

KULTURKAMPF IN THE SHTETL OR, CUTTING HISTORY DOWN TO SIZE

I. THE SHTETL IN HISTORY

Q: How do historical forces penetrate the closed world of the shtetl?

Q: How does the shtetl react?

Q: Where do the writers stand?

A: It depends on what side of history think they are standing.

A: It depends when they were writing.

A: Why shtetl fiction must be read in time.

1. Dik / AB

A letter arrives during recitation of Kinot in besmedresh

The [progressive] 1827 edict against juvenile marriages

As revisited in 1868

As comically refracted through Tisha b'Av

2. Abramovitsh / AB

Of Bygone Days / Shloyme reb Khayims (1891, 1899)

[3] The Story of the Hat

[8] Terror of the Shkoles

[14] Clothing Decree & economic collapse

[15] Rumors of the Colonies

[17]'s Illness & Death, PURIM to PASSOVER

- The shtetl is already dead—and so is Reb's Chaim, his father.

3. Peretz / AB

A shrayber, native to this region, comes armed w/questionnaires

if history = science, progress, self-knowledge

then shtetl may still be fixed

But shtetl imploding; Shrayber admits defeat;

cannot be reborn other than through myth, madness

4. Sholem Aleichem

(1902): Zeydl = only 1 who reads a paper!

(1904) Makar radicalized by reading *The Banner*

Kasrilevke invented as bulwark against history

an ironic Covenantal Community

Great Panic [of 1904]—but nothing more; ineffectual response

(1914) Powerless in face of German/Russian armies & Polish betrayal
(Krushnik)

The next generation; raised on shtetl fiction

Q: How does History impact the shtetl now?

A: From the outside

5. Ansky / AB

Footsteps: Halfway house for renegade yeshiva students

V[itebsk] vs. Boblitseve

Young radical infiltrates while locals work underground

History = Haskalah, Russian Nihilism

6. Weissenberg /AB

Thru songs, outside agitators, rev. pamphlets

Proximity of Warsaw

Shtetl as hub of rev. activity

7. Bergelson

- The TRAIN: impact of capitalism & the industrial revolution
- Rootless men & unhappy women, cut off from their past
- Jewish middlemen, still beholden to the local nobility
- But the market economy is now bankrupt
- Common denominator: all children of the shtetl
- Those who dream of going home to their native shtetl & those who don't