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THE EAST EUROPEAN SHTETL AND ITS PLACE IN JEWISH HISTORY

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article tente d'évaluer la place du *shtetl* est-européen dans l'histoire juive. C'est par la littérature que la «petite ville», telle qu'elle existait surtout dans la «zone de résidence» de l'Empire russe, a fait au dix-neuvième siècle son entrée dans le discours juif, et est devenue, dans la tradition narrative du peuple juif, l'un des symboles les plus durables de la vie en diaspora. Pourtant la réalité du *shtetl*, surtout celui de la zone de résidence, a été largement ignorée de l'historiographie et de la recherche sur le judaïsme. Une part importante de la population juive des temps modernes, statistiquement parlant, a vécu au *shtetl*. Celui-ci était caractérisé par la prépondérance démographique de la population juive, et se distinguait ainsi des villages environnants, peuplés de paysans slaves. La densité du réseau constitué par ces centaines de petits villages, entre la mer Baltique et la mer Noire, et le fait qu'ils aient connu pendant une longue période une existence séparée de leur entourage, justifient que l'on parle de «formation du *shtetl*» ou «pays du *shtetl*». La culture, la mentalité et les attitudes d'une grande partie des juifs modernes ont été durablement affectés par la sociologie et la mentalité du *shtetl*.

SUMMARY

The article is an attempt to evaluate the place of the East European *shtetl* in Jewish history. The small town, as it existed mainly in the Pale of Settlement of the Russian Empire, was introduced to Jewish discourse in the Nineteenth century by its literature. It became in the narrative of the Jewish people one of the more lasting symbols of life in the Diaspora. Yet the real *shtetl*, mainly that of the Pale, was almost completely absent as a subject of Jewish historiography and research. The *shtetl* was home of a numerically significant part of the Jewish people in modern times. It was characterized by the demographic preponderance of the Jewish population, imparting a distinct ethnic character on several hundred small urban centers and forming a world apart from the surrounding Slavic peasant environment. The

* The article is an essay in historical interpretation. It is based on extensive research in the history of the *shtetl* and represents some general conclusions of a forthcoming book on the subject. Some of the facts and ideas mentioned have long been in the public domain and therefore are not always documented.

density of the network of hundreds of small towns, between the Baltic and the Black seas, as well as their distinct existence for a long period justifies its designation as the Shtetl Formation *or Shtetlland*. The culture and mentality and attitudes of a large proportion of the modern Jewish people for a rather long period was affected by the small town sociology and mentality of the *shtetl*.

Introduction

Modern Jewish history has been written by and large with disregard to the effects of specific environments. No attempt was made to investigate how the structure of the community or the mentality and behavior of the individual were affected by the particular surroundings of their daily life. A major reason behind this lacuna is the underlying tenet of modern Jewish nationalistic historiography about the unity of Jewish history. The Law provided an identical background for the diverse communities. The Jewish way of life was assumed to be basically the same regardless whether it took place in the surroundings of a North African village, a ghetto in a West European town or the capital of the Ottoman empire. Thus, the well known fact that during most of the modern period the largest section of the Jewish people lived in small towns in Eastern Europe, the so called *shtetls*, has barely been noted and never investigated in Jewish historiography. As a consequence the affects of the small town environment on the individual and community, their mentality, behavior and culture, never found their proper place in the Jewish historical narrative. It should have been obvious that modern Jewish culture and mentality, as well as political behavior in Israel and the Diaspora, carry traces of the *shtetl* experience. The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the East European *shtetl* environment and its place in Jewish history.

Significance

The *shtetl* of Eastern Europe provided the physical environment for a significant part of the Jewish people in the modern era. It constituted also a major urban element in the territory between the Baltic and Black seas. From the sixteenth to the middle of the twentieth century it was home of the most numerous Jewish community on the globe and its population formed the most largest urban element in the area. The *shtetl* as a distinct form of settlement existed in the Yiddish-speaking parts of Europe. However, it was in the lands that formed part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that

the *shtetl* achieved its importance as an habitat for a significant section of the Jewish people, local society and economy. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century these lands were partitioned by Poland's neighbors, the largest part going to Russia. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the *shtetl* served as the most important source of Jewish emigration overseas and other parts of Europe. Descendants of *shtetl* Jews, living in the Americas, Europe, South-Africa, and Israel, constitute the largest single group of present-day Jewry. Only the Holocaust put an end to the *shtetl* as a major habitat of the Jewish people. The *shtetl*, like any other environment, played a major role in shaping attitudes, lifestyle, mentality, and culture of a significant part of the Jewish people and hence significantly affected the course of its history: This form of settlement came to symbolize Jewish life in eastern Europe, and there were those who considered it the epitome of Jewish existence in the Diaspora. As a historic reality and cultural and ideological symbol, the *shtetl* stands out as one of the most important phenomena in modern Jewish history, its ideologies and politics. Some of the most pressing problems facing the major Jewish communities in Israel and North America, in the fields of Jewish education and self-identity, assimilation, and secularism, were affected by the mentality and experience *shtetl* immigrants brought to their new homes¹.

The fact that the largest part of the Jewish people in modern times lived for an extended period in small towns was not reflected in Jewish historiography. While occasionally noted, the *shtetl* is conspicuously absent as a subject of independent historical inquiry. When mentioned at all, no attempt is made to assess the influence of this particular environment in shaping the life and character of the community and its individual members. It has been relegated in the Jewish discourse to the realms of linguistics, folklore, literature, and memory. The place of the *shtetl* in the dominant Jewish narrative was determined principally by those who left it, and frequently turned the small town into cliché, stereotype, and symbol.

1. Most Jews who lived in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth resided in small towns, *shtetls*. According to B.D. WEINRYB, the prominent historian of Polish Jewry, "the Jewish immigration from Poland [most of the immigrants coming from small towns], lasting almost three centuries, transferred... approximately three million Jews to countries scattered all over the globe... These immigrants and their descendants constitute 50 to 70 percent of world Jewry," in "Yehudei polin mikhuts l'polin", *Mehqarim u-meqorot le-toldot Israel ba-et haḥadasha*. Jerusalem, 1986, p. 230.

Place in narrative

Shtetl and Ghetto were the two basic forms of Jewish settlement in modern times. Originally the Ghetto was designed as a compulsory residential area for the Jewish population in towns of western and central Europe. In time, it also came to mean voluntary segregation in certain quarters of the town in an attempt to preserve ethnic identity. The Ghetto environment produced a distinct way of life, character and mentality².

Life in the small east European town had a similar effect on the development of its residents. The *shtetl* was the product of the encounter between a traditional Jewish community and an agrarian Slavic society. The impact of this blend on the mentality and culture of the modern Jewish nation is felt to this day. In the last two centuries Ghetto and *shtetl*, occupied center stage in the Jewish cultural and ideological discourse. They became negative symbols in the ongoing struggle between tradition and change. Shtetl and Ghetto came to represent everything that the Jewish modernizing revolution was trying to change. They were the negative pole to get away from, literally and metaphorically, by moving to new locales, adopting different lifestyles, shaping a different character, creating the “new Jew”.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of the modern secular ideologies in the Jewish community, the *shtetl*, home to millions, suffering from overpopulation, poverty, and cultural deprivation, became the most important negative symbol in Jewish discourse. It came to stand for everything that was wrong with Jewish life, as perceived by the movements of change, Political Zionism in particular. As Benjamin Harshav so aptly put it: “Most modern trends in Jewish life, literature, and consciousness pushed away from the ‘*shtetl*,’ abandoned it, despised it, or at least saw it in an ironic or nostalgic light”³. The *shtetl* served as a pole of departure for those who wanted change. “Not here, not like now, not as we are” was the quintessential expression of revulsion from *shtetl* life as shared by many. This negation was common to all modernizing Jewish movements. It assumed a great variety of forms and exerted a powerful influence on behavior and action. The *shtetl* thus took a giant step to becoming a symbol and a myth with little regard for what it actually was and to how its people lived. At present, almost six decades after it was destroyed in the Holocaust, the real *shtetl* is even farther from a balanced portrayal. A revitalized sense of guilt and nostalgia towards the *shtetl*, emotions that

2. For the origins and meaning of the term, see “Ghetto”, in *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

3. Benjamin HARSHAV, *The Meaning of Yiddish*, Berkeley, U.C.Press, 1990, p. 94.

were present already at the closing decades of the 19th century, has been added to the prevailing negative images and the distortions of cultural mediation.

To this day, the small east European town is invoked as a symbol in the cultural and political discourse in the major centers of Jewish life. Phrases like “*shtetl* mentality” and “*shtetl* character and behavior” are used in public exchanges in culture and politics. Thus, one finds that the state of Israel is no more than “a *shtetl* that became an empire”, as claimed by some critics⁴. Similarly, the article “Civility in Israel: Beyond the Shtetl” assumes that traditions rooted in the small east European town were to blame for some basic shortcomings of Israel’s political culture. The article was written by no less an authority than Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, the doyen of Israeli sociology⁵.

There are obvious differences between Israel and the Diaspora in their attitude to the *shtetl* and its connotations. While in Israel it is still used, mainly, as the mythological symbol of what is considered disagreeable in Diaspora life, outside the independent Jewish state, in the Diaspora, across the ocean, there is a much more positive attitude. “...Shtetl reminds one (mostly, perhaps not entirely) of good things: of the comfortable, reassuring joys of family, piety, community, unencumbered identity...” asserts a contemporary American Jewish historian⁶. In the same vein we learn from another American Jewish source that “*shtetl* is a term coined from within. It conveys affection, intimacy, warmth, and security. The Yiddish attaches to the concept a sense of belonging, of closeness. Shtetl is an extended family”⁷. In North America one could detect very early a yearning for a world lost with the emigration, an intense sense of nostalgia for the old home. The final destruction turned the often shabby and miserable small east European town in the minds of its descendants into “a ruined garden”⁸. The reason for the differences in the perception between Israel and the Diaspora are quite obvious. Migration to the ancient homeland was much more ideologically motivated than the movement that took millions of *shtetl* Jews to the shores of the New World. The pioneers who laid the

4. *Maariv*, Tel Aviv, August 28, 1998.

5. Shmuel N. EISENSTADT, “Civility in Israel: Beyond the Shtetl”, in: *Forum* 38, Summer 1980, pp. 17-30.

6. Steven L. ZIPPERSTEIN, “The Shtetl Revisited.” It was published as a “Feature Essay” in the Jewish Studies Program’s *News Letter* of Stanford University, Spring 1993.

7. Miriam ROSHWALD, *Ghetto, Shtetl, or Polis*. San Bernardino, 1997, p. 9. See also the highly nostalgic description of the *shtetl* in Irving HOWE’s *World of Our Fathers*, New York, 1976, pp. 7-15.

8. Jack KUGELMAS and Jonathan BOYARIN, *From a Ruined Garden. The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry*, New York, 1983.

foundations of the state of Israel did not merely leave the *shtetl* behind: they denounced its way of life, its very existence. The migrants to North America looked for a better life, and when they found it, at a price paid in terms of loss of identity, intimacy and warmth, and so on, the old home in the *shtetl* appeared dearer still. Echoes of these basic differences in attitudes are found to this day⁹.

How were the present-day myths and stereotypes of the *shtetl* created? As noted above, the modernizing movements propagated the image of the *shtetl* as the negative symbol of Jewish life. But the image of the *shtetl* as a uniquely Jewish world, a town set apart in a non-Jewish environment, is largely a literary creation. The process of mystification and the transforming of the real *shtetl* and its people into stereotype and symbol was achieved mainly by Jewish literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Authors such as Mendele Mocher Sforim, I.L. Perets, and Sholem Aleichem, together with a long list of less famous novelists, were responsible for the creation of the stereotypes and the notion that the small towns of the Pale of Jewish Settlement of the Russian empire and of its Polish provinces were unique enclaves of Jewishness where the non-Jew was rarely present and only on the periphery of the Jewish existence. Mendele, considered the founding father of modern Jewish literature, was responsible more than any other author for the negative *shtetl* image. But Mendele, an avid proponent of the Jewish Enlightenment movement, the Haskalah, who published his works after 1860, depicted a *shtetl* afflicted by the poverty and ignorance that preceded the rapid industrialization; he was describing what may be called the traditional *shtetl* that had not yet suffered the ravages of modernization, a fact not often registered in reference to Mendele's *shtetl*¹⁰.

In his study on "the image of the *shtetl*", Dan Miron, a literary critic and historian of literature, maintained that the small East European town as depicted in Jewish literature had little to do with reality. It essentially represented an ideal Jewish kingdom, a metaphor for heavenly Jerusalem. Miron rejected the validity of the *shtetl* portrayal as a cohesive and unique Jewish world. According to Miron, that was merely a preconceived ideological-lit-

9. While systematic scholarship on the *shtetl* phenomenon is conspicuously scant, there are literally hundreds of publications on the subject, most of them written as memorial books for individual towns following the Holocaust. They vary in subjects covered, literary style, and quality of research, and follow a distinctive personal approach. Among the more impressive ones published in recent years are Theo RICHMOND, *Konin: One Man's Quest for a Vanished Jewish Community*, New York, 1996, and the encyclopedic book by Yaffa ELIACH, *There Once Was a World: A 900-Year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok*. New York, 1998.

10. On the crucial role of Mendele in the creation of the negative *shtetl* images, see the literary critic Avraham KARIV, the essays, "Olam v-tilo" and "Klalut u-pratut", in: *Atarah le-yoshnah*, Tel Aviv, 1956, pp. 30-117.

erary construction, a myth, which had no roots in the realities of Eastern Europe¹¹. To understand why the *shtetl* became such a powerful symbol in modern Jewish discourse, one that maintains its vitality to this day, it has to be placed in its true historical context and dimensions. To comprehend the full extent of the *shtetl*'s impact on Jewish history it has to be approached as a totality, a structure, a formation that was central for an extended period in the life of the largest Jewish community at the time. It was no mere accident, nor was it the result of willful ideologically motivated literary manipulation, as some might assume, that since the nineteenth century the *shtetl* has become an all important and all-embracing entity. The people responsible for the creation and spread of the *shtetl* symbol were familiar with the reality, which affected all aspects of communal and individual life. Only because it was relevant to the life experience of many millions over an extended time span could the *shtetl* become such a powerful myth. The fact that the *shtetl* was a real place, a unique town of Jews, not a literary metaphor, made it the natural negative pole for those who wanted to join the modern world and who made the *shtetl* Jew the antipode of the so called "new Jew", the idol of all modernist ideologies, modern Zionism in particular¹².

Historiography

Submerged under layers of literary and cultural discourse, the real *shtetl* did not fare well with scholars, historians included. In what are considered classic surveys of Jewish East European history, such as Shimon Dubnov's *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland* or Salo W. Baron's *The Jews under Tsar and Soviets*, the *shtetl* is hardly mentioned by name or treated as a distinct historical entity. Nor does Bernard D. Weinryb, in his classical study *The Jews of Poland*, devote much attention to what clearly had been the primary habitat of the Jews in the Polish state¹³. In recent years several studies have appeared on the relations between the Polish magnates and their Jews that shed some light on the small private towns¹⁴. However, it

11. Dan MIRON, "Vegn klassishn imazh fun *shtetl* in der yiddisher beletristik", in: *Der imazh fun shtetl. Drai literarische shtudies*, Tel Aviv, 1981, pp. 21-138.

12. The image of the Israeli Sabra as representing the "new Jew" is treated by Oz ALMOG, *Ha-šabar — diokan sošiologi*, Tel-Aviv, 1997.

13. See Salo W. BARON, *The Russian Jew under Tsars and Soviets*, New York, 1964; S.M. DUBNOV, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, New-York, 1975; Bernard D. WEINRYB, *The Jews of Poland. A Social and Economic History of the Jewish Community in Poland from 1100 to 1800*, Philadelphia, 1973.

14. Jacob GOLDBERG, *Jewish Privileges in the Polish Commonwealth: Charters of Rights Granted to Jewish Communities in Poland-Lithuania in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centu-*

has to be stressed again that there are no historical studies of the classical nineteenth-century *shtetl* of the Pale of Settlement. What we have are occasional and generalized statements and, at most, an overview of the history of the small town, often with unfounded assumptions. In surveys of Jewish history in the Russian empire, the *shtetl*, when mentioned at all, appears only where the misery and poverty of the Jewish community at the end of the nineteenth century are portrayed. Jewish historiography hardly dealt with the peculiarities of life in the numerous small towns, home of such a large section of their people¹⁵.

An up to date and intelligent summary of the prevailing contemporary scholarly views of *shtetl* history and its place in Jewish culture and imagery is Steven J. Zipperstein's article "The Shtetl Revisited", published in 1993¹⁶. The author, who serves as the director of the Jewish studies program at Stanford University, and himself an authority in the field of Russian Jewish history, repeats in this concise paper some of the most common views on the subject.

The article's thrust is directed against an idealized depiction of the *shtetl*, asserting that in contemporary America there is a tendency to associate *shtetl* with "mostly... good things". Zipperstein maintains, rightfully, that "literary presentation" rather than "historical literature" has come to dominate the public's images of the *shtetl*. Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog's book *Life is with People*¹⁷ is singled out by the author as the most influential of the "literary" kind. It is important to note that Zborowski and Herzog's book, despite its shortcomings, remains to this day practically the only scholarly study of the *shtetl*, while the "historical literature" has still to be written. Published in 1952, *Life is with People* was written in close

ries, Jerusalem, 1985; Gershon David HUNDERT, *The Jews in a Polish Private Town. The Case of Opatow in the Eighteenth Century*, Baltimore, 1992; Moshe J. ROSMAN, *The Lords' Jews: Magnate-Jewish Relations in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge, Mass., 1990.

15. Indicative, even instructive, in this respect was Salo Baron, for many years the dominant figure among Jewish historians in North America. In his one-volume textbook on the history of Russian Jewry, the *shtetl* is not mentioned by name and its only description is a quotation from a novel. Curiously, when describing the economic situation in the Pale, he referred to the "masses suffocating in the increasingly crowded ghettos", not mentioning the *shtetl*, home of millions. See BARON, *op. cit.*, pp. 105, 113.

16. ZIPPERSTEIN, *op. cit.* The author returned to the subject later in "Shtetl: There and Here: Imagining Russia in America," in *Imagining Russian Jewry*, Seattle, 1999. The article deals, mainly, with the place of the *shtetl* in American Jewish discourse.

17. Margaret MEAD headed the project that eventually produced the book. In her instructive foreword the renowned anthropologist described the methods used and the people involved in preparing what she called "a composite picture of a way of life." See "Foreword", in Mark ZBOROWSKI and Elizabeth HERZOG, *Life is With People. The Culture of the Shtetl*, New York, 1952.

proximity to the Holocaust and the destruction of the *shtetl* and its people, and carries its imprint. This anthropological study portrayed an ideal Jewish society that never really existed in the small East European towns. However, the underlying assumption of the book, that the *shtetl* was a Jewish town, a Jewish enclave, a world of Jews, was based on historical and demographic realities to be found mainly in the nineteenth-century Pale of Settlement of the Russian empire.

This premise is by and large unacceptable to Zipperstein. It contradicts his claim about the disintegration of the small towns during the second half of the nineteenth century. The *shtetl* became merely “an imagined” locus of Jewish authenticity, according to Zipperstein. This view is in line with similar statements made by writers and intellectuals who lived at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The image of the *shtetl* and its place in the Jewish narrative since the last decades of the nineteenth century were largely determined by people who were born in small towns yet left them in search of greener pastures. Not surprisingly, they assumed that with their departure the *shtetl* could not remain the Jewish world they knew: it had to decline and deteriorate. For the Jewish literati the small town became “their proverbial, mythological ‘space,’ a collective locus of a network of social and ideological relationships wrought in the phraseology of Yiddish folklore and literature”¹⁸. That was reality for them. Or to phrase it in other terms, the home of a most significant part of the Jewish people, a place where people lived and died, practically ceased to exist as a historical reality and became part of the realm of literary imagery and cultural discourse. However historical reality was different. Life in the *shtetl* did not necessarily comply with their prognosis of accelerated decline; it indeed changed, yet it preserved the major characteristics that made the town distinct in the Jewish world. It lost some of its traditional trappings, but gradually acquired a new vitality.

An outline of what is at present considered the history of the *shtetl* could be constructed from the more general course of Jewish history in Poland and Russia. It would be based on analyzing the more general trends and developments, since there is no separate treatment of the history of the *shtetl* as such. The *shtetl* appears on history’s stage in the sixteenth century on the private lands of the Polish aristocracy, mostly in the eastern parts of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth. There, on territories that at the end of the eighteenth century became, mostly, part of the Russian empire, a distinct form of settlement, the small Jewish town, the *shtetl*, evolved. The

18. HARSHAV, *op. cit.* p. 94.

Jewish community, to all intents and purposes, constituted the town itself, and therefore “could strengthen and consolidate a homogeneous pattern of values, attitudes and mores”¹⁹.

During the nineteenth century the *shtetl* economy, society, and culture came increasingly under pressure, from different directions, undermining its social and economic foundations and lifestyle. This general historical schema roughly distinguishes two periods: the first was that of the traditional *shtetl*. It was characterized by social and economic stability and relative prosperity based on the agrarian economy of the region and a traditional religious Jewish community. The second period that witnessed the decline and dissolution of the *shtetl*, set in sometime in the nineteenth century. No specific dates are given, but it was held to be in full swing by the last decades of the century. The decline and dissolution of the *shtetl* at the time are associated, according to the prevailing scheme, with industrialization, urbanization, migration overseas, and the secularization of the younger generation. These were also the times when the *shtetl* occupied the central stage in Jewish literature. To complete the life cycle of the *shtetl*, after having to all intents and purposes dissolved at the end of the nineteenth century, the general scheme dissolves it once again in the 1917 Russian revolution and, over again, in the Holocaust²⁰.

This outline of *shtetl* history was based on several assumptions and misconceptions as to its nature as a Jewish town and the effects of the forces of change and destruction on the basic components that made the small town unique. The Jewish identity in the *shtetl* was assumed to be determined mainly by extensive learning and practice of Jewish religion and laws, and when a decline in religious observance was detected disintegration and dissolution of the Jewish identity of the place was bound to follow. Yet it has to be emphasized from the outset that the Jewish identity of the *shtetl* as a community, and of its inhabitants as individuals, consisted of many elements, most of them not related to religion (e.g., language, social structure, external appearance, etc.), whose sum total was distinctiveness relative to the surrounding society.

Religious orthodoxy, albeit important, was just one element. Another powerful agent of change that supposedly affected the *shtetl* was industrialization and its accompanying destruction of the small towns socio-eco-

19. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, p. 1471.

20. For a concise summary of the prevailing scheme see *shtetl* as present in the entry for Pale of Settlement [*Tḥum ha-moshav*] of the Israeli *Entsiklopedia Ivrit* [Hebrew Encyclopedia], vol. 31, pp. 767-771. It is worthwhile noting that the editors did not think that the *shtetl* deserved an entry of its own.

conomic structure. This too is a greatly exaggerated and imprecise portrayal of what actually happened. This was a much slower and geographically more selective change than those who migrated to Warsaw, Odessa, or New York, lamenting the loss of the Jewish *shtetl*, would have liked us to believe. What took place was a gradual transformation, the emergence of new elements in the *shtetl*'s life rather than the destruction of the town, which continued its distinct and unique existence. It would have been superfluous to "dissolve" the *shtetl* again in 1917, and again in the Holocaust, had industrialization been so effective in achieving that goal. The misconceptions were primarily the result of insufficient knowledge on what had been occurring all along in the *shtetl* itself. The small East European town was frequently depicted as a guardian and preserve of Jewish religion, it also sustained and perpetuated a distinct Jewish identity. The two were not identical.

Shtetl and shtetlland

Many factors combined to create the rather regrettable situation of the existing lacunae in research and perception of the *shtetl*.

The scholars who were the natural candidates to investigate and write about the *shtetl* were victims of the Nazi and the Soviet regimes. Their successors in the free world preferred to investigate other subjects. We have at present detailed studies of minor political factions of the Zionist movement, elaborate analyses of third-rate ideologues of Jewish labor organizations, and sophisticated expositions on eccentric hasidic leaders, but no study of the structure of daily life, small town mentality, or the effects of industrialization on the *shtetl*, the home of millions of simple Jews.

Settlements with significant Yiddish-speaking population could be found in many parts of Europe: in eighteenth-century Germany and Alsace, as well as in other east and central Europe states. However they encompassed only a small proportion of the contemporary Jewish people. The *shtetls* were unique in history as a habitat for a large Jewish community. It was the first time since the destruction of the Second Temple that such a large proportion of the Jewish people lived in small urban settlements. A way from the Land of Israel, Jews were mostly city dwellers with a pronounced preference for larger urban centers. The fact that for an extended period of modern history such a large part, if not a majority, of the Jewish people lived in small towns had its impact on many aspects of their social and individual culture and mentality.

In the Polish-Lithuanian state, which harbored the largest Jewish community in the early modern period, the Jews were increasingly driven out from the larger and more developed cities into small urban settlements, located mostly in the eastern provinces of the state. The animosity of the Christian burghers, who resented Jewish competition, and the attractions of the economic opportunities and privileges offered by the nobility to the new settlers drew large numbers to the small towns located on private holdings. By the mid-eighteenth century, on the eve of partitions of the Polish state, an absolute majority of the largest Jewish community lived in small towns. The east European small towns founded on the territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were shaped by the unique encounter between a traditional Jewish community and the particularities of the region. The multi-ethnic and religious composition of the area included among others Poles and Russians, Ukrainians and Belorussians, Jews and Germans. They were affected by the backward agrarian society, the peculiarities of the political regime of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth and Russian Autocracy and their social-economic structures and relations as well as the generally low cultural level of the surrounding peasantry. There were many hundreds of small towns, inhabited by millions of Jews, spread over a large part of Europe between the Baltic and the Black Seas that preserved their major characteristics for several centuries. The most important reason for the unique significance of the *shtetl* in Jewish history were the dimensions of the phenomenon itself.

In the eighteenth century, before the partition of Poland, about two thirds of its Jewish population lived in towns, most of them small and located on the private holdings of the higher nobility in the eastern provinces. "This means that in the eighteenth century about one quarter of the Jews in the world lived in private towns. It should be stressed that the characteristic form of urban settlement in Poland was the small town", asserts Gershon H. Hundert²¹. By the end of the nineteenth century the data, as recorded in the 1897 census of the Russian empire, were even more impressive. The total Jewish population numbered 5, 306, 576, of whom 1, 618, 763 lived in settlements that were officially designated as *Mestechki*, namely small towns or *shtetls*. It is quite safe to assume that the number of the *shtetls* was indeed at least 1846, the number of settlements that were included in the category²². A more detailed analysis reveals that hundreds of the small

21. HUNDERT, *op. cit.*, p. XI.

22. Isaac LEVITATS, *The Jewish Community in Russia, 1844-1917*, Jerusalem, 1981, p. 2. For an analysis of the distribution of the Jewish population across the different provinces and forms of settlement see B.D. BRUTSKUS (ed.), *Statistika evreiskogo naseleniia*, St. Petersburg, 1909, pp. 2-7.

towns had absolute Jewish majorities. For example, the *gubernia* (the largest administrative unit in the Russian empire) of Vohlin had 60; Grodno, 50; Vilno, 28; Kovno, 59; and the *gubernia* of Mogilev, the last in our sample, had 41 settlements with an absolute Jewish majority. Thus the five provinces of the sample had 238 *shtetls* with absolute Jewish majorities. Fifty-seven had a Jewish population of almost 100 percent²³.

The 1897 census revealed that in the western provinces of the Russian empire, in the Pale of Jewish Settlement and Poland combined were 462 *shtetls* with absolute Jewish majorities, 116 of which had a Jewish population of over 80 percent²⁴. It should be noted that the census took place at the end of the century when, according to prevailing views, the *shtetl* as a Jewish town “was increasingly a thing of the past”! Quantity in this case created, as it often does, a qualitatively unique and a distinctly idiosyncratic phenomenon, which, to borrow an analogy from geology, might be called a historical-geographic formation, the “Shtetl Formation”. The term does designate a structure that had extended over a large area, included hundreds of similar small towns with hundreds of thousands, even millions, of inhabitants who lived in similar communities and environment, shared a common culture and lifestyle during an extended time span. The *shtetl*, as it existed in the extensive lands that stretched “from sea to sea”, as the Poles dubbed the territories between the Black and Baltic seas, deserves such a designation. The Shtetl Formation could rightfully be designated as “Shtetlland”, rather than “Yiddishland”, as Harshav called the sum total of the small towns. It certainly was not an “imagined” creation of Jewish writers who lived in the larger cities of Poland and Russia. Yiddish as the language of the small towns was just one, albeit important, cultural attribute of Shtetlland. However, the choice of those terms is indicative that the presentation of the *shtetl* and its image was monopolized by literary texts. Novelists portraying Jewish life in the poverty-ridden small towns, linguists studying the Yiddish language and historians of Jewish literature were the people that shaped popular knowledge of the *shtetl*. No wonder that it has remained to this day buried under cultural discourse, in the world of cliché, stereotype and myth.

The structural elements that made up the Shtetl Formation were formed and took shape through the combination of two basic components; the cul-

23. The statistics are from the entries for the *gubernias* of Vilno (vol. 1, pp. 557- 562); Vohlin (vol. 3, p. 736-737); Grodno (vol.6, p. 793); Kovno (vol. 9, pp. 579-582); Mogilev (vol. 10, p. 153), as they appear in F.A. BROCKHAUS and I.F. EFRON (eds.), *Evreiskaia ensiklopedia*, St. Petersburg, c. 1910.

24. The data of the 1897 census as they appear in the entries for the different *gubernias* in the *Evreiskaia ensiklopedia*.

ture and lifestyle of a large Jewish population and the Slavic society in a backward agrarian economy. The *shtetls* varied in size from several hundreds to several thousands inhabitants; there were also regional differences resulting in minor variations. However, they shared some major structural features. A clear demographic preponderance of the Jewish population in the small town itself was at the root of the *shtetl* uniqueness. It was true for hundreds of *shtetls* in the region, where they constituted absolute majorities. Economically the small town and its Jewish inhabitants provided urban services for the surrounding Slavic peasantry. This created the distinct economic and social structure of the *shtetl* community in relation to its surroundings. The ethnic origin, culture, religion, language, and lifestyle of the *shtetl* were distinct from its surrounding peasant neighbors. In this economically backward and culturally deprived area, where illiteracy was dominant even in the twentieth century, even the low quality elementary education of the *shtetl* Jew could be construed as cultural superiority. This would not be the case when the *shtetl* Jew moved into other environments. The *shtetl* Jewish community enjoyed a wide ranging internal autonomy, granted by rulers of a country that was under-governed under Polish and even Russian rule. It was based on an elaborate Jewish tradition of self-government that provided the individual and the *shtetl* as a whole a unique sense of community. An important element that set the *shtetl* community apart from the countryside, was the obvious external differences of its Jewish inhabitants from the Slavic peasantry. The Jews constituted a “visible minority” in these territories, to use a contemporary phrase. This *shtetl* “visibility”, not often mentioned, persisted till the Holocaust. Combined, the different components of the *shtetl* distinctiveness created small Jewish enclaves, or islands, surrounded by a Gentile world. Yet, since the Shtetl Formation included many hundreds of towns, which were in turn connected with larger urban centers, it could also function as a quasi-territorial basis for the non-territorial Jewish minority²⁵.

Shtetlland, as an historical formation, originated in the sixteenth and reached its fullest development in the nineteenth century²⁶. It survived the disintegration of the Russian empire as a distinct historical entity mainly in the eastern provinces of independent Poland. *Shtetlland* came to an end

25. *Shtetlland* was the real territorial basis for the various schemes for Jewish cultural autonomy like those of Dubnov and the Jewish Bund. See Simon DUBNOV, “Autonomism, the Basis of the National Program”, in *Nationalism and History*, K.S. Pinson (ed.), Philadelphia, 1961.

26. On the early stages of Jewish colonization see Sh. ETTINGER, “Heikam shel hayehudim bakolonizašia shel Ukraina, (1569-1648)”, *Tsion*, 1956.

with the Soviet annexations in 1939 and Nazi occupation during the war. The formation was affected by the major historical developments that swept the region all along its existence. Devastating wars, political upheavals, changes of international borders and political regimes, as well as new technologies, economic practices, and modern forms of communication — all left their mark on *Shtetlland*. The mid-seventeenth century crisis that almost destroyed the Polish state took its toll on the small towns of the region. Many settlements were sacked and their Jews massacred. Poland as a state never really recovered from that crisis; however, the accelerated decline of the power of the monarchy enhanced the authority of the so called magnates, the high aristocracy, particularly in the eastern provinces of the state. Here, on the private holdings of the aristocracy, most of the small towns were located. The result was a steady growth of the Jewish population that moved to the area, thereby reinforcing *Shtetlland*²⁷.

The fortunes of the *shtetl* formation were closely linked to those of the Polish state. The second half of the eighteenth century saw the decline of both. It ended with the three partitions of Poland between 1772 and 1795. The largest share of the Polish state that included also most of the *shtetl* formation, was annexed by the Russian empire. Jewish residence in the Russian state was limited to an area that became known as the Pale of Jewish Settlement²⁸. In this area, during the nineteenth century, what might be called the model classical *shtetl*, that entered Jewish discourse mainly through its literature, took shape.

The developments in the region in the last decades of the nineteenth century were of special interest in shaping the popular conception of the *shtetl* to this day. The Russian empire underwent at that time an accelerated process of industrialization with its accompanying developments: expansion of railroads; urbanization; mass consumer commodity production; etc. The Jewish community at large was deeply affected by these social-economic changes²⁹. Many moved to the fast growing cities, large numbers moved abroad. Religious observance was on the decline while new secular ideolo-

27. The intricate relations among Jews, magnates, and the peasant population in the north-eastern provinces of the Polish-Lithuanian state during the eighteenth century were investigated by Adam TELLER, *The Economic Role and Social Status of the Jews on the Radziwill Estates in Lithuania in the Eighteenth century* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1997. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis.

28. On Russian policy toward the newly acquired Jewish population and the establishment of the Pale see Richard PIPES, "Catherine II and the Jews: The Origins of the Pale of Settlement", in *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, London, 1975, pp. 3-20.

29. Arcadius KAHAN, "The Impact of Industrialization in Tsarist Russia on the Socioeconomic Conditions of the Jewish Population", in R. Weis (ed.), *Essays in Jewish Social and Economic History*, Chicago, 1986, pp. 1-70.

gies and political movements were undermining the traditional way of life. All these developments should have tolled the death knell for the *shtetl*. The prevailing general account of Jewish east European history indeed does present a picture wherein the *shtetl* was fast becoming a thing of the past, a literary myth. According to that view, the *shtetl*'s economic role as a provider of the countryside was undermined by the intrusions of railroads, resulting in accelerated pauperization and misery; the *shtetl*'s population was depleted by migration to the fast evolving industrial centers and overseas; community life was disintegrating as a result of the abandonment of tradition and religion by the younger generation. Among the many who left the *shtetl* and encountered the often brutal realities of the big city, emerged also a sense of nostalgia, thus setting the stage for the creation of the *shtetl* myth. Historical reality, however, was more complicated, as it of the outline, while plausible in its general assumptions, does not take sufficient account of what actually took place in *Shtetlland* as a whole. Many of the symptoms set forth as proof of *shtetl* disintegration at the end of the nineteenth century had either long existed or were only part of a more diverse picture. While it is true that reports on *shtetl* misery appearing in the Jewish press at the end of the century were frequent, it should not hide the fact that grinding poverty was endemic in the *shtetl*, at least since the beginning of the nineteenth century; it certainly did not have to await the advent of the railroads. Numerous accounts by western travelers and official Russian Reports from the first decades of the century, document in sordid detail how destitute and poverty-stricken were the Jewish townlets. As to the insidious role of the railroads, it too deserves a more sceptical look. A detailed communications map of the region would reveal that the rail network at the relevant period, from the 1870s to the end of the century, was not sufficiently wide to reach large parts of the area, and had had to rely on more traditional means of communication. The railroad had a limited impact on some areas, but not enough yet to radically alter the economic life of the *shtetl* territory. For the most part, the basic economic role of the *shtetls* remained unchanged. True, the last decades of the century witnessed large-scale migration to the big cities and abroad, but there were great regional differences. Moreover, the high birth rate usually compensated for the loss. The net result was that *Shtetlland* as a whole continued to suffer from overpopulation. Even more basic for the preservation of the *shtetl*'s unique character, was continuing Jewish demographic preponderance in the numerous small towns of the western provinces of the Russian empire. This had been unequivocally recorded in the 1897 all-Russian census.

At the end of the nineteenth century secularism was taking giant steps in the Jewish Russian community. In the *shtetl* too religion was under attack, and observance in its many forms were on the retreat. The modernizing secular movements found their way to the small towns. While destroying many of the religious affiliations that bound together the *shtetl* communities, they at the same time formed new modern schools, institutions, organizations, political parties, cultural unions, and so on. The *shtetl*, which was ridden all along by internal economic and ideological divisions, and whose social relations were never as idyllic as some might think, entered a period of intensified internal strain. Nevertheless, the elements of change and modernity gradually transformed the community, imparting an intensity and a new vitality to the social and cultural life in the *shtetl*. The last decades of the nineteenth century should therefore be considered not the end of the *shtetl*, as it is usually presented, but a transition period, when old forms disintegrated and were gradually replaced by new. The full impact of this process of substitution was seen, and abundantly documented, when it matured in the inter-war period of the twentieth century in that part of the *shtetl* formation that became independent Poland.

The stability and relative longevity of the *shtetl* formation, which lasted in its central components for approximately three centuries, was the result of a unique historical combination. It rested primarily on the ethnic and demographic realities of the region. In this multi-ethnic area the Jews constituted the numerically most important urban element. In many hundreds of small towns of the *shtetl* formation the Jewish residents formed an absolute majority till the Holocaust. Those were largely backward agrarian lands whose economic structure changed very slowly, even after the onset of modern industrialization³⁰. This was a major cause for the relative endurance of existing economic-geographic formations. Distance and relative isolation from other settlements and from the larger economic centers contributed to the slow pace of cultural change. The region, as mentioned above, was characterized by broad local autonomy and despite appearances was undergoverned on the local levels under Polish-Lithuanian and Russian rule alike³¹. The numerous *shtetl* communities benefited from this condition,

30. Throughout the entire industrialization period there was a "higher rate of population increase in the smaller towns and semi-rural areas than in big cities", asserts A. KAHAN. The result was that despite migration and industrialization the *shtetls* retained the Jewish demographic preponderance. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

31. Of special interest and highly instructive, contrary to the popular view, is the fact that government was hardly present outside the major centers of the Russian empire. See S. Frederick STARR, "The Undergoverned Provinces, 1830-1855", in *Decentralization and Self-Government in Russia, 1830-1870*, Princeton U.P., 1972.

contributing to the preservation of their distinctive identity. In this part of Europe, where different nationalities struggled for political and cultural supremacy, and sensitiveness to ethnic differences was particularly fine-tuned, *shtetl* Jews constituted not only a separate religious-national group but also a visible minority. Living in the numerous small towns, the *shtetl* Jews as a group clearly looked different from the rural Slavic peasants. Combined with the cultural backwardness and a strong antisemitic tradition, this salience acted as a formidable deterrent to assimilation into the surrounding environment and as an added cause for maintaining the strong Jewish identity found in Shtetland.

In the nineteenth century the largest Jewish community and most of the *shtetls* were in the western regions of the Russian empire, the Pale of Jewish Settlement [*Cherta Evreiskoi osedlosti*] and its Polish provinces. The Russian authorities were at a loss as to the precise status of the annexed small towns. The Jewish residents, mainly for taxation purposes, were categorized as *Meshchane*, city inhabitants³². But there was no clear definition of a *shtetl* although it was accepted as a distinct urban form called *mestechko*³³. Only in the 1880s did the Ruling Senate, the High Court of the empire, in a series of rulings, draw a more precise distinction between village and small town³⁴. As a result we have a separate listing for small towns in the 1897 census, the only full-scale modern census of the Russian empire.

Shtetl as Jewish space

The small towns of the Western provinces of the Russian empire in the Nineteenth century served as the model of what the stereotypical *shtetl* is. This was where and when the Shtetl Formation reached its most extensive dimensions and its structural elements their most typical manifestations.

In the Pale was located what might be called the classic *shtetl*. Here during the nineteenth Century the small town ceased its existence merely as a

32. See John D. Klier, *Russia Gathers her Jews. The Origins of the "Jewish Question" in Russia, 1772-1825*, DEKALB (Ill.), North Illinois U.P., 1886, pp. 65-68; I. MADRIAGA, *Russia in the age of Catherine the Great*, London, 1981, p. 5.

33. On *mestechko* as an urban settlement in the Russian empire see the official listing of all urban settlements prepared by the Ministry of the Interior, *Gorodskiiia poseleniia v Rossiiskoi imperii*, St Petersburg, 1860, vol. I, pp. 9-10. The five-volume publication has a full, separate listing of all the *mestechki* in the empire.

34. The expulsion of Jewish residents from some *shtetls* in the wake of the so-called "Temporary Regulations" of May 1882 forced the Ruling Senate to draw a clearer distinction between village and *shtetl*. See "Vremennyya pravila" in *Evreiskaia entsiklopedia*, *op. cit.*

form of settlement and entered through literature and ideology the mainstream of Jewish discourse as a cultural-geographic phenomenon. Therefore to understand and assess the significance of the *shtetl* as a cultural-historical phenomenon it has to be studied in the context of the Western provinces of the Russian empire. The single most important feature or characteristic of that settlement, the one that made it distinctive and unique, was its being a Jewish town, a Jewish island and enclave, a world of its own. This basic fact, true for hundreds of towns, has to be emphasized, because while obvious to contemporaries who were familiar with life in the *shtetl*, it was treated as a literary concoction by later generations. The *shtetl* was a Jewish world mainly because its population was made up of a preponderant Jewish majority. There was not necessarily anything ideally Jewish about it, nor, as we shall see later, was life there imbued only with Jewish norms of human solidarity, sanctity, and universal charity. It was Jewish because in a variety of ways it exhibited the culture and lifestyle of its Jewish population.

A composite-collective portrait of a *shtetl* in the nineteenth-century Pale would show the extent of it being a real Jewish world³⁵. From the external appearance of yards and buildings, through the sights and sounds and smells in its streets, to the daily rhythm of its economic activity, the *shtetl* bore the imprint of the cultural peculiarities of its inhabitants. As a space it affected everyday life of the people who were born and raised there. Its Jewish nature existentially determined their identity, consciousness, and personality.

From cradle to grave, the individual was surrounded by an environment that represented Jewish temporal and spiritual culture in its interaction with the Slavic East European environment.

The *shtetl* in the Pale had a “Jewish look”. This statement, which might appear dubious to some or even outright antisemitic to others, is firmly based in contemporary east European realities. It was described as a Jewish town by western travelers who passed through the area, as well as by local Jewish and Gentile inhabitants³⁶. In its external appearance it was easily distinguished from neighboring Slavic settlements. The *shtetl* impressed its visitors with the poverty of its buildings and streets. The plains of this backward agrarian region provided poor and short-lived building materials,

35. The portrait of the *shtetl* is based on literally hundreds of descriptions as they appear in autobiographies, travel diaries, *shtetl* memorial books, etc. Since this is an interpretive study, no attempt has been made to draw attention to any particular *shtetl*.

36. On the impressions of western travelers see N.M. GELBER, “Oislendishhe raizende vegn poilishe yidn inem 18tn iorhundert”, *Historishe Shriftn* 6, Warsaw, 1929, p. 231-252. Also V. LIFSHITS, “Englishe un amerikaner raizender fun 18tn un ershter helft 19tn iorhundert vegn yidn in Poiln un Rusland”, *Yivo Bleter* 3, pp. 313-329.

wood and clay, less often brick, and rarely stone. Poor workmanship and frequent devastating fires, which left visible traces, often created a dilapidated landscape, investing the town a makeshift feeling, a sense of being a temporary place, which has been captured so graphically by many artists³⁷. It was a combination of the prevailing poverty as well as the attitude of *shtetl* residents to their life in this environment. It also reflected, perhaps, the lingering hope of return to the ancient homeland when the time was ripe. While the neighboring Slavic peasants, despite equal and even greater poverty, devoted more time and means to embellish their homes and neighborhoods, the Jewish town conspicuously showed little interest in external appearances³⁸. In the *shtetl*, naturally, most prominent public buildings and sights were related to the Jewish way of life. Hence, the geographic and social focus of the town was the central synagogue. As the most important prayer house it was always a relatively impressive structure in its surroundings, and it also served for social and communal activities. Smaller houses of prayer were scattered all over town, serving different sections of a community that was split along class and ideological lines. Other buildings for Jewish religious practices and customs, such as the ritual bath, the kosher slaughterhouse, the many one-room schools [*hadarim*] where children were instructed in the basics of Judaism, and so on, were visible marks of the Jewishness of the small town³⁹.

For people who lived in the *shtetl*, as for the peasant who came there on market day and the curious tourist from afar, what made the *shtetl* Jewish were above all the people they saw in the streets, met in the shops, bought from in the marketplace and drank with in the taverns. They looked obviously different and spoke a strange, exotic language that had nothing in common with the other languages of these Slavic lands. Moreover, the lifestyle and economic rhythm of the town were to a large extent determined by its Jewish inhabitants. The daily routine and the weekly economic cycle reflected strongly Jewish religious practices, even at times when religious observance was on the decline.

On the Jewish rest day, the Shabbat, practically all economic activity in the *shtetl* came to a standstill, as it did on all Jewish holidays. The latter,

37. Almost every *shtetl* memorial book contains a story of a devastating fire, which served as a landmark in the history of the small town.

38. For portraits of *shtetls* and their residents as seen through foreign eyes, see, for example, E. HENDERSON, *Biblical Research and Travel in Russia*. London, 1826, pp. 223-224; F.H. PALMER, *Russian Life in Town and Country*. London, 1901, pp. 110-125; G. REIBBECK, *Travels from St.Petersburg to Germany, in the Year 1805*. London, 1807, pp. 137-138.

39. On the urban geography of the *shtetl* see Y. BAR-GAL, "The Shtetl-The Jewish Small Town in Eastern Europe", *Journal of Cultural Geography* 5/2, 1985.

spread throughout the yearly calendar, became not only signposts in the economic cycle, by providing breaks in the flow of the economic life of *shtetl* and countryside; they also became visual manifestations of the Jewish presence and preponderance in town. Temporary wooden booths on Sukkot, bands of masquerading children and adults on Purim, or candles on the windowsills on Hanukkah, were among the visible hallmarks of the *shtetl* turning it into a tiny Jewish world in a non-Jewish surroundings.

The Gentile that the *shtetl* Jew encountered was in most cases a peasant or one of the Slavic nationalities and occasionally a government official or the landlord. The Gentile was in stark contrast, an antithetical other to the *shtetl* Jew. They were distinctly different in their external appearance. The looks of the *shtetl* Jew has been one of those subjects that Jewish historians tried to avoid in particular after the Holocaust, it is problematic by its very nature, and too close to topics related to racism and anti-Semitism⁴⁰. Yet it was an important component in the *shtetl's* self-image and identity. The obviously distinct discernable features of most *shtetl* Jews constituted an additional and formidable obstacle to the assimilation or integration into the surrounding society. He was tangibly the visible other-in complexion, attire, gesture and manners. It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the full range of relations between *shtetl* Jew and the Gentile world. Living in proximity quite naturally produced a mutual influence, as is obvious in such fields as music, folklore, or food. Our main interest here is to note some of the more lasting effects of the relations on the perceptions and identity of the *shtetl* Jew.

On the whole, the relationship with the Gentile world was problematic. The two differed in almost every aspect of their lives: external appearance, ethnic origin, religion, language, economic function, and social structure. The most frequent encounter between the *shtetl* Jew and his non-Jewish neighbor took place in the economic sphere, mostly in an adversarial situation. The two represented town and village, which needed each other but had opposing interests. The *shtetl* resident was the artisan, peddler, shopkeeper, or innkeeper; the Gentile, the *Goy*, was the buyer while selling his own produce.

Lingering ill feelings were frequently the result of this encounter. There were few enterprises where Jew and Gentile worked together for common goals. The absence of any extensive social contact contributed to the mutual

40. Two opposite approaches to the problem of the "Jewish look" are presented by Arthur KOESTLER, "Race and Myth", in *The Thirteenth Tribe*, London, 1977, p. 160-176, and by Arthur RUPPIN in his book on the sociology of the Jews, *Ha-sošiologia shel ha-yehudim*, Tel Aviv, 1931, Vol. 1, pp. 15-22.

ignorance and prejudice on both sides. For the *shtetl* resident the world and values of the Gentile seemed antithetical to his own. One should not nourish any illusions as to the cultural level or the scholarly achievements and erudition of the *shtetl* residents. Still, there was a high regard in the small town for learning and intellectual excellence, and considerable efforts were made to provide every child with some education. In the Jewish town moderation and spiritual values in general were considered the right norms for human behavior. All of it appeared antithetical to the prevailing lifestyle in the economically backward villages. The countryside was afflicted by ignorance, heavy drinking, and frequent recourse to violence. Physical prowess and external beauty were highly regarded among the Slavic peasants, but were held in low esteem by the *shtetl* Jew. After centuries of living in the region and fulfilling a most vital function in its economic life, the Jew remained a familiar yet separate, distinct, and largely obscure entity to his Gentile neighbor.

Compounding the multi-faceted antagonism between the *shtetl* Jewish community and the surrounding population was a pervasive anti-Semitism⁴². With some local variations, the peasant communities neighboring on the small towns of the Pale harbored deeply ingrained anti-Semitic sentiments. They were an integral part of the Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian peasant culture and religion. Combined with the mutual ignorance and the pronounced differences in the socio-economic structure and value system, anti-Semitism tended to become violent and destructive. The *shtetl* lived in ever-present anxiety about peasant violence, which was considered a “natural” behavior. Recurring outbursts of sporadic violence, culminating in large-scale and intensive attacks, the infamous pogroms, periodically reinforced a deep-seated mistrust in the *shtetl* of its surrounding Gentile neighbors. It further strengthened seclusion, internal cohesiveness and solidarity, which in turn became central symbols of the small town in the eyes of its descendants.

Within the confines of hundreds of small towns evolved an autonomous and largely self-regulating Jewish community. An elaborate autonomous network of organizations, composed of formal permanent institutions and ad hoc voluntary associations, bound together individual and community in the *shtetl*. They were involved in almost every aspect of the individual and communal life. The structure of the *shtetl* was similar in its principles to that of other Jewish communities. What made it unique was the fact that it embraced such a large proportion of the town’s population, thus imparting to it an intensity it probably lacked in other places. The organizational network catered to the individual from cradle to grave; every aspect of life

was prescribed, organized, supervised. It gave the *shtetl* inhabitant a feeling of security and provided assistance in time of need. The closely knit community bestowed on its members a sense of belonging and intimacy in an alien and on occasions hostile environment, and at the same time it provided all with a stable sense of Jewish identity. Mark Zborowski and Herzog in their above mentioned study, depicted some truly central elements of *shtetl* life and captured many of the essential values and norms that characterized it. What is regrettably missing in the book are the dynamics of real life in the *shtetl*. There is no attempt made by the authors to highlight the dialectical tensions that existed between the individual and the ever watchful community; between assistance in time of need and prescribing what a person's needs were; between intimacy of family-community and the stifling of any individuality, producing frustration and misery. Conformity and ever-present pressure to toe the line were the other face of warmth and intimacy of family and community, elements that figure so highly in *shtetl* nostalgia. Also missing from Zborowski and Herzog's study is an adequate treatment of social and economic divisions that were always present in the small town, threatening to wreck its social fabric. While rightly emphasizing the high esteem for learning and the learned, the study refrains from drawing attention to the existing tensions and animosity between the latter and the masses, who could barely read the prayer book, or the low level of teachers and teaching.

In popular mind one of the *shtetl* characteristics was a high regard for learning and religious piety. The image of an intensely religious community devoting time and effort to cultivate learning and religious practice took root particularly in North America. This mostly nostalgic view evolved in reaction to the massive abandonment of religious practice and the assimilation into American culture of the *shtetl* immigrants. A more balanced view would have emerged out of a better acquaintance with *shtetl* realities.

After due account is taken of differences of period and location, it is still true that the common *shtetl* Jew received an extremely poor education, even in the basics of Jewish religion. As one might have expected, and this is abundantly documented, the poverty-stricken *shtetl* community in this economically and culturally deprived region could provide, in most cases, only a rudimentary level of education. One does not have to accept at face value the numerous horror stories of the *shtetl melamed*, the proverbial elementary level teacher, to realize how low was the level of instruction and inadequate the results. The elementary teaching profession was staffed, most of the time, by people who failed in all other occupations, and they were paid accordingly. An ability to recite-read the prayer book, mostly without un-

derstanding its meaning, was the most that the common *shetel* inhabitant did achieve. Very few continued their studies at a *Yeshivah*, a higher educational institution that existed only in selected places⁴¹. Hence religious practice in the *shetel* was based, by and large, on a very low level of erudition and cultural sophistication.

This might be one of the important contributing factors to the rapid secularization and assimilation of the *shetel* Jews after leaving the sheltered environment of the small towns. It was relatively easy to feel educated and belonging to a higher culture when the standard for comparison was the peasantry of the countryside close by. It was a completely different story in the larger urban centers, and outright impossible to feel that way facing some of the most advanced industrial societies of Europe and overseas. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to analyze in detail the educational and cultural levels of the *shetel* or the strength of the prevailing religious commitment of its residents. However, there should be little doubt that an important part of the explanation for the scale and speed of the secularization of the East European Jewish community, a development that has no counterpart in any other modern society, is to be found in the culture of the small town.

A unique sense of Jewish identity developed in the *shetel*. Among the common people, paradoxically, it combined a relatively low level of erudition in Judaism with a rather strong and self-assured sense of being Jewish. For those who grew up in the *shetel*, to be a Jew was practically the only option available. It was also the result of a life experience in what might rightfully be called a Jewish world. The culture of the surrounding peasant societies was of limited attraction for the *shetel* Jew. Thus, millions of Jews, in hundreds of small towns, living in isolation from the surrounding society, developed a confident and strong Jewish identity. Based on a Jewish language, Yiddish, it might be called an existential Jewish identity. Its uniqueness and strength became evident when religious practice declined and secular movements and ideas became dominant. The non-observant secularized Jew who lived in the *shetel* considered himself and was seen by others as a Jew regardless of his behavior and beliefs. The Jewishness of a person was a given, and the individual did not have even to be conscious of the causes of that fact. When religious practice in the *shetel* declined, there was no question as to the Jewish identity of the non-observant masses. It held true whether they stayed in their native town or moved to new lands. In the Americas or in the Holy Land the secularized *shetel* Jew carried with

41. On antisemitism in Russia see Sh. ETTINGER, "Rusia vhayehudim — nisaion shel sikum histori", in *Haantishemiut ba'et ha'hadasha*, Tel Aviv, 1978, pp. 169-189.

him a profound sense of being Jewish; however, his problem was how to perpetuate it under different circumstances and in an unknown environment, away from the small towns of the Slavic lands

Conclusion

The largest Jewish community in modern times lived on the wide plains between the Baltic and the Black Seas, on territories which up to the end of the eighteenth century were part of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth and were later incorporated into the Russian empire. Here, within the confines of the Pale of Jewish Settlement, mainly during the nineteenth century, the components of the *shtetl* as a cultural-geographic entity were formulated. In this area, beginning in the sixteenth century and lasting till the Holocaust, a unique historic-geographic entity, which might be called the Shtetl Formation, evolved. Jews constituted an absolute majority in hundreds of small urban centers, forming hundreds of Jewish enclaves, and in sum providing a quasi-territorial base for the Jewish community, which may be named *Shtetlland*. There were differences and variations between the small towns that constituted this historic geographical structure, depending on local conditions and historical circumstances. The great historical waves that swept the region left their mark on the *shtetl* and its people. However, the major elements that made up the formation survived for several centuries. Its basis was the encounter of a Jewish community with an economically and culturally backward Slavic peasant society. The mainstays of the formation consisted of a Jewish demographic preponderance in hundreds of small towns; the economic role of providers of urban services to a backward agrarian society; internal cultural cohesiveness based on a common religion and the Yiddish language, accompanied by a sense of cultural superiority over the surrounding peasants; an elaborate internal autonomy and voluntary organizations. All these elements survived in significant parts of the formation throughout its existence. The last decades of the nineteenth century deserve special attention as they are perceived as the time when the *shtetl* was rapidly disintegrating. Industrialization and secularization affected the *shtetl*, yet it did not bring about its disintegration. Many emigrated, religious practice declined, and some of the *shtetls* were hurt by the economic developments. However, the Shtetl Formation continued to exist. In most *shtetls* the high natural birth rate compensated for those who moved out⁴². The backward agrarian economy persisted in

42. On the struggle between religion and the secularizing tendencies in Russian Jewry see Ehud LUZ, *Maqbilim nifgashim*. Tel Aviv, 1985, pp. 23-52. Also, Imanuel ETKES, *Rabbi Israel Salanter v-reishitah shel tenu'at ha-musar*, Jerusalem, 1982, pp. 147-187.

most of the *Shtetlland*, requiring the traditional services of the small towns. Secular movements and institutions revitalized the *shtetl* communities. Yiddish not only remained the language of everyday life, it actually became a major tool in an unprecedented bloom of Jewish culture. A significant part of the formation was destroyed in the lands that became the Soviet Union after 1917. Yet much of the Shtetl Formation survived till the Second World War, mostly in independent Poland. Only the Holocaust destroyed the *shtetl* as a living Jewish entity.

In the narrative of modern Jewish history the *shtetl* should occupy a highly prominent place. This is not because it was a hospitable habitat for its people. Life in the *shtetl* was miserable for the many and for most of the time. Nor was the *shtetl*, despite legend and myth, a center of high culture and learning. With few exceptions the *shtetl* itself could not and did not excel in either. Most of the cultural heights of east European Jewry were achieved in the larger urban centers. It is rare in conditions of economic backwardness and poverty for culture and learning to flourish. The *shtetl* is important because it was home for a very significant part of the Jewish people for over three centuries. It was also the major source of Jewish migrants in modern times, invigorating the communities they joined with a strong sense of Jewish identity. The *shtetl* also played an important role in the culture of the Jewish people as one of the most potent symbols and myths in modern times, thus taking part in shaping the self-image and identity of the contemporary Jewish community. Moving away from the *shtetl*, literally and metaphorically, summarizes the radical change that took place in the life of the Jewish people in the last hundred years.

Jewish history has been written with almost complete disregard for what was for a long period the major habitat of its people. While it was on the Jewish agenda, no consistent effort was made to investigate its unique place and role in the life and history of the nation. When the Shtetl Formation takes its rightful place in Jewish historiography, some central chapters of modern Jewish history and culture will have to be rewritten.