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The Shtetl Book by Diane K. Roskies and David G. Roskies  
Ktav Publishing House

Reviewed by Morris Sukenik

Do you want to visit the shtetl? Do you want to know how our ancestors came to settle there? Do you want to know how gefilte fish should taste or better still do you want to know why my grandmother's fish was sweet and your grandmother's fish was geffefert (peppery)? Do you want to know the difference between a galitsyaner Yiddish and the Yiddish spoken by an upgebrutener (roasted) Litvak? Do you want to know these things and so much more about the shtetl? If you do, and it appears that at this period in our sojourn in the Goldene Medina so many of us want to search out our Roots, then this is the book for you.

The Roskies have written a charmingly scholarly nostalgic book about the East European villages from which our parents and grandparents came to America. This is a scholarly work and yet popular appeal permeates its pages. It deals with politics, economics, history, linguistics, sociology, religion. Yet, it is the anecdote, the melody, the games, the shprechvort (proverb), the idiom which stands out. Er iz arayn vi a yovn in suke (He dropped in like a Greek into the suke - An unexpected and unwanted visitor).

This book is a visit to a Besmedresh (a house of study and weekday prayer), to an itinerant Rebbe (a chasidic rabbi), to children using the chumesh (Pentateuch) for play. The photographs and graphic illustrations are superb. Read and reread. Study the pictures. Close your eyes. Conjure up the shtetl for it is only in the mind's eye that it can exist today. Those of us who tend to photographic realism will see the mud, the broken down houses, the poverty. Romantics will see the beauty of a life style which has passed into Jewish history. To me this reading was a joy.