles to pursue their lives apart, and together, as their traditions dictated.

SINGING

On market day, the shtetl was a veritable Coney Island, where all kinds of people came together.

SINGING

The village Jews, for instance, were called yeshuvnikes. They were the Jewish version of the country bumpkin. The yeshuynike is the kind of guy who would sit at his Passover seder and every now and then would look into a mirror. Why? Because it says in the Passover Haggadah, every person must view himself as if he personally went out of Egypt.

The shtetl knew the most intimate secrets of everyone's life. One poor fellow had the misfortune to become the father of a son, three months after his marriage; that earned him the nickname of "the hero".

In the 1930s, when Alexander Harkavy, the noted Yiddish lexicographer, left his home in New York to visit Navaredok, his native town, his first stop was at the Hotel Europa, owned and frequented by Jews. Here, he was wined and dined, as befitted a great scholar whose Yiddish-English-Hebrew dictionary is still unsurpassed.

MUSIC

Later he would be received by the mayor, a Polish Catholic. Posing for the camera, he surveyed the market from the balcony of his room.

Navaredok was especially busy at this time of year, for its major export was matses. Here is how the matses are described in the Navaredok Memorial Volume:

"Navaredok matse was known throughout the world: it was thin, well baked and crisp. From Hanukkah, that is, from early winter on, the town was turned into one big matse factory. The owners of such factories were known as contractors, podriatshikes. Young girls, old women

ROSKIES: (CONT)

and boys from the surrounding shtetlekh would arrive in Navaredok to work in these makeshift factories. The women did the kneading, telling the water pourer, usually a child, how much water to add. When the exact measure of dough was kneaded, another group of women would cut it into ten or more pellets. Then, each pellet was rolled flat and put on the table of the perforators, the men who made lines of perforations in each cake. Finally, a second group of men, known as pushers, placed the matse in the oven. These freshly-baked matses were then packed in boxes and shipped all over the world -- Europe, America, as far away as Australia."

The fame of Navaredok matses points to another crucial aspect of shtetl life: that there were two levels of reality in Eastern Europe, the Jewish and the Gentile. A non-Jew would not only have been totally ignorant of this famous product, but would probably not even recognize the name of the place in which it was produced. To be sure, every Pole had heard of Nowogrode, the birthplace of Poland's greatest poet, Adam Mickiewicz, and there was even a mound on the outskirts of town built in his memory. People would come from all over Poland to add a wheelbarrow of earth until they finally raised this impressive monument. But the Jews knew this place as Navaredok, and revered not only its matses, but also its famous yeshiva, or Talmudic academy. For Navaredok was one of several "college towns" that Lithuania was famous for.

Many shtetlekh had magnificent synagogues, architectural masterpieces built of wood.

#### MUSIC & SINGING

Others were built of stone, or masonry, massive structures, fortress-like, some built as early as the 15th or 16th century. These synagogues were often used by Jew and Gentile together, as places of refuge in times of siege.

Navaredok boasted such a beautiful old synagogue. Because of its thick walls, it was always chilly inside. And so it was called di kalte shul, the cold synagogue.

The shtetl was a Star of David, imbedded

ROSKIES: (CONT)

within a mosaic of Gentile culture. All around them they were reminded of another past, of secular history. The castle ruins on the hill overlooking Navaredok was eloquent testimony to battles lost and won, to a time when Christian Poland was a great empire, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. In other parts of Poland, there were statues of Kosciuszko and other famous soldiers.

Though Jews studied that history as part of the compulsory Polish state curriculum, what little children learned in cheder, what adults rehearsed in their rituals and prayers, and studied in their scrolls and books, was the Biblical story of creation, revelation and redemption. It was the story of an ancient, eternal past. Their most immediate link to the past was not in castle ruins, but in the beys-oylem, in the Jewish cemetery.

#### SINGING

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the dry bones greeted each visitor to the Navaredok Jewish cemetery. "Son of man," the inscription began, "these bones are the house of Israel."

A shtetl was not a living Jewish institution, kehillah kedosha, a holy congregation, until it had its own sanctified burial ground.

The shtetl Jew recognized no boundaries between the present living and the past dead. So much so that it was believed that the great men and women of the past could intercede with God on behalf of the living. In Kolbushov, the grave of Avrom-Arn Teytlboym, who had been the town's rabbi for 50 years, was regarded as a holy site. Fenced off with a simple wooden fence, according to Rabbi Teytlboym's own instructions, it was regularly visited by Hasidim, ultra-Orthodox pietists, who would pray there and leave petitionary notes called kvitlekh on his grave.

Not far away was another important site: the graves of the ten victims of the Kolbushov pogrom of the sixth of May, 1919, a pogrom carried out by the Polish Legion, as a grim celebration of Poland's independence.



ROSKIES: (CONT)

There are many ways of approaching the significance of the shtetl within the larger context of European life, and especially Eastern European life. To my mind the most interesting and fascinating approach is through Jewish cultural geography, because what we're dealing with here are essentially two different cultural maps of the same territory. Jews had different names for the same places. But the same places also had a different significance for Jews than for non-Jews. There wasn't a Jew in the world, for instance who didn't know that Chelm was a fool's town, Chelm being a real place in the Lublin province of Poland. But the Polish Christians didn't know it was a fool's town, only Jews had that as part of their folklore.

A better example are all the Hasidic centers that cover the map of the Ukraine and Poland. The places, such as Mezhibzh, and Mezritsh, Ger, Khmyelnik, Talne, Shpole, Husiatin and Kotsk -- these were major Hasidic centers; small, insignificant towns as far as the non-Jewish population was concerned, but for Jews, these places were so important that they were even pilgrimage sites. The town of Kotsk, for instance, also in the Lublin province, was the home of the famous Kotsker Rebbe. And male Hasidim would travel there during holidays, and they even had a special song that they sang in Yiddish on the way to Kotsk. You don't travel to Kotsk, you go on foot. Because Kotsk is in place of the temple; you have to make a pilgrimage to Kotsk. And in dialect, it sounds like this:

Kayn Kotsk furt men nisht  
Kayn Kotsk gayt men  
Vayl Kotsk iz dokh bimkoym hamikdesh  
Kotsk iz dokh bimkoym hamikdesh  
Kayn Kotsk darf men oyle-regl zayn  
Oyle-regl zayn.  
"Regl" iz dokh der taytsh: a fis,  
Kayn Kotsk darf men gayn tsu fis  
Zingendik un tantsndik  
Un az khsidim gayen kayn Kotsk }<sub>2</sub>  
Gayt men mit a tants.

ROSKIES: (CONT)

You have to go on foot to Kotsk, singing and dancing all the way there.

In contrast to these centers of mysticism in the south, these Hasidic centers, there were centers of Talmudic learning in the north, the great Talmudic academies in Valozhin, Mir, Slonim, and Navaredok, known throughout Eastern Europe. In fact, throughout the entire Jewish world. And, so, though the culture of Eastern Europe was internally consistent and coherent, one cannot speak of Eastern European shtetl culture as being monolithic. There were significant cultural differences, not only between one region and another, but even between one shtetl and another.

All this, the medieval market economy, which remained unchanged for centuries, the double reality of Jews and of Gentiles, the preoccupation with the past, Jewish cultural geography, all this would suggest an utterly static, unchanging, provincial backwater, untouched by industrialization. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

For what such visitors as Zuckerman and Harkav and anyone else who went back home, what they saw on their return to the old country was a society starting to embrace the future, while remaining attuned to its past.

Side by side with the traditional cheder, where boys began their study at the age of three, later to graduate to independent Talmud study in the yeshiva, there were now Beys Yankev schools for religious girls, secular schools for Jewish boys and girls, where the language of instruction was Polish, Yiddish, or Hebrew. Alongside the besmedresh, with its shelves of sacred tomes in Hebrew and Aramaic, was a lending library, where the novels of Victor Hugo, Tolstoy or Sholom Aleichem, all in Yiddish could be borrowed for free.

ROSKIES: (CONT)

MUSIC

For some, the only leisure activity was still a nice stroll on the Sabbath.

MUSIC

For others, there was the amateur Yiddish theater, the cycling club and soccer.

The fire brigade, here performing its weekly drill for the benefit of the camera, was made up almost entirely of Jews.

Vying for the hearts and minds of the young shtetl Jews, there were now political parties which covered the entire political spectrum, from the Jewish Socialist Bund on the left, to the Revisionists on the right.

At Passover, the great festival of freedom, approached, there was no one in the shtetl, not even the most secular, who did not prepare for the seder. As one little girl was sent to the slaughtering house to have the chicken slaughtered, her older sisters were off trying on their makeup.

While the best water in town was still brought by Borukh Vall, nicknamed the scarecrow, Yankl the water carrier made deliveries by wagon. And on the eve of the holiday, some of the students and merchants returned home by the traditional horse and buggy, while others by bus. Navaredok, much more up-to-date than most shtetlekh, even had its own gas station in the center of town.

But redemption could not just be a story recited each year in the Passover Haggadah. It had to be worked at in the here and now, and so, the venerable Gmiles Hessed or Free Loan Association, was transformed into a major social institution. There was a Jewish hospital, and a medical staff that took care of sick Jews for a nominal fee. Vocational training schools were set up: carpentry for boys; sewing for girls. And it was this talent for urban organization, for self-help societies in the shtetl, that was then transplanted to America and made such institutions as the settlement houses possible on the Lower East Side.

ROSKIES: (CONT)

Young Zionists on hakhshara prepared for the rigors of agricultural life in Palestine. The Socialists made ready for the revolution. The word of the Prophets, and the word of Marx, resounded on the same shtetl streets.

To the outsider passing through, the shtetl was just another dusty place on the map. To the native son returning home, for Passover or any other time, the shtetl was a place where past, present and future combined in a brilliant flourish of sound and spirit; it was a community of Jews who prepared for the redemption even as it stood on the brink of destruction.

MUSIC

ANNOUNCER:

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Your announcer, Howard Reig.

MUSIC

(END TRANSCRIPT)

CREDITS

Produced and Directed by  
STANLEY LOSAK

Production Associate  
JEROME INGRAM

Research  
RHODA GRADY

Video Tape Editor  
KEN EYRING

Post Production Audio  
VERN NUGENT

Camera  
CHARLIE ZACHARIAE  
EUGENE BRODA

Audio  
EDWARD YOUNG

Lighting  
HARRY BAKER

Title Design  
SAL KANIDINC

Electronics Graphics  
STACEY MCDONOUGH

Unit Manager  
SUSANE E. SULLIVAN

Associate Director  
JOHN BIANCO

Music Selection  
PHEBE HAAS

Production Secretary  
HELEN MAKAROWSKY

Executive Producer  
HELEN MARMOR

For the Radio and Television Department of The Jewish Theological  
Seminary of America:

MILTON E. KRENTS  
Producer

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RABBI MAX ROUTTENBERG  
Program Editor

LINDA NASS-TELL  
Assistant Director

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