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The shtetl

An ethnic town in the Russian empire

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THE SHTETL: AN ETHNIC TOWN IN THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE UNDER THE TSARS was not a “melting pot”, nor did it produce out of its diverse population a “Russian man.” The empire was made up of many historical nations, ethnic groups, and tribes. While there was no doubt as to the ruling nationality and official religion, the Russian Orthodox empire, on the whole, enabled the separate and distinct existence of other ethnic groups within its borders.¹ Although there were periods when the Russian government pursued a vigorous policy of religious conversion and Russification, by and large the various nationalities and denominations lived side by side with each other, preserving their separate identity. The empire was and remained a multi-ethnic state. The western regions of the empire were inhabited mainly by related Slavic nationalities, Poles, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Russians, and Jews. The territories formerly belonged to the Polish-Lithuanian state and were annexed at the end of the eighteenth century.² Here were to be found hundreds of small towns, built mostly as private towns on land belonging to the Polish nobility in pre-partition Poland. Those were the *shtetls*, as they were named in Yiddish, or *mestechki*, in Russian. Their inhabitants, mostly

1. On the multi-ethnic composition of the Russian empire see: M. Florinsky, *Russia: A history and interpretation*, New York, 1960, Vol. 2: 797-800; 1086-1088; H. Seton-Watson, *The decline of Imperial Russia: 1855-1914*, New York, 1961: 30-40; id., *The Russian empire, 1801-1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): 485-505; B. M. Kabuzan, *Narody Rossii v pervoi polovine 19 v. Chislennost' i etnicheskii sostav* (Moscow, 1992): 137-146; 149-153; 179-208.

2. I. de Madariaga, *Russia in the age of Catherine the Great* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981): 427-454; E. C. Thaden, *Russia's western borderlands, 1710-1870* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984): 32-81; 121-168.

Jews, imparted a specific ethnic coloring to these urban settlements, making them “Jewish” towns in the Russian empire.

Russian governors, administrators and settlers were found in every corner of the empire. With them came the Russian language, culture, and Greek Orthodoxy, the state religion. However, other religious denominations did not vanish and many languages and dialects were heard within the boundaries of the empire. Non-Russians were discriminated against and even, on occasion, persecuted; nevertheless, with few exceptions, there was no lasting successful effort to eradicate other ethnic cultures in an attempt of complete Russification. Local cultures, customs and mores in their different manifestations in the arts and cultural landscape continued to exist. Russians who settled in the annexed territories mostly built their own agricultural and urban settlements alongside with preexisting local communities.³

Generally no attempt was made by the Russian authorities to change the urban character of newly annexed territories. In the eastern and southern regions of the empire Russian towns and villages were built alongside with local communities, the borderlines were quite clear, different ethnic groups preserving the distinct character of their settlements. However, there were regional variations, in response to local conditions. The ethnic composition and history of the western provinces of the empire presented the Russian authorities with different problems than those encountered in the east and south. It was an area fraught with historical ethnic tensions and at the same time where the local populations could more easily blend with and assimilate into each other. Here the Russian government conducted a more vigorous campaign of Russification, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century, designed primarily to diminish Polish presence in the area.⁴ In this region, between the shores of the Baltic and Black seas lived the largest Jewish community in the world of over five million at the end of the nineteenth century. A large part of the Jewish population lived in the small towns of the area. Up to the last quarter of the nineteenth century they were the main urban element in this largely agricultural region.

Towns and their inhabitants played a subordinate role in the history of the Russian state.⁵ In his nine-volume survey of Russian history written at the beginning of the twentieth century, G. I. Shreider maintained that before Alexander II's reforms, the cities of Russia “deserved recognition primarily for their

3. B. A. Anderson, *Internal migration during modernization in late nineteenth-century Russia* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980); R. Pierce, *Russian Central Asia, 1867-1914. A study in colonial rule* (Berkeley, 1960); S. Becker, *Russian protectorates in Central Asia: Bukhara and Khiva, 1865-1924* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

4. On Russification in the western provinces: H. Seton-Watson, *The Russian empire, op. cit.:* 736-737; E. C. Thaden, “The Russian government,” in id., ed., *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981): 15-108.

5. On the city in Russian history see: D. R. Brower, *The Russian city between tradition and modernity, 1850-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); M. F. Hamm, ed., *The city in Russian history* (Lexington, 1976); J. M. Hittle, *The service city: State and townsmen in Russia, 1600-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

insignificant size: they were an unnatural occurrence in a land of peasant serfdom and lacked any genuine cultural significance.”⁶ With few exceptions, the Russian “pre-revolutionary official town, *gorod*, was essentially an administrative settlement with weak rights of self-government,” noted R. L. Thiede in his study on the connection between industry and urbanization.⁷ Being small and of limited economic significance, the towns served the neighboring agricultural countryside mostly as administrative centers. Only the abolition of serfdom and the great reforms that followed ushered in a new phase in the history of the town in the Russian empire. The accelerated modernization and industrialization in the last decades of the nineteenth century brought a dramatic change in the growth, size, and role of the cities in the empire.

The towns in the empire were classified in 1785 by Catherine the Great according to the administrative organization of the state. Hence we had two major administrative subdivisions; towns that were *gubernia* capitals and towns that were *uezd* centers. Since the empire had been subdivided several times, it also included a special class of towns that were named *neshtatnye*, namely, not on the official list, settlements that lost their status as administrative centers. *Posad* was a form of urban settlement that derived its status from the economic activities of its residents and not from its administrative role. “It should be obvious to all, how accidental and arbitrary were and still are the grounds for granting the status of town to this or another settlement in our country,” asserts an official publication of the Ministry of Interior in 1860.⁸ The criteria for determining a settlement's urban status were ill-defined, the differences between the various categories blurred, with little consideration for the economic role of the settlement. For the sake of fairness, one should add that the problem of what constitutes a town is not only complicated but also one that has not yet been resolved, and even today there is no single definition that is universally accepted by historians and geographers alike.

With the annexation of the western provinces from Poland at the end of the eighteenth century, a new class, the *mestechki* (small towns), was added to the list of urban settlements, relates the author of the Interior Ministry. Hundreds of small towns were scattered throughout the western provinces that had been acquired by Russia at the end of the eighteenth century. They were founded under Polish rule by grants of special privileges by the crown to big landowners giving them the right to establish on their holdings fairs, markets and industry as it was done in towns. The Polish landlords “attracted to the new settlements artisans and Jews to develop their economy.”⁹ For all practical purposes these were the only urban centers serving the

6. As quoted by M. F. Hamm in “The modern Russian city: An historiographical analysis,” *Journal of Urban History* (1977): 39.

7. R. L. Thiede, “Industry and urbanization in New-Russia, from 1860 to 1910,” in M. F. Hamm, ed., *op. cit.*: 125-126.

8. *Gorodskie poseleniia v Rossiiskoi imperii* (St. Petersburg, 1860), vol. 1: 9-10.

9. *Ibid.*: 9. On the origin and early history of the shtetls see the introduction in G. D. Hundert, *The Jews in a Polish private town* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992).

peasant population of the territory. The new rulers found it difficult to define the status of this urban form, since in Russia, towns did not exist on private lands regardless of size and occupation of the settlement. The shtetl residents, for taxation purposes — the main interest of the rulers in the ruled population — were defined as forming part of the town classes, *meshchane*, but the legal definition of the shtetl itself remained in limbo for almost a century. The Ruling Senate, serving as the high court of appeals, was forced in a series of decisions taken after 1882 to try to define what constituted a *mestechko*. It was defined as a settlement that possessed privileges of a town, and was recorded in an appropriate official document granted to the owners of the land. The residents of such a town belonged to the *meshchanstvo* (town class) and engaged in commerce and industry.¹⁰ While still ill-defined, the Ruling Senate's decisions facilitated the conclusion of a more definite listing of shtetls in the empire. Consequently, a separate category of small towns, *mestechki*, appeared in the 1897 census, the first full-fledged census to take place in Russia. The census thus provides us with a list of settlements officially defined as small towns (*mestechki*) or shtetls.

Jews, who for centuries were forbidden to reside in the Russian empire, constituted a minority that lived mostly in urban settlements in an area that was especially designated for their residence, the so called Pale of Jewish Settlement. Various attempts made since they became subjects of the tsar at the end of the eighteenth century to force their assimilation were, by and large, of limited success. The bulk of the Jewish population preserved its distinct religious and ethnic identity and lifestyle as well as its cultural idiosyncrasies. They were recognized by the Tsarist authorities and by the Soviet government after the revolution, as a separate nationality. The Jews did not constitute a territorial minority, however, their high concentration in the numerous small towns of the Pale could be taken as providing a semblance of a territorial basis and contributed to the maintenance of group identity.

According to the 1897 census in the *gubernii* of the Pale of Jewish Settlement and Poland, there existed 462 small towns with an absolute Jewish majority, and 116 had a Jewish population of over eighty percent.¹¹ It should be added that in the latter category were towns that were for all intents and purposes, completely Jewish, since most non-Jews, registered as residents, lived on the periphery and were engaged mostly in non-urban occupations. The town's Jewish residents completely dominated its commerce and trade and hence determined the settlements' urban character.

10. The Senate was forced to deal with the status of the shtetls in the wake of the so-called "Temporary regulations" of May 1882. The expulsion of Jewish residents from some of the shtetls, under the pretext that these were villages, required a more definitive distinction between the two. See the article on the Temporary regulations (*Vremennyya pravila*) in the *Evreiskaia entsiklopediia*, F. A. Brockhaus and I. A. Efron, eds. (St. Petersburg, 1910).

11. The calculations are based on the 1897 census as recorded for the different *gubernii* in *Evreiskaia entsiklopediia*, *op. cit.*

The basis for the “Jewishness” of the shtetl was quite obvious to the people who lived in the region, or happened to visit there. Jews were by far the predominant ethnic group in the urban settlements of the area. In the ethnic make-up of the region the numerous Jewish communities constituted a visible minority. Visible in the sense that it is being used in contemporary North American discourse, as applied to such groups as the Afro-American or the American-Indian communities. The Jews were easily distinguished from the Slavic peasants of the countryside. The numerous small towns where the Jewish population constituted an absolute majority and often the only residents, were Jewish in the same sense that similar settlements in other parts of the empire were Armenian or Polish. Each carried the imprint of its civilization and the prevailing material conditions. The whole material culture as reflected in the cultural landscape and seen in the building materials, shape and size of public structures, private homes, streets and public parks, sewage system, etc., reflected the prevailing poverty of the region, one of the more backward on the continent. The shtetl carried the imprint of the material priorities and cultural attitudes of its predominant ethnic group as it evolved in this East European Slavic environment.

Many of the shtetls of the Pale dated from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, yet they did not have the air of respectability that comes with age frequently found in small towns in other parts of Europe. They looked rather dull and shabby, the result of poverty and neglect. The shtetl stood out in its squalor even on the background of the typically dull Russian provincial town. Whether portrayed by a sympathetic Jew, born in the small town or coming from afar, a Gentile tourist that happened to pass by, or a Russian official appointed to investigate the economic situation, a similar sordid picture of the shtetl emerged. Crossing the north-western provinces in 1805, on the road from St. Petersburg to Berlin, a Prussian diplomat noted that: “[the area that was only recently annexed] may in truth be denominated the land of Jews, whose number is incalculable. [...] One is in fact miserably off on a Friday evening after sunset or on a Saturday, when one is want of anything, for everything must be had from the Jews.” The towns looked obviously Jewish to the German diplomat. The shtetls he ran across on his way he characterized as primarily market towns consisting of a market-place with a few brick houses and “a few miserable streets with wooden huts. The filth which prevails both within and without exceed everything witnessed in Russia, which is saying very much.”¹² Summing up his impressions ten years later, in 1814, yet another Westerner noted that: “As all towns in Lithuania Novogrudek has a large square, from which a number of dirty lanes branch off. In the center of the town are a few mean brick houses. [...] The people are coarse, mean and dirty and consist chiefly of Jews. [...] There is little or no trade carried on beyond the traffic of the Jews.”¹³

12. G. Reinbeck, *Travels from St. Petersburg to Germany in the year 1805* (London, 1807): 137-138.

13. R. H. Johnston, *Travels through parts of the Russian empire and the country of Poland* (London, 1816): 355.

Of particular interest are the insights provided by F. Palmer who spent many years in the empire and became intimately acquainted with everyday life in the Russian countryside. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century he compared in great detail the “Jewish town,” as he unhesitatingly names the shtetl, and the Russian “country town.” The latter, Palmer maintained, had “streets generally wide and paved, the best only were paved with cobblestones. In many of the larger provincial towns [...] the sidewalks for foot passengers are often formed of planks. Purely Russian towns are [...] generally kept in somewhat better order than those of the Jewish district. But even in the former it is only in the more important that any system of drainage is ever attempted.” Jewish towns are, according to the author, of smaller size and their houses “[...] always far more slightly built than the *izbas* [huts] of the peasantry. Though there is considerable variety in their architecture, there is one feature that they almost all possess in common — the extreme of squalid dilapidation. The sanitary condition is, if possible, worse than in the very poorest of the Russian towns. Household refuse of every kind is simply thrown into the street.”¹⁴ Depressing as the foregoing descriptions may seem, they do portray the reality of the shtetls in the Pale as revealed to any observer. The scenes of decay and urban disintegration were corroborated by numerous similar reports from diverse sources like Western travelers, Jewish journalists, Russian officials, etc., all along. Probably, the most famous and influential depictions of the shtetl in the same spirit are to be found abundantly in the classical Jewish literature. There should be little doubt as to their veracity.

When depicting the shtetl, outsiders visiting the western provinces of the Russian empire as well as local residents often allude to a town with what may be called a “Jewish look.” Among the details of that “look” one always finds a reference to a pervasive poverty that confronts the visitor. Buildings and streets, shops and marketplace bore evidence to the continuing pauperization of the Jewish population in the Pale. The houses were crowded, the streets without pavement or adequate drainage, the stores with little merchandise. In the small towns with a predominant Jewish population, the accidental guest was impressed by the lack of elaborate gardening or embellishments, contrary to what he saw at non-Jewish settlements. There was a rickety quality, captured so vividly in the paintings of many artists, to the entire settlement. There reigned a certain air of temporariness reflecting the material level as well as the cultural attitudes of the Jewish population. The way houses and their surrounding courts, sidewalks and streets looked and were treated represented not just poverty or material affluence but cultural-ideological attitudes as well. It is a well known Zionist tenet that the Diaspora Jew, particularly in Eastern Europe, was ever waiting to be returned to his ancient homeland, an attitude reflected in the way he lived and treated his physical environment.

In 1821-1822, many years before Zionism appeared on the historical scene as a political entity or modern ideology, an Englishman passing through the Pale of

14. F. H. Palmer, *Russian life in town and country* (London, 1901): 110; 122-125.

Settlement noted that among the Jews “some, who are in circumstances of affluence, possess houses and other immovable property, but the great mass of the people seem destined to sit loose from every local tie and are waiting with anxious expectation for the period when, in pursuance of the divine promise, they shall be restored to what they still consider their own homeland.”¹⁵ Limited attention to gardening, painting and decoration in general, activities more common among their Gentile neighbors, reflected a deep-seated reservation for external beauty that could be found in traditional Judaism. When combined with the insecurity and poverty of life in the Pale it produced the drab and squalid sights encountered by outsiders and by shtetl inhabitants alike.

The basic geographic layout of the shtetl corresponded to its economic role and ethnic composition. In a schematic way there was “a clear pattern of center and periphery [...] and the location of the various functions [was determined] according to their importance on the socio-cultural scale of the Jewish town. The center stands out as an important area that expressed Jewish culture and way of life. The periphery and beyond were of lesser importance.”¹⁶ Here, on the periphery were to be found the homes of the Gentiles, quite frequently engaged in non-urban pursuits, constituting a gradual transition to the non-Jewish countryside. On the periphery, not far removed from town was located the residence of the shtetl owner or his representative. The center of the settlement was also the focal point of economic activity and Jewish presence. Serving as an urban center for the surrounding countryside, the market square was the natural center of town and close by were also to be found the major Jewish public buildings and residential area. The main street led to the market square that was the most important meeting ground between the shtetl Jews and the Slavic peasantry. It served as a reminder of realities beyond shtetl limits.¹⁷

The small East European town was built mostly of wood, straw and clay, the cheap and easily available building materials of the region. Brick buildings were a sign of affluence and less frequent, mainly found in public structures, while houses built of stone were a rarity. Fires were common and every shtetl had several on record. Many buildings were relatively new, hence what might be called their “young” appearance. However the sight of health and freshness associated with youth, when combined with low-quality building material, lent it a deteriorating, downtrodden appearance. The shtetls lacked the serene respectability and the patina of age that is part of the charm of the small towns of the Mediterranean or Central Europe. Absent from the rather bland East European settlements were the composure frequently found in the brick- and stone-built towns of other parts of the continent. The overall view of the shtetl reflected the poverty of its inhabitants,

15. E. Henderson, *Biblical researches and travels in Russia* (London, 1826): 224.

16. Y. Bar-Gal, “The shtetl — The Jewish small town in Eastern Europe,” *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 5, 2 (1985): 17.

17. *Ibid.*: 20-21.

their culture and the economic underdevelopment of the region, among the poorest in Europe.¹⁸

Too small to have any significant governmental presence, most of the prominent public structures in town were associated with the life of the Jewish population. Foremost were the synagogues, houses of prayer and assembly. Their number and prominence varied from town to town, reflecting the size of the community, its material well-being and existing ideological and class divisions. There always was a central synagogue designed to accommodate the entire community for religious or social purposes. In the shtetl, the synagogue had the same role as in other settlements. Along with the primary role of a house of prayer, the synagogue also served as an assembly hall and a place of study. In their heyday, before the onset of modernity and secularization, shtetl synagogues were bustling with life and activity not only at the designated times for prayer, they were real community centers. Contrary to the church found often in town and mainly serving the countryside peasantry on Sundays and holidays, the synagogues were used for religious and social activities throughout the day and the entire week.

Buildings and sites associated with the Jewish religion and its customs were prominent sights in the urban landscape of the shtetl. Small places of worship were to be found all over town. They carried different names, *Beit-midrash*, *Shtibl*, *Kloiz*, and served different sections of the community. Besides being places of worship, the synagogues were also centers of learning of the scriptures and their commentaries. However, the primary place of instruction was the *Kheder*, literally “room,” where a teacher provided his pupils with basic education. In a region where elementary education was a rarity among the surrounding population, the *Kheder* was a unique institution. Located in the private residence of the teacher, the “rooms” were to be found all over town and the sounds and sights of classes packed with children chanting and learning by rote were part of the peculiar ethnic characteristics of the shtetl. So were other sites with a definite Jewish nature, like the *Mikveh*, ritual bath, the kosher slaughterhouse and the cemetery that was one of the first signs of the existence of a Jewish community. Together they made up a network of sights and sounds, tangible manifestations of the distinct ethnicity of the shtetl.

Yet, more than any single physical or structural element found in the landscape of the small Pale town, what made it ethnically Jewish were its people and their lifestyle. Demographic preponderance meant that the outside observer or the local inhabitant met on the unpaved sidewalks, on the street or market square the Jewish residents of the shtetl. In this part of Europe, where Jewish emancipation had been slow in coming and ever-present ethnic animosities and struggles strengthened group cohesiveness, the Jews constituted what may aptly be called, in present-day terms, a visible minority. Even in the twentieth century, when external

18. The description of the shtetl as presented in this paper draws on documents long in the public domain. The composite portrait is based on literally hundreds of separate descriptions published in autobiographies, travel diaries, memorial books, etc. Since this is an interpretative study, no attempt was made to draw attention to any particular shtetl.

acculturation and widespread assimilation took place, the shtetl Jew was quite easily distinguishable from his Gentile neighbors, mostly belonging to one of the Slavic nationalities. The usually darker complexion of the shtetl Jews, even though there were individual exceptions, left no doubt as to the town's distinct ethnic make-up. During most of the nineteenth century, the men had beards and side-locks (*peyes*), that set them further apart from the Slavic peasant. What made the shtetl Jew even more visibly distinct from his surroundings was his peculiar clothing that drew the attention of foreign visitors. "Jews are all dressed alike," claimed R. Johnston who traveled through the region in 1814. In a rather lengthy passage of four pages he went on to describe the peculiarities of the way Jewish men and women dressed and how different they looked from their Gentile neighbors.¹⁹ The description is negative if not outright anti-Semitic and is very much similar to that of E. Henderson, written almost a decade later.²⁰ He noted that the attire of the Jews, in particular that of the women, was lavish and elaborate when compared to that of the peasants. Writing at the end of the century, F. Palmer noted significant changes in the clothing of the shtetl Jews living in the Pale. He noticed that "the dress of the older generation has a distinctly Jewish cut," which was not true anymore of the younger men. However, what impressed him most was the special effort to wear clothing that looked different, more respectable in their eyes, than that of the Gentile peasant.²¹ Beyond stereotype and prejudice found abundantly in the foregoing observations that cover the entire nineteenth century, it is obvious that the dress of the shtetl inhabitant was different from his neighbors'. The general appearance of the small town's residents emphasized its distinct ethnicity.

The structure of daily life within the confines of the shtetl imparted to the small town a distinct ethnic beat, reflecting the Jewish spiritual and temporal civilization.²² Throughout most of the nineteenth century the shtetl embodied a traditional Jewish way of life. This should not be construed as if life in the small East European towns were in any way ideally Jewish or idyllic. No such claim is being made. The content and quality of life in the shtetl are not the subject of the present paper, but rather their external manifestations and impact on the town's ethnicity. Every aspect related to the conduct of the individual and the community was regulated by law and custom, thus affecting the rhythm and flow of the town's life. Working hours were affected by daily praying times. The Jewish weekly rest day, the *Shabbat*, brought to a halt all economic activity in town. It determined the weekly economic cycle and the external appearance of the shtetl. Preparing for the *Shabbat* occupied an important part of the week and could be noticed in the stores, at the marketplace and in the streets. The small size of the population and the high percentage of Jews imparted a prominence to the peculiarities of Jewish tradition

19. R. H. Johnston, *op. cit.*: 331-333.

20. E. Henderson, *op. cit.*: 223.

21. F. H. Palmer, *op. cit.*: 126-127.

22. For a rather idealized version of life in the shtetl see: M. Zborowski and E. Herzog, *Life is with people. The culture of the Shtetl* (New York, 1952).

and customs since they practically affected the entire settlement. The general standstill of all economic activity on rest days imparted to the small town a unique sensation of festive tranquillity and rest. It has been remembered with a tinge of yearning and nostalgia by those who lived there and it was recorded with a certain amazement by foreigners. The unique ethnic composition of the Pale small town was particularly evident on this rest day. So were the major holidays of the Jewish calendar. They were landmarks in the yearly cycle that highlighted the ethnicity of the shtetl. Each holiday had its visible trappings and specific customs. The routine hustle and bustle of daily life came to a standstill during the High holidays, when the shtetl for all intents and purposes closed down. *Pesakh*, *Sukot* and *Purim*, all had their visible presence in town as did the *Khanuka* candle lights in the cold December nights. The Jewish calendar left its mark on the small East European town.

The numerous shtetls in the Pale of Settlement of the Russian empire carried a distinct ethnic character which could be traced in almost every aspect of life: in the way buildings and streets looked; in the sounds of a distinct and exotic language heard in shops and at the marketplace; it could be detected in the rhythm of daily life and seasonal cycles. And most of all, in the presence of a distinct people that made the shtetl a Jewish ethnic town.

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