

Remembering the Shtetl

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NOTE: This is an introductory-level undergraduate-course designed especially for first-year students and others who have not previously taken any courses in the Jewish Studies Department. The course is cross-listed with the History Department. This course was last offered in 2004, and so the syllabus does not include more recent publications that I might well add in the future.

Course description

This course provides an introduction to the study of Yiddish culture by focusing on what has become understood as its quintessential locus: the shtetl, or East European small town. The course will provide students with historical and cultural background on the shtetl and will trace the dynamics of the remembrance of the shtetl, beginning in the late 19th century, as modernizing Jews leave these small towns and their traditional culture. The first part of the course entails reading key works by major Yiddish authors (Mendele Mokher-Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, Sholem Asch, et al.) who look back on shtetl life during the late 19th-early 20th century, followed by later literary responses (including the fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer) to the destruction of shtetl life during pogroms, revolutions, and two world wars. Students will also see how the shtetl became a subject of study by ethnographers and artists, and how it became an object of immigrant imagination in American Yiddish films. The course concludes by examining the range of post-Holocaust remembrance of the shtetl, including landmark works of ethnography, memoir, literature, as well as through art, tourism, photography, websites, and film. (All readings are in English.)

Requirements

- 1. Class attendance, preparedness, and participation.**
- 2. Written assignments:**
 - Guided response papers: Short essays of 2-3 double-spaced pages (ca. 500-700 words) each, in which students write a guided response to a text, film, or other work assigned for class; guided response papers are due the day that the text is to be discussed and may not be turned in afterwards. Guidelines for guided response papers will be given one week before they are due.
 - Midterm and final examinations: These will be take-home examinations, which will consist of a set of identifications and one or more essay questions.

Grade for the course is determined as follows: Reaction papers, 40%; Midterm exam, 20 %, Final exam, 30%; Class attendance and participation, 10%.

Class schedule

1-2: Introduction: Historical and cultural background

Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), pp. 5-25.

3: Early modern Yiddish literature on the shtetl: Haskalah satire

Mendele Moykher-Sforim, “The Calf”

4: Sholem Aleichem’s Kasrilevke

Sholem Aleichem, “The Great Panic of the Little People”

5: Abraham Reisen’s “shtetl realism”

Abraham Reisen, “Avraham the Carpenter,” “The Old Shoemaker,” “The Tree”

6-7: Two rival shtetl novellas: Asch vs. Weissenberg

Sholem Asch, “The Little Town”
I.M. Weissenberg, “A Shtetl”

→ Guided response paper #1 (on Weissenberg’s and Asch’s novellas) due.

8: The shtetl in pogrom literature

L. Shapiro, “White Challah”; Moyshe-Leyb Haplern, “A Night” (selections)

9-10: Shtetl folklore and ethnography

Hirsz Abramowicz, “A Lithuanian Shtetl,” in Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), pp. 77-98.

Beatrice Weinreich, ed., Yiddish Folktales (New York: Pantheon, 1988), pp. xix-xxxii; 222-230.

→ Take-home midterm exam distributed.

11: The shtetl from the West European Jewish perspective

Joseph Roth, "The Jewish Shtetl"

→ Take-home midterm exam due.

12: Immigrant shtetl culture: *Landsmanshaftn*

Daniel Soyer, Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 49-80.

13: Interwar immigrant travel back to the shtetl

Chone Gottesfeld, Tales of the Old World and the New (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1964), pp. 244-78.

14-16: The shtetl in interwar Yiddish films

In-class screening: East and West

In-class screening: The Light Ahead

J. Hoberman, Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds (New York: Schocken, 1991), pp. 59-71, 299-313.

17: Isaac Bashevis Singer's gothic shtetl

Isaac Bashevis Singer, Satan in Goray \$

→ Guided response paper #2 (on *Satan in Goray*) due.

18: Postwar remembrance of the shtetl: Memorial books

Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, eds., From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), *selections TBA*.

19: Postwar ethnography of the shtetl

Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, Life Is With People: The Culture of the Shtetl (New York: Schocken, 1995[1952]). pp. 11-48.

20: Researching the family shtetl

Theo Richmond, Konin: A Quest (New York: Pantheon, 1995), pp. 3-85.

website: <http://www.jewishgen.org/shtetlschleppers/>

21-22: Postwar return to the Eastern Europe

In-class screening: Shtetl (documentary by Marian Marzynski).

→ Guided response paper #3 (on *Shtetl*) due.

23: Yaffa Eliach and the case of Eyshishki

Yaffa Eliach, There Once Was a World: A 900-Year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), pp. 3-14.

website: <http://www.shtetlfoundation.org>

24: Shtetl memory artists

Ilex Beller, Life in the Shtetl: Scenes and Recollections (New York/London: Holmes and Meier, 1986).

In-class screening: Shtetl (short documentary film about Meyer Kirshenblatt)

→ Guided response paper #4 (on Beller's *Life in the Shtetl*) due.

25: The role of prewar photography in postwar shtetl remembrance

Roman Vishniac, Polish Jews (New York: Schocken, 1947).

Louis Levine, ed. Lives Remembered: A Shtetl Through a Photographer's Eye (New York: Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2002).

Jeffrey Shandler, "Szczuczyn: A Shtetl Through a Photographer's Eye," in Lives Remembered, pp. 19-27.

26-27 : Re-creating the shtetl in postwar cinema

In-class screening: selections from The Train of Life, Ivan and Abraham

27: The shtetl in recent American Jewish literature

Melvin Jules Bukiet, "The Apprentice"

→ Guided response paper #5 (on "The Apprentice") due.

→ Take-home final examination distributed.