

ORININ, MY SHTETL IN THE UKRAINE

ROOTS AND REMEMBRANCES

by BERYL SEGAL

THE SHTETL

My generation is perhaps the last to have been born, raised, and educated in the *Shtetl**. We were fortunate to have escaped annihilation at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators in the Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. It is therefore our duty, each in his own way, to tell about that special way of life.

The *Shtetl* was neither a city nor a village. It could have been a community where two or three thousand souls lived, or a little settlement such as my *Shtetl*, Orinin, of five or six hundred Jews, living completely apart and in isolation, an isolation decreed by law and fortified by tradition. But within this isolation there was a wealth of folkways and folk living that are gone forever. Yiddish was the tongue of the *Shtetl*. Yiddish song, Yiddish anecdotes, Yiddish wisdom, they nourish us to the present day and will continue to be a source of inspiration and wonder for generations to come.

We are the remnants of those who still remember the *Shtetl* with its beauty and also its ugliness, its spiritual greatness, and its grinding poverty. We also remember — it is engraved upon our hearts and minds — the tragic end of the *Shtetl* and all who lived in it at the unclean hands of the enemy.

Yet the *Shtetl* refuses to die. It is immortalized in hundreds of studies. It lives in the works of great writers who knew it well and told the world about it. It inspired poets and singers who were once touched by the afterglow of the *Shtetl* and who stand in awe of it, as one stands before a towering crag.

We never exhaust the stores of tales, and listeners never tire of hearing these reminiscences, just as people never tire of listening to the strains of a beautiful melody.

The reasons are many.

To the immigrant, such as myself, the *Shtetl* brings back memories of childhood and of youth, of days when we were dreaming dreams

Footnote: Much of this material has appeared in somewhat different form in the *Rhode Island Herald*.

*Small town or village, diminutive of the German *Stadt*, meaning "city" or "town".

and strove to attain peaks that stretched as far and as high as our fertile imagination could reach.

To the sons and daughters of immigrants tales of the *Shtetl* help them in understanding of their parents. It is the natural thirst for knowledge about ancestors that are gone, and a life that has passed away. Stories told to them when they were young come back to them, and as they read about the *Shtetl* they exclaim: "This is exactly what my mother told me about her *Shtetl*". Or, "My father told me about the poverty he had endured in the *Shtetl*, and I could not believe it." Or, "The pictures of my grandfather and grandmother on the mantelpiece of our house fit in exactly with the stories of the *Shtetl*."

And for the reader of the third and fourth generation, as well as for the non-Jews who have no romantic ties with it, the *Shtetl* presents at once a puzzle, a mystery, a wonder. To them the *Shtetl* is an absorbing object of inquiry and study.

I shall, therefore, add my own recollections and experiences and describe the *Shtetl* of my birth, where I lived until the age of twenty.

ORININ, MY SHTETL

Orinin was a small town of about five hundred inhabitants, almost surrounded by a riverbend in a fertile valley that was part of the breadbasket of the Ukraine. Located in the district of Podolia, hard by the Austrian border*, it was far away from a railroad, had no telephones, no electric lights or gas, and no newspapers. News was carried by word of mouth, greatly delayed and very often exaggerated, when someone came back from the big city. Plumbing and sanitary facilities were unheard of. In winter the houses were heated by burning wood and straw. A wood and straw fire was also used for cooking and baking, chores that were done by the housewife every day. The foods one could buy in the stores were few, and fewer still were the housewives who could afford to buy them.

Most of the houses were made of clay. On a spring or summer day one might come upon a house being newly built or having a room added. Such an event attracted spectators as it does universally. On a large area in front of the construction men and women could be seen treading with their bare feet a mass of clay mixed with the droppings

*Galicia, was the easternmost portion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. East Galicia is now within the U.S.S.R. Podolia is the west central region of the Ukraine. Kamenets-Podolsk on the River Dnieper, former capital of Podolia, before World War II had 40 per cent Jews.

of cattle, the whole reinforced with straw. When the three ingredients were well and uniformly homogenized, the mass was broken up into bricks and placed between the wooden framework of the new house. A house made of this material was cool in the summer and held the warmth in the winter. The roofs were usually made of straw. Such roofs were fire hazards to be sure, but they were also effective protection against rain, frost, and winds. The houses of the rich had shingle roofs or were covered with sheet metal of a red and green color, appearing very colorful at a distance.

The straw of wheat and barley had many uses. In addition to its use in the construction and heating of houses, it was used in the feeding of domestic animals. When used for food the straw was cut into small bits in a very primitive mill and fed to the horses and cows mixed with oats and other feeds. Most of the households kept a cow or a goat to supply the dairy needs of the family, and the merchants had horses to transport them about the villages. For the animals each house had an attached lean-to or a large barn, where the animals were cared for as if they were members of the family.

Every household had a barrel or two of water. The children had the task of bringing water from the wells that dotted the *Shtetl* within walking distance. Although there were water carriers who supplied water for a few kopecs a week, most households used these carriers only in the slippery winter season. Going to the well was a favorite pastime for youngsters.

New houses were seldom built. A house was handed down from one generation to another. As the families grew, so did the houses. Extra rooms were added onto this side or that of the old house as needed, and family dishes and furniture were shared by the new family.

The greater part of the kitchen was taken up by an oven, large enough for two or three children to sleep on, warm enough for them to do without covering at night. Near these ovens the mothers spent their time cooking meals and baking bread, and preparing delicacies for every festival and season.

The oven had two compartments. The *pripetchok*, the fore part of the oven where the cooking was done, and the oven proper used for baking bread and *hale*,* the Sabbath bread.

A stranger traveling toward Orinin would stop at the top of the hill and gaze down at the sight revealed to him. In the valley below stood

*A braided loaf of white bread (Hebrew).

houses stacked upon houses, roofs topping roofs, patches of color vying with one another, and a river like a silver ribbon embracing all of this on three sides.

But as the stranger came down from the hill into the valley he would discover a little town divided into streets and alleys, squares and market places, each throbbing with a life of its own.

The stranger has arrived at Orinin.

There are two churches, one at either end of Orinin, the larger, the Russian church with its green cupola, and the smaller Polish church with its modest cross protruding above the tall stone walls around it. They stood guard over the *Shtetl*, as if to say:

"You are not to expand beyond the Russian church. There is the territory of the *Krestianin*, the Christians, the *Pravoslavy*. And you cannot go beyond the Polish church, because the river laps the grounds of the stone wall, and you have no business to live across the river."

Was it by accident or by design that the two churches stood at either end of the Main Street, or Post Road, of the *Shtetl*? The fact was that no one dared to step out of the boundaries set up by the Polish and Russian churches. When a new house was built in the *Shtetl*, it was built in the empty spaces within the town, and not in the wide open spaces of the village.

The stranger strolling at a modest pace down the Post Road between the Russian and the Polish churches could walk the distance in about fifteen or twenty minutes. He would have walked the entire length of the *Shtetl*. But there was also a width to the town. The bulk of the population lived in the streets and alleys that began suddenly and ended just as suddenly within the limits of Orinin. The Post Road was straight and was paved with cobblestones, but the others were not as favored. There was the *Yatke Gass*,* the butcher's alley, where all of the slaughter houses were located, characterized by the stench of slaughtered animals and dogs underfoot. The street began at the large animal slaughter house and came to an end by the fence of the policeman's garden. There was the *Variatsky Gass*, where the merchants of dry goods lived. Bolts of cotton, alpaca, cretonne, and linen were stacked on the shelves of their establishments, which were simply the front rooms of their houses.

Leather goods were also sold on the *Variatsky Gass*. The aroma of freshly tanned soft calf skins, karakul, and beaver always hung in the air as one approached the stores.

*From the German *Gasse*, meaning "alley".

A narrow street called "between stores", hardly a street at all, was busiest on market days. Two customers going in opposite directions rubbed elbows while stopping to buy ribbons and trinkets there. It was a short street, which ran the length of the *Variatsky Gass*. It was crowded, stores almost touched one another. Beyond these named streets began a jumble of alleys and crooked passageways known under the general designation of Lower Streets. The *arirzans*, the horse dealers, and the poor inhabited that part of Orinin.

But the Lower Street had the distinction of having the Old or Big *Shul*,* and four Houses of Worship along its way. The Old *Shul* was at the very shore of the river as it curved to embrace the *Shtetl*. The *shul* and the *mikveh*, the public ritual bath house, stood side by side. Farther removed from the shore were the Old and the New *Beth Midrash*,** the *Zinkover* and the *Tchortkover Klois*.† The latter were known by the names of the towns where the Hasidic *rebbe*‡ resided, and in them their followers worshipped.

One could draw a triangle with a line running from the Russian church to the Polish church for the base and the Old *Shul* at the apex of the triangle at the mid-point of town. The Old *Shul* was not very impressive to look at from the outside. The structure was low in profile, and appeared even lower because it was built in the lowest part of town, so as not to distract from the two churches. Old-timers explained that this was done at the insistence of the two Christian churches, so that the Jewish synagogue could not be seen as a landmark of Orinin. Others said that the synagogue was intentionally built in a low-lying area so as to conform to the words of the Psalmist: "Out of the Depths I call Unto You, O Lord."

But the interior of the Old *Shul* was awe-inspiring. The small windows high up near the ceiling allowed little light to penetrate the interior. There was a hushed quiet as one entered the sanctuary, sheltered from the hustle and bustle of the street. Illuminated by the flame

**Shul* is Yiddish for "synagogue", from the German *schule*, "school".

***Beth Midrash* is Hebrew for "House of Study".

†*Klois*, from the German *Klaus* (enclosure), was term often used by the Hasidic Jews for their synagogue, where the adults studied *Talmud*.

‡*Rebbe* (rabbi) was the term used by the Hasidic Jews for their spiritual leader. *Rav* or *Rov* was used by the non-Hasidic community. Rabbi is Hebrew for "my master", *rav* means "great". *Rebbe* is a corruption of the Hebrew *rabi* (pronounced rah-bee), anglicized to rabbi. The Hasidic *rebbe*, though well-grounded in Jewish learning, did not necessarily have formal ordination from an academy or *yeshivah*. The *rebbetzen* was the rabbi's wife. *Reb* was also used as a title — a shortened form of *rebbe*. The subtle differences and apparent interchangeability of these terms is confusing, but probably not too important.

of the Eternal Light the large chandeliers could be seen hanging from the ceiling. The intricate carvings of the *Aron Kodesh*, the Holy Ark, the work of an unknown artist, reaching the full height from floor to ceiling, held the eye of the visitor. And the *balemer*, the readers desk, standing in the center, lured one to ascend the three steps to the platform and to look around in silence.

Yet the *Shtetl* was inhabited by people who needed sustenance and the essentials for survival. How did they manage to eke out a living?

IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE

My father was a *klei kodesh*, literally a Holy Vessel, one whose function is essential to the Jewish community. A *Shtetl* could get along without a rabbi if necessary, but no Jewish community could function without a *shohet*, a slaughterer of fowl and cattle according to Jewish law. My father was not only a *shohet*, but was also a *mohel*, one who performs the rites of circumcision. He was also the *sofer*, the scribe of the Holy Scripture. He wrote *mezuzas** and *tefillin*** as well. In addition he was the *hazan* and *Torah* chanter† in one of the houses of worship. There were other functions in the community where his learning or skill was required, such as the printing of marriage contracts, or *troyim*, and performing marriage ceremonies, as well as writing divorce procedures.

I mention all these skills or trades or duties of my father so as to understand the spiritual needs of a *Shtetl*. There were such *klei kodesh* in every little community. Despite all of these occupations my father was far from being a rich man. We lived austere, and when an emergency arose we had to borrow from one of the money lenders. We were always making weekly payments to one lender or another. As the boys grew up they were put to work to help with the expenses of raising a family of nine. My older brother and I were sent away to teach the sons and daughters of Jews living in isolation in the villages. There were such Jews who were owners of flour mills, or supervisors of wood cutting in the forests, or proprietors of roadside hostleries, and therefore privileged to live outside of the *Shtetl*. They rented these facilites

*Hebrew for "doorpost". Small parchments on which are inscribed the first two paragraphs of the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-9; 11:18-21). Rolled tightly, it is placed in a small case or capsule and attached to the doorpost. *Shema* means "Hear", from "Hear, O Israel".

**The prescribed prayers.

†The *hazan* was the cantor. He sings long passages of the liturgy. *Torah* is the Pentateuch.

in perpetuity, and were usually rich Jews. But they were at the mercy of the *Poritz*, the owner of the land and all that was on it.

But even before we became teachers to village Jews, we helped in the many enterprises of my father. On days before the Sabbath and in preparation for the holidays we stood at the entrance of the slaughter house and collected tickets or money from those who brought chickens or geese or pigeons to be slaughtered. The tickets were of different colors for each category of fowl. We sorted them by color and counted them so that father could collect the money due him from the man in charge of taxation. Each family was taxed to raise funds to pay the *shohet*.

Our largest chore was preparation of the *Sefer Torah*.* The *Torah* is written by hand on separate *yerios*, or sheets of parchment. These *yerios* had to be sewn together to form a scroll. When father finished a *yerio*, we would proof-read it. One of us had a printed book of the *Torah*, while the other read from the hand-printed *yerio*, word for word and letter for letter, making sure that the dots and ornaments on the letters were in place. We would then prepare the *giddin*, the sinews of young calves by which the various *yerios* were held together. The sinews were dried and beaten until individual strands were separated. The strands were joined together, end to end, and wound on spools. This was the only means of sewing together a *Sefer Torah*, *yerio* to *yerio*.

In fact, we made such an abundance of *giddin* that the dealer in parchment would come once or twice a year to sell parchment to our father and buy *giddin* from us.

My father also taught young men *Hilchos Shehita*,** the laws of ritual slaughter. There was always a young man in our house, a student from another town.

In the midst of all of these activities my father always studied. I cannot remember a single meal without a *sefer*, a book of instructions, morals, or words of wisdom at father's side. He would look into the book between dishes and mother would have to remind him that the meal was getting cold.

There were other *klei kodesh* in the *Shtetl*, servants of the community, essential to the spiritual life of a town such as Orinin.

The *rov*, the rabbi, was of course the most respected of the *klei kodesh*. The *melamdim*, the teachers of little children, were most essential,

*The scroll containing the five books of Moses that is kept in the Ark in front of the synagogue.

***Shehita* is "ritual slaughter". *Shohet* the "ritual slaughterer". (Hebrew)

though their lot was not always an enviable one. The cantor of the Old *Shul* as well as the *shammos*, the attendant of the *Shul*,* were invited to every wedding and *brith* (circumcision). To a lesser degree the *kabron*, or the funeral man who was in charge of the *Beth Olom*, the cemetery, and the manager of the *mikveh*, the ritual bath house, were also counted among the *klei kodesh*.

All of these men were at the mercy of the rise and fall of the fortunes of the *Shtetl*. In times of prosperity the *klei kodesh* had enough to eat. When times were bad they could barely keep body and soul together.

In such cases my father would see the money lender, and we boys would carry *vochen gelt*,** weekly payments, to their houses.

But good or bad times, the boys always attended *heder*, the Jewish school for children, and when we grew older we were sent to the *yeshivah* in the big city, Kamenetz Podolsk.

WHAT COULD I DO IN THE SHTETL?

The universal dream of every child is to become either a policeman or a fireman. These were out of the question for a Jewish boy growing up in the *Shtetl*.

He could not aspire to be a policeman because that exalted office was out of reach of a Jewish boy by decree of the Czar. Oh, to be a policeman with a uniform, and brass buttons, and a sword at his side! He could not be a fireman because there were no firemen in the *Shtetl*. When a fire broke out the entire population would come out with pails of water to form a chain of fire fighters. They would keep it up until the conflagration was out. By the time the "fire brigade" arrived from the nearest town there was nothing for them to do except to disperse the crowd.

There was one man in the *Shtetl* who was dressed in a uniform and treated everybody as if he was doing a great favor in acknowledging their existence. He was the postal clerk who stood behind a grilled window and received and distributed mail. But that office was forbidden to a Jewish boy. Jews were excluded from all government offices, including the Post Office. Jews were forbidden to be in federal, state, or local civil service. The Jew could never become a judge or district attorney or hold a notary public seal. He certainly could not be a teacher in the public schools or an instructor in a university.

*i.e. the sexton.

**From the German *Wochengelt*, "weekly money".

The army and navy were distasteful to Jews. When a boy was drafted, the unhappiness at home was very great. He would not be able to observe the sabbaths and holidays, and would not have kosher food. The government would never think of providing these for Jews. A Jewish officer in the army and navy was rare, and he was usually in the medical corps. When a Jewish boy rose to officer rank you could be sure that he had tampered with his faith. Renouncing the faith and becoming a member in the *Pravoslavny* church, "a True Believer," was the key to a good position and to proper marriage in Russia. Some Jews did this, and received the keys to the kingdom. They never returned to the *Shtetl*.

Attendance at government schools, equivalent to public school here, was fraught with difficulties. The ten per cent norm for Jewish children was strictly observed. Within my memory only two boys ever went up "to the hill", as the government school was called in Orinin. Parents were not very anxious to subject their children to all kinds of humiliation on the part of teachers and pupils. The schools were under the supervision of the Russian (*Pravoslavny*) church, and religious instruction and prayers were a dominant part of the curriculum. The same was true of the middle school, the *gymnasium*, a school which was not available in Orinin. One had to go to the city to attend that type of school. But not having an elementary education, how could one aspire to the *gymnasia*?

A Jew could not own a farm, or cultivate his own field, or gather the fruit of his own orchard. Ownership of land was forbidden to Jews. In a country where agriculture was the main occupation of the people, the Jew was excluded from participation in it except for buying and selling the fruits of other people's labor.

Buying and selling were the only occupations open to Jews, provided they had the inclination or aptitude for such pursuits or the means to establish themselves.

What could I grow up to be or what could boys of my generation do in the *Shtetl*? We could become merchants in grain and cattle, provided our fathers set us up in such business. Children always followed in the footsteps of their fathers in Orinin. Children of merchants became merchants. You were born into it. You were trained in the business, and you found it easier to slip into it as you grew up.

We could become *arendars*, that is people who rented a water mill and ground wheat and corn for the peasants. We could rent a section

of forest and work its wood for its fuel, its lumber for furniture, building, or export. We could rent an orchard and gather the fruit when it ripened, or lose everything we invested if the crop failed. Again, we could gamble on the abundance of the *Graf's** or *Poritz's* fields. When the wheat or corn or barley crops were plentiful, we became rich. When the rains did not come in time, or the sun was scorching, or the grains for some reason were shriveled on the sheaves, we became impoverished overnight. The *Poritz* had no responsibilities for the crop. We would buy it up as soon as the grain was planted.

Or we could, and many of us did, open a store, one more store, to sell dry goods, food stuffs, or agricultural supplies to the peasants. Such stores enslaved the owners to the business day and night, all through their lives. And it required money, which was in short supply in Orinin.

The profession open to everybody because it required little money and no skill and no specific qualifications was to be a *luftmensch*,** a *shtekel dreier*, a twirler of the cane, an agent for one thing or another. These *luftmenschen*, or agents, would attach themselves to a money bag and do all kinds of services for him. They would make deals for him, collect his debts from improverished debtors, go to far-away places in all kinds of weather to do his bidding, take all kinds of insults from him, and for him from people whom he displeased. Such persons were known as *meklars*, and their livelihood was precarious. They lived out of thin air — they were truly *luftmenschen*.

Orinin had more than its share of *meklars*.

We could become artisans. Most of the population of Orinin were artisans of one kind or another. There were tailors, carpenters, shoemakers, sheet metal workers, rope twisters, barrel joiners or coopers, wagon makers, or silversmiths. But these were trades that were handed down from father to son, and unless one had some family connection, there was no way he could learn the trade. There was no trade school in Orinin.

Then again because of *yihus*,† the complicated relations between

**Graf* is German for "Count".

***Luftmensch*, Yiddish, from the German *Luft* ("air") and *Mensch* ("man"), described by Leo Rosten as "1. Someone with his head in the clouds, 2. An impractical fellow, but optimistic, 3. A dreamy, sensitive, poetic type, (or) 4. One without an occupation who lives or works *ad libitum*". *Shtekel dreier* is Yiddish.

†Hebrew, meaning "distinguished connections or genealogy". Originally the distinction of belonging to the family of a priest or scholar.

the various sects and groups in the *Shtetl*, no son of a *balebos** who resided in the Upper *Gass* would ever think of learning a trade. "Es *shtet nit on*" — it is not becoming to a nice *balebatish* boy. Whenever one of such *balebatishe* children went down to an alley in the Lower *Gass* and apprenticed himself to a master tailor or carpenter, respectable dwellers of the Upper *Gass* would turn up their noses.

Children were expected to walk in the footpaths of their fathers, and any deviation from the established rule provoked the disapproval of clannish Orinin.

But we, the sons of *klei kodesh*, those who worked in holiness, were in a class by ourselves. The son of the *rov* was expected to become a *rov*, and the son of a *shohet* had to be a *shohet* when he grew up. We were covered, and limited, by the law of *Hazokah*. By this law a *klei kodesh* had the right to bequeath his position to his sons. If he had no sons he could bequeath it to his son-in-law. Accordingly, my elder brother studied *Hilchos Shehitah* and was awarded the *semihah*, the authorization to become a *shohet*. I was the next in line, and I, too, was sent to a *yeshivah* to study and be a slaughterer of fowl and cattle.

But then came the revolution, and everything was uprooted. All of the laws, ukases, and edicts of the Czar were abolished. All limits, all restrictions, all do's and dont's were as if they had never existed. The *Krome Yevreyev*, "Except Jews", of the Czarist laws were declared null and void at one stroke and forgotten. All restrictions on living quarters or professions and divisions into sects and classes were removed. The *Shtetl* dwellers broke out of the yoke they had lived under all these years. They traveled over the length and breadth of Russia unrestrained. All professions were opened to them, and the sons and daughters of the *Shtetl* filled the trade schools and the universities of the land.

Is there any wonder that so many of us were infected with the fever of the Revolution and in those days became the most ardent followers of the new order?

The *Shtetl* as my generation remembers it was swept away in the storm of the Revolution. But as so often happens, everything was swept away, the good and the evil, the beautiful and the ugly, the spiritual together with the vulgar.

**Balebos*, from the Hebrew, refers to the owner of a store, shop, or establishment: a manager or superintendent; one who assumes authority; and ultimately the head of a household. *Balebatish*, the adjective, means "of some consequence," "responsible," and ultimately "quiet," "respectable," or "well-mannered."

THE HEDER

The *heder* was the Jewish answer to government schools. There was no compulsory attendance in school; hence the *Shtetl* took care of its own education system.

The *heder* was the most remarkable phenomenon in the life of the *Shtetl*. It was private and yet under the supervision of the parents. Since the parents were themselves products of the *heder*, they could follow the progress of their children in all stages. It was voluntary, yet with a degree of compulsion imposed by public opinion. Every Jewish child in the *Shtetl* had to attend a *heder*, any *heder*, and those who could not afford to pay tuition were assisted by community funds collected for such purposes. In larger towns the community supported a *Talmud Torah*, a place of study for the poor children. The rich and the poor children sat side by side, the *rebbe*, the teacher, usually favoring the poor child, because it is said in the *Talmud*:

“Be careful of the children of the poor,
because from them will come forth Torah”.

Heder means a room, a schoolroom, a form, but typically the *heder* was a room in the house of the *rebbe*. Children came to *heder* early in the morning and left for home late in the evening. We sat around a long rectangular table, on long hard benches, and learned from books placed in front of every student. We studied in a sing-song manner, the *rebbe* setting the tune and we repeating after him. Every once in a while the *rebbe* would stop in his recital and point to one or another of the pupils, asking him to read alone.

Woe to the pupil who did not know the place and just pretended to sing along with the class, moving his lips. No one could fool the *rebbe*. Not for long, at any rate.

A child came to *heder* at the age of three. By that time he knew quite a few things required of a Jewish boy. Some knew more, some less, depending on the home they came from. Before a child came to *heder* he knew the blessings over bread and water, and milk and wine, and fruits and vegetables. He knew the *modeh ani*, the morning prayer in which we give thanks to the Creator for giving us back our souls, in his great mercy. He also knew the *Shema Yisroel*, the admonition to every Jew to remember that God our Lord is One. And much more. Some children learned the entire *Aleph Beth*,* before coming to *heder*.

The first *heder* was at the house of the *dardeki melamed*, the teacher

*The Hebrew cognates of *alpha beta*, i.e. the “alphabet”.

of little children. *Dardak* means a "child", a youngster. Passing by the *dardeki heder* one could hear the sing-song of *Kometz Aleph* — *O, Kometz Beth* — *Bo*, and so on through the entire *Aleph Beth*, until all the letters were paired together, each consonant with each vowel, and each vowel with each consonant.

What was the method of teaching in the *heder*? Before explaining such things as methods, I must point out that the *dardeki melamed*, the teacher of beginners, was not at all versed in the psychology of children, or in methodology of teaching. The subject matter as well as the method were both handed down from generation to generation. The *rebbe* was not at all innovative or original in his method, which consisted of endless repetition. Day in, day out, we repeated the reading of the *rebbe* in the *siddur*,* the prayer book, which was the textbook par excellence, until we knew the entire text mostly by heart. The sing-song of teaching was a great aid to memory. The *rebbe* sang, and we emulated him. The text was remembered together with the melody.

Repetition, emulation, and singing were the old and proven methods of teaching in *heder*, especially so in the *heder* of the *dardeki malamed*.

The *kantchik*, the leather tongued whip, was the chief aid in teaching. The *dardeki melamed* and the *kantchik* were inseparable. The *melamed* would make the rounds of the table and listen to the sing-song of the children. With the *kantchik* poised in mid-air, he would bend an ear to the reading of each child. If something displeased him, it would come down on the shoulders of the pupil. The child would whimper a little and go on with the sing-song.

The *dardeki heder* had another institution, the *behelper*.** He was the assistant to the *rebbe*, an apprentice who was in training to become a *dardeki melamed* in his own right. His job was to bring the children in in the morning and take them back at sunset. He would walk with his flock ahead of him, carrying the weaker ones on his shoulders, holding on to the hands of the frightened ones, and singing with them the *Aleph Beth* or other songs of the *heder*. He would dress and undress the children in cold weather, and he was in charge of the lunches they brought with them. The *behelper* would have his meals at the house of a different child every week.

*Hebrew for the daily and Sabbath prayer book. Contains three daily services, the Sabbath prayers, in some editions the festival prayers, ethics of the Fathers, and special readings.

**Yiddish for "assistant" or "helper". From German *helfen*, "to help".

The *dardeki melamed* was the first step in the education of a child. After that came other *melamedim*, teachers of other *hedorim*. There was the teacher of *Humosh* and *Rashi*.^{*} There was the teacher of the Prophets, and the *gemoro*^{**} *melamed*. Each one would take the pupil one step further toward the completion of the standard course of study. After that, some went on to a *yeshivah*, a rabbinical school, but most helped their fathers in making a livelihood. Their education was over.

In presenting the *heder* and its system of instruction we should mention one more step in the learning process. It was called “*farheren*”,[†] listening. Every Sabbath afternoon the *rebbe* came to the house of the pupil and had the parents or some other person “listen” to the progress of the child. Some children would bring their books to the *rov* in *Beth Midrash* to show him what they had learned during that week. In this way the parents checked on the *rebbe* and his teachings. In this way also the uniformity of teaching was assured, so that the children of Orinin and the children of hundreds of other places, hundreds of miles away, knew the same prayers, the same *sidras* and *midrashim*, and were imbued with the same Jewish ideas. In a world without newspapers, journals, conventions, or schools for teachers, such uniformity was miraculous.

The year of the *heder* ended during the High Holidays. On these days, called *Bein Hazmanim*, in-between seasons, the *melamedim* of the various schools were seen around the *Shtetl*, visiting parents of children who would be prospective pupils in their *hders*.

Usually when one child of the family went to one *heder*, all of the others in their turn would attend the same *heder*. Calling on such a family was a mere formality. In the meantime the *rebbe* talked of various subjects to the man of the family, while the woman brought tea and cookies for the guest.

The relations between parents and teachers were very personal, very close, a relationship we miss in our schools today. We also miss the ceremony of the first day of a child in *heder*, when he was initiated into the study of *Torah*. There is hardly a person of my generation who does not remember that first day, with the father carrying the child to the *heder*, the mother bringing cooked chick-peas and raisins

**Humosh*, the five books of Moses, or the Pentateuch, synonymous with *Torah*. *Rashi*, abbreviation of Rabbi Shelomoh Yitzhak (Hebrew for Solomon ben Isaac) of Troyes, French Bible and Talmud scholar of the eleventh century.

***Gemoro* is one of the two basic parts of the *Talmud*.

†Yiddish, from the German *hören*, “to hear” or “listen”.

and candy to distribute among the children, and sweet cakes baked for the occasion and dropped from above the head of the pupil onto the pages of the *siddur* as he read each letter. That too was a means of bringing *rebbe* and pupil and parents together.

THE SHREIBER, A HEDER FOR GIRLS

Girls never attended the same *heder* as the boys in Orinin. The *Shtetl* rigidly observed the separation of sexes in education. The girls went to a different *heder*, they were taught different subjects, and their teacher was not dignified with the name of *rebbe*. He was called a *shreiber*,* a writer. While there were many *rebbes* in the *Shtetl*, there were only two *shreibers*, which means that parents did not feel obligated to send their daughters to school. To send a girl to a *shreiber* was considered a luxury.

The *shreiber* used a method which is, alas, used even today—copying. The first thing a *shreiber* did in his school was to write down the letters of the *Aleph Beth* on a sheet of paper with a pencil. The pupils were required to go over the letters with pen and ink. They would write the letters and repeat the names of the letters aloud.

Having learned the entire *Aleph Beth*, the girls were ready for a *Shurah Grisl*,** that is a Greeting Line. The girls would use their pencils and ruler and mark lines on the paper. The *shreiber* would write on the first line, and the girls would copy the same line on the rest of the paper. They would go from the simple to the complex, from the familiar to the novel, from the easy to the difficult. They would learn to write their names, their father's and mother's names, the name of Orinin. Later they would learn to copy sayings, moral and ethical concepts, and proverbs. Why it was called *Shurah Grisl* no one really knew. But from copying these single lines, the girls gained fundamental knowledge and folk wisdom.

After copying a *Shurah Grisl*, the girls were given textbooks which were called *brivenshteler*,† letter writing handbooks. They were soft covered booklets, sold by the traveling booksellers when they came to Orinin. The *brivenshtelers* did not have the same standing as the *siddur*, the prayer books. From the *brivenshteler* the girls learned how to write a letter, an art that is still taught in the secretarial schools.

*Yiddish, from the German, *Schreiber*, "writer".

**Yiddish. From the German, *Gruss*, "greeting". *Grisl* is a diminutive.

†Yiddish. From the German: *Brief* means "letter" (*briefen* is plural). In German, *Briefsteller* is a "letter-writer".

There were business letters, of course. But mainly these letters related to episodes in the life of a Jewish girl. A letter of invitation to a wedding, and a letter accepting such an invitation. A letter of introduction to the future mother-in-law and a letter telling of accomplishments to the future father-in-law. A letter to a friend telling of yearnings for the bride-groom and a letter from a friend who was married and moved away to a strange town and, alas, not so happy in marriage. Romantic letters and letters expressing sorrow at the loss of someone dear or close.

The letters in the *brivenshteler* were printed in Yiddish, and the girls had to copy them in Yiddish script. The letter handbooks were kept at home and copied many times even when one was not a pupil at the *shreiber*. They were used as models for writing letters. The books are a rarity now, and are kept in libraries and museums. The Yiddish of these handbooks is mixed with Germanic expressions, for this was the style of the day. The spelling of Yiddish words was also in the style of those days and followed the Germanic orthography.

But with all its shortcomings the girls had a secular education, something the boys never received.

Strange as it may seem the *shreiber* also taught the girls arithmetic and elements of geography. One *shreiber* also taught the girls Russian, a tongue the boys were expected to pick up from the streets of the *Shtetl*.

A few parents taught their daughters *Humosh* and *Rashi*. A *rebbe* would come to the house to teach the daughters what the boys learned in *heder*, and he also taught them to write in Yiddish. But boys and girls never learned together in the same *heder*. Sex education was considered anathema.

A new refreshing wind began to blow in Orinin. During the first decade of the new century modern Hebrew Schools were opened in many towns in the vicinity, Orinin among them. The modern features of the Hebrew Schools consisted of the following:

1. A house, a special house, for this purpose was hired. The house was furnished with desks and blackboards, and the pupils were seated in alphabetical order. They even wore a uniform and were called by their given names.

2. Teachers, actual teachers, were hired. They were mostly young and graduates of teachers courses offered somewhere in Odessa or Kiev. These teachers wore modern clothing, shaved their beards, and spoke Hebrew.

3. Hebrew speaking was a novelty in Orinin. While everyone knew Hebrew, nobody spoke it in everyday affairs. It was considered a Holy Tongue and not to be profaned by mundane usage. The teachers in the modern Hebrew School spoke Hebrew and taught history and even geography and arithmetic in Hebrew. And singing. Nobody ever heard of a school in which time, precious time, was given to singing. They sang songs of Zion and of nature and even of love.

No boys were going to waste time singing and reading stories and poems written by the new writers. And so the modern Hebrew Schools were for all practical purposes during the first years of their existence mostly schools for girls. Here again the girls had the advantage over boys.

In time the Hebrew Schools became co-educational. The *heder*, the *rebbe*, and with them the *kantchik*, were on their way out in Orinin, as indeed in all other towns.

And yet, the *heder*, as an institution, with its emphasis on traditions, with its home-like atmosphere and its close *rebbe*-pupil-parent relationship, and above all in its voluntary yet obligatory nature, has never been duplicated in modern education.

WHAT DID THE CHILDREN DO IN THE SHTETL?

Orinin had little to offer in the way of entertainment, so we entertained ourselves. We were the actors. We were the audience. We had no movies, no radio, no TV, no playground, no band, nor orchestra or concert singers, not even funny books, all of the things that take up so much of the time of children in America. We had no organized games or sports. But do not make the mistake of thinking that Orinin lacked excitement, that life was always bleak and that children were forever depressed. Nothing is further from the truth.

The *heder* took up most of the day, but the *heder* was a warm place, both literally and figuratively. When the wind and snow raged outside in winter, we were kept warm and secure. At such times the *rebbe* told us tales of long ago. Tales of heroes and epics of great men and women. In *heder* we heard about the exploits of Deborah and Barak, about Samson and Delilah, about the Maccabees and Bar Kochba, about the Rambam* and Abarbanel, about lost tribes and the restless River Sambatian. Stories of kings and queens, of judges and prophets, of great joy and deep tragedy. And all of these things happened in distant lands, across the Great Ocean, under different skies. And these skies

*Hebrew, abbreviation for Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, Maimonides.

became as familiar to us in our imagination as the crooked streets and narrow alleys of Orinin.

But also games and diversions occupied our time, games suited to various seasons and climates.

The snowdrifts in Orinin were as high as the houses themselves. The snow lay undisturbed except on the Main Street, where people and animals had trodden a path for themselves. It lay unsmeared in the back of the houses and in between the houses until the spring thaw. We dug tunnels underneath the snowdrifts, and built castles and ramparts around them. None had ever seen a castle or been in a tunnel, but we built them from stories we had heard and above all from our own imagination.

The river around Orinin was frozen most of the winter months. We made "skates" for ourselves, which were no more than pieces of wood tied to the shoes with strings or wire—plus a little imagination.

We made sleds to slide down the hill. The sleds, like everything else, were homemade. All one needed were two side boards, some narrow pieces of wood, and plenty of nails. The two boards were made smooth by rubbing them with a stone until they would slide over snow or ice, and the shorter pieces of wood served to hold the two boards together and also to hold the rider. The sleds were carried up to the top of the highest hill in Orinin, called "Mount Sinai", and we would come down triumphantly into the valley below. There were many mishaps — the sled would collapse, the rider would spill, sleds would collide — but these were the hazards of sledding. We expected them. We welcomed them.

But most of the games were invented during spring and summer evenings. There were swimming places on either side of Orinin, two for boys and two for girls. As soon as supper was over we would rush to the river, unbuttoning our shirts and trousers as we ran, and jump into the water in the nude. Nudity was not a crime in the *Shtetl*. We didn't know one could swim otherwise.

On summer evenings we would go fishing. We fished for anything the fishing pole brought up. The poles of course were homemade. They were simply long rods, soft and elastic, freshly cut from the willows that grew in abundance at the river bank, with a long string tied at the end, and a crooked pin attached to the string. There were plenty of earthworms near the river, or we would attach a piece of dry bread for bait. The worms wiggled out of our pins, and the

bread was eaten up by the fish, but we stood in the stillness of the summer evening and watched little fish splash in the water, make a pass at our hooks, and disappear.

A very popular game was called "Sticks and Stones". It was our football and golf and hockey combined, with some elements of each of these games. We chose sides on the big square of the horse market, and stood facing each other in two rows. Each player had a heavy stick, preferably with a knob at its head. At a signal from the head player each side hit its stone, a round, smooth rock that was kept hidden in a corner of the square. Both sides tried to keep the opponent's rock out of its territory. It was our task to hit the stone as it approached our side. There were rules and regulations, usually made up on the spur of the moment. But the one rule that everyone had to observe was never to use hands, either to throw a stone or to chase away a player from the opposite side. We could use our bodies to push away the players, but could never touch them with our hands.

Needless to say girls were excluded from these games. The girls had games of their own, chief among which was *cheichen*. They picked up seven smooth little stones, hardly more than pebbles found on the shore of the water and would sit down in a circle on one of the lawns. Each had a larger pebble of her own in addition to the seven smaller ones required in the game. This was considered the lucky stone. The trick was to hold the lucky stone in the palm of the hand and to pick up as many of the smaller pebbles as one could with that hand. The adept girls, and there were famous champions in Orinin, could pick up as many as five or six at a time. But before anyone won the game, there would be arguments, and sometimes they came to blows. One could hear the noise and commotion blocks away.

On rainy days we played at being musicians. The fiddles were made of thin pliable boards shaped into violins. Strings for the violins and bows were obtained from the tails of horses. We made wind instruments from hollow reeds that grew along the shore of the river, cutting little vents in the reeds, and fashioning a slanting mouthpiece at one end. Some of the boys were lucky enough to have clay birds and trumpets that were sold during the fair held in Orinin by an itinerant artisan. For cymbals and drums we borrowed kettles, sieves, pots, and pans from the kitchen, and hoped that no one would find out about it. We gathered in the attic of the house of one of the boys and played to our hearts' content.

The girls played ball against a wall. They would bounce a ball to

and from the wall, and all the others would count: Not one. Not two. Not three. When the player failed to catch the ball on the rebound, another girl would take her place. It wasn't simple, and no game was over without quarrels. But the girls played and chanted for hours — nonsensical songs that no one understood.

The girls also played with hoops around the square, and "covering the bride", each one dressed in her mother's old clothes and talking mother talk.

All in all boys and girls were inventive and filled their free time without interference from their elders. What is more, these games, there were dozens of them, were accompanied by songs and ditties that were a mixture of Yiddish and Ukrainian, some with nonsense words that were incomprehensible to us. They were probably handed down from time immemorial, from parents to children, and were a part of the games.

HOUSES OF WORSHIP IN ORININ

There were five houses of worship in Orinin. Three of them stood side by side, so that the singing and the chanting in one could be heard in the others. The other two were a little farther removed down by the river bank. The five houses of worship were designated as the Old *Beth Midrash*, the New *Beth Midrash*, the *Zinkover Klois*, the *Tchortkover Klois*, and the Old *Shul*.

The worshippers in these houses of worship represented the various shades of difference in the population of the *Shtetl*. The Old and the New *Beth Midrash* attracted the solid *balebatim* of Orinin. They were the well-to-do, the merchants, and all dwelled on the Main Street and on the *Variatsky Gass*. The *Zinkover Klois* was so-called because its worshippers followed an Hasidic *rebbe* of the town of Zinkov, who was a descendant of the *Apter Rov*. The *Tchortkover Klois*, sometimes also called the *Sadigurer Klois*, were followers of the Hasidic *rebbe*s who held court in those Galician towns. But the largest and the most impressive house of worship was the Old *Shul*. It was so-called because no one among the living knew when and by whom the *shul* was built. While the other four houses of worship were nothing more than simple two-room houses, one room for men and the other for women, the Old *Shul* was architecturally distinct. The *Shul* was a conglomerate of several buildings added to the main structure. Its windows were small and were tucked away at the top of the high walls, near the roof. It had no heat, and in the fall and winter worshippers did not take off their overcoats. It was therefore also known as the Cold *Shul*.

The *mizrah*, or the eastern wall, was taken up almost entirely by the intricately carved Holy Ark and the *hazan's* stand. A few steps led up to the Holy Ark, which contained several *Sefer Torahs* of ancient origin. Copper candelabras hung from the beams of the roof. They were lit only on holidays and Sabbath Eves. Attached to the main *Shul* was the women's gallery, way up near the roof. One of the buildings, really a lean-to attached to the *Shul*, was the repository of *shemos*, a general name for all torn prayer books, *Humoshim*, and dog-eared Psalms and *Tehinos*, prayers for women. They were not to be thrown away, but kept forever because they contained the name of God.

Another lean-to was used as the chapel during weekdays, and for "dissenters", those who preferred for some reason to worship by themselves on Sabbaths and festivals.

The Old *Shul* was built as already described in the lowest part of Orinin. Besides, the worshippers had to go down a few steps before entering the *Shul* proper.

Now, we are told, the Old *Shul* has been torn down, after it was used as a stable for the Cossack horses. The *shemos* were probably unceremoniously disposed of either by fire or by scattering to the winds. Nobody will ever know how many generations brought their old torn books for safe-keeping in the *Shul*. Lost with the *shemos* is also the secret of the first builders of the first house of worship in Orinin. The only witness to the *shul* are the waters of the river that lapped the foundation of the structure, and probably still laps the same foundation, but without the *shul* or worshippers of over three hundred years.

Every wedding in the *Shtetl* took place on the little square before the Old *Shul*. Under the starry skies the *huppa*, the wedding canopy, was put up, and the entire population crowded to see the ceremony.

Traditionally every house of worship had a distinct function. The Old *Beth Midrash* provided the platform for every *magid*, itinerant speaker, who came to Orinin. On a Saturday afternoon the house would be crowded with listeners who came to hear him. Some *magidim* were amusing, some were eloquent, some would exhort. Others could tell tales of woe and awaken sympathy for their predicament. On the next day the *magid* and the *shamos* would go from house to house to collect fees for his talk.

The *Zinkover Klois* congregation sang and danced much more than others in the *Shtetl*. Once a year the Rebbe from Zinkov would come to Orinin for a Sabbath. The *Shtetl Hasidim* would go out on the high-

way to meet the *rebbe*. About a mile from Orinin, near the forest, the *rebbe* and his entourage would stop, and the young *Hasidim* would unhitch the horses and pull the phaeton into town by themselves. On the Post Road the older *Hasidim* would crowd around the *rebbe* and shake his hands, while the younger ones would dance and sing around him. A weekend of singing in the *Zinkover Klois* would follow, and dinners and suppers and dancing till all hours of the night. The *rebbe* has come to Orinin!

The *Tchortkover Hasidim* had not had such a Sabbath. The *rebbe* had never come to town from his residence in Galicia, a district of Austria only a few miles from Orinin. Instead they made a pilgrimage to the court of Tchortkov, or Sadigura, once a year. In their house of worship one could always find a group of people who were bent over volumes of *Talmud* absorbed in study. The *Tchortkover* were the scholars of Orinin. The western wall of the *klois* was covered with shelves filled with volumes of the *Talmud*, the *Midrash*, and commentaries on the Scriptures.

But it had fallen to the New *Beth Midrash*, the least pretentious of the houses of worship in Orinin, to provide living quarters for the *rov*. The house was divided into two halves with a corridor between them. On rainy Sabbaths, and more lately when the *rov* had been sickly, the doors of the *Beth Midrash* were left open and also the door to the room of the *rov* so that the old man could sit draped in his *tallis** and listen to the worship. When the weather was pleasant and the *rov* was in good health, he would leave his house early in the morning and go to the *Tchortkover Klois*, where he had a seat next to the Holy Ark.

I knew every corner of these houses of worship as well as I knew our own house. They are gone forever.

THE ROV OF ORININ

The *rov* was the final authority on what was *kosher** and what was *tref*,** what was clean and what was unclean, what was permitted, and what was forbidden to a Jew. He derived this authority by virtue of years of study in the *yeshivah*, the rabbinical school, and by ordination before he accepted the call to be a *rov* to Jews. His verdict was final, and no one dared contradict him.

*Hebrew, "prayer shawl".

***Kosher*, Hebrew, "fit to eat," ritually clean according to the dietary laws. *Tref*, Hebrew, animal not slain according to ritual law; any food which is not Kosher.

The *rov* belonged to the entire community, but no one ever met him on the streets or in public places. He sat constantly at a long table strewn with open books of varying sizes and thickness and seldom spoke to anyone. His main duty was to *pashken a shaaloh*, to rule upon an inquiry. These inquiries were on a variety of subjects:

What was the housewife to do when a dairy dish was mingled with meat dishes?

A chicken was seemingly slaughtered by the *shohet*, but on the way home it came alive, ran away, and expired a little while later. Is the chicken *kosher* or *tref*?

The innards of the goose were exposed, and a rusty nail was found in the gizzard. Should the entire goose be discarded?

There were also questions relating to puberty, menstruation, and infidelity.

In such cases, whenever a woman came into the house, the *rov* would cover his face with his hand and call his wife from the kitchen. She served as the interlocutor. The woman making the inquiry asked the question of the *rebbetzen*, the *rov's* wife, who would transmit the question to the *rov*, who then consulted some books if the *shaaloh* was a difficult one. He next pronounced his decision to the *rebbetzen*, who transmitted it to the inquiring woman.

Thus, the *rov* would be spared the sin of being alone in the same room with a woman not his wife, speaking to a woman not his wife, or coming in contact with a strange woman when there was a need of examining a chicken or goose or any object brought in as evidence.

Jews seldom went to courts of law. In the first place there were no courts to settle litigations in Orinon. In the second place the proceedings in the courts in the big city nearby were extremely slow and cumbersome. When two Jews had a case of contention between them, they resorted to arbitration. Each picked an arbitrator, and they came before the *rov* and presented their arguments. The *rov* listened and gave his decision after consulting rabbinical precedents. The two sides abided by that decision. It was not the decision of the *rov*; it was the opinion of the rabbis of old.

Twice a year the *rov* spoke at one of the houses of worship. On *Shabbat Hagadol*, the Great Sabbath before Passover, he spoke in the Old *Shul*. On *Shabbat Bereshis*, the Sabbath when the *Torah* is rolled back to the *Sidrah Bereshis*, to be read again for the coming

year, an event that takes place after *Succot*, he spoke again. And that was the extent of his public utterances.

The *rov* had no contract with the *Shtetl* and no fixed wages. His subsistence was derived from two sources: from donations and from yeast.

Whenever a man was given an *aliyah*, the honor of going up to the reader's desk where the seven weekly portions of the *Torah* are read every Sabbath and on holidays, he would donate toward the livelihood of the *rov*. Each gave according to his means. From these donations the *rov* received his wages. The *shammos*, the sexton of each house of worship, would collect the sum given by the donor and bring it to the *rov*. The second source of income was from the sale of yeast for the Sabbath bread, the *halē*, which Jewish housewives baked every Friday. A penny's worth of yeast was sufficient for a family. The *rov* had a monopoly on the sale of yeast, and the storekeeper who sold yeast to housewives was guilty of *masig gvul*, infringement on the rights of another person, in this case the *rov's* livelihood. *Hasogas gvul*, infringement on someone's territory or means of livelihood, was a great offense.

Another source of income for the *rov* was the sale on Passover Eve by Jews to non-Jews of non-Passover foods and grains. This was called *mechiras hometz*, selling of the leaven. The *rov* was the seller of the *hometz* for the entire community. It was a token sale, of course, and the sales contract was null and void the day after Passover.

The *rov* was highly respected in Orinin, as well as in other towns, because of his piety, scholarship, and impartiality.

As time went on, the town was left without a *rov*. He had passed away, and none of his heirs was suited to take his place. In such cases the *hazokoh*, the right of perpetuation of the office in the family, returned to the community.

But Orinin could not decide upon a single *rov*. Two factions arose in the community, and each brought in a *rov* of its own. The *Shtetl* was divided, and friends of yesterday became enemies of today. They were at loggerheads, one against the other.

Unfortunately, the days of the *Shtetl* were numbered, and both factions, each with its own *rov*, were doomed to extinction. Came the Russian Revolution. Came the Second World War and the Nazis. The *Shtetl* disappeared.

The old *rov* was spared all this.

A YARID IN THE SHTETL

The livelihood of the *Shtetl* depended on the *yarid*, which was held once or twice a week. In Orinin the *yarid*, the market day, was held on Tuesday and Sunday. Merchants, peasants, horse dealers, and artisans of all kinds mingled on this day. People watched the skies days before the *yarid* to foretell the weather for the market days.

Yarid, by the way, is a Hebrew word, meaning a place where people get together for selling and buying or exchanging merchandise. In Yiddish the word *yarid* took on the meaning, in addition to that of a market place, of confusion, noise, disorder. Sholem Aleichem, the Jewish humorist, compared life itself to a *yarid*. You come full of hope and expectation, run around, hustle and bustle, take a lick of this, a smell of that, and at the end of the *yarid*, when the evening of life approaches, you feel empty, disillusioned, and are very tired. Such was the *yarid* in the *Shtetl*.

Orinin had four market places for the *yarid*. The largest of the four was the horse market. Horse dealers came from far and wide and parked their horses and wagons around the stone fence of the *Pravoslavny* church. With the break of dawn, peasants from the surrounding villages congregated in the square, each leading a few horses nicely combed, their harnesses attractively decorated, glistening in the sun, impatiently neighing and stamping. Buyers approached sellers and the drama of the *yarid* began.

The horse dealer would hold out the palm of the peasant's hand and ask: "How much for this undernourished horse?"

The peasant would grab the outstretched hand of the dealer and reply: "You call this an undernourished horse? Why, look at his calves! See how impatient he is! He wants to be harnessed to a wagon!"

The peasant would quote an impossible sum of money.

The horse dealer would begin to laugh. He called to his partner. After telling him the sum of money asked for the horse, they would both laugh aloud. While all the time the dealer held onto the peasant's palm. The other partner would in the meantime look the horse over from all sides. He would look at his mouth, kick his shins, pull him by the tail, drive him through the square. The dealer would raise the price while the peasant would lower it, to the accompaniment of slaps on the palms. The quotations would fly back and forth, and the slaps would grow in frequency and intensity, until finally they arrived at some price much lower than the peasant asked for, and much higher

than the dealer wanted to pay at the start. At the end buyer and seller departed to the nearby saloon and drank "Na Zdorovia", To Health! and everything ended happily.

The second market place was for general merchandise. Itinerant merchants would put up tents the night before and sleep in them. When morning came, they opened the tents and displayed a dazzling array of manufactured goods. There were ornaments and jewelry, ribbons and kerchiefs, scissors and knives, ikons and candles, crucifixes and beads. And the colors of the merchandise, the flattery of the merchants, the bargaining of the buyers, these were all part of the *yarid*. The merchants in the tents came from Great Russia. They were called *katzapes*, and they were recognized by their dress: high boots, wide trousers tucked in the boots, and billowing white shirts tied together with wide colorful belts. On their heads they wore small caps with leather visors. They always held long pliable whips in their hands to scare away intruders such as cats, dogs, and pigs and to crack over the hands of would-be pilferers. The children would fear them and at the same time were attracted by them and their wares.

We were fascinated by the toys which they displayed. They had trumpets made of tin, singing birds made of clay, drums and drumsticks beautifully carved and colored. And they had wooden soldiers painted with colorful costumes. But what could we buy for the kopek we were allowed for the *yarid*? We stood open-mouthed and watched.

The third square was used for the grain market. The merchants had storage bins for corn and barley, for sunflower and caraway seeds, for wheat and buckwheat. The merchants held scales in their hands and weighed out the bundles brought by the peasants' wives. It was less colorful than the horse market but more business-like.

Down by the river, where the slaughterhouse stood on the hill, was the market place for lambs, goats, calves, and sheep. The noise in that market place was not that of buyers and sellers, but the baaing and mooing of the animals as they were being separated from their herds.

But the *yarid* spilled over into the side streets and alley-ways of Orinin as well. There was hardly a house that was not involved in the *yarid*. At one place women bought chickens and geese and eggs from the peasants. In front of houses people put up little tents and displayed pots and pans, seives and funnels. Artisans of all kinds sold their wares and implements. Coopers made barrels right on the spot,

and the rope maker walked back and forth with wads of flax around his loins as he twisted lengths of rope for the waiting peasant.

A most exciting place was the farm tool and implement market. Peasants would pick up a scythe, a sickle, or plow. They would listen to the sound the implements made as they hit them against a stone, and from the sound they would decide whether to buy.

There were smaller merchants who bought a bunch of rareripes or garlic, pumpkin seed, or dried beans. Everybody was busy on the days of the *yarid*. But when evening came and the peasants departed, the out-of-town merchants drove off with their spirited horses and wagons, the tents and stands were folded, and the horse dealers gathered the horses they had bought and sent them off to the nearby Galician border, peace descended upon the *Shtetl*, and people began to prepare for the next *yarid*.

Not bad, the *Shtetl* people would say to one another. But it could be better. Maybe next *yarid*. Next week.

The *Shtetl* would return to normal. Normal worries. Normal anxieties. Normal petty squabbles.

LOVE IN THE SHTETL

Boys and girls of Orinin, as of any *Shtetl*, were paired off at an early age. The mother of a girl who had her eye on a boy of a friend would send a *shadchen*, a matchmaker, to the parents of the boy, and the *shiduch*, the engagement was arranged. The boy and the girl both attended *heder* and played hoops nearby yet never spoke to one another. But for all practical purposes they were engaged to be married.

Two *Hasidim* met at the court of their *rebbe*. It turned out that one had a son and the other a daughter; so they arranged an engagement. They then drank to the *hoson-kaloh*, the bridegroom and bride-to-be, and the *rebbe* wished them health and good fortune. The two shook hands and made a *tkias kaf*, a hand-shake in the presence of other *Hasidim*. A *tkias kaf* had the power of an official agreement. It could not be broken.

The boys and girls were left out of the agreement entirely. The boy received the traditional gold watch and chain and was known as the *hoson bohur*. The girl received a beautiful kerchief, and became known as *kaloh moid*. Both of them continued whatever they were doing in their parents' homes. Nothing was changed, although the *Shtetl* knew that they were engaged to be married.

Most boys and girls became engaged through a *shadchen* or a *shadchente*. Both men and women were proficient in the profession. The *shadchen*, the male matchmaker, usually brought together out-of-town couples, while the *shadchente*, the female matchmaker, had a local clientele.

A successful matchmaker had an abundance of patience. He (or she) would come to a prospective client on a Saturday afternoon for a visit and a glass of tea. They would be dressed in their Saturday best, and would talk about everything under the sun, until the *hoson* or *kaloh* were mentioned in a round-about way. The parents knew what the matchmaker wanted, but no one mentioned it.

When the *shadchen* was encouraged in his conversation, he would proceed further, lavishing praise upon the bride or bridegroom. But when he sensed a reluctance on the part of the parents to continue the matter, the *shadchen* would bring the conversation around to another prospect for marriage. The *shadchen* knew everyone in the *Shtetl* and knew the foibles of each family. He must be careful of the sensitivities of parents. But when the match was made, the two young people were not consulted. The match was between the two families and not between the young people.

There were certain basic principles that every *shadchen* or *shadchente* had to observe in bringing a prospective match to a family:

1. *Yihus*, lineage, or caste, if you please. Lines were drawn between rich and poor, *balebos* and laborer, dwellers of the upper and lower streets. These lines were seldom crossed. The son of a tailor was not good enough for the daughter of a *balebos*. But it was different if the son of a poor water carrier happened to be a scholar, a *Ben Torah*. In such cases the *shadchen* would be sent to the *yeshivah* in the town where the boy was studying, and the brilliant boy would be selected for the rich daughter of the merchant in the *Shtetl*. A scholar, a *sharfer kop*,* a *masmid* in the *yeshivah*, a diligent student transcended *yihus*. Such was the value the *Shtetl* put upon learning and scholarship. Every poor mother dreamed of her son becoming a scholar and being chosen by a rich man as his son-in-law.

2. Names, first names, had to be gone into before a match could be brought up. The name of the mother of the *hoson* and that of the *kaloh* could never be the same. In some families it was considered bad luck for the father of the bride and the *hoson* to have the same first name.

*“Sharp head”. Yiddish.

3. Priesthood could not be violated. A widow or a divorced woman were forbidden to a Cohen, a man of the priestly family. Every man with the last name of Cohen, Kahn, Katz, Kaganowitz, Kaplan, or Kagan was most certainly a descendant of priests. But even when the last name did not suggest priesthood, there were family traditions, handed down from time immemorial, from father to son, about their genealogy. A *shadchen* had to make sure about his prospects.

4. "Blemishes" on either side could not be overlooked. Apostasy in the family, no matter how distant a relative involved, was considered a blemish. *Farflecken di mishpacho*, to soil the family, was an unforgettable offense.

In all of this the feeling of the *hoson* and the *kaloh* were not taken into account. Tradition and family considerations came first. Love was not a prerequisite to marriage.

The task of the matchmakers was not over with the bringing together of *hoson-kaloh*. There were many obstacles to overcome. There was the delicate deliberation about the *nadan*, the dowry, and the promise of board and room to the *hoson*. The parents of the bridegroom always held out for a greater dowry and insisted on a longer term of board and room from the parents of the bride. At any moment the *shiduch*, the engagement, was in danger of being dissolved. *Oploson a shiduch*, to let an engagement dissolve, was even worse than a divorce. The shame to the bride and her family was more than they could bear. The matchmakers shuttled between the two sides until a compromise satisfactory to both sides was reached.

Then and only then did the *shadchen* and the *shadchente* receive their commissions. There was no set fee. The greater the *nadan* and the promise of support, the larger the commission.

Matchmaking came into disuse by the time my generation was ready for marriage. A quiet revolution had taken place in Orinian and in the towns all around. Boys and girls met on their own in various places. We met in the *Beth Am*, which was at once a community center, (People's House), a library, and a lecture hall. We met on the Doroshka, the pathway which divided the two streams of the Big River, one continuing its course around the town of Orinian and the other diverted to turn the stone of its grist mill. The Doroshka ran for about half a mile between the two streams and was a shaded place, very quiet, very romantic. We would walk back and forth on the Doroshka and would observe the moon rise, and the willows by the river grow pensive, and the cicadas chirp away through the long evening.

The matchmaker continued to practice his skill for many years, but for most of us it was considered "old-fashioned," a relic of days gone by. We were emancipated. Little did we know that matchmaking was still going on — in America! Loneliness is not limited to the *Shtetl*. One can be lonely in the big cities as well.

WELFARE IN THE SHTETL

No one went hungry in the *Shtetl*. Poverty there was, but hunger did not exist. The poor did not know where tomorrow's meals would come from, but for today their needs were provided for by neighbors.

Widows and orphans were first on the list. Every *balaboste*, the wife of a merchant or store keeper, as she baked her weekly supply of bread would bake an extra loaf for a widow. Every Friday when the same *balaboste* baked her *halē*, the white twisted bread for the Sabbath, she would also braid an extra *halē* for the poor. And so it was for the Holidays. The poor did not have delicacies, but they did not lack bread. The portions of bread and meat and other necessities were sent to the home of the widow or sick in secret. The woman of the house would send one of her children with a covered basket. The child was told to leave it on the kitchen table and tell the widow that mother had sent what she owes her.

The poor, the sick, the orphaned, and the widowed were cared for by the *noshim tzidkonioth*, the good-hearted women of the *Shtetl*. The men contributed to a general fund that was maintained by the *gabbai*, the elected head of each house of worship.

There was a fund for *hachnosath orhim*, the sheltering of the strangers. When a poor stranger came to town he immediately repaired to a house of worship. There he was sure to find a place where he could rest his feet from the long walk from the last *Shtetl*. In the evening worshippers would come, would greet him with *Sholom Alechem*, and inquire where he came from and when he was leaving. The *shammos* took him to an inn and then to a *balebos* for supper. On Sabbath Eve strangers were particularly numerous. I hardly remember a meal without an *orah*, as the strangers were called. A guest for Sabbath was the norm rather than the exception.

Hachnosath kaloh literally means "bringing the bride under the canopy". There was a fund for the purpose of providing a full wardrobe for the bride of the poor. This included *nadan*, a dowry, no matter how small; a bed, chairs, and table; and kitchen utensils. Very often a stranger would come to the *Shtetl* bearing a letter from his *rov*

(rabbi) stating that the bearer was the father of a grown daughter in need of a dowry. The *gabbai* saw to it that the stranger did not leave the town empty-handed.

A *nisraf*, a man who was impoverished by a fire, was a common visitor to the *Shtetl*. He, too, brought with him a letter from the *rov* of his town testifying that a fire had consumed everything the man possessed, and that he was worthy of receiving aid from the town. He was not only given assistance from the common fund, but was recommended to a select few who helped him rebuild his house and restore his livelihood.

Moes hittim, money for wheat, was an annual charity that was scrupulously observed. This institution, which was brought to America and is still observed, is very ancient. Jews could not conceive of the idea that a person would sit at his Seder table loaded with all of the Passover foods, while another sat at an empty table. So much was this tradition observed, that it was said of *Moes Hittim*: either one gives, or one takes. More gave than took.

Bikur Holim, visiting the sick, was the duty of the entire *Shtetl*. It involved sitting at the bedside of the patient all night so that the family would be able to sleep. Men or women were hired for this purpose and paid from the community fund. The men sat all night chanting psalms, while the women read *techinos*, supplications for women.

Hevrah Kadisha, the Holy Society, was another of the Jewish institutions brought to this country from overseas. When someone died, the *Hevrah Kadisha* took over the arrangements for the funeral. The body of the deceased was washed, purified, and dressed in the *tachrichim* (the shrouds), and wrapped in the *tallis* (the prayer shawl), which every male had used while he was among the living. The body was carried on the shoulders of the members of the *Hevrah Kadisha* by a route mapped out by the society: From the house to the house of worship where the deceased had prayed, to the Old *Shul*, and then to the cemetery. All of the time, the *shammos* would precede the funeral procession with a metal box and cry: *Tzedaka Tatziil Mi'moves*, "Charity saves from Death". The money collected would be used for funerals of the poor.

Every once in a while an appeal would come to the *rov* or the *gabbai* for *Pidyon Shvuyim*, "Ransom of the Captives". This goes back to the days when Jews would be captured and brought to a Jewish community for redemption money. This was practiced quite commonly during the Dark Ages. The *Shtetl* was called upon to aid in the defense of a

Jew who was falsely accused of some offense which he did not commit. Aid for this purpose was also called *Pidyon Shruyim*, "redemption of the innocent", and immediately dispatched wherever it was needed.

Eretz Yisroel, the Land of Israel, always sent out emissaries, *meshulachim*, for various purposes. It might be a *yeshivah* they could not support by themselves, or a hospital that needed help. Sometimes the emissary himself was stranded and would ask for a return ticket. Emissaries from *Eretz Yisroel* were in a class by themselves and were aided generously.

There were a dozen funds to which the *balabos* contributed annually. On the eve of *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, the entrance hall to the house of worship provided some idea of the extent of charitable funds to which every Jew had to contribute. Dozens of plates were arranged on a long table. Each plate had a card near it telling the name of the charity, and every Jew entering the house of worship left something in the plate.

The town was small, and the needs were many, but the Jews gave as much as their means would allow. The donations were voluntary. The *Shtetl* had no power of coercion. But the funds were always well subscribed.

SABBATH IN ORININ

All who have written of the *Shtetl* have marveled at the miraculous change that came over it as soon as the Sabbath arrived.

The inhabitants threw off their workday yokes and became Sabbath princes. The men and their women and children all took on an extra *Neshomoh*, a Sabbath soul. The interior of the houses, the clothes of the people, the very streets of the *Shtetl* had another—worldly aspect.

The transformation took place on Friday afternoon, for which Jews have a name, *Erev Shabos*,* the Eve of Sabbath, not just another day of the week. The *Shamos* of the Old *Shul* would make the rounds of the *Shtetl* streets, stopping at every second or third house, and in a hoarse voice chanting: "*In Shul Arein! In Shul Arein! In Shul Arein!*" "To the synagogue! To the synagogue! To the synagogue!"

Immediately the stores would be shut down, transportation would stop, and all business dealings would come to a standstill. Soon the *balegoles*** would roll down the hill, bringing passengers home, and

*Yiddish. *Erev Shabbat* in Hebrew.

**Drivers of wagons or phaetons for hire.

merchants in their one-horse coaches would quicken their steeds to get to the stables with all dispatch.

Out of the houses came fathers and sons, hurrying to the public bath with towels and underwear under their arms. With water dripping from beards and heads, they would rush back to their houses to dress for the Sabbath. The women, mothers and daughters, would set the table for the Sabbath meal and put finishing touches on the houses. Black clothes for the men. White linen cloths on the tables. The women dressed in their Sabbath best. The whole house would take on a Sabbath mood.

Mother would bless the candles while the whole family stood around her. She would cover her eyes with both hands, her lips moving in prayer, and then she would greet everyone with: "*Good Shabos. Good Shabos*" ("Good Sabbath, Good Sabbath.")

The same procedure would be repeated in hundreds of homes in the *Shtetl*. Tables set with *halē* and wine. Candle flames swaying. From now on no work will be done. No fire lit. No hilarity allowed. No music played. No dancing allowed. No frivolity tolerated. The day of rest has arrived.

Father and sons would walk slowly to the houses of worship along quiet streets past cheerfully lit houses, joined by neighbors as they approach the synagogues.

Again greetings of "*Good Shabos*" when father returns and he chants the *Sholom Aleichem* ("Peace to you, Angels of Peace. Come in peace, bless us with peace, and depart in peace, you Angels of Peace"). Father also sings the *Eshes Hayil*, a Woman of Valor. While the family stands, father sings the *Kiddush*, the sanctification of the wine, and everyone sips from the cup.

Supper lasts longer than any other evening meal, and the meals are different, special for the Sabbath. The *Zmiroth* (hymns), the chants between courses, are part of the Sabbath supper. *Zmiroth* of thanksgiving. *Zmiroth* of exultation. *Zmiroth* of prayers for the rebuilding of the Holy Temple and the coming of a day which is wholly Sabbath.

The Sabbath day is devoted entirely to prayer, study, and rest. The Sabbath prayers last a long time and the family remains in the *Beth Midrash*, the House of Study, from early morning till late in the afternoon. After a Sabbath nap father returns to the *Beth Midrash* to study, to hear a *magid*, a preacher who comes from afar, or to chant *Tehillim*, the Psalms.

At home, mother would read from the *Tzeenu Urenu*, a book in Yiddish for women, translating the *Sidra** of each week and adding beautiful legends from the *Talmud* and *Midrash*.* A few neighbors would gather to listen to her reading in a sing-song, shaking their heads and wiping a tear for the sin of Adam and Eve, for Noah and his Ark bobbing in the waters of the flood, for Abraham binding his only son Isaac, for Joseph being sold to the Ismaelites, and for the destruction of the Temple in Zion.

The young people of the *Shtetl* are out on the *Shosee*, the paved highway out of Orinin on the way to Kamenetz, or on the *Doroshka*, the pathway near the Polish church by the river. They promenade back and forth until evening falls on the *Shtetl* and it is time for the evening meal.

In the half dim house mother whispers the "God of Abraham:"
God of Abraham, of Isaac and Jacob.
The queen Sabbath is departing,
The week of toil is coming back.
Send us sustenance,
Guard us from evil,
And grant us peace.

And soon father comes home, chants the *Havdalah*, the prayer of separation of the Holy Day from the weekdays, and says *Kiddush* over a cup of wine and lights the twisted candle.

As if someone had waved a magic wand, the splendor of the Sabbath is over, the wine cup is put away in the cupboard, the festive Sabbath clothes are changed to weekday drab garments, and the house is back to its worries, its problems, and its humdrum existence.

But there will be other Sabbaths, days of delight and refreshment of soul.

A DAY IN THE SHTETL

The *Shtetl* was astir with the break of day. The first *minyan*** was already at worship in the Old *Shul* as the first rays of the sun appeared in the east. The streets were blueish and eerily quiet, so that the scraping of doors and the unlocking of gates were heard all over town.

**Sidra* (Hebrew) is the weekly portion of the Pentateuch read publicly in the Synagogues on Sabbath. *Midrash* (Hebrew) are commentaries and interpretations of the Bible. Leo Rosten states: "The very highly developed analysis, exposition, and exegesis of the Holy Scriptures".

Whether Yiddish or Russian, it certainly derives from the French *chaussee*, meaning "highway".

**The quorum of ten men, necessary for worship.

The *balegoles*, the drivers of wagons and phaetons who take passengers to and from the big city, were the first to line up on the market square. Some had steady customers. As soon as they saw them coming they would run to meet them and to help them with their satchels. They left as soon as all of the seats in their vehicles were taken. Other *balegoles* were not so fortunate. They had to wait for fares, to bargain for prices, and to set new fees for each of the customers.

The merchants would drive out of their alleys in neat wagons or in sulkies drawn by one horse, trotting smartly on the cobbled Post Road. They were off to the other *yaridn* (markets) in the neighboring towns, or to supervise their interests in the villages around Orinin.

The market women, the poorest of the poor, put up their fruit stands in the square. Summer and winter they stood at these stands and tried to eke out a living with fruit and vegetables displayed on a space no larger than an ordinary kitchen table. Their stands were placed next to one another, and the jealousy among venders added to their miseries. When a housewife appeared in the square, they all proclaimed the virtues of their wares, and followed the would-be buyer until she stopped at a stand.

The storekeepers opened their shops and brought out bulk merchandise to the sidewalks in front of their business houses. Sacks of salt and squares of salt for cattle to lick. Barrels of black sticky tar to lubricate the wheels of vehicles. Bundles of dried, salty herring hung on nails over the doors of the stores. Casks of nails in all sizes for various purposes. All of these were waiting for the peasants as they came into the *Shtetl* for their supplies.

From the butcher street came the cry of lambs as they were taken out of the pens and led away to be slaughtered. The coopers rolled out their wares from their storage places, barrels of various widths and heights, and the hollow beat of their hammers could be heard in the distance.

Old men returned from their *klois* or *Beth Midrash* where they had been praying and studying on empty stomachs since early morning. They would return to study and prayer soon after they had eaten something.

The *meklars*, the cane twirlers, the *luftmenschen*, persons without an identifiable profession, stood in circles in front of stores and exchanged the latest news.

Children were taken to the *dardeki melamed*, the teacher of young children, by the *behelpers*, the assistants to the *rebbe*, while older children, with their books under their arms, were rushing to their various *hedorim*, rooms of the teachers, for a day of study.

The daily routine of the *Shtetl*, established so many years ago, was repeated with minor seasonal variations from day to day.

Smoke rises from the chimneys of the houses. Housewives stand at their kitchen *pripetchoks*, the fore-ovens, preparing the meals for their families. It was a laborious time-consuming chore. The housewives, in fact, spent most of the day cooking and baking. Washing and ironing, cleaning and scrubbing — in addition to baking, cooking and canning — were the daily routine of the housewife.

With the setting of the sun the *Shtetl* had a rhythm of its own. Children returned from the *heder*. The travelers came back from the big city and from their dealings in the villages. Children waited at the bridge for their fathers' return and were picked up for the short ride to their homes. Old men rose up from their studies and began the evening prayers. Lights appeared in the windows and people sat down to a long evening meal.

With the coming of the night the *Warta* showed up on the streets of Orinin. The *Warta* consisted of young men who guarded the *Shtetl* at night. They took turns every month traveling in twos, walking the streets and alleys of the *Shtetl*. They carried no arms. When something suspicious occurred, they would raise an alarm and drive off the would-be thieves or other disturbers of the peace. But the nights were quiet, and in the summer months the aroma of growing things, of flowering things, and of ripening things, and the murmur of whispering things filled the air of the *Shtetl*.

At midnight a candlelight would flicker in some houses. Grandfathers and fathers would arise for *hatzoth*, the lamentations at midnight. They would lament for the "Presence" of the Holy One who was exiled, for the Holy Temple that was destroyed, and for the Land of Israel that was taken away from us. And they would study in their sing-song, swaying over the large folios of the *Gemoro*.

The *Shtetl* had its charms day and night, and we who knew them can never recapture them.