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# SHTETL

by **Samuel Kassow**

in **The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe**

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The Yiddish term for town, *shtetl* commonly refers to small market towns in pre–World War II Eastern Europe with a large Yiddish-speaking Jewish population. While there were in fact great variations among these towns, a *shtetl* connoted a type of Jewish settlement marked by a compact Jewish population distinguished from their mostly gentile peasant neighbors by religion, occupation, language, and culture. The *shtetl* was defined by interlocking networks of economic and social relationships: the interaction of Jews and peasants in the market, the coming together of Jews for essential communal and religious functions, and, in more recent times, the increasingly vital relationship between the *shtetl* and its emigrants abroad (organized in *landsmanshaftn*).

No *shtetl* stood alone. Each was part of a local and regional economic system that embraced other *shtetls* (Yid., *shtetlekh*) and provincial towns. Although the *shtetl* grew out of the private market towns of the Polish nobility in the old commonwealth, over time a *shtetl* became a common term for any town in Eastern Europe with a large Jewish population: towns not owned by noblemen in Poland, as well as towns in Ukraine, Hungary, Bessarabia, Bucovina, and the Subcarpathian region that attracted large-scale Jewish immigration during the course of the nineteenth century.

For all their diversity, these *shtetls* in Eastern Europe were indeed markedly different from previous kinds of Jewish Diaspora settlement in Babylonia, France, Spain, or Italy. In those other countries, Jews had lived scattered among the general population or, conversely, inhabited a specific section of town or a Jewish street. Rarely did they form a majority. This was not true of the *shtetl*, where Jews sometimes comprised 80 percent or more of the population. In many *shtetls*, Jews occupied most of the town, especially the streets grouped around the central marketplace. Poorer Jews would live further from the center and the frequently agrarian gentiles would often be concentrated on the peripheral streets, in order to be closer to the land that they cultivated.

This Jewish life in compact settlements had an enormous psychological impact on the development of East European Jewry—as did the language of the *shtetl*, Yiddish. Despite the incorporation of numerous Slavic words, the Yiddish speech of the *shtetl* was markedly different from the languages used by Jews' mostly Slavic neighbors. While it would be a great mistake to see the *shtetl* as an entirely Jewish world, without gentiles, it is nonetheless true that Yiddish reinforced a profound sense of psychological and religious difference from non-Jews. Suffused with allusions to Jewish tradition and to religious texts, Yiddish developed a rich reservoir of idioms and sayings that reflected a vibrant folk culture inseparable from the Jewish religion.

The *shtetl* was also marked by occupational diversity. While elsewhere in the Diaspora Jews often were found in a small number of occupations, frequently determined by political restrictions, in the *shtetl* Jewish occupations ran the gamut from wealthy contractors and entrepreneurs, to shopkeepers, carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, teamsters, and water carriers. In some regions,

Jewish farmers and villagers would be nearby. This striking occupational diversity contributed to the vitality of shtetl society and to its cultural development. It also led to class conflict and to often painful social divisions.

The experience of being a majority culture on the local level, sheer numbers, language, and occupational diversity all underscored the particular place of the shtetl as a form of Jewish Diaspora settlement.

### **Origins of the Shtetl**

Shtetls developed in the territories of the old Polish Commonwealth, where the nobility encouraged Jews to move onto estates in order to stimulate economic development. The eastward expansion of the commonwealth after the Union of Lublin in 1569 coincided with a growing market in Western and Central Europe for timber, grain, livestock and hides, amber, furs, and honey. Eager to develop their estates, the nobles needed competent managers and entrepreneurs—as well as regular markets and fairs. Jews were suitable instruments, especially because they could never become potential political rivals. Thus developed the *arenda* (leasing) system, in which landlords leased key economic functions to a Jewish *arendar* (agent). *Arenda* usually included extensive subleasing, which further encouraged Jewish immigration to the landed estates. The manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages—largely in Jewish hands—was particularly important as it gave landlords an important hedge against falling grain prices in export markets.

Noble magnates established private market towns and sought to attract Jews to reside in them. Economic competition from Christians in older cities in western and central Poland, as well as Jew-hatred fanned by the church and by guilds, also stimulated Jewish migration to the shtetls in the less-developed eastern regions of the commonwealth (today's eastern Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania). These new towns—all centered on a market square—reflected an emerging symbiosis of nobles, Jews, and the surrounding peasantry. One side of the market would often feature a Catholic church, built by the local landlord as a symbol of primacy and ownership, with a synagogue on the other side. The weekly market days brought together Jews and peasants and created a web of relationships that were both economic and personal. Usually the landlords granted charters that precluded market days and fairs on the Sabbath or on Jewish holidays. The shtetls—with their synagogues, schools, ritual baths, cemeteries, and inns—also served as a base for the numerous *dorfsgeyer*, that is, Jews who would fan out to the villages as carpenters, shoemakers, and agents. Many Jews who lived lonely lives in the countryside as taverners, innkeepers, or leaseholders could come to the shtetl for major holidays and important family occasions.

While some shtetls date from the sixteenth century, the peak of shtetl development occurred after the 1650s, following the ravages of *gzeyres takh vetat* (the Khmel'nyts'kyi uprising) and the Swedish invasion. The nobility made a concerted effort to recoup their economic standing by establishing new market towns. The development of these shtetls coincided with an enormous demographic increase of Polish Jewry. While the Polish–Lithuanian Jewish population stood at perhaps 30,000 in 1500, by 1765 it had expanded to about 750,000. A striking feature of this Jewish settlement was its marked dispersion. By the 1770s, more than half of Polish Jews lived in hundreds of private towns owned by the nobility: about one-third lived in villages. In many Polish cities, Christian guilds and the Catholic Church fought to curtail Jewish residence rights.

With the collapse of the Polish Commonwealth in the late eighteenth century, the world's largest Jewish community passed under Russian, Prussian, and Austrian rule. The anti-Russian Polish revolts of 1830–1831 and 1863 severely weakened the Polish nobility, and thus their Jewish

partners. Nobles also suffered from the abolition of serfdom. The building of railroads and the rise of major urban centers helped create new regional and national markets that undercut the economic base of many shtetls. New peasant movements questioned the Jewish role in the rural economy and started cooperatives that undercut the shtetl. Moreover, progressive urbanization of peasants and the movement of Jews to the great cities that commenced in the second half of the nineteenth century meant that Jews became a minority in many towns where they had formerly predominated. In Galicia, shtetls suffered from economic pressures, but on the whole, Jews—especially after 1848 and 1867—benefited from a more liberal political regime. This was not the case in the Pale of Jewish Settlement in the Russian Empire.

Russia's rulers, who had acquired a Jewish population after the Polish partitions, had little experience with either Jews or shtetls. In Russia proper, smaller towns had been primarily administrative centers rather than market towns, which many Russian officials regarded as sinister bridgeheads of Jewish corruption of the countryside. Russian Jewish policy often veered between a desire to change the Jews—through assimilation—and a determination to curb their contacts with the native Russian population. In 1791, Catherine II established the Pale of Jewish Settlement (formalized in an 1835 decree), limiting Russia's Jewish population largely to the former Polish provinces. Congress Poland had a separate legal status. While certain categories of Jews would eventually receive permission to leave the Pale, whose borders expanded somewhat in Ukraine, these residence restrictions remained legally in force until 1917. On the eve of World War I, about 94 percent of Russian Jewry (some 5 million individuals) was still living in the Pale.

During the nineteenth century, the center of gravity of Jewish life began to shift to the cities, but legal barriers to free movement in Russia, along with the rapid demographic expansion of East European Jewry, meant that the shtetl population continued to grow in absolute terms during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, despite massive migration to new urban centers (Odessa, Warsaw, Łódź, Vienna) and emigration to the United States and other countries. Many shtetls adapted to changing circumstances by becoming centers of specialized manufacture. The shtetl suffered terribly during World War I and during the waves of pogroms that swept Ukraine in 1905 and in 1918–1921. Nevertheless, it was the Holocaust alone that finally destroyed it.

### **Defining the Shtetl**

Legally and politically, there was no such thing as a shtetl. Since Jews were an extraterritorial people with little political power, they did not make the laws that defined and established the status of various kinds of settlements. The term *shtetl* meant nothing to the non-Jewish inhabitants or rulers. What Jews called a shtetl might be a city, a town, a settlement, or a village in Polish, Russian, or Austrian law. In 1875, the Russian senate established the legal category of *mestechko* (small town), which, unlike a village, had a legal organization of “town dwellers,” known as *meshchanskoe obshchestvo*. Such legal definitions became extremely important in the Pale of Settlement after the Russian government passed the May Laws of 1882, forbidding Jews to live in “villages.” The Jews' right to stay in the shtetls where they had lived for generations depended on whether their locale was classified as a town or a village. Handsome bribes often influenced the outcome, and lawsuits that contested these legal classifications flooded the Russian senate. According to the 1897 Russian census, 33.5 percent of the Jewish population lived in these “small towns,” but the shtetl population was probably much higher than this, since many legal cities were actually shtetls.

How did Jews themselves define a shtetl? Yiddish distinguished between a *shtetl* (a town), a *shtetele* (a small town), a *shtot* (a city), a *dorf* (village), and a *yishev* (a tiny rural settlement). In defining a shtetl, the following clumsy rule held true: a shtetl was big enough to support the basic

network of institutions essential to Jewish communal life—at least one synagogue, a ritual bathhouse, a cemetery, schools, and a framework of voluntary associations that performed basic religious and communal functions. This was a key difference between the shtetl and a village, and shtetl Jews made many jokes at the expense of their country cousins. The difference between a shtetl and a provincial city was that the former was a face-to-face community, while the latter was somewhat more anonymous. In Yisroel Aksenfeld's cutting satire of shtetl life, *Dos shterntikhl* (The Headband), a city was distinguished from a shtetl by the fact that "everyone boasts that he greeted someone from the next street because he mistook him for an out-of-towner." Of course, a new railroad could quickly turn a sleepy shtetl into a bustling provincial city, while a major city like Berdichev could become "an overgrown shtetl" (as Mendele called it), largely because the rail network bypassed it.

The shtetl was small enough for almost everyone to be known by name and nickname. Nicknames could be brutal and perpetuated a system that one observer called the "power of the shtetl" to assign everyone a role and a place in the communal universe. As one woman recalled of her shtetl in the 1930s:

Many in our town had nicknames that were derived either from their occupation, physical appearance or deformities such as Chaim the Redhead, Moische the Icon, Faivel Parch (Favus), Eli Puz (big belly), Avrum the Hernia, Meishl Pick (the stutterer), Berl the Copperbeard, Henech the Tin Collar (his garment shone like metal, for it had not been cleaned since he put it on twenty years earlier). There was Libitchke the Maiden. Although she had been married and had children, the townfolks could not forget that Libitchke had married late in life. We had in our shtetl Crutch the Tailor who lost a leg and walked with one crutch; Yankl the Hunchback, Yosl the Latrine, because he had a disagreeable body odor and so on and on.

([feepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~cpsa/pruzany/luba\\_bat.htm](http://feepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~cpsa/pruzany/luba_bat.htm))

While shtetls in isolated parts of the Vilna region or Polesie usually conformed to the classic model of a market town, shtetls such as Mińsk Mazowiecki or Kałuszyn, linked to the Warsaw metropolis by rail, found themselves far less dependent on the marketplace and more oriented towards light industry and specialized handicrafts. In the Soviet Union, the new economic system effectively eliminated the shtetl as a market town by the late 1920s, but many shtetls adjusted to the new economy by becoming centers of consumer-oriented artisan production.

Rarely did Jewish numbers in the shtetl translate into local political power. In the commonwealth, Jews never controlled local government, although there were many ways that they could bargain for their interests. In the Russian Empire, legislation also effectively barred Jews from a deciding role in local councils. In post-1867 Habsburg Galicia, Jews had greater opportunities to serve on local councils and even became mayors—especially if they won the approval of the Polish nobility. In interwar Poland, it was often the case that even where Jews formed a majority of the voting population, local authorities found ways to guarantee—by annexing surrounding areas or by subtle pressure—a Jewish minority in local town councils.

Whatever the legal status of the *kehilot* (autonomous Jewish communal institutions) under Russian and Habsburg rule happened to be (and this is a complicated question), some type of formal or informal internal Jewish communal government remained—even after the formal abolition of the *kahal* in Russia in 1844—and these bodies continued to perform important communal functions. In interwar Poland, a 1928 law established popularly elected *kehilot* in both small towns and larger cities. These elections, however, often led to bitter disagreements over secularization or because of ideological differences among Jews and outside interference by the Polish authorities.

## The World of the Shtetl

The common stereotype of the shtetl as a harmonious community is misleading. Those with little education and little money were constantly reminded of their lack of status; in this regard, women from poor families were especially disadvantaged. Sanitary and living conditions were often squalid. Spring and fall turned unpaved streets into a sea of mud, while summertime aggravated a terrible stench from raw sewage, outhouses, and hundreds of horses visiting for the market day. Quite often the presence of gentile farms on the outskirts of the shtetl limited available space for expansion and resulted in dense overcrowding. Building codes were nonexistent. Shtetl buildings were usually wooden, although the local *gvir* (rich man) might occupy a *moyer* (brick building) on the market square. Fires were common and were a major theme of shtetl folklore and Yiddish literature on the shtetl. Educational facilities, especially for poorer children, could be shockingly bad. Nonetheless, it would also be wrong to accept uncritically the charges of a wide array of critics—*maskilim*, Zionists, Soviet Jewish scholars—that the shtetl was a dying community riven by hypocrisy, stultifying tradition, and bitter class conflict. The reality is much more complex and has to consider both historical context and regional variations.

Until the twentieth century, the *hevrot* (Yid., *khevres*; associations) were the basis of communal social life. These included not only the burial society, which was the most prestigious, but others devoted, for example, to providing dowries for poor brides, visiting the sick, or distributing funds for the observance of the Sabbath or Passover. There were associations devoted to study, for instance of the Mishnah, and still others that functioned as guilds. Traditional Jewish society frowned on social activities, parties, or banquets that were not connected to an ostensible religious purpose. So each *hevrah* would commonly have a traditional banquet that was linked to the week when a particular portion of the Bible was read. In one Jewish town, the water carriers would meet on Saturday afternoons to study Talmudic legends ('En Ya'akov). Their yearly banquet took place during the week when the Bible portion of Emor (Lv. 21:1–24:23) was read. This was because Emor resembled *emer*, the Yiddish word for water pail. This pun might seem forced, but it reflected the determination to anchor life in religious tradition.

Gender roles in the shtetl were, at first sight, fairly straightforward. Men held the positions of power. They controlled the *kehilah* and, of course, the synagogue, where women sat separately. Girls from poor families indeed faced bleak prospects, especially if they could not find a husband. Behind the scenes, women—especially from well-off families—often played key roles in the communal and economic life of the shtetl. Women clearly had some opportunities to learn how to read and write. Religious and secular literature in Yiddish for them (and for poorer, less educated men) included such mainstays as the *Tsene-rene* (figurative translations of and legends based on the Pentateuch), private individual prayers called *tshines*, and romances. A bestselling Jewish writer in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe was the maskil Ayzik Meyer Dik, who wrote didactic Yiddish novels that were largely read by women.

The presence of a market was a defining characteristic of the shtetl, and on market day, peasants would start streaming into the shtetl early in the morning. Hundreds of wagons would arrive and Jews would surround them to buy products that the peasants had to sell. With money in their pockets, the peasants then went into the Jewish shops and taverns. Market day was a noisy cacophony of shouting, bargaining, and hustling. Often after the sale of a horse or a cow, peasants and Jews would shake hands and share a drink. Sometimes fights would break out, and everyone would run for cover. Especially on a hot summer day, the presence of hundreds of horses standing around would lend the shtetl an unforgettable odor. But market day was the lifeblood of the shtetl.

Market day further underscored the complex nature of relations between Jews and gentiles. In the hundreds of small Jewish communities surrounded by a Slavic rural hinterland, many customs—cooking, clothing, proverbs, and Eastern Yiddish itself—reflected the impact of the non-Jewish world. While Jews and gentiles belonged to different religious and cultural universes, they were also drawn together by personal bonds that were often lacking in the big cities. While each side held many negative stereotypes about the other, these stereotypes were tempered by the reality of concrete neighborly ties. It was not very unusual for gentiles to speak some Yiddish and even less unusual for Jews to speak the vernacular.

If market day was noise and bustle, the Sabbath was the only real leisure time that the shtetl Jew had. In the interwar years in Poland, the shtetl Sabbath began to reflect the major changes coming in from the outside world, and synagogue attendance began slipping. A visiting Yiddish writer from a big city might lecture to a large audience at the fireman's hall. Young people from Zionist or Bundist youth movements would go on hikes or perform amateur theater—much to the dismay of their religious parents, who saw this as a desecration of the holy day. Yet these secular Sabbaths continued the concept of a special day as a break in time and as a period dedicated to the spirit.

The social differences that divided shtetl Jews were felt everywhere, from the synagogue to the market place. At the top of the social scale were the *sheyne yidn*, the well-off elite who ran the shtetl's institutions and controlled its politics. In the synagogue they usually sat along the eastern wall. Just below the *sheyne yidn* were the *balebatim*, the “middle class” whose stores and businesses did not make them rich but afforded them a certain measure of respect from the community. Further down the social scale came the skilled artisans, such as watchmakers and exceptionally skilled tailors. Near the bottom were ordinary tailors and shoemakers, followed by water carriers and teamsters. Lower still were the beggars and the marginal types that every shtetl seemed to have.

### **The Transformation of the Shtetl: Poland and the Soviet Union**

The breakup of the Austrian and Russian Empires after World War I divided the bulk of the Jewish shtetl population between the new Soviet Union and several successor states, the largest being the reborn Polish Republic.

Interwar Polish Jewry saw a continuation and an acceleration of many trends that had begun before World War I. Thanks to rapid urbanization, by 1939, 25 percent of Poland's 3.5 million Jews lived in one of the five largest cities. While the cities—especially Warsaw—became centers of political and cultural life, the shtetls did not disappear. In 1939 about two-fifths of all Polish Jews were still living in these small towns whose Jewish communities were also undergoing far-reaching changes.

Ideological competition was intense. The pace of secularization accelerated, and new forms of cultural expression—the daily press, theater, literature, film—continued to develop. By 1939, a majority of Jewish children were attending state schools in the Polish language, and the Jewish press in Polish had become increasingly influential.

As road and railroad transport improved, many shtetls were on their way to becoming suburbs of larger cities. During the course of the nineteenth century, several factors had linked the shtetl to the wider world: yeshivas, Hasidism, the press, and emigration. These contacts now intensified. Dances, sporting events, movies, and even beauty contests all became common features of shtetl life. Nevertheless, despite secularization, the interwar shtetl was a place where even nonreligious Jews were more likely to go to synagogue on Sabbath and holidays—if only to “keep up

appearances.” In the shtetl, Jews were far more likely to speak Yiddish than in the big cities, where linguistic assimilation was proceeding rapidly.

A major feature of the period was the intensive development of new organizations that embraced a growing proportion of the Jewish community. New youth movements—Zionist and Bundist—helped create the beginnings of a counterculture that challenged traditional religious norms and that reversed long entrenched prejudices against physical labor. Hikes, amateur theater performances, libraries, and debates all gave young people new outlets and, in many cases, affected their relationships with their parents. Another sign of the “democratization” of communal life was the rise of new *handverker fareynen* (artisans unions)—in a certain way, descended from Jewish guilds of earlier times—which promoted the pride and self-assertion of social groups in the shtetl that had long been denigrated. Many Jews who had formerly been proud *balebatim*, pillars of the shtetl middle class, now lost their former status, the result of profound dislocations caused by several years of war, pogroms, and economic chaos. Elections to the *kehilot* provided a new focus for political life and were hotly contested. Intramural conflicts continued to rage over the election of rabbis or about communal taxation. The interwar shtetl gave more opportunities to Jewish women to participate in communal life. Women joined new *froyen fareynen* (women’s unions). Many shtetls established new kinds of modern Jewish schools—religious, Zionist, Yiddishist—that broke with traditional educational models.

Shtetl Jews found themselves exposed to new pressures that severely undercut their economic position. Government policies hit Jewish merchants and artisans especially hard. In the 1930s, a wave of pogroms swept through many Polish shtetls. While the government neither organized the pogroms nor approved of them, it did sanction a nonviolent boycott of Jewish businesses. Jews from Przytyk who defended themselves against pogromists in 1936 were arrested by authorities. Pickets appeared in front of Jewish shops, and on market days, conflicts were common. The 1930s saw a sharp deterioration in Polish–Jewish relations that affected shtetls and cities alike. Nonetheless, in some ways, mutual relations were better in the shtetls. Relationships that went back for decades were not easily sundered and many peasants ignored the boycott and continued to patronize their familiar Jewish merchants.

The shtetl also fought back against economic antisemitism. New *gmiles khesed kases* (free loan societies), aided by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), provided an important lifeline and reminded shtetl Jews that they were not alone. Under pressure from the JDC, shtetl Jews put their political differences aside and worked to make the *kases* a success. Another vital lifeline was the critical support that the shtetls received from *landsmanshaftn*, the emigrants’ organizations in the United States, South Africa, and elsewhere. By the 1930s, foreign help often provided the crucial margin necessary to keep the shtetl afloat.

Voices from many parts of the political spectrum continued to proclaim the terminal decline of the shtetl. The Bund, which had gained great strength by the late 1930s, emphasized that the future of Polish Jewry lay in the big cities. Other observers, however, warned against writing the shtetl off: it occupied too large a place in Polish Jewish life. New organizations, including the Society for Landkentenish (engaged tourism; literally, knowing the land), as well as YIVO, urged serious study of the shtetl and encouraged shtetl Jews to write their own history, collect folklore and documents, and study local cemeteries and synagogues. Until the very end, the shtetls of Poland continued to be the home of diverse, fractious, and resilient Jewish communities.

The shtetl in the interwar Soviet Union underwent a very different experience from its Polish counterpart. In the early years of Soviet power, the Communist Party’s policy toward Jews and



toward the Jewish shtetl was a work in progress. Since most Communists had inherited a hostile view of the shtetl, the new Soviet state explored various options to provide alternatives and to amend the Jewish situation. But while emigration to the big cities, agricultural colonies, and a Jewish autonomous region in Birobidzhan all provided new alternatives, a large proportion of Soviet Jewry still remained in the shtetls, and the regime could not ignore this fact.

While hundreds of shtetls in Poland had suffered severe war damage, those in Ukraine had to endure savage pogroms that ravaged the region during the civil war between 1919 and 1921. At least 60,000 Jews were killed. The Russian civil war and the introduction of communism dealt a major blow to the traditional role of the shtetl as a market town. While some recovery occurred between 1921 and 1928, heavy taxation and political discrimination weighed heavily on the shtetl. A large percentage of shtetl Jews suffered under Soviet legislation that deprived former members of the “bourgeoisie,” petty shopkeepers, and religious functionaries of many legal rights; these people became known as *lishentsy*. The advent of collectivization in 1928–1929 ended what was left of the traditional market relationship between the shtetl and the surrounding countryside.

The Soviet state gave its Jews very little liberty and the Soviet shtetl knew none of the rich political and associational life that developed in interwar Poland or the Baltic states. The regime severely restricted religious instruction, closed down synagogues, and banned all political activity not sanctioned by the Communist Party. The Jewish sections of the Communist Party, the *Evseksiia*, were often more intolerant than non-Jewish Communists and spearheaded a crusade against religion, Zionism, and Hebrew culture. Still, Zionist groups and religious schools continued to survive illegally into the 1930s. Many Jews managed to attend religious services, circumcise their newborn sons, eat matzo on Passover, and buy kosher meat.

Despite persecution, many shtetls still preserved a large measure of their Jewish character. In Ukraine and Belarus, local Communist authorities supported the *Evseksiia*'s policy of promoting Yiddish schools for Jewish children, and until the mid-1930s Jewish children in these small towns were not only speaking Yiddish at home but also receiving their primary education in that language. Whatever the shortcomings of the Communist Yiddish schools, they did provide some reinforcement against assimilation, but parents understood that the path to higher education and advancement favored graduates of Russian schools.

After the start of the Five-Year Plans in 1928, the Soviet regime began offering Jews more social mobility and educational opportunities. New legislation modified many of the restrictions on the *lishentsy*. Many Jews, especially young people, began leaving the shtetls for work and study in the bigger cities, including Moscow and Leningrad. By the mid 1930s, many former shtetls had begun to adapt to the new socioeconomic reality created by collectivization and the Five-Year Plans. They became centers for local artisan production or served nearby collective farms. Despite the momentous changes that transformed these shtetls, Jews who lived in them were more likely to speak Yiddish and much less likely to intermarry than their contemporaries in the larger cities.

It was the Holocaust that finally destroyed the Soviet shtetl. Unlike Jews in the big cities of the Russian Republic, shtetl Jews in Ukraine and Belarus had a very difficult time escaping the Wehrmacht. Their destruction changed the entire character of Soviet Jewry by eliminating its most nationally conscious and least acculturated elements.

### **The Imagined Shtetl**

From the mid-nineteenth century, the shtetl also became a cultural and a literary construct. This “imagined shtetl,” unlike the “real shtetl,” was often exclusively Jewish, a face-to-face community

that lived in Jewish space and time and that preserved traditional Jewish life. In literature and in political and cultural discourse, the “imagined shtetl” evoked many different reactions that ranged from parody and contempt to praise as a supposed bastion of pure *yidishkeyt* (Jewishness). As a shorthand symbol, attitudes toward the “imagined shtetl” were a revealing litmus test of the Jewish encounter with the dilemmas and traumas of modernity, revolution, and catastrophe. After the annihilation of East European Jewry, the shtetl became a frequent if inaccurate metonymy for the entire lost world of East European Jewry.

As a new Yiddish and Hebrew literature developed in the nineteenth century, the portrayal of the shtetl closely followed the Haskalah and its critique of Jewish traditional society. While writers such as Ayzik Meyer Dik, Yisroel Aksenfeld, and Yitskhok Yoyel Linetski became extremely popular with their parodies and criticisms of shtetl life, it was Sholem Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher-Sforim) who developed a literary shtetl—especially in *Dos vintshfingerl* (The Magic Ring; 1865), *Fishke der krumer* (Fishke the Lame; 1869), *Di klyatshe* (The Nag; 1872), and *Masoets Binyomin hashlishi* (The Travels of Benjamin the Third; 1878)—that would have enormous influence on future writers. Abramovitsh had been a *maskil* and the names he assigned his fictional shtetls and towns—Tuniyadevka-Betalon (Donothingburg), Kaptansk-Kabtsiel (Beggartown) and Glupsk-Kesalon (Foolsville)—speak for themselves. Yet, mimetic realism was only a part of a complex aesthetic structure that many critics erroneously mistook for an unerringly accurate ethnographic description of the shtetl. In this imagined shtetl, myths of origin, legends, and customs could be parodied and satirized—but nonetheless linked to a collective consciousness shaped by Jewish tradition and messianic hopes. Through the mediation of his character, Mendele the Book Peddler, Abramovitsh transcended Haskalah criticism to examine the artistic and cultural dilemmas posed by the aesthetic imperatives of literary development as well as by the enormous gap that separated the Jewish intelligentsia (including Yiddish writers) from the Jewish masses in the shtetl. Torn between his pungent criticism of Jewish society and his deep attachment to the Jewish masses, quicker to discern problems than to suggest solutions, Abramovitsh let Mendele pass through the shtetl, an outsider and insider at the same time. He could thus skewer the common Jews and the Jewish intelligentsia with equal finesse.

The dilemmas faced by Jewish intellectuals returning to the shtetl were also delineated in Y. L. Peretz’s *Bilder fun a provints-rayze* (Sketches from a Provincial Tour; 1891). Commissioned to study the economic and social conditions in impoverished shtetls, Peretz conveyed the ambivalent reaction of an “outsider” whose presumed stance of cultural superiority gave way to growing self-doubt in the face of shtetl Jews who—despite their desperate material state—undermined his confidence in his mission and even in himself.

Sholem Aleichem created one of the most important literary shtetls, Kasrilevke, which served as a partial corrective to Mendele’s Foolsvilles and Beggartowns. The *kleyne mentshelekh* (“Little Jews”) who lived in Kasrilevke met misfortune with dignity, humor, and an inner strength imparted by their folk culture and their language. As the Kasrilevke Jews heard the ominous tidings of an encroaching outside world—of pogroms and antisemitism—they nonetheless stubbornly refused to give up their faith in the eventual triumph of *yoysher* (Justice). An even more positive treatment of the shtetl appeared in Sholem Asch’s 1904 prose poem, *A shtetl*. Asch portrayed a shtetl deeply rooted in the age-old Polish landscape. It had its share of squabbles and natural calamities, such as fires. Nonetheless, Asch’s shtetl was an organic community, where natural leaders enjoyed moral authority, and whose economy was based on a natural order undisturbed by railroads and industrialization.

As revolutions and total war ravaged Jewish Eastern Europe, the treatment of the shtetl in Yiddish literature increasingly diverged from the models of Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Asch. Yitskhok (Itshe) Meyer Vaysenberg's 1906 masterpiece, *A shtetl*, portrayed a community torn apart by an internal Jewish class conflict. Yet, Vaysenberg asked, what was the ultimate importance of these internecine Jewish struggles in a fragile shtetl, a negligible dot in an enormous gentile world that stretched beyond its muddy streets? In his 1913 classic *Nokh alemen* (After All Is Said and Done) and in many shorter stories, the writer Dovid Bergelson presented a picture of a shtetl marked by banality and emptiness. Like Vaysenberg, Bergelson denied the shtetl any redemptive meaning. A devastating picture of the wartime shtetl appeared in Oyzer Varshavski's 1920 novel *Shmuglars*, in which World War I turns the entire community into a gang of immoral smugglers. Traditional values collapsed as all classes let nothing stand in their way in pursuit of a quick profit. In the 1920s and 1930s, the shtetl was portrayed in Soviet Yiddish literature as a doomed community. The poet Izi Kharik envied his famous Russian counterpart Sergei Esenin, who mourned the Russian village. While the shtetl was to Jews what the village was to Russians—the crucible of their folk culture—Kharik could not mourn its passing. But, he admitted, even while he cursed the shtetl, his curses were intermixed with feelings of lingering tenderness.

In interwar Poland, the late 1930s saw some revision of the predominantly negative treatment of the shtetl. In his 1937 novel *Bay di taykhn fun Mazovye* (By the Rivers of Mazovia), Mikhl Burshtin portrayed a shtetl beset by rising antisemitism and devastated by a pogrom, but determined to rebuild and endure. One character, a young doctor, leaves Warsaw to return to his native shtetl where, he feels, he can make more of a difference. Like Vaysenberg and Varshavski, Burshtin's shtetl, with its many gentile characters, was no longer the exclusively Jewish world of a Mendele or a Sholem Aleichem. But once again it was the symbol of a Jewish home. In his poem "Es Brent," written in the late 1930s, the popular songwriter Mordkhe Gebirtig used the shtetl as the symbol of Polish Jewry. The shtetl is "on fire." It is up to Polish Jewry to put out the flames—and engage in active self-defense.

### **After the Holocaust**

In the State of Israel, the negative image of *goles* (exile), including the shtetl, changed little from the old, negative Zionist stereotype. Zionism had transcended the shtetl and the only reason to look back was to learn how to avoid the pernicious signs of a "shtetl mentality" that had no place in the new state. By the 1970s, however, there were some signs of a renewed interest in Yiddish culture and in the shtetl, and prominent Israeli scholars published much valuable material. In Israel and elsewhere, survivors joined with older emigrants to publish hundreds of *yizker-bikher*, or memorial books. These *yizker-bikher* typically contain hundreds of pages with photographs and personal reminiscences. For understandable reasons, many of these books were largely eulogies and elegies, and the committees that compiled them avoided including unflattering details on the shtetl and its inhabitants. Some, however, were edited by professional historians and conform to scholarly standards.

For an American Jewry just beginning to come to terms with the Holocaust, the shtetl—reviled and forgotten before the war—came to represent a lost world that was brutally destroyed. It became a symbol of the integral Jewishness and the supportive community that many American Jews, economically secure in their new suburban homes, now began to miss. In 1952, the publication of Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog's *Life Is with People* presented American readers with a composite portrait of a Jewish shtetl that was the quintessential "home": culturally self-sufficient, isolated from gentiles, and timeless. The 1963 Broadway production of *Fiddler on the Roof* transformed Sholem Aleichem's village Jew, Tevye, into a shtetl dweller. Tevye's genuine conflicts with his wife and daughters—expressions of the growing religious, class, and interethnic tensions

of Jewish society—found a resolution on the Broadway stage that harmonized Jewish and American values. The shtetl had become a way station to America.

Vulnerable as it was, the shtetl for many Jews continued to symbolize the distinct Jewish peoplehood in Eastern Europe that had evolved over the course of centuries. It long influenced the contours of Jewish collective memory, and its spaces, streets, and wooden buildings remained etched in the collective imagination. Both the “real shtetl” and the “imagined shtetl” are an integral part of East European Jewish history.

### **Suggested Reading**

Yaffa Eliach, *There Once Was a World: A Nine-Hundred-Year Chronicle of the Shtetl Eishyshok* (Boston, 1998);

Gennady Estraikh and Mikhail Krutikov, eds., *The Shtetl: Image and Reality* (Oxford, 2000);

Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews* (Boston, 1997);

Gershon D. Hundert, *The Jews in a Polish Private Town: The Case of Opatów in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1992);

Samuel Kassow, “Community and Identity in the Interwar Shtetl,” in *The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars*, ed. Yisrael Gutman, Khone Shmeruk, Ezra Mendelsohn, and Jehuda Reinharz, pp. 198–220 (Hanover, N.H., 1989);

Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised* (New York, 1973);

Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse, N.Y., 2000);

Ben-Cion Pinchuk, “The Shtetl: An Ethnic Town in the Russian Empire,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 41.4 (October–December 2000): 495–504;

Theo Richmond, *Konin: A Quest* (New York, 1995);

David Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington, Ind., 1999);

Diane K. Roskies and David G. Roskies, comps., *The Shtetl Book* (New York, 1975);

Murray J. Rosman, *The Lords’ Jews* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990);

Adam Teller, “The Shtetl As an Arena for Polish-Jewish Integration in the Eighteenth Century,” *Polin* 17 (2004): 25–40;

Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York, 1995).

## ***“The Eichmann Trial”*. Commentaries on Deborah Lipstadt’s New Book**

### **Editor’s comments:**

*Half a century has passed since Israel pursued, captured, prosecuted and executed Adolf Eichmann. The dramatic story of the Eichmann affair is one of the singular moments in the history of the Holocaust. Deborah Lipstadt’s latest book, “The Eichmann Trial” deals with these events. It is a gripping and thought-provoking account.*

*Professor Lipstadt has done an outstanding job researching, documenting and interpreting the moral, political and judicial issues surrounding the trial. For me, Eichmann was not the central focus of her book; I’ve had my fill of this despicable creature and his ilk.*

*Instead, I was intrigued by the motives, strategies and contributions of other personalities who participated directly or indirectly in the trial. They included: David Ben-Gurion (Prime Minister of Israel who ordered that Eichmann be brought back alive from Argentina to stand trial in Israel), Gideon Hausner (who lead the team of prosecutors), Robert Servatius (German lawyer who defended Eichmann), Moshe Landau (Presiding Judge), Rachel Auerbach (Warsaw Ghetto survivor who helped Hausner prepare for the trial) and Konrad Adenauer (Chancellor of West Germany persuaded Ben-Gurion to place all blame on the Nazis and soften suggestions that the German nation was complicit in murdering 6 million Jews. In return, Adenauer supported Israel politically and economically).*

*Professor Lipstadt also included a detailed critique of philosopher Hannah Arendt’s “Eichmann in Jerusalem”, a landmark thesis published in 1963. One of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most celebrated political theorists, Arendt’s analysis of the conduct and validity of the trial and her ideas about the character and behavior of the perpetrators and the victims continue to provoke heated controversy. Lipstadt contributes to the debate by carefully dissecting many of Arendt’s theories, supporting some and refuting others.*

*Gideon Hausner called approximately 100 survivors to testify about their suffering at the hands of the Nazis and their followers. None of the victims had any direct contact or connection to Eichmann. The defense and the judges were right to question the legal relevance of their evidence. But the prosecution’s strategy prevailed. Their painful memories put a “face” to the victims. Their words transformed how Jews and non-Jews in the civilized world dealt with the legacy and the memory of what happened to European Jewry.*

*Finally, Professor Lipstadt summarized her personal motives for writing “The Eichmann Trial”. She felt compelled to speak out on behalf of those who were overwhelmed by unimaginable evil and has declared war on Holocaust deniers and revisionists.*

*Below, I have copied more extensive commentaries on “The Eichmann Trial” by Jonathan Kirsch and by Thane Rosenbaum. In addition, I printed Deborah Lipstadt’s reactions to the fates of two mass murderers, Adolf Eichmann and Osama bin Laden.*

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## **The Whole Truth** by Jonathan Kirsch

*in JewishJournal.com, April 26, 2011*

On the occasion of Yom HaShoah, I can think of no more appropriate act of remembrance of the Holocaust than to reconsider the circumstances surrounding the trial of Adolf Eichmann, and I can think of no one better able to explain those circumstances to us than Deborah E. Lipstadt, a leading figure in Holocaust studies and author of "The Eichmann Trial" (/Nextbook/Schocken, 2011. \$23.95).

It's an urgent, intimate, discerning and wholly compelling study of the Eichmann trial, the precise point at which "history, memory and law met in this Jerusalem theatre" — that is, the theater that was converted into a courtroom for the Eichmann trial. "Would he even try to justify the genocide?" she muses. "And what, if anything, would be the lesson for the future?"

As Lipstadt's rhetorical question suggests, a profound irony suffuses her book. Eichmann, after all, may have denied his own culpability for the crimes charged against him at the famous trial in Jerusalem in 1961, but he never denied that they were committed. Indeed, the trial was meant to record the hard facts of the Holocaust for the contemporary world and for posterity. In that sense, however, the trial was a failure because today we are confronted with the Orwellian phenomenon of Holocaust revisionism, which seeks to minimize, explain away or flatly deny the crimes for which Eichmann was convicted and executed.

Lipstadt, a professor at Emory University and author of "Denying the Holocaust," among other works, is herself a victim of Holocaust denial. She was famously sued for libel by David Irving after referring to him as "the world's leading Holocaust denier," and she was forced to prove the truth of the facts that he denied, all thanks to the oddities of British libel law. "This trial has done for the new century," wrote The Daily Telegraph at the time, "what the Nuremberg trials or the Eichmann trial did for earlier generations."

Thus, in a real sense, Lipstadt's book is a parallel narrative that touches on both trials. The focus, of course, is on Eichmann — the daring extraction of Eichmann from his hiding place in Argentina by Israeli operatives, the making of the case against him by Israeli prosecutors, and the repercussions of the trial in law, history and culture across the half-century that has passed since Eichmann's life ended on a gallows. The subtext is Lipstadt's own courtroom battle against Irving and, in a larger sense, the remaking of Eichmann as an artifact of popular culture.

To her credit, Lipstadt frankly concedes that the Eichmann trial often strayed beyond the scope of actual crimes: "The problem," she writes of the prosecution's case, "was that Eichmann did not play a role in all aspects of the Final Solution." As a result of the decision to use the trial as a tool for documenting the crimes of Nazi Germany, some of the evidence had little or nothing to do with the Nazi who sat in the bulletproof glass box that has itself entered our collective memory.

“The prosecution would call a series of witnesses who had no connection with Eichmann,” she writes. “Their testimony would be highly prejudicial, legally irrelevant, and often based on hearsay, if not outright gossip. Yet their presence would transform the trial from an important war-crimes trial into an event that would have enduring significance.”

We may think we know a lot about Eichmann and his trial, but Lipstadt is capable of surprising us. To demonstrate “how mind-boggling obedient he was,” she reveals that he would ask permission of his Israeli captors before commencing a bowel movement: “May I begin?” he would call out from the toilet. He provoked laughter in the courtroom when he insisted that there was room to pack 1,000 Jews into the railway cars headed for Auschwitz — a third more than their maximum capacity — because the luggage had been sent ahead. Remarkably, we learn that Eichmann’s request for funds to hire a rabbi to teach him Hebrew was turned down by his Nazi superiors.

“It would have been best had I proposed that a rabbi be arrested so that he could give me instruction from prison,” Eichmann said on the stand. “But I had not thought of this.”

Perhaps the single most poignant moment in Lipstadt’s book is a small revelation about the official English, French and German translations that were provided to the reporters who covered the trial, a practice that outraged the journalists from Yiddish newspapers: “Why, they asked, could bulletins not be made available in Yiddish, which, they reminded Israeli officials, was the language ‘of Eichmann’s victims.’” Lipstadt reminds us that the officials regarded Yiddish as “the epitome of exile” and told the journalists that “they ought to know Hebrew.”

Lipstadt deals frankly with the celebrated figures who attached themselves to the Eichmann saga in one way or another. She points out, for example, that Simon Wiesenthal “contributed very little to the actual capture” of Eichmann, and she takes him to task for including 5 million non-Jewish victims in the death toll of Nazi crimes against humanity “In an attempt to elicit non-Jewish interest in the Holocaust.” According to Lipstadt, “Wiesenthal’s historical invention obscures, if not denies, the true nature of the Holocaust.”

She also deconstructs Hannah Arendt’s book about the Eichmann trial, “Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil,” a work that has taken on a life of its own and has introduced a famous phrase into the vocabulary of moral philosophy. “To many people,” she observes, “Arendt was a more central character in the Eichmann story than Eichmann himself.” Here, too, is a fascinating parallel narrative that elaborates upon the Eichmann trial in new and provocative ways.

Lipstadt points out the little-noted fact that Arendt was absent from long stretches of the trial and relied on transcripts for much of her acerbic commentary on the proceedings. She quotes Gershom Scholem’s observation that Arendt was “suffering from a lack of ahavat Yisrael” — love of the Jewish people — and allows us to overhear some of the hateful things Arendt was capable of saying about both Eastern European and Mizrachi Jews. Above all, Lipstadt points out the numerous errors of fact that appear in Arendt’s work: “Sometimes, in addition to being cruel, Arendt was just plain wrong.”

Now and then, Lipstadt flashes back and forth between the Eichmann trial and her own experience in court. For example, Eichmann left behind the manuscript of his own memoir of the Holocaust, but the government of Israel locked it away in the National Archives; only when Lipstadt was put on trial in England was the manuscript unsealed and provided to Lipstadt for use in her defense. “[O]ur objective was to prove that Irving’s claims about the Holocaust were lies.” Although she is

careful to acknowledge the moral and historical primacy of the Eichmann trial, she allows us to see why the struggle against Holocaust denial is so crucial.

Lipstadt's conclusion is unsurprising: "Future generations, those who were not there, must remember," she quotes one Holocaust survivor. "And we who were there must tell them." For Lipstadt, "This may be the most enduring legacy of what occurred in Jerusalem in 1961." But I credit Lipstadt with something at least as important — the self-imposed task of telling not only the truth, but the whole truth, which is exactly what she has done in "The Eichmann Trial."

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## **On 50th Anniversary of His Trial, Eichmann's Case Still Brands Israel**

*Transformed Young Country Into State With an Activist Holocaust Agenda*

by **Thane Rosenbaum**

in *The Jewish Daily Forward On Line*, May 6, 2011, < <http://www.forward.com/articles/137259/> >.

The early 1960s was more than simply the revelry of TV's "Mad Men." It was also a time when international justice held court, and a certifiable madman found himself at the center of the world's judgment.

In 1961, a young American president read James Bond novels, while high-stakes espionage dominated popular culture and fed global anxieties. Neighbors suspected one another of being double agents. Meanwhile, down in Argentina, Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi with the most Jewish blood on his hands, was one of those neighbors leading a double life. One day, while living in a suburb of Buenos Aires under an alias, Eichmann was spirited away from his street, drugged and dressed up as an El Al flight attendant and smuggled to Israel to stand trial. Suddenly, the CIA and the KGB had competition. The Mossad and Shin Bet, Israel's secret intelligence agencies, instantly became the new rage in cloak-and-dagger.

For many, it was the world's first exposure to Israel's spy networks and crack commandos, long before Operation Entebbe and the Six Day War. But the Eichmann trial — its 50th anniversary is this month — did much more than give Israel its own credentials in covert operations: It endowed Israel with an altogether different national identity from the one it had so triumphantly achieved in 1948.

No longer was Israel merely a safe haven for Jews, a refuge where death camp survivors could return to life. It was now a Jewish state with a dramatically activist Holocaust agenda. In addition to the kibbutz movement with its bronzed *sabras* and blooming deserts, Israel — plucky and full of grit — suddenly played like a superpower when it came to bringing justice to the Jewish people. And it all started with the Eichmann trial, which showcased Israel's justice system and the curious sight of a man standing trial in a bulletproof glass booth. Israel captured not only Eichmann but the world's attention as the crimes of the Nazis were gruesomely recalled and telecast from an Israeli



courtroom. The trial lasted 14 weeks and featured 100 prosecution witnesses, the vast majority of whom were concentration camp survivors. Depositions written in Eichmann's defense were delivered by diplomatic couriers from 16 different countries, and more than 1,500 documents were entered into the record.

Indeed, it was perhaps the first time the world was willing to take an unvarnished look at the Holocaust. The Nuremberg tribunal had happened too soon; the survivors themselves were too traumatized to speak, or felt silenced; and "The Diary of Anne Frank," whose English translation appeared in 1952, was too universal and life affirming. The Eichmann trial, 16 years after the liberation of the camps, was of the right moment, and it captured the right mood. And, perhaps most important, by holding the trial in Jerusalem with judges and prosecutors who were Jews, it localized the Holocaust as a particular Jewish tragedy and a crime against the Jewish people.

Eichmann was, unquestionably, the perfect defendant for this spectacle. After directing the transport of millions of Jews to their deaths, he managed to escape detection after the war, slipping past the Americans and living in Germany and Italy before finally decamping to Argentina, where he remained hidden for 10 years as Ricardo Klement, an unassuming water engineer and rabbit farmer. Now, he was the one transported to a Jerusalem courtroom — for judgment and to await his own death.

"Front page articles all over the world," recalled Nobelist Elie Wiesel, whose Holocaust memoir, "Night," was published in English months before Eichmann's capture. "People were suddenly interested in the Holocaust, even before the word had any meaning. The world was actually beginning to speak about the murder of European Jewry and to listen to the testimony of survivors."

The "never again" ethos that informs, if not inflames, Israel's national character was made real with the trial. Along with its global achievements in science and agriculture, Israel exported an attitude of national toughness — avenging all crimes committed against its people. Nowhere could a fugitive from Jewish justice hide, not even tucked away in a suburb of Buenos Aires. The targeted assassinations of those responsible for the murders of Israel's Olympic team members in Munich, a little over a decade after Eichmann's execution, was no doubt a byproduct of the trial.

For Israel's defenders, the country's later global isolation as designated pariah at the United Nations gave the Eichmann trial further lasting significance: If Israel didn't pursue justice for itself, the world surely would not provide it. The Eichmann trial was quickly transformed from a judicial proceeding to a national metaphor. And all this from a country that was a mere 13 years old, as if the trial had served as Israel's bar mitzvah.

In recalling the significance of the Eichmann trial, Israel's ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, seems to agree that Israel's lightning response, once it realized where Eichmann had been hiding, remains a reliable template for national policy today. "As the nation state of the Jewish people, Israel reserves the right to act on behalf of Jewish security and justice worldwide, to redress past atrocities and prevent future ones," Oren said. "In that sense, seizing and trying Eichmann was no different than airlifting Jews from Ethiopia or preempting Hamas terror." One can even see the fingerprints of Eichmann's capture in the more recent but equally dramatic abduction of Dirar Abu Sisi, the Gaza engineer who mysteriously vanished from a train in Ukraine on February 19 and now sits in an Israeli prison facing charges of having developed rockets and missiles for Hamas.

One nation's righteous commitment to justice is another's extraordinary rendition, however. Did Eichmann and his execution perhaps set a precedent to which the Israelis feel morally bound, regardless of its potential conflict with international law? After all, Dirar Abu Sisi, even if he is ultimately found to be the architect of Hamas' rocket program, as Israel alleges, is surely not in the same league with the architect of the Final Solution. On the other hand, wouldn't Hamas gladly fire up the ovens of Auschwitz if given a chance?

While it is tempting to view all of Israel's derring-do as the natural offspring of its abduction of Eichmann, it is important to distinguish between targeted, undercover assassinations and a public trial conducted before the world, adhering to the rule of law. Abu Sisi, like Eichmann before him, will have his day in court. Such trials, however, are rare occurrences — even in a liberal democracy such as Israel. Many prior targets of Israeli assassinations left this world without any judicial review.

International law experts continue to debate the legality of spy adventures such as Israel's hits on the Munich Olympics murderers (which led to the accidental killing of a Moroccan waiter in Norway), or President Obama's current authorization for U.S. forces to assassinate Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemen-based radical Muslim cleric — and U.S. citizen — who is allegedly linked to several terrorist attacks in the U.S. But in contrast to these extraordinary cases, Israel's enemies never seem to bother with trials or show any concern over whether they have the right target. Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl was summarily decapitated because he was a Jew; and Gilad Shalit sits in a Gaza prison without a trial date, a lawyer or even a visit from the Red Cross.

The paradox, of course, is that while the kidnapping of Eichmann might have violated international law, the trial itself may have redeemed the act by serving as a landmark of international justice. This was a trial, for example, in which Eichmann was afforded two attorneys of his choice, paid for by Israel. But adding even more drama to the proceedings, Eichmann conducted much of his own defense. He argued that he was just "following orders," a defense strategy that failed at Nuremberg, as well. During cross-examination, Gideon Hausner, the chief prosecutor and Israel's attorney general, asked Eichmann whether he was guilty of the crimes charged. "Legally not, but in the human sense... yes," Eichmann replied. Wiesel, who covered the trial for this paper when it was a daily and published only in Yiddish, remembered how shocked he was to see Eichmann looking so "visibly human," given all the evil he had done.

But Wiesel was quick to note that Eichmann's shrunken appearance did not distract him from realizing that the glass booth was actually serving as a cage for a true monster. One person who was apparently confused by Eichmann's manner was Hannah Arendt, the German Jewish philosopher who herself narrowly escaped the Holocaust. She is credited with coining the catchphrase "the banality of evil," which became the subtitle for her book "Eichmann in Jerusalem." Unfortunately, the idea that murderous acts can become normalized and routine — and that, therefore, no one is inherently evil — is an oddly comforting notion. The banality of Arendt's argument, however, is that it is the system that must be blamed and not the people who simply become introduced to a new moral order.

In making this case, Arendt trivialized Eichmann's true anti-Semitic nature, diagnosing him instead as a mere bureaucrat who followed orders like a cog in a machine, stripped of his moral core because of his exposure to Nazism. The darker truth, however, was that the evidence against Eichmann and his facility with true evil was self-evident and self-condemning. He was no mere cog; he cynically and knowingly deployed his anti-Semitism in the hope of advancing his career. "It is deeply regrettable that the canard that Eichmann was only a follower of orders continues to find

acceptance,” said Eli Rosenbaum, who for many years has been America’s chief Nazi hunter and today is the director of the human rights and special prosecutions section of the Department of Justice. Rosenbaum, speaking only in a personal capacity, told the Forward that the phrase “banality of evil” resonates “mostly because few who write about the case seem to have bothered to read the trial record, which is replete with evidence of Eichmann’s proactive and seemingly indefatigable efforts to eliminate the Jews.”

Eichmann was hanged without expressing a word of remorse. It was the first and last time Israel’s justice system resorted to capital punishment, and this, perhaps, is as it should be. After all, despite Arendt’s claim, there was nothing ordinary or banal about Eichmann and his evil. He was a special case, a self-styled specialist when it came to the logistics of mass murder. Even in Israel, where acts of terrorism are so commonplace, Eichmann’s crimes will always stand apart.

With the Holocaust receding in memory and cultural significance, Israel may one day no longer view the Eichmann trial as a signature moment. A half century ago this month, however, the world was watching only one trial, one notorious defendant and a tiny nation that stood tall for justice.

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## **Should Bin Laden Have Faced a Judge?**

***What the Eichmann Trial Taught Us***

*by* **Deborah Lipstadt**

*in* The Jewish Daily Forward On Line, May 3, 2011, < <http://www.forward.com/articles/137457/> >

When I heard the news that Osama bin Laden had been killed, I was in the middle of an author’s tour for my recent book on the Eichmann trial. It was impossible not to immediately see the parallels between the fates of these two mass murderers, who both ended up in watery graves: While bin Laden’s body was dumped in the sea, Eichmann’s ashes were strewn over the Mediterranean.

Adolf Eichmann was responsible for the murder of close to 1.5 million Jews. Bin Laden had far less blood on his hands. And while both men wished to kill as many Jews as possible, bin Laden was, of course, also interested in killing any American or “Westerner” he could. Each man was ferreted out, in the end, by forces operating clandestinely on foreign soil. Both operations were decisive, swift and successful.

But, of course, what happened to bin Laden and Eichmann after each was located was radically different. One was shot and killed on the spot; the other was put on trial.

It was not inevitable, however, that this would be Eichmann’s fate. It was a decision by David Ben-Gurion that prevented Eichmann from ending up like bin Laden and having justice delivered immediately, with a bullet to the head.

The Israelis were slow at first to follow up on a German tip that Eichmann was living secretly in Argentina. Only once he was given additional, unimpeachable proof did Isser Harel, head of Israeli Security Services, present what he knew to Ben-Gurion.

At that point, the Israeli prime minister could have told Harel to “bump him off.” Let Eichmann end up dead in a ditch. His fate would telegraph a message to all Nazi war criminals that they should not sleep so soundly in their beds; someone was on their trail. Instead, Ben-Gurion authorized a highly risky operation to bring Eichmann to Israel, where he would be given what he never gave his victims: a fair hearing.

One has to wonder what would have happened had bin Laden been captured alive. Would he have stood trial? Would it have been in a military court or a civilian one? It’s tantalizing to imagine. The United States’ biggest enemy would have been offered a striking illustration of American democracy: The rule of law applies to even the most nefarious defendants.

It is here that my mind segues to the recent death, on May 1, of Moshe Landau, a member of Israel’s High Court who was the presiding judge at Eichmann’s trial. Born in Germany and educated in London, Landau was intent on ensuring that this trial be as “undramatic” and unexceptional as possible. The evidence and the testimony would be emotional enough; he did not have to add anything to it. On the first day of the trial, with reporters from every corner of the world present, he offered no rousing opening statement. He did not call attention to the momentous nature of what was about to unfold. He simply began the proceedings.

If there was one person in the courtroom who was the object of Landau’s criticism it was not Eichmann but the prosecutor, Gideon Hausner. Landau berated Hausner for letting witnesses wander off topic and give orations about the Final Solution. He grew angry when Hausner tried to use the trial as a forum for discourse about resistance or other topics that had little connection to Eichmann.

Landau understood, more than anyone else in that courtroom, that the legacy of this trial would be, at least in great measure, the clear-cut message that it was as fair and as just as was possible. Sometimes he succeeded, sometimes he did not. But he never forgot that a trial, in addition to bringing justice, was a sacred forum that could help secure the historical record.

While I am not sorry that bin Laden was shot, I regret that he never was shown the wonders of a democratic system of justice. It would have been the best response to the culture of death and hatred that this man represented.

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Laurie Naiman and Louise Taichman assisted in the publication of the e-Newsletter.  
Thank You!