THE GOLDEN AGE
SHTETL
A NEW HISTORY OF
JEWISH LIFE IN EAST EUROPE

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Many of us recall Anatevka from *Fiddler on the Roof* with warmth, mercy, and grief. Anatevka was a Jewish village in dire straits, with its broken-down Jews, wooden huts, rotting shingles, clumsy wooden fences, cracked church walls, and pitiful marketplace with several crooked wooden stalls. Anything made of stone in this village—the church, a factory, the administration offices—was clearly not Jewish, except, of course, the tombstones. The hand-polished copper candlesticks and samovars of the inhabitants of Anatevka shone like rare treasures in that sepia world of decay.

The literary invention of the ingenious imagination of Sholem Aleichem, Anatevka represented the wooden age of the shtetl, the penultimate chapter of its existence. The actual shtetl, however, had seen much better times. A century earlier, in the 1790s, it entered a fifty-year period that I shall call the golden age of the shtetl. Of course, this description sounds like an oxymoron. How could a ramshackle village in the middle of nowhere where nothing happened but pogroms and expulsions have had a golden age?
This book seeks to answer this question by inquiring into the huge archival evidence that turns upside down the received wisdom about the shtetl and demonstrates the golden age shtetl as economically vigorous, financially beneficial, and culturally influential. The shtetl between the 1790s and the 1840s was an East European market town in private possession of a Polish magnate, inhabited mostly but not exclusively by Jews and subject to Russian bureaucracy. The golden age shtetl presented fascinating opportunities for the Russian Empire to integrate its Jews, and for Jews to adapt themselves to Russia—opportunities that Russia, following a new nationalistic and chauvinistic state ideology, completely lost. The golden age shtetl was the manifestation of a highly productive and promising encounter between the Russian Empire and the Jews, but an encounter ultimately ruined by the ideologically and geopolitically driven Russian administration, not without the help of some Jews.

Between the 1790s and the 1840s the shtetl went through a fifty-year period of prosperity and stability, a time of economic and cultural opportunity. During this period the shtetl was very different from what we usually imagine it to have been. The beginning and the end of this little-known golden age were marked by two events. The first was the partitioning of Poland by Russia, with the help of Prussia and Austria, which began in 1772, continued in 1773, and ended in 1795. It diminished Polish presence, offered new socioeconomic opportunities, and brought about the flourishing of the shtetl. The second event was the Russian imperial iron age, with its militarization, political and economic rivalry, xenophobia, and nationalism, which after the 1840s transformed the shtetl little by little into a ramshackle town, perhaps even a village, stricken by poverty and pogroms—an Anatevka of sorts. In East European Jewish cultural memory, that later shtetl replaced the shtetl as it had been before. It is precisely this earlier shtetl that this book resurrects by digging it out from beneath layers of literary and cultural stereotypes.

As a result of the partitions, Russia inherited the shtetl with its Polish magnate town-owner and the Jews as its driving economic mechanism. The golden age shtetl was a Polish, Jewish, and Russian joint effort, and it was a proud place with a fascinating social tapestry. Russia treated the shtetl at first with caution and respect, then turned envious, suspicious, and intolerant. Seeking to suppress the Polish shtetl owners, Russia introduced laws that the Jews saw as meted out specifically against them. While the shtetl retained its delicate balance of power among Poles, Russians, and Jews, it endured through its golden age. Yet the more vigorous the shtetl was, the more dangerous it became in the eyes of the new regime, which now sought ways to undermine the shtetl's economic power. In a word, the shtetl prospered so long as the Russian regime put up with its Polish heritage, and it entered into a decline when the regime chose to eradicate it. When in the 1840s Russia finally chose ideology and protectionism over economic growth, the balance shattered, and the glorious years of the shtetl came to a halt. The shtetl's golden age tells the story of a lost struggle for freedom and survival—the early nineteenth-century understanding of survival and freedom.

For some fifty years, between the 1790s and the 1840s, the shtetl was politically no longer Polish but administratively not yet entirely Russian, and its Jews were left to their own devices. It was the unique habitat of some 80 percent of East European Jews, who constituted two-thirds of world Jewry at the time. The shtetl's unlikely golden age marked the first encounter of East European Jews with the Russian Empire. The shtetl had little to no chance of surviving Russia's modernization, yet it endured as long as it withstood the attempts to reform and transform it—and as long as Russia left it in peace. Once its better days were over, the shtetl continued on in the cultural memory, folklore, literature, and phraseology of Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews. Moreover, the shtetl realities informed much of these cultural memories, as reflected in the literature, language, and folklore, which thus posthumously perpetuated, perhaps even immortalized, the shtetl.

Since this golden age had a beginning and an end, an examination of this specific period reveals not only the everyday reality but also the unrealized potential of the shtetl: who its Jews and other inhabitants were, what kind of lives they lived, why the Russian regime could not accept them as such, and how the regime hastened the shtetl's demise. The story of the golden age shtetl is a story of unfulfilled promise and myopic geopolitics. By trying to make the shtetl one of its own, Russia broke its back, destroyed its uniqueness, and triggered its transformation into Anatevka.

Introduction: What's in a Name?
The shtetl could have become the economic if not sociopolitical backbone of the western part of the Russian Empire and could have had a very different history, but because of its unique socioeconomic, political, and legal structure, it never did. This story also illuminates how the shtetl Jews changed when the regime forced them to, yet still remained who they had been. If we consider the attempts of the regime to transform the shtetl as a forced modernization, the desire of Jews to remain who they were could equally be considered as countermodernity. But the dichotomy of modernity and countermodernity only poorly conveys the vagaries and travails of the shtetl's grass roots, which is precisely what this book seeks to revive.

We will look at several dozen shtetls in Podolia, Volhynia, and Kiev, three provinces in Ukraine, in the southern part of what the Russian administrators called the Pale of Jewish Settlement in Russia, roughly coinciding territorially with what today is the area encompassed by Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine, a land representing East European Jewish life in the nineteenth century as a whole.2 These three provinces in central Ukraine, even before they were established by the incoming Russian administration, formed a distinct habitat quite different from that of other regions—Belorussia and Lithuania to the north, central Poland and Galicia to the west.

Above all, the three provinces were different demographically. Before the partitions, out of forty-four Polish towns with Jewish populations of more than one thousand, seventeen were distributed unevenly between northern, western, and central (formerly Polish) territories, while twenty-seven were located in central Ukraine, at that time a southwestern region of the Russian Empire. Economically, these central provinces of Podolia, Volhynia, and Kiev also stood out: no others had such a significant number of markets and annual fairs attracting thousands of merchants.3 In terms of their turnover, the trading firms in towns such as Radzivilov were comparable to the biggest trading firms in Moscow and St. Petersburg, whereas manufacturing in the three provinces far surpassed the manufacturing in the Belorussian provinces in the north and the Polish provinces (also under the Russian Empire) in the west.4 Also, Volhynia Podolia, and Kiev provinces did not suffer from the devastating Napoleonic invasion and the 1812 military campaign.

Central Ukraine was a peculiar religious entity with distinct traditions of piety, mysticism, folklore, and magic. It was also precisely there that Hasidism as a movement of religious enthusiasm came into being, in Podolia and Volhynia, and moving north and west from there. Hasidism was a full-fledged socioreligious movement in central Ukraine already in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, whereas in the north, in Lithuanian and Belorussian lands, the adherents of Hasidism were marginalized, persecuted, and excommunicated by their anti-Hasidic brethren. Hasidic courts dotted the Ukrainian shtetlekh, and the names of many Hasidic dynasties and trends came from these towns, from Bratslav, Linitis-Sokolovka, Radzivilov, Nesukhozh, and Chernobyl to Skvira, Talnoe, Ruzhin, and Makarov. Hasidic masters shaped the shtetl as much as the shtetl shaped Hasidism. Whereas in Poland the tsadkim, Hasidic masters, preferred to settle in urban areas or near big cities, Ukrainian Hasidic masters preferred the shtetl, an entire community they could control, educate, and subsequently convert to their mystical worldview. The shtetls, where Hasidic masters established their courts, became centers of pilgrimage.

The Jews in central Ukraine had differences in cuisine; for example, they almost never sweetened their gefilte (stuffed) fish, unlike the Polish and Lithuanian Jews. In addition, the Jews inhabiting these territories spoke a variant of the mameleishn, the Ashkenazi Jewish mother tongue, known as the Volhynian Yiddish.

The three provinces are circumscribed by the Dnieper River in the west and the Dniester in the southeast, the Priepet in the north, and an imaginary line connecting Chernkas and Kamenets-Podolsk in the south. Unlike other regions with a significant Jewish population in East Europe, such as Belorussia and Lithuaniua, our three provinces—Volhynia, Podolia, and Kiev—lie in the center of the “black soil” of modern-day Ukraine—a fertile area with lakes and rivers, mild winters and humid summers, and charming landscapes that alternate between picturesque hills and valleys, abundant pastures and vast meadows, the beauty and
richness of which could not escape the eye of the Polish magnates, who established their latifundia here.

Jews settled in what is today Ukraine in the first centuries of the Common Era, along with Greek colonizers. They established trading ports along the Crimean shore, and centuries later, together with the Byzantine merchants, moved northward to the Duchy of Kiev. In the ninth and tenth centuries, Jews moved to Ukraine not only from Byzantium and the Crimea but also from the nomadic kingdom of Khazaria, which stretched between the Volga and the Dnieper rivers, and from Western Europe, and which, contrary to common knowledge, had never been a Jewish polity. There was an organized Jewish community in Kiev already in the tenth century, yet the Jews in the Duchy of Kiev—also known as Kievan Rus—left little, if any imprint on the later Jewish communities established in the same areas only after the Mongol invasion in the mid-thirteenth century, the demise of Kievan Rus, and the conquest of these territories by the Duchy of Lithuania.9

Of course, the expulsion of the Jews from all Western and some Central European countries (Spain, Portugal, France, England, Hungary, and several Germanic lands), the intolerant policy toward Jews in the crown Polish towns where the Catholic Church established its headquarters (such as Kraków), and the welcoming attitudes of the mercantilist-minded Polish magnates toward the infidel Judaic settlers were decisive factors for robust Jewish resettlement in what was at the time Eastern Poland. The Polish magnates gladly used the Jews as a colonizing force in these very underpopulated and economically underdeveloped territories, for the Jews helped them build and maintain their manorial estates.10

The manorial estates of the landlords grew into towns and came to define a unique type of settlement unknown elsewhere in Europe, the Polish private town. After the 1569 Union of Lublin (finally and formally uniting Poland and Lithuania), the Polish magnates took over the areas they called województwo (palatinate) Bracławskie, Wołyńskie, Kłowskie, and Podolskie, and established themselves there for good reason: these territories were covered in forest, convenient for the famous national sport of the Polish nobility, hunting. The forests abruptly stopped at the Dnieper, on the left bank of which stretched the steppes, while on the other side, in the west, the three provinces bordered on the Carpathian Mountains and Galicia. One of the poorest regions in all of East Europe, Galicia was placed under Habsburg rule, whereas the former Polish palatinates in central Ukraine, fertile and agriculturally rich, now became the territory of the three Russian provinces Kiev, Volhynia and Podolia.

We begin the story of the shtetl's golden age at the moment when Russia moved westward and inherited these formerly eastern Polish territories with about one million Jews, one-third of whom lived in central Ukraine. For the author, this story also began with a hunt for primary sources. That hunt brought me to the strongholds of previously classified archives, where a wealth of documents from the shtetls has lain dormant for more than two hundred years. To gain access to these documents, I sometimes disguised myself as a Ukrainian clerk, a Soviet speleologist, and a Polar explorer. This unorthodox approach yielded several thousand archival sources in seven languages, from six countries and dozens of depositories, that reveal the shtetl in its years of glory.

From the publications of my mentors, predecessors, and colleagues, much can be learned about Russia's attempts to create new legislation and introduce regulations regarding the Jews, the variety of reformist and counter-reformist efforts of the Russian tsars, the structures and functions of Jewish communal institutions and their intercessors in the government, and the voices of enlightened Jews, who encouraged the state to reform traditional shtetl life.11 Until now, however, no one has been able to tell this story of the shtetl's Jewish tavernkeepers, international smugglers, members of Slavic gangs, traders in colonial commodities, disloyal husbands, and avid readers of books on ethics and Jewish mysticism—ordinary Jews in ordinary and extraordinary circumstances. Resorting to what Clifford Geertz called "thick description," I hope to re-create a three-dimensional, colorful, and picturesque shtetl. Even as we delve into the material culture and cultural anthropology, we will keep an eye on the social, economic, and political history, as well as on the reflection of the shtetl in the Jewish cultural memory.

To reconstruct various aspects of the shtetl and simultaneously keep the reader's interest in the story, I structured the chapters around an interplay between the case studies and a broader context. Organizationally,
each chapter begins with a case study, which serves as a window on a larger sociocultural issue. The ensuing discussion of the political history provides the general context for the events in the shtetl and helps us focus clearly on the subject against its broader political backdrop. Police grassroots reports allow us a look at history from the bottom up, thereby balancing the top-down approach of the central administration to the same empirical reality. All these diverse sources come together to tell the story of the shtetl and its Jews, who both adapted to a new environment and molded this environment to suit their own needs, thus endowing it with extraordinary economic capacities and cultural longevity. This capacity for survival, however, meant that the shtetl would outlive its golden era and enter a very different period of a longlasting agony.

Although I do point out various forms of shtetl’s afterlife, I do not go that far to explore the shtetl’s agony and death in the fires of the twentieth-century revolutions, two world wars, totalitarian projects of social engineering, and the Holocaust. Of course, there are books that emphasize historical change over a long period of time; there are also books that reconstruct the minutiae of everyday life and discuss how the meanings of things came into being. Some of these meanings are still carved into our cultural identities, while others have been entirely abandoned. This book seeks to combine both approaches, but emphasizes the second. We will pause sometimes on the big-name players—general governors, magnates, tsars, rabbinic leaders, Hasidic masters—yet our focus is on the ordinary people, the Ukrainians, Poles, Russians, and Jews who walked through history without leaving a footprint.

This book argues that these people did leave their imprint and made the golden age shtetl what it was. To humanize the shtetl dwellers, we decontextualize the shtetl, presenting it first as a phenomenon in and of itself, with its own system of regulations, its unique legislative idiom, and its own logic of development—beyond the political, intellectual, and ideological. This does not mean that we will take the empire and its institutions out of the shtetl. On the contrary, we will discuss how the empire came in and what it did to the cultural and socioeconomic texture of the shtetl. Yet we will be concerned above all with the ordinary shtetl dwellers, across whose lives we will see why the shtetl could not have survived under Russian control as a Polish private town. Thus this book brings the reader into the shtetl and the shtetl to the reader on a journey through the high moments of shtetl life, exploring the world that Russia, Poland, and Ukraine irretrievably lost.

**BEYOND COLLOQUIAL STEREOTYPES**

I will use the word *shtetl* often: the shtetls each have a history, and so does the word itself. Paradoxically, we know better what the shtetl is not than what it is. The authors of a book on Jews from Luboml insist that their hometown was indeed a shtetl because it was not a metropolis, was in a bad location, and did not have even one small Talmudic academy, yet for some mysterious reason it held a “noteworthy position among the Jewish communities of Volhynia.”12 A book on Korsun claims that “Korsun was too large to be called a village (a *dorfer* in Yiddish), and too small to be called a city (a *shetot*), but large enough to be called a small town, a *shtetl*.13 As we will see, the shtetl habitually becomes a kind of synecdoche for something distant, small, and lost, and rarely for something thriving and vigorous.

We do not actually know what makes an East European locale a shtetl. The number of Jews, their hustle and bustle, or perhaps their poverty, if not their piety, all seem to play a role, yet none is constitutive. Jewish nineteenth-century writers convince us that we were not missing much in the shtetl, a shrinking, insolvent Jewish habitat on its path from decay to demise. The grandfather of Yiddish literature, Mendele Mokher Sforim, calls his imaginary shtetl “Kaptansk,” a name referring not only to destitute *kaptoynim*, “Jews without a cent to their name,” but also to the town’s imminent fall, kaputs in Yiddish or kapets in Russian.14 A golden age Kaptansk would defy common sense.

This vision of the moribund Jewish town appears in many authors, including Sholom Aleichem, who compares the shtetl houses to gravestones; Y. L. Peretz, with his portrayal of an imaginary shtetl as a “dead town”; Isaak Babel, shocked by shtetl agoraphobia; and David Bergelson, who calls the shtetl a godforsaken town. The shtetl came to usher its own decline and fall, as if there were nothing in its history but agony.15

However, an alleged downtrodden village and a loser by definition, the shtetl looked different to some of its shtetl contemporaries, who used
the word shetl, a small town, and the word shtot, town, indiscriminately. Born and raised during the golden age of the shetl, Yisroel Aksenfeld sketched what was perhaps the first literary portrayal of the shetl: "A few small cabins and a fair every other Sunday." Unlike the shetl, continued Aksenfeld, dripping with sarcasm, a Jewish town, a shtot, was different. He portrayed a big imaginary Loyboyopoli with its burgeoning economy, Jewish communal institutions, and the entire gamut of Jewish social types just to make his point: Loyboyopoli was unquestionably a town, a shtot, not a shetl. And then, unexpectedly, Aksenfeld mocked his own definition: "in a shetl like—oops! Pardon me, that was a slip of the tongue—in a town..."16

Today, Aksenfeld's irony and revealing slip of the tongue would be lost on us, since it is assumed—and as we will see, mistakenly—that the shetl was a decaying Jewish nonentity. Berdichev was an epicenter of civilization and therefore, according to today's assumptions, could not possibly be a shetl. On the contrary, Slavuta, Belaia Tserkov, or Talnoe were anything but centers of civilization and therefore correspond to what we think of as shetls. But the shetl was a civilization, in and of itself, a very specific one, and not for Jews alone.

The shetl of Jewish literature became the embodiment of a Jewish spirituality. The famous photographer Roman Vishniac carefully selected from among his thousands of pre-Holocaust East European pictures and published only those "that advanced an impression of the shetl as populated largely by poor, pious, embattled Jews."17 The writer Eva Hoffman deftly captured in her book how the shetl conveys the "idea of a less" and summons "poignant, warm images of people in quaint black garb, or Chagall-like crooked streets and fiddlers on thatched roofs."18 The shetl as an impoverished yet God-fearing Jewish dwelling place has taken such a powerful hold on the common imagination that one insightful writer diagnosed our shared romantic longing for the shetl as "nostalgia for the mud."19 We ascribe all our warmest cultural memories to this nostalgic world—but we are never ready to confront its vigorous and flourishing past, which challenges our predispositions.

But let us make no mistake: this lethargic yet spiritualized shetl is a historical phenomenon shaped by post-Holocaust sensibilities. In his 1945 lecture on the East European Jewish legacy, Abraham Joshua Heschel portrayed the inhabitants of the shetl as highly spiritual, pious Jews, genuine holy martyrs. Heschel, who never lived in a shetl, portrayed the utopian Jew as a shetl sage, a Hasid or a Talmudist or both. Like Natan Neta Hanover, who witnessed and lamented the destruction of the Jewish communities of Eastern Poland during the mid-seventeenth-century Cossack rebellion, Heschel sought to inspire us with what he maintained was the key traditional Judaic value of the destroyed Jewish world: Torah-based study.20 Heschel's eulogy evinces profound ethical and intellectual messages. The problem is that both black-hat and hatless Jews took this message out of its post-Holocaust context and transformed it into a new, overarching portrait of the shetl.

The ethnographer Mark Zborowski, author of the bestseller Life Is with People, used this overarching portrait to describe Jewish life and people as they never were. His shetl Jews, young and old, lived not in the multicul tural and highly interactive localities portrayed in this book but on what one contemporary scholar calls "a kind of an island of unadul terated Yiddishkayt." Zborowski's Jews always follow the spirit and the letter of rabbinic prescriptions and spend their every free minute learning and praying.21

Inhabited by pious Yiddish-speaking dwellers, Zborowski's shetl is a Judaic monastery with a rabbi instead of an abbot. It is an immaterial phantom, a sublime feeling, "a state of mind."22 Not only does Zborowski's book overtly spiritualize the Jews, it also sketches an imaginary and misleading map of the shetl, empty of any Catholics, Tartars, Armenians, Lutherans, or Eastern Orthodox, making the shetl exclusively Jewish and meriting unmitigated scholarly critique.23 It is easy to imagine this shetl as the epitone of Jewish traditionalism and spirituality, and these features are discussed in due course in the final chapters. Yet the real golden age shetl revolved around its economic axis, and hence depended above all on the marketplace and money—zloty and chervontsy, Polish and Russian gold-value coins. As I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, in 1964 the hit Broadway show Fiddler on the Roof immortalized the imaginary shetl of Anatevka as a quintessential Jewish village. Its Jews were steeped in piety.
and poverty. Tevye the Milkman was the only Jew with a cow. The local rabbi was as disrespectful of Russian power as one could possibly be, and his advanced students were village boors unaware of things: Jewish boys study in elementary school. In Anatevka, Jews and Gentiles lived separated by an invisible cultural wall and got together only for a drink or a pogrom or both. It will be very difficult to dispel this by now fully accepted, deeply loved, and widely known vision of the shtetl as an impoverished dump with one wealthy Jewish butcher.

This Sholem Aleichem shtetl, destroyed by intercultural sex, antisemitic politics, and international revolution, was widely accepted until the historians of early modern Poland in the 1990s dragged the fiddler off the roof by telling a shtetl prehistory rooted in the eighteenth-century Polish private ownership of towns, the landlords’ protectionist trade, and a sophisticated system of leaseholding. The new scholars of Polish Jewry, Gershon Hundert, Moshe Rosman, and Adam Teller, reframed our former vision of the shtetl as victim of political persecution, proving that the shtetl had a burgeoning trade and economy, as well as an oppressive and unlikeable Jewish oligarchy. These historians drew heavily on Isaac Levi-tats’s unsurpassed reconstruction of East European Jewish communal life with its umbrella kahal, the Jewish version of a town council, and its subordinate havurot, voluntary confraternities. Already in the twenty-first century the late historian John Doyle Klier, one of my spiritual mentors, took the study of the Old Polish shtetl into the Russian imperial realm and boldly stated that there was no such thing as a “typical” shtetl, that every shtetl was different, that the shtetl “grew from a Polish private town,” and that it was the locus of economic and cultural interaction, bringing together Christians and Jews.

One caveat: unlike Russian historians, the historians of Old Poland very rarely use the word “shtetl” to describe its early period. In most cases they did as the contemporary Polish, Russian, and other European travelers did, who liked local color but did not know the word shtetl. In most cases, but not all, what we today call the shtetl the nineteenth-century Poles called a miasteczko, the Ukrainians a mitscheko, and the Russians a mestechko, Slavic for a small market town. To understand the shtetl we have to consider the mestechko—in a sense, the shtetl’s Russian bureaucratic equivalent.

**THE AVATAR OF THE SHTETL**

To map out the new territorial acquisitions for economic purposes after the partitions of Poland, the Russian authorities had to make sense of the unusual Polish shtetl-based latifundia system, now geographically in Russia, and define what a mestechko, the key factor in this latifundia, was supposed to be. In their attempts at defining what mestechko meant, they help advance our deeper understanding of what the shtetl was, precisely late in the eighteenth and early in the nineteenth century.

Russian statesmen quickly became mired in a network of incompatible intricacies that mirror modern debates about the shtetl. Why did certain formerly Polish localities, called mestechki (plural of mestechko), benefit from the privileges granted to towns, though they seemed just like villages? Why were other mestechki registered as small towns, whereas demographically they competed with big localities and should have been classified as cities? The Russian bureaucrats turned to their staff to collect and provide them with hard data on the rich Polish-owned lands within the Russian borders. Controlling the actual definition of those localities could help establish Russian power in the empire’s western borderlands, still unknown territory, which the regime was just staring to explore.

Russian lower-ranking bureaucrats were often undertrained, corrupt, and underpaid, yet many of them were diligent and reliable. They discovered that regarding the mestechki, size did not matter. Some of them were bigger than villages, others were smaller. Later they noticed that counting the Jewish-owned houses in the mestechki also signified little. In 1845, Skvira had 242 Jewish-owned houses; Shpola, 182; Smela, 239; and Talnoe, 166, whereas Belaia Tserkov, Korostyshev, and Berdichev, each of which the imperial rosters always identified as a mestechko, had two, five, and six times more Jewish homes—respectively 468, 1,066, and 1,329.

The Russian clerks tried to define the mestechko as the town of the Jews, whom they often saw at the marketplace. They compiled a meticulous local census and found that in 1802, such localities as Malchnovka

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12 *The Golden Age Shtetl*

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13 Introduction: What's in a Name?
and Vasilkov were 54 percent Jewish (1,795 inhabitants out of 3,333 and 1,302 out of 2,428), Boguslav and Radomyshl were 50 percent (2,418 out of 4,769 and 703 out of 1,406), and Uman was 51 percent (2,390 out of 4,706). 32

If other mestechki were roughly half Jewish and half gentile, the locality could hardly be called a "Jewish town," particularly since up until the 1840s many, such as Belaia Tserkov, retained the same pattern: in 1845, it was 50 percent Jewish (7,043 out of 14,177). 32 In 1868 the mestechki in Volhynia, Kiev, and Podolia provinces had 184,384 Eastern Orthodox peasants, 24,688 Eastern Orthodox of nonpeasant stock, 9,173 Catholics (Poles), 1,549 Lutherans (Germans), and 176,547 Jews — roughly half the population. Russian clerks also discovered that the ratio of Jews to gentiles helped little to explain this phenomenon because some towns, for example Kamenets-Podolsk, legally never defined as mestetchki but statistically close to them, also had a half Jewish population (in the 1830s, 2,903 Christians vs. 2,895 Jews). 33

Nineteenth-century Russian bureaucrats had good reason to think that somehow the presence of Jews was helpful in understanding the mestechko, but the number of Jews alone was insufficient to make a; ethnically and socially diverse locality into a mestechko. After all, Shpola, Korostyshev, Makhnovka, Talnoe, and Tomashpol had two thousand to five thousand Jews; Korets, Medzhibozh, Smela, and Tulchin had between five and ten thousand; and others, such as Berdichev, Boguslav, Vasilkov, and Skvira, had more than fifteen thousand. 34 And each of these was classified as a mestechko. Zborowski with his Life Is with People was fairly accurate when he emphasized that the shtetl was "not size at all." Yet he failed to mention that the shtetl was not a little town and could in fact be quite big!

Delving into the taxonomy of the mestechko, Russian clerks became the earliest historians of the shtetl. They studied the amassed evidence and realized that, by and large, almost any mestechko previously belonged to a Polish landlord and had been or still was a private town. This town grew out of a small manorial estate. To make their estate and surrounding settlement into a town, Polish landlords obtained special royal privileges allowing them to establish annual fairs and regular market days and to produce and sell liquor. In early modern times the privilege was a legal document, implying among other things a monopoly: no one else could have annual fairs on those dates and no one else in the vicinity could distill and sell vodka. Privileges shaped the protectionist economy, which enormously favored the magnates and boosted the economy of their estates.

It also, however, favored the Jews, who were invited to settle on the landlords' estates. In exchange for legal residence, Jews had to fulfill a specific obligation: they had to bring in trade and trade in liquor. They had to engage in specific occupations and perform an important function rather than just settle as passive colonizers. The mestechko thus emerged as the product of precisely this Jewish activity, which made private towns into prosperous, economically advantageous, and financially beneficial possessions—that is, for the magnates, of course.

For example, as occurred everywhere else with only minor differences, the 1740 agreement between a magnate and the Zaslav (Iziaslav) Jewish communal elders outlined the key function of the Jews, who would

![Image of a shtetl inn, late 18th to early 19th century, Brailov, Podolia. Courtesy of Benjamin Lukin.](image-url)
organize five annual fairs during Eastern Orthodox and Catholic holidays such as Spas (Savior) and St. Martin in the old part of the town, and another four, also on Christian holidays such as St. Peter and S. Virgin Mary, in the new part of the town, and still three more brief fairs in the town’s central square.67 Operating shtetl trade was a Jewish obligation, not a choice. As the late eighteenth-century French traveler Hubert Vautrin observed, Jews were "foreign to the state" and served "the material interests" of the Poles.78 When they were not efficient enough from vantage point of the Polish magnate, the latter resorted to draconian measures to make them pay their dues. Therefore, what historians have called the marriage of convenience between Jews and magnates in reality was not an equal partnership and sometimes took the ugly forms of humiliation, exploitation, and abuse.89

Since this Jewish privilege outlived the partitions of Poland and continued to shape the Zaslav economy well into the nineteenth century. Zaslav, as well as hundreds of other shtetls, turned out to be a lingering Polish presence for the Russian regime. Still, the word mesteckie in Russia only partially stood for what a private town, a miastecko, had been earlier in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Even half a century after the partitions of Poland, the mesteckie still remained the private possessions of Polish landlords: Gornostaiapol belonged to Gimpka, Khodorkov to Swidziński, Zhabotin to Florkowski, Belopolie to Tyszkievicz, Korostyšhev to Olizer, Pogrebishche to Rzewski, and Rahmanstrikva to Zalewski. Although Potocki sold parts of Uman in the 1790s and lost the town entirely by the 1830s, and Bariatinski sold Dubno in the 1840s, Polish magnates still controlled several of the most important shtetls in the area: Count Branicki controlled Belaia Tserkov and Boguslav, Prince Radziwill controlled Berdichev, and lesser-known landlords owned several hundred other mesteckie of secondary economic significance.90

As a major landowners’ asset, these private towns slowly but steadily changed hands from Poles to Russians, a process that intensified after the 1830–1831 Polish rebellion and the subsequent confiscation of the rebels’ property, including that of disloyal magnates. But even before the rebellion, as early as the 1790s, the Russian Ministry of Finance was taking away private towns from now politically bankrupt Poles and redesignating these towns as Russian government towns—or, as they put it, treasury-owned towns (kazennye, from the Russian for treasury, kaza).

In the eyes of the government, economic control over the western borderlands signified political control. For this reason, the Russian rulers enticed the Eastern Orthodox (that is, non-Catholic) gentry to follow their lead, take advantage of the dire situation of the Polish magnates, and buy their towns out from under them. Unlike the early twentieth-century Yiddish literati and modern-day memoirists, the Russian regime found the shtetls to be a highly valuable asset.

Thus encouraged, Colonel Berezovsky purchased Gostomel, the Russian statesman Count Palen came to own Makarov and Chernobyl, Talnoe came under the ownership of Duchess Narayshkina, Starokonstantinov came under the ownership of Countess Abamalek, Duchess Bobrianskaia purchased Smela, and the landlord Uvarova purchased Pavoloch. The Russian authorities confiscated or appropriated in lieu of debts such shtetls as Balt, Dubno, Ekaterinopol, Uman, and Fastov. Later, in midcentury, the government also purchased the fortified shtetl Zhvanets from the landlord Komar and Zhinkov from Prince von Wurtenberg.90

Though fifty towns became the property of the Russian state, they still appeared on the government rosters as mesteckie. The contemporary Russian clerks were no fools: they understood that little had changed economically in the mestecko with its overnight reclassification, although the reclassified shtetl legally was no longer a private Polish town. Through the 1850s and even later, into the 1880s, the Russians continued to identify as mesteckie both the towns still in the private possession of a Polish magnate or a Russian landlord and the towns already belonging to the imperial treasury.41

The Russian bureaucrats sought a legal basis for the confiscation of the private towns from the Poles, thus reconstructing for posterity the genealogy of the shtetl. They established that Ekaterinopol, Chernobyl, and Boguslav had become mesteckie back in the sixteenth century—respectively in 1557, 1566, and 1591. Others, such as Tetiev, Gornoistaipol, Ianovka, Zhidichin, and Vishenki, retrospectively acquired the status of mestecko in the seventeenth century—in 1606, 1616, 1618, 1638, and 1695.
One of the oldest private towns in the area, Brusilov, had its privilege issued and reconfirmed in 1574, 1585, and 1720, with such pivotal Polish rulers as Stefan Batory and August II the Strong confirming it. Localities such as Belaia Tserkov, Korostyshev, and Tomashgorod received privileges from Stanislaw II August between 1774 and 1779, whereas Rimanov and Obukhov became private possessions according to the 1817 and 1837 decisions of the Russian Senate, and Zhashkov did so merely because it was mentioned as a mestechko in the 1794 papers of Count Potemkin.41

To make sure they had a good grasp of the history and structure of the shtetl, the Russian clerks also interrogated the town-owners: what did it mean to be or become a mestechko? They dispatched requests, obtained answers, and compiled the information in tables. Krasnopol, they discovered, was called a mestechko "only because several Jewish families settled there." Landlord Zakaszewski, the owner of the shtetl of Gorodok, explained that his locality "had always been considered a mestechko: Jews had settled here long ago, they had their synagogue and butchery, and also they had regular fairs." Baranovka, Korets, Liakhovtsy, Rimanov, Troianov, Shepetovka, Sudilko, and many other localities had no papers to support their claims but were known to have acquired their special status "from old times" and, more important, "had distinct Jewish communities."42

This last point became crucial for the Russian clerks. They summarized: Jews were "allowed to sell liquor in the existing mestechki," the localities "represent[ed] the center of trade activities," and the local Jews "had already established their communities and manufacturing."43 Thus in the mestechko, a productive Jewish community and economic prosperity went hand in hand, a configuration that was far removed from the imaginary shtetls of East European writers.

Both for the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth before the partitions and for the Russian Empire afterward, the mestechki came to be defined by what the Jews did there—and the shtetl Jews were seen as the backbone of the towns' economic growth. This aspect helps explain, among other things, the attempts of the Russian gentry to imitate the Polish magnates. According to the Ministry of Finance, Russian landlords inundated St. Petersburg with multiple "petitions to rename villages as mestechki," as did Golenshchev-Kutuzov and Dolgorukov, for example, who wanted "to establish trade usually conducted by Jews," therefore asking to rename their villages of about 200 homes as mestechki.42 The shtetl was something they sought out and found profitable. Of course, the government had to accommodate the landlords: permissions were grudgingly granted, taverns opened, market days established, and the early nineteenth-century shtetls grew in number.

The shtetl received its final clarifying touch when the governor general of Kiev, Volhynia, and Podolia provinces summed up a century-long quest. By the 1880s, there were 378 mestechki under his auspices, 322 of which belonged to the gentry and 56 to the state treasury. Out of those 378, 92 had received their privileges from the Polish kings, another 40 had been turned into mestechki by the Russian administration on its own initiative, and yet another 40 applied for and were given the status of mestechki after the partitions. Eighty-nine localities were called mestechki on the basis of some scanty documental proof, and 48 had no documents at all but retained their status as mestechki since they had been known as such from the time of the medieval grand duchies of Kiev and Lithuania.44

The governor general gave two reasons for calling a locality a mestechko. His first reason was of Polish origin: the locality was a market-centered settlement of urban character, belonging to a member of the Polish gentry (szlachta), having a monopoly on liquor trade, and known for its annual fair or fairs. "Many owners," he claimed, "had sought to rename their villages as towns, asking the Polish kings for the right to establish a fair, introduce the Magdeburg law, and obtain permission to sell vodka."

But the governor also provided another reason, this one rooted in the Russian taxonomic system: many rural-like settlements had been inhabited "by merchants and townsfolk," not only by peasants; hence it was logical to call such a locality a town, a mestechko. Whatever its size—2,000, 12,000, or 20,000 people—a mestechko was a place with ordinary taxing people, not serfs. The specific shtetl economy, centered on the marketplace, made it different from a village, while the unique shtetl history, centered on private ownership, made it different from a city. The shtetl was prosperous as long as the Russian authorities agreed to its intermediary status. Once they chose to reform or reclassify it, the shtetl's predicament was sealed.
The governor general acknowledged that a mestechko owed its status almost exclusively to the Jews. He realized that a 34 percent Jewish population in the mestechki of Kiev province, 45 percent in Podolia, and 44 percent in Volhynia did not answer the question of why the locality was a Jewish-made phenomenon, whereas Jewish representation among the two most economically active urban estates, the townsfolk and merchants, did.

Townsfolk or urban dweller was a legal category. Individuals covered by this category constituted a specific estate, a class, a group of people known in Russian as a soslovie, different from other types of soslovie or estates, such as landowning nobility, petty gentry, clergy, state clerks, and peasants. These groups accounted for the Christian 50 percent of the mestechki population. Unlike these groups, the townsfolk were made up of retail traders, leaseholders and tavernkeepers, middlemen, and artisans— butchers and bakers, shoemakers and tailors, barrel makers and tanners, blacksmiths and furriers—in a word, the third estate in its original meaning.

Jews were enormously overrepresented among these urban estates. The Kiev mestechki had 93 percent Jewish townsfolk, Podolia had 94 percent, and Volhynia had 92 percent, with respectively 96, 95, and 99 percent Jewish merchants. In Kiev, Podolia, and Volhynia provinces 98, 97, and 98 percent of small stores, trading stalls, and shops belonged to Jews, in numbers respectively 3,974, 4,445, and 4,007. Therefore it was the activity of the Jews, not their demographics, that made a locality a mestechko and defined its economic power.

More than anything else, it was the commercial and economic contribution of the Jews that had a definitive impact on making the mestechki. If there were no specifically Jewish businesses, such as tavernkeeping, then the town was not a mestechko, and vice versa. This connection between the burgeoning town economy and the Jews was obvious to practically every Russian provincial bureaucrat, including one who observed that in his province, "several mestechki bear the title of mestechko for no reason: hence Jews should not be dealing in alcohol there." Not the ratio of Jews to gentiles but the ratio of economically active Jews to economically active gentiles from the same class or estate—this unique socio-

economic configuration and the Jews’ pivotal function in it defined the mestechko.

The nineteenth-century shtetl emerged as a Polish economy driven by Jews and existing within the Russian administrative system. It was this unique role of the Jews that made the early nineteenth-century locality into a vibrant, energetic, and growing shtetl. The moniker “shtetl Jews” was about producing something, not just being something.

Eastern Orthodox or Catholic landlords sought to get the mestechko privilege precisely because it would assure them that Jewish liquor manufacturers, innkeepers, and guild merchants, however small their number, would transform the village into a town solely by virtue of their entrepreneurship and their engagement with what contemporaries understood as urban business. And since that business was profitable and beneficial, naturally it defined the shtetl’s golden age, although we now need to clarify why the Yiddish-speaking contemporaries rarely called the golden age mestechko a shtetl.

A SHTETL THAT WAS NOT

Jews only called their locality a shtetl once they had gotten out of the shtetl. People who left their native towns voluntarily or who were banished from their father’s table observed their past from the heights of the big city and from a distance separating the Russian imperial culture from a Yiddish underdog one. They pondered their birthplace through the privileged lens of an acculturated individual who spoke the language of the state, dressed in European clothes, and no longer had use for kosher food, Talmudic debates, or the pious way of life.

Their place of origin was now a thing of the despised past: a small town, a towanet, a hamlet, a shtetl. The smaller the better—thus they could explain their escape from their particular past and their desire to become part of something universalistic, imperial, mainstream, big and important. The shtetl for them was a yardstick measuring the gap separating their acculturated present from their Jewish past.

For loyal shtetl dwellers, the word shtetl was too charged with pejorative and condescending meanings. God forbid a traveling Jewish merchant from Brody would tell the Jews of Medvedovka that they lived in a
shtetl, or even worse, a shtetele. This condescending Yiddish nickname was reserved by the townspeople of Zaslav for those of Shargorod and by the townspeople of Slavuta for those of Polonnoe—and vice versa.

If asked where they lived, they waxed superlative. They lived in a town, a shtot—nothing less. Consider the ways in which Jews identified their localities in *pinkasim*, the nineteenth-century record books of the Jewish communities, voluntary societies, and professional confraternities, written, as a rule, in Hebrew. Responsible for the title pages and statutes, Jewish scribes proudly identified Lutsk in Volhynia, Kamenets in Podolia, and Nesvizh in Belorussia as towns. That Berdichev in the 1830s was described as a town (ir) and Bar of Podolia in the 1790s as a large town encircled by a wall (krak) is hardly surprising.51 But Jews also called Baranovka, Zaslav, Ostropolis, and Starokonstantinov towns, as well as dozens of other places that we today would call a shtetl. Even the enlightened Avraam Ber Gottlober wrote in his Hebrew memoir that his father had been born in the town of Tarashcha and himself in the town of Starokonstantinov—both quintessential shtetls.32

Jews were proud of their locales and called them holy towns and holy communities, making no distinction between a settlement of five hundred dwellers and an urban center of ten thousand. Zhinkovets and Karvasar were holy communities on a par with the large walled town of Kamenets-Podolsk, which they were on the outskirts of. In turn, Rakhmiistrivka, practically a village, claimed the status of holy community on par with Volozhin, Letichev, Miropol, and Medzhiboizh.33 When Rabbi Nachman needed a new dwelling place, he established himself in what his scribe Nosson proudly called the "community of Zlatopolie," and did not mention that it was no bigger than a village.34

Like the Russian administrators who sought to define *mestechko*, the Jews ignored the significance of demography and statistics. What mattered for the Jews was not the size of the place but what the Jews did there. If they had a prayer quorum to read the Torah and say kaddish, a butcher to slaughter poultry, a scribe to write a mezuzah, and a warden to open the synagogue and light the candles, any locality would then be a Jewish town, a holy town. And they would also have their own kahal made up of the most influential representatives of the local financial and mercantile elite. Jews, Poles, and Russians acknowledged the legal status of the kahal and respected its major functions—collecting taxes, distributing communal relief funds, and supervising religious and social mores. With all this available locally, Jews did not need to walk miles in the dirt behind a wagon carrying a coffin to a distant town cemetery, and they did not need to go to a bigger city to hear the Purim story of the blessed Mordekhai and the cursed Haman. Jews could pay their respects to the dead and reenact the ancient dramas at home.

Holiness stayed local. It was created by virtue of the Judaic divine commandments transforming a rustic village-like locality into a civilized place of Jewish good deeds. What looked like a provincial rural settlement
to the outsider was the center of the world for its Jews. Hence, local Jews were the proud residents of what they called a town, not a townlet or a village. The Hebrew language of the communal records was one of the reasons why the word shtetl was not used there. But even Jews who wrote in Yiddish, for example the tailors from the outskirts of Berdichev on the other side of the Gnilopiat River, presented themselves as being from the "community behind the greblia" (the Russian for dam), living in the town of Berdichev.55

Rabbinic scholars, also writing in Hebrew, called most shtetsel where Jews lived towns. They were particularly careful about the names of the Jews and Jewish localities in the case of divorce documents, which had to give a clear, indisputable, standardized spelling of the name of a locality. Here a mistake might invalidate an entire document, and consequently turn the woman into an agunah, an abandoned wife.

In a complex divorce case, a Jew from Zaslav needed to collect signatures from one hundred different town rabbis from three different countries. But what do we call a town and what a country, asked a local rabbi? Clearly, Hungary and Austria are different lands although one and the same country; language is here a decisive factor. On the contrary, although the border splits Gusiatin and Tarnorud into two parts, they still constitute a single entity, a town, because of their thriving Jewish communities.60

Shtetels to us today and mestechki to the Russian bureaucrats and the Polish nobles, these localities were all towns to the Jews at the time. Rabbi Israel Isser from Vinnitsa in his responsa was more concerned with potential mistakes invalidating a divorce document and therefore discussed how properly to write the name of a town—was it Belo Polie or Belopolie (White Plains)? He did not use the word shtetl and did not predicate the status of the town on its size.57

However, the proverbial preacher Yaakov Kranz, known as the Maggid of Dubno, or perhaps his editor Avraam Flahm, who published the maggid's works posthumously in the 1830s, did use the diminutive word shtetl, and used it interchangeably with the word shoteh, town. He did it indiscriminately: as long as his wandering poor Jews were able to find a generous Jew, a welcoming household, a synagogue with a bench to lean their head on, this was a shtetl. Or a shoteh.58

The illustrious Yekhezkel Landau from Prague reacted in a similar manner. When a rabbinic scribe asked him whether Radzivilov could serve as a town where the court could issue divorce documents, Landau focused on how to write Radzivilov—in German or in Yiddish spelling, Radziwil or Radvil. He answered: in clear Yiddish. But he never asked what Radzivilow was, a city, a town, or a village. If they had a scribe there, a rabbi in charge of marriages and divorces, two knowledgeable Jews serving on the rabbinic court, and could issue a sophisticated document, this was a definitely a town, a formidable center of Jewish life.69 This is precisely what the shtetl was in its golden age, and this is exactly what the Russian regime both liked and disliked about it.

A LOCUS OF ACTION

The residents of modern Ukrainian towns that were once mestechki use the word shtetl as a memory locus, distancing themselves from it. When asked where the shtetl was located, they wave their hand toward the center of the town, somewhere around the former market square: it was over there, where the Jews lived, traded, prayed, cried, and rejoiced. The shtetl was there—in a historical and geographic distance, in an imaginary town center with its noisy, bustling trade.60

Today we readily call any locality in East Europe where Jews once lived a shtetl, although the Jews who lived there two hundred years ago called it a town and the Russian bureaucrats called it a mestechko. The shtetl thus absorbs various meanings and the tension between them: the Polish legal and economic private town, the Russian administrative mestechko, and the Jewish religious "holy community."

It was precisely the combination of these factors that created the triangle of power, shared by Poles, Jews, and Russians—that shaped the shtetl golden age. As we shall see, once one of these constituencies was removed, the shtetl turned into a bent, impoverished, and stultering East European beggar, as it entered classical Yiddish literature and as it appears in some of the photographs in this book.

Whatever the meaning of the word shtetl, its Jews were the doers, not just the dwellers. A shtetl Jew could go about his business in the small shtetl of Ruzhin, the medium-size shtetl of Skvira, or the large shtetl of...
The golden age shtetl was alive and kicking. We shall see in the next chapters how the vigor of the shtetl manifested itself at the marketplace and prayer-house, at home and in the tavern—in and outside the shtetl. We shall see the shtetl in action, ponder its chances for its survival, and observe the beginning of its fall.

The shtetl was a dynamic place and a dynamic concept, moving through stages and changes, edifying and modifying itself along the way. It was Polish Jewish in the eighteenth century, Russian Jewish at the turn of the nineteenth, and found itself in a unique synergy of three powers—Russian, Polish, and Jewish—late in the eighteenth and early in the nineteenth century. Far more nuanced than just "a state of mind" or a "locus of memory," the shtetl embodied action—economic and manufacturing, religious and educational, political and civic, cultural and criminal, the complex nature and transformation of which is our focus.

The shtetl would not exist without its Jews—trading, producing, and exchanging whatever could be exchanged, traded or produced. The shtetl for us is a place, but perhaps we need to reconceptualize it also as an action, a whirl of activity. After all, it was this activity that shaped the shtetl’s unique golden age and its suppression that triggered the shtetl’s demise.

Had Russia come to grips with the shtetls’ character and activity, its relations with its Jews would have taken a different path. This did not happen. Political and ideological interests had the upper hand over common sense, and the shtetl found itself at the epicenter of a longlasting if latent war between the Russians and the Poles. Since the Russians were playing the game on their own territory, they won, at the expense of interethnic tolerance and the golden age shtetl.

Although for the Poles the shtetl was a private town and an economic category, for the Russians an administrative subdivision, and for the contemporary Jews a religiously defined community, in this book it is indiscriminately called a shtetl. After all, "shtetl" as a word is nothing but a cultural artifact, a caprice of collective memory. It signifies a vanished Jewish Atlantis, a yearning for a distant and utopian national culture and for the redeeming traditional values of East European Jerusalem, that "holy community" that we tend to strip of corporeality and then sugarcoat its imaginary residue. This book fleshes out the shtetl and adds some salt to it.
Governor General Ivan Funduklei was uneasy about the shtetls that belonged to Polish magnates, were situated on the Russian land, and were economically dependent on the Jews. Rumors of suspicious activities of Jews and Poles reached his receptive ears and left him deeply concerned. He had heard that Jews and Poles were stockpiling arms, trading wholesale in horses to help reestablish the Polish cavalry units, and using the annual fairs as a cover for Polish conspiratorial meetings.

Funduklei wondered whether the government’s outlawing of the wholesale export of horses to prevent the enemy from purchasing this means of warfare had been in vain. And what was the point of capturing new western lands for the Russian Empire if the towns’ profits still went to the magnates? Funduklei could sense the latent unrest and ordered envoys sent out on special assignments to investigate what the Poles and Jews were up to during the fairs.

Thus, Gendarme Corps Major von Gildebrandt received a note stating that a secret society called the balagolas, made up of about sixteen
individuals, was roaming about between Kiev and Volhynia provinces. The major was to travel as an undercover agent and try to identify these people. His colleague, Major Gaivoronsky, had to move secretly to Balta and engage in conversation with Poles coming to the St. Onufry fair. His task was to listen to rumors and find out what the incoming Poles were talking about.

Colonel Radischchev, from the same cohort, received instructions to go to the biggest annual fair in Berdichev "and secretly find out the political expectations of the Polish gentry, especially whether there are emissaries among them under aliases." Radischchev was to arrest anybody selling or distributing suspicious objects such as "rings with a Polish eagle, Lithuanian horseman, or iron signets in the form of a chain" symbolizing the greatness of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which no longer existed. The instructions were to the point: "many Polish gentry get together at the Berdichev fair, collect money for Polish exiles, and spread all sorts of rumors." This was a familiar task for the gendarmes: four years earlier Colonel Bek from the same corps had gone on a similar mission.

Thus, in late spring 1840, three secret Russian agents went on the road. Eventually they wrote detailed accounts of the shtetl fairs, where they spied on the Poles. What they actually found was the marketplace, its burgeoning life, and the Jewish trade, which had transformed the shtetl into a civilization in and of itself. Too independent and robust, it was destined to clash with the Russian authorities, who attempted and failed to control it.

**FIGURING OUT TRADE**

Like the Russian envoys on special assignments, the Russian thinker and ethnographer Ivan Aksakov also visited the Ukrainian markets and observed that "Jews added to trade a particularly febrile agitation—they ran, hustled and bustled, accompanying each word with quick gesticulations; everywhere one hears their swift guttural talk, on each and every step they stop a visitor and offer him merchandise." These agitated and ubiquitous Jewish middlemen, called faktors, also fascinated Pavel Shpilevsky, a Belorussian ethnographer, who observed that the factor would "fulfill all your wishes, however difficult they might be" and would spend the entire day "doing chores for as cheap as half a ruble." Andrei Glagolev, in his picturesque notes, portrayed Jewish men in wide hats, smoking pipes and "living at the marketplace from morning till night." Trade was life and the marketplace was the heart of the shtetl.

The shtetl at its height was able to satisfy any demand because it drew everybody into its spiral: in addition to merchants, 77 percent of all townsfolk and 18 percent of artisans also engaged in trade. Jews were overrepresented in the marketplace. In Podolia, the privileged Jewish guild merchants numbered 858, while Christians numbered only 80. The Jewish population exceeded Christians fivefold (140,000 against 29,000), while
Jewish merchants exceeded Christians tenfold. In Kamenets-Podolsk district alone, Russian clerks identified 62 Jewish and no Christian guild merchants. In the first third of the nineteenth century, the number of Jewish merchants in Volhynia grew fivefold, while the number of Christian merchants remained unchanged. Overall, Christians and Jews among guild merchants constituted 21 and 79 percent, respectively, in 1797, and 4 and 96 percent, respectively, in 1832.

The Jews had reason to be proud. In fifty years, Jewish merchants grew twenty-fold in number and more than threefold percentage-wise. In Kiev province, for example, 168 Jewish guild merchants constituted 27 percent of the total in 1797, whereas by 1845 they constituted 84 percent, numbering 3,281 male and 3,102 female merchants. The situation in Berdichev worsened for the Jews toward the mid-nineteenth century, but even in the 1850s Countess Radziwill still emphasized the unfolding Jewish predominance in local trade. This situation so embarrassed a state clerk that in his report to Nicholas I he crossed out Jewish and Christian ethnic diversification and put both groups of merchants together in order to create an ethnically neutral aggregated figure.

With this clumsy gesture the state clerk attempted to conceal the fact that Jews were a major mediator between the town and the village. Peasants received permission to trade only later in the century, but from the 1790s to the 1820s Jews were first and foremost intermediaries between urban and rural areas in central Ukraine, "the richest in grain among not only all the Russian, but also among all the Polish provinces." Due to their trade activities, the golden age shtetl did not have "piles of corn as big as houses, enough to feed all Europe" that in the 1770s had been left rotting in Podolia and Volhynia.

Moreover, before the 1861 abolition of serfdom brought thousands of peasants to the marketplace, the Jews brought the market to the village. For example, in the shtetl of Makhnovka, near Berdichev, Jews travelled to the surrounding villages and purchased geese, hens, cattle, veal, fish, and ducks from the peasants. In 1820 alone they bought about seven hundred head of cattle and moved the livestock to the nearby Berdichev marketplace for retail. In exchange, Jews brought iron tools, tar, haberdashery, and a variety of multicolored textiles to the villages. Not for nothing did Gogol make one of his folklore figures a Jew selling a devilish red shirt at the Sorochinsky fair in his Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka.

The more Jews participated in trade in a certain locality, the lower the prices and the faster the turnover. A major nineteenth-century Ukrainian ethnographer, Pavlo Chubynskyi, observed that prices in Jewish stores were for the most part fair and that Jews were equally trustworthy when dealing with both Christian and Jewish merchants. It was not Jewish trade but the ugly mercantile attempts to control it that prevented faster economic growth and ruined free trade. In cases where the Russian governmental measures were effective, as for example in the town of Kremenets, instead of a flourishing Christian trade, the town slipped into an irreversible commercial decline. This was also true elsewhere: the shtetls prospered as long as the Jews were involved in trade.

The Jews had to survive in the economic niche that the magnates had carved for them, or perish. Trade was demanding, yet one could survive. The intensity of trade accounted for some fascinating developments. Economists show that density of population and intensity of trade go hand in hand. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the population of Ukraine grew by 55 percent (46 percent in European Russia). Although there was a constant southeastward relocating of the population, Kiev and Podolia provinces still had the highest population density in Russia, excluding Moscow province. In addition, no other region in the Pale of Settlement had such a considerable Jewish population as Volhynia, Podolia, or Kiev provinces.

Epidemics of contagious diseases notwithstanding, this region had the lowest death rate in the empire, and Volhynia and Podolia were not affected by the terrible murrain elsewhere in Russia in the 1820s. Peasants from the northern Russian provinces, particularly the Belarusian ones, escaped to Volhynia and Kiev provinces during the years of famine, according to the annual reports of the ministry of the interior.

Some Jews also escaped there. Reinbarg, a tailor from Kobrin, knew that the Ukrainian shtetls were more prosperous than his native Belorussian shtetl. He considered this opportunity when in the early 1830s famine struck the Kobrin district, potatoes became expensive, and bread became a luxury. Nobody had old clothes mended or new ones made anymore.
Struggling to survive, Reinbarg felt that he had reached bottom. He bought a passport that allowed him to move through the Pale and went to Ukraine in search of job opportunities. For several years he worked as a tailor throughout Kiev and Volhynia provinces. He was caught as a vagrant in Berdichev and drafted into the army, spent a year as a private in Lomza, then deserted and went back to Kiev province.

There he met Iankel Pinhasovitch, a miller from Belaia Tserkov, who gave Reinbarg shelter and offered him a partnership. For several years the two men sold grain, flour, and groats. At the end of the second year, Reinbarg bought out his partner for the sum of 50 rubles and moved on to trading apples with another Jew. After half a year he had enough money not only to provide for himself, but also to pay 30 rubles to the Belaia Tserkov kahal, asking them to legalize him and inscribe him in the communal register. He might not have been a successful tailor, but he certainly was ready to go into any kind of trade—and the shtetl marketplace needed just that: jack of all trades.

**DENIZENS OF THE MARKETPLACE**

Jews were extraordinarily active economically, though, as we shall see, trade was not in their genes, and Jews bowed down neither to Mammon nor to Mercury. Being double-taxed, Jews found their way by creating an exchange of unparalleled intensity. The economic niche that the Polish and Russian regime created for them shaped the Jewish predisposition to trade in the same manner that the medieval laws of Catholic Europe made them prone to money-lending.

The shtetl was a town invented for trade, and trade was an occupation ascribed to the shtetl. The trading stalls, an architectural element "that distinguished the shtetl from the surrounding villages," was its defining locus. Catherine II encouraged shtetl trade by granting the shtetl dwellers the privilege to establish trading stalls, home-based stores, and hangars. The annual fairs, the Sunday bazaars and the weekly trade rallied around these stalls. Usually built of stone in the form of an arcade imitating European marketplace galleries, they combined a number of back-to-back and shoulder-to-shoulder stores under one roof and were the embodiment of the indefatigable shtetl trade.

Almost all, if not all, the stores in the shtetl marketplaces belonged to Jewish merchants. In the late 1790s, Russian clerks registered four stone and six wooden stores in the center of the marketplace in Nemirov, sixteen stone and fifty-five wooden stores in Tulchin, and thirty stone and sixty-five wooden stores in Trostianets. In Satanov, they observed, thirteen Jews had their stores sheltered under one shingled roof. In Felshtyn, the marketplace arcade encompassed twenty-two stone stores, and the central trading square in such shtetls as Dunaevtsy, Kitaigorod, Chernyi Ostrov, and Iarmolintsy had a similar number of trading stalls either leased or owned by Jews. Since the shtetls had no residential segregation, Jews sought to live closer to the place of trade: they occupied 60 to 85 percent of the houses lining the marketplace. Seeking to transform the area surrounding the marketplace into one uninterrupted trading arcade, Jews established stores right next to churches.

The dizzying array of available goods offered by Jews suggests that it was a supermarket, not just a marketplace. Jews exhibited on the counters of their trading stalls the entire gamut of local Ukrainian and imported Oriental textiles: rolls of silk, thin and demi-cotton, multicolored tule and soft sari, velvet and batiste and calico, taffeta and satin fabric, as well as wool, yarn, and thread. Among stockpiled goods were haberdashery items, including pillowcases, kerchiefs, gloves, stockings, and socks. Next to them the Jews placed the delicacies—Russian caviar, sugar, coffee, Chinese pekoe tea, chocolate, dates, peaches, figs, oranges, Turkish beans, almonds, and raisins.

Behind the counter were sacks and barrels: the Jews always had salt and fish, perhaps the items most in demand in the shtetl daily trade. The upper shelves of the marketplace stores were packed with leather goods such as boots and belts. For female customers, Jewish traders had earrings and hairpins. And, of course, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox would find items that made them particularly happy: tobacco, tobacco boxes, and pipes.

Ordinary townsfolk also came to trade at the marketplace, either from rented stalls or from their wagons. For that, they needed a permit. To obtain one, a Jewish townsman had to pay a half ruble duty to the state treasury and bring a special ticket from the communal elders. “Itsko
Chervonyi pays his dues and taxes on time and can go in for trade," read one of them in Hebrew. Moshko Ratmanovsky "has paid his taxes on time, does not have any arrears, and is allowed to trade," read another, also in Hebrew. These were formulaic and widely used statements. In 1825, sixty Jews and ten Christians applied to the Vasilkov town hall for trading permits. Permits were granted, and they rushed to sell whatever they had in stock or to act as middlemen with no stock, as a mishur or a faktor, making money on commission for bringing an incoming merchant directly to a storeowner.

Each marketplace offered "everything one's heart desires," as the nineteenth-century Russian counting rhyme put it. The Vinnytsa marketplace with its one stone, twenty-four wooden, and thirty-nine mobile stalls on wheels traded in textiles, spices, wax, and candles, and varieties of smoked fish and caviar from the internal Russian provinces. Tulchin and Nemirov offered colonial sugar, coffee, tea, chocolate, dates, and oranges. Trostianets boasted of calico from a local factory and beer from a local brewery; both items bought there wholesale and resold in marketplaces as far away as Berdichev. Uman lost its fairs after the town was confiscated by the state, the Potockis remaining out of big business, yet because of the presence of the military, the town boasted two hundred trading stores and traded mostly in local wheat, mead, candles, tobacco, and bricks.

Not only the Polish szlachta, who constituted an exceptionally high 10 percent of the prepartitioned Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Rzecz Pospolita), but also other Jews, Eastern Orthodox, and peasants were among the regular customers. A Russian cultural historian noticed that regular townsfolk and peasants "observing the lifestyle of the elite, dreamt of possessing luxury goods, which ranged from small items such as ribbons, mirrors, and combs to more expensive items such as clothing, china and furniture." Generally, besides grain, salt, textiles, vodka, and fish, Jews offered practically any commodity—and did it with gusto.

Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto did not write his ethical treatise Mesilat yesharim (Path of the Just; Amsterdam, 1740) for East European Jews alone, yet his book became especially popular with them, perhaps because Luzzatto's key concept of zrizut (alacrity) fit in very well with the commercial excitement and dexterity of the shetl dwellers. When a certain Rabbi Isaac met a certain Rabbi Nathan in the marketplace, he saw precisely this "great alacrity so typical of him." This alacrity could help transform the shetl into the Russian Amsterdam or Hamburg, should the Russian authorities be willing to endorse and encourage it. But they didn't.

Investing large sums into one type of merchandise incurred risks that Jews could not afford. A monopoly of wholesale stock of a certain type of commodity fit in the slow and cumbersome magnates' businesses—or those of the guild merchants. For a Jew to specialize in a certain type of product meant to build a monopoly from the bottom up and become too vulnerable. It seems that Jewish merchants heeded the Talmudic warning tafasta meruba—lo tafasta, "if you grab too much, you have grabbed nothing." They seem to have resorted in their daily activities to the Talmudic principle bari shema, bari adif—between "for sure" or "maybe" "for sure" is preferable. Applied to financial options, this principle implied that certainty overrode potentiality. Selling less "for sure" was always better for a Jewish trader than "maybe" selling more. Or, if we are willing to use the colloquial language of the marketplace, az men ken nit kakh, iz a forts alaym oyykh gut—"if one is not able to shit, a fart is also good."

Jewish trade was as impressive as it was funny. Today we would find someone simultaneously trading in shoelaces, sausages, and computers neither efficient nor smart, but the Jews in the shetl would find it to be both. Iankel Gershkovitch from Belaia Tserkov, an indefatigable wholesale merchant who crossed the Russian border several times a year, would be a good and representative example. First he declared 1,700 feet of white cloth, 420 feet of wool, and twelve harnesses. The next time he brought 1,700 feet of cloth, 100 pounds of potassium alum (as an effective blood coagulator), and thirty woolen hats.

Abram Yankelevich from Fastov brought 100 pounds of each of the following: candles, ginger, sandalwood, pepper, and coffee, five packages of paper, and 100 spoons of thread. Volko Mordekhaevich, also from Fastov, brought 2,000 feet of tick fabric, 300 feet of cloth, 1,000 feet of calico, another 1,000 feet of various textile goods, 200 packages of paper, 100 pounds of potassium alum, 60 pounds of sandal, and another 60 pounds of ginger. The volatile market made Jews masters of all brands and
commercially omnivorous. As such, they worked harder than any Christian wholesaler: no wonder they monopolized the market!

Jews offered a wide variety, but in limited quantities. These are exactly the products one could find, for example, in Letichev, which specialized not only in locally produced lard, wax, soap, incense, clay and wooden utensils, and powdered amber (used as laxative) but also in multicolored ribbons and female adornments. This relatively insignificant shtetl could offer something gourmet, too, for example German wines from Gdansk and Leipzig, English beer, and French cognacs and champagne.

At the same time at the Medzhizboz marketplace, far more advanced than that of nearby Letichev, Jews traded in Oriental textiles, particularly colored cashmere, paisley, batiste, and footwear from Mogilev and Nemirow, as well as Swabian, Prussian, and Ivanovo textiles and brocade, in high demand among Polish nobility. Here one would also find olive oil from Provence; Turkish tobacco; and Dutch, Swiss, and Parmesan cheese, olives, and cigarettes. For all of these items, Medzhizboz or Letichev merchants did not need to go as far as Nizhni Novgorod or Leipzig. They could purchase most of these as well as other items wholesale during the “great meetings” of foreign merchants, as a Russian report portrayed the Berdichev annual fairs.

Shtetl trade prefigured all-in-one department stores, while specialized trade was not Jewish trade, as Jews working for Christian merchants demonstrate. The Christian merchant Grigory Chistovsky from Kremenets and his three Jewish assistants traveled from the east to transport twenty-one wagons of salt. One Pole, three Jews, and one Eastern Orthodox, all agents of the Polish magnate Knieski, brought twenty wagons of flour to a Jewish factor in Zhvanets, Podolia.

This type of wholesale specialization was good for the rich, well-protected, and slow Christian monopolists, something ordinary Jews or even well-to-do merchants could not allow themselves. Although the margin of income would be quite substantial, the risks were too high. Besides, the income was never certain—it was always a “maybe” income. Therefore such endeavors were not the shtetl Jews’ type of business.

Jews had to make do with less, move faster, and obtain their return quicker—only to reinvest it again and again. They undertook projects that their Christian counterparts rejected as unprofitable. In Uman, for example, after the 1830 Polish rebellion, the Russian government confiscated the Pokotei estate. The Russian treasury obtained not only the town but also its liquid possessions, including 7,000 spustov (44,000 gallons) of vodka. The Ministry of Finance did not accept preliminary offers, chose to auction the stock, and invited the wealthiest merchants to participate. The Christian first-guild merchant Panfil Abakumov bid 2.95 silver rubles per measure but then realized that the authorities would not sell him the entire stock, got angry, and withdrew from the bidding. All or nothing, was his logic. As a result, the stock was divided unevenly between the bidders, various parts of it ending up in the hands of Jewish merchants. They were satisfied with a low margin of profit, eager for a quick turnover.

If there was anything for which Jewish trading was rightly (and wrongly) known as Jewish, it was this readiness to be satisfied with a not-so-beneficial financial arrangement. These merchants could repeat to themselves a biblical proverb well known in the traditional Jewish community: “Better a little with the fear of Lord than great wealth with turmoil.” They could also think of the dayenu principle from the famous Passover song: “It would have sufficed for us!”

Because Jews sought to turn any item into marketable merchandise, shtetl trade was not always innocent. Some Jewish traders, along with the smugglers, dealt in merchandise that could not but alarm the authorities. Take, for example, Mosliho Poliak from Makhnovka, who purveyed victuals and commodities for the army. Local police accused him of selling three hundred rifles to the local gentry. A search proved that he had stored about thirty swords, twenty bayonets, and fifty rifle chargers in his attic. This was not the first time that Jews had purchased wholesale and resold the ammunition of the relocated troops, including bullets, small shot, and powder. Did this imply that the governor general Funduklei was right, and that Jews were secretly supplying arms for the rebellious Polish szlachta?

Poliak, whose quite suspicious real name was Warshavsky (“from Warsaw”), his nickname meant “the Pole,” managed to convince the police that the commander of the Ekaterinburg regiment had left all that
ammunition with him for reselling. When Polisk pulled out not only several valid permits signed by the military but also a certificate of his 500-ruble government award for blameless service, the authorities returned everything they had confiscated. It was precisely this kind of trade that made Jewish trade suspicious in the eyes of the regime. The more versatile the shtetl trade, the more the regime wanted to control it.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO BERDICEV

Controlling the shtetl marketplace was like regulating the Polish economy while on Russian soil. Long before the Polish partitions, in order to accommodate their Jewish subjects, who were to bolster trade, the Polish magnates petitioned the king, obtained the corresponding privileges, and established annual fairs in their towns as early as the sixteenth century. After the partitions, things changed little. While before they had turned to the crown asking to establish fairs, now the magnates turned to the Russian minister of finance. Prince Radziwill, the governor of Przemyśl and a distant relative of the Berdichev Radziwiłls, put it clearly in a private letter: towns needed fairs in order to compete.

Seeking profit for the imperial treasury, the Russian governors carefully monitored the fairs, counted the customers, and made sure no contraband merchandise was on sale. They approved the town halls' or magnates' requests for new fairs, and sometimes initiated requests themselves. Thus, Volhynia, Kiev, and Podolia provinces became dotted with fairs. By the 1840s, central Ukraine boasted two thousand fairs—accounting for half of all the fairs held in Russia, and far exceeding the number in any other provinces in the Pale.

The town-owners used popular religiosity to boost the fairs. They requested that fairs be established on saints' days, when peasants went en masse to the towns to worship in the churches, light candles for saints, and kiss the icons. Even underdeveloped shtetls such as Letichev had five annual fairs, all falling on Eastern Orthodox holidays: one during Holy Week, the second on the feast of St. Nicholas the Miracle-Maker in December, the third on the feast of the Deposition, the fourth on the feast of Virgin Holy Shrouds, and the fifth on St. Nicholas of the Spring day, in May. Fairs lasted from Sunday through Thursday and almost never coincided with Jewish religious holidays—otherwise, who would work the fair?

These fairs were a whirl of never-ending activity. Like the Polish crown earlier, the Russian authorities now sought to create internal turnover, realizing that "the entire well-being of a shtetl depended on fairs." Once a fair in one town ended, another fair started somewhere else, usually a day's ride away. Those merchants who did not manage to sell their wares in one shtetl could continue their business in the next.

On the last page of the calendars, whose circulation was in the dozens of thousands—in Polish, Russian, and Hebrew—a merchant could find a list of annual fairs, indicating their locations and length, and the distance between the towns. Because of this schedule, the fairs in Ukraine never ended. It was the same situation on the eastern side of the Dnieper River. The Kharkov fair followed the November fair in Sumy, the Romny fair followed Kharkov's, and then the trade moved to Poltava and Krovets. Ivan Aksakov, who closely observed this phenomenon, called it a "mobile marketplace.

Fairs in different towns seemed similar, but each fair specialized in certain products. What Braudel described as the process of specialization of the markets did not affect the Jewish commercial modus operandi but did affect the shtetl fairs. Dubno and Rohov offered hop, seeds, and pigs, with Jews dealing in all of the above. Balta and Nemirov became famous for livestock trade. Two of the fastest-growing shtetls in Volhynia, Polonnoe, and Shepetovka, provided textiles, boots, fur coats, and locally brewed wines and vodkas.

The Kiev Contract fair (Kontraktovaiia), not that of a shtetl, functioned as a stock exchange, yet Jews there were still offering wholesale sugar, grain, alcohol, coal, salt, and lumber. The Balta and Berdichev fairs had less turnover than such famous fairs as the one in Kiev or Nizhnii Novgorod. Still, Nizhnii was unique, far from any other fair at a huge distance of hundreds of miles, whereas the network of the "mobile marketplace" in Volhynia, Kiev, and Podolia provinces with their one hundred to two hundred annual fairs had no rivals in the empire. Rabbi Nachman of
Bratslav claimed that it would be better for a Jew to become a merchant and go in for trade than to become a teacher—if only he could go to the marketplace and scorn it in his heart. 30

Let us pay a visit to the Trinity fair in Balta. Despite its dirty roads and narrow bridges over the Kodyma River, Balta welcomed about ten thousand people annually. They traded in mead, grain, oil, tar, glass, wooden and clay utensils, hides, leather goods, fish, fresh and dry fruits, but most important, salt and cattle. Merchants brought some nine thousand horses from the Don River steppes and the southern districts, some of them unique breeds. Wholesalers shipped cattle from the Kherson and Bessarabia regions and paper and silk from Russia.

When a Russian police envoy inspected Balta in 1840, he did not find the fair particularly impressive. Horses were sold for 250,000 rubles total, manufacture for 50,000, and haberdashery for 20,000 rubles in banknotes.

Retail customers spent about 10,000 rubles on their purchases, and overall the turnover that year was about 330,000 rubles. 31 To quote the police report, the merchants “did not manage to sell their entire stock, as people did not have enough money.” Reports of the Ministry of Interior also lamented the low efficiency of such fairs, caused by high prices and years of famine. 32 In fact, comparatively speaking these sums were quite extraordinary: one Balta fair exceeded the income of the ten major fairs in Belorussian shtetls combined. 33

Lacking almost any manufacture and totally dependent on trade, the Balta fair was the heart, nerve, and sinew of the town. Because of its seasonal trade and the opportunity to lease the houses and storage spaces to incoming merchants, Balta remained the economic center of Podolia for more than a century. The southwestern Russian press recognized godforsaken Balta as the core of the province’s grain, cattle, and livestock market.

Clients not only from the Russian Empire but also from Austria, Prussia, and Poland came to Balta to trade. Incredibly, they bought horses at the Balta Trinity market even for export to America. 34

The Balta fair, like perhaps any Ukrainian fair, also impressed its visitors visually, although not everyone could express this impression in words or images. Though it did not have its own Gogol, the fair’s sheer beauty fascinated two national Polish painters, Józef Brandt (1841–1915) and Józef Marian Chelmerski (1849–1914), who immortalized it on their canvases, The Fair in Balta (ca. 1870) and The Horse Fair in Balta (1879). These late Romantic artists captured not only the untamed and unbridled nature of the wild horses sold at the fair but also a deeply disturbing feeling: look what we lost and who we could have been, had Balta remained Polish!

No fair in the Pale could compete with that of Berdichev. After the partitions, Matvei Radziwill, the Polish owner of the town, hurried to make sure that his main source of income would retain the same privileges as before. He wrote an ingratiating letter to Paul I of Russia, saying that in 1765 the Polish king had confirmed that the town of Berdichev would have ten annual fairs, creating extremely beneficial circumstances for all the townsfolk. Radziwill appended a copy of the Polish kings’ privilege in Russian translation and humbly requested its renewal. 35 Hence
Berdichev kept its annual fairs and eventually became the most important trading center of right bank Ukraine.

Because of its annual fairs, Berdichev grew with unprecedented speed. About three local Jews a year declared their newly acquired capital and became guild merchants. In 1829, with a population of 34,000, Berdichev boasted 335 third-guild, nine second-guild, and two first-guild merchants. At that time, 95 percent of those merchants were Jews, all of whom owned stalls and stores in the Berdichev Old Market. Ten years later, the number had grown to 477 third-guild, twenty-four second-guild, and seven first-guild merchants—ten times more than in the nearby provincial center of Zhitomir.35

The most important reason for the town's growth, however, claimed an anonymous Russian expert, was the enormous influx of people, who came, as we already know, to the local annual fairs. We can only sympathize with the parents of Nosson Sternhartz, whose son became the scribe of Rabbi Nachman in the small shtetl of Bratslav instead of establishing his family business in Berdichev: they were bewildered by what they considered his crazy choice.37

The Berdichev fairs competed with the largest trading centers outside the Pale of Settlement. In 1812, for example, one out of ten Berdichev fairs attracted 4.5–5 million rubles' worth of merchandise, bringing an income of four to eleven percent to the trading merchants. Although Berdichev's St. Onufry fair could hardly compete with the Romny, Kharkov, or Kursk fairs with their turnover of 13 million, 10 million, and 14 million rubles, respectively, one must take into account the intensity and density of the fairs in Ukraine in general and in Berdichev in particular.38

In the 1830s, several Berdichev fairs enjoyed the same turnover as the Contract fair in Kiev. Merchants brought some 1,700,000 rubles' worth of Russian goods to the Berdichev St. Onufry fair, 190,000 rubles' worth of paper items and textiles, 130,000 rubles' worth of refined sugar, 361,225 rubles' worth of various types of comestibles and tobacco, 26,000 rubles' worth of spices and tinctures, 370,000 of European and 164,000 rubles' worth of Asian goods. The Uspensky fair in Berdichev was no less impressive, with its 1,030,000 rubles' worth of Russian goods, 196,000 rubles' worth of European goods, and 79,000 rubles' worth of Asian goods.39

Why was Berdichev so popular? There was no other town in the province offering the benefits of Berdichev. In state-owned towns such as nearby Zhitomir, merchants had to pay a duty of 180 rubles in banknotes, whereas in Berdichev, a private town, the duty was only 100 rubles. With all its urban trade, Berdichev remained a cheap, semirural place with unpaved streets, an easily affordable cost of living, and relatively cheap real estate. A house on the outskirts of Berdichev cost between 5 and 14 zloty, and ten new Jewish families settled there annually late in the eighteenth century.40 As a shtetl with its own regulations, Berdichev was hard to compete with, particularly since the town also offered a bonus not always available elsewhere—entertainment.

The Ukrainian fairs epitomized adventure, entertainment, unexpected fun, and unheard-of miracles. In Berdichev, a local theater offered Polish plays. A retired clerk ran a casino in his house and welcomed gamblers to join the card games. Three traveling Dutch showmen displayed wax figures and a cosmonauta with a sophisticated system of mirrors and lenses through which spectators could see various world landmarks. The Russian secret envoy reported that one of the Dutchmen "fed his anacoma snake chickens, rabbits, and doves in public." An Italian who called himself Dominicali entertained the public with a cast of rare animals.

The town authorities also organized horse races, if mediocre ones, but even they were a thrill for the people coming from the backwoods of Volynia and Podolia. Trapeze artists demonstrated all sorts of vertiginous tricks under a circus tent. One Yiddish memoirist, without providing a date for the event, tells the story of a traveling circus that brought an elephant to a Berdichev fair. The elephant ran away and walked straight into the Gnilopiat River, from which nobody, including the owners, could convince it to come out until the entire fire brigade had arrived.41 Perhaps at a similar fair, Rabbi Pinhas of Korets watched a tightrope walker balancing on the rope and observed that everybody needed to find his own individual way of serving God.42

Berdichev also offered something of spiritual value, connecting secular trade and religious pilgrimage. Poles came here to look at the miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary, whose healing capacities and miracle-working reputation attracted hundreds of Catholic believers to the chapel.
of the local Roman Catholic church. Russians and Ukrainians flocked to the wooden eighteenth-century Eastern Orthodox church with its famous medieval icon of St. Nicholas the Miracle-Maker. For the Jews, the town was the gravesite of Levy Isaac of Berdichev, one of the illustrious Hasidic masters and a living legend of Jewish folklore. Like worshipping the icon of the Virgin Mary or kissing the icon of St. Nicholas, praying at the grave of Levy Isaac was believed to be healing, comforting, and invigorating, a remedy for all diseases and a blessing for any endeavor.

The fairs, including those of Berdichev, were impressive for anyone except the adepts of a well-managed state, that is, governmental clerks of all ranks, who left detailed accounts. No doubt, chaos reigned at the fairs, and the trading was crazy and disorganized. Jews sold goods from their stalls and traded from the windows of the houses at the marketplace as well as from the streets, which led from the marketplace in different directions. Peasants sold produce from wagons parked all over the marketplace. Trade agents pulled at the sleeves of potential customers, offering them the best deals. Jews, recalled Aksakov, "grabbed their goods and took them in all different directions, brought them to villages and hamlets, to the lazy gentry, to the stay-at-home Cossacks, to flamboyant male peasants, to chic female peasants."

The density of trade was indescribable, to the great joy of pickpockets and swindlers. The street leading through Balta was one long trading stall, packed with wagons and merchandise. Makhnovka Street in Berdichev had wagons lining both sides, and the houses on the street overflowed with customers and salesmen. One could easily be crushed by the multitude of horses and people and could inadvertently bump into someone while pulling out money. Customers and salesmen eagerly exchanged Yiddish and Slavic obscenities.

No consideration was given to either sanitary or fire safety. In fact, among the many hundred trading stalls in Berdichev's Old Market, ninety-two were very old, overcrowded, and falling apart; several of them used as outhouses. If a fire broke out, there would be no way to save anybody, warned the cautious police observers. It would be much better, suggested the police, to relocate the fairs, as was done in Russian towns proper, to lands beyond the territory of the town.

The fairs, however, were too well embedded in the architectonics of the shetl. Relocating them would change what the shetl was all about. Instead, Governor General Bibikov sought to establish more fairs—for example, in Uman. His logic was not only to develop internal trade but also to make good use of the key players at the fair, the Jews. Thus he made an attempt to establish annual fairs in Belaia Tserkov. In his request, Bibikov underscored that this town, still in the possession of Count Wladislaw Branicki, stood right on a strategically important road connecting Kiev and Odessa, and in the proximity of Skvira and Vasilkov. Bibikov emphasized that "trade had previously moved to the borders of the empire but now there is drastic need to establish centers of trade in the interior of the empire." He suggested establishing three fairs, each one week long: St. Nicholas, in May; the Savior, in August; and St. Luke, in October. Belaia Tserkov, observed Bibikov, had 7,043 Jews, the backbone of the town's trading capacities. Its 6,120 peasants were still serfs and could not take charge of the trade, nor could the shetl's 475 Poles, 68 Christian townsfolk, or 411 members of the gentry. On the other hand, the Jews

3.3. A synagogue in Uman.

In, f. 9, sp. 73, ark. 83. Courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.
already had one first-guild, one second-guild, and thirteen third-guild merchants in town. "Only Jews," claimed the governor, "go in for trade and manufacture." The fair would not only be profitable for the state treasury, it would help "local Jews pay their debts."

Kankrin grudgingly agreed, with all sorts of caveats, although he wanted to see more fairs outside the shtetls and under Russian, not Polish, magnate, control—in Poltava, Kharkov, Kremenchug, and Zhitomir, towns with a smaller Jewish presence. While local authorities contributed to the blossoming of the shtetl trade, the central administration sought to undermine it. The shtetl found itself in the center of a Polish-Russian economic and political rivalry, but also in the focus of Russia's version of the Enlightenment, with its aversion to trade, considered by the leading liberal-minded East European officials as something antithetical to the genuine economy.

DOWN WITH BERDICEV!
The Russian authorities realized that the annual fairs made some towns prosperous while towns without fairs slowly declined. The key role of Berdichev in Ukrainian trade and the absolute predominance of Jews in this trade triggered deep anxiety. Leading figures of the Russian state, beginning with the minister of finance, were confident that it was manufacture and agriculture rather than trade that created a stable economy. Followers of the Prussian enlightened thinkers, they viewed trade as suspicious, uncontrolled, and volatile. To their sheer dismay, in the western borderlands it was also Jewish-driven. Since Jews came to be associated with trade, leveling the towns economically meant fortifying some towns at the expense of others and suppressing what contemporaries called Jewish trade.

Enlightenment ideas accommodated the growing xenophobia. The governor general spoke directly to ethnic prejudice when the central authorities asked him why certain towns were not prospering. "The most important reason," he emphasized, "is that trade belongs predominantly to Jews, a cunning and greedy people, who under various pretexts almost always and everywhere manage to keep the turnover of capital entirely in their hands." He added significantly that "the concentration of trade in Berdichev ruins other towns, such as Kremenets."

Like him, the government also decided that Berdichev had become too powerful and out of control. Although it was economically flourishing, it was still a town in private possession, while merchants from the nearby state-owned town of Zhitomir suffered. In the 1830s the government decided to undertake a number of steps to subdue Berdichev, one of which proved to be successful: playing one town against the other.

Nicholas I had heard enough about Berdichev to realize that this economic center was Polish and Jewish, hardly Russian at all. What could be done to diminish its impact and buttress the development of the state-owned, and therefore in his eyes, Russian towns? Establish the Contract fair in Kiev to compete with Berdichev, advised Nicholas. Allow Jews to trade at the fair, although they were banished from the town in the 1830s, and let them contribute multi-thousand duties to the treasury. Do not allow the Volhynia Jewish bankers to make their credit available for the Kiev Contract fair wholesalers, lest it again benefit Berdichev. And do not allow more kosher canteens in the Kiev marketplace than the absolute minimum. After all, the idea was to offset Berdichev, not to benefit the Jews.

But that was not enough. Following Nicholas's advice, the authorities chose another town, state-owned Zhitomir, as Berdichev's competitor. Hearing the rumors from the capital, the Zhitomir elites concocted a petition to meet Nicholas halfway. They requested that Zhitomir be granted all sorts of privileges to help them attract Russian merchants, and, to put Berdichev down, establish two fairs in Zhitomir right before the fairs in Berdichev, which would then have to make do with the leftovers. They also took precautions to prevent Berdichev from establishing its own town hall, independent from Zhitomir. This was an economic and political step with barely any anti-Jewish overtones. After all, fifteen Jews, most of them third-guild merchants, signed the anti-Berdichev petition, in addition to the head of the Zhitomir town hall and the two wealthiest Christian merchants. However, it was definitely an anti-shtetl step: the gold of Berdichev sparkled too much.
The Russian authorities decided to try and upset the shtetl economies by establishing new district centers in state-owned towns so that the shtetls would then legally report to them. The government-orchestrated fight between Berdichev and Zhitomir was not unique; other towns and shtetls were drawn into its devastating whirl. For example, the authorities provoked a conflict between the prosperous Medzhibozh and the nearby impoverished Letichev, which was underpopulated, in shambles, and without manufacture, a pharmacy, or even a mill. Instead of transferring the administrative center to Medzhibozh, too Jewish for their taste, the authorities chose to stimulate the development of Letichev with its Russian administrative offices and state archive.

In neighboring Belorussia, the two shtetls of Pinsk and Karlin also entered into bitter rivalry when the emerging Karlin tried to become administratively independent from nearby Pinsk. Although these inter-town conflicts had different origins (such as the distribution of the tax burden), they were not unknown in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with its ongoing rivalry between Kremenets and Vladimir-Volynsk, on the one side, and Ostrog and Lutsk on the other.

Neither Christians nor Jews knew that the authorities were playing the towns one against the other. An impressive cohort of Berdichev Jews tried to justify their cause. They convinced their attorney to help them construct an appeal to the Kiev provincial military general governor Levashov. Well-known local tycoon Mordko Guberman signed the petition first, which outlined the inconveniences of Berdichev submitting to the Zhitomir town hall. The merchants of Berdichev had to travel forty miles to Zhitomir each time they needed a certificate issued or a tax payment arranged, he explained.

If one believes the complaint, about ten thousand Jewish traders had to obtain required documents in Zhitomir. Round trip by wagon cost 10 rubles, and then there were food and living expenses while the Berdichev Jews negotiated their way through the red tape in Zhitomir. Furthermore, such a trip disrupted local business. Berdichev townsfolk were wasting tens of thousands of rubles without any benefit for the town. Of course, more reasonable would be to establish the town hall in Eerdichev and once and for all put an end to its underdog position.

The Zhitomir Jewish elders and several Jewish traders immediately reacted. Their response to Levashov contained a vociferous and well-substantiated bluff. Those Berdichev Jews seeking to move the magistrate from Zhitomir to Berdichev were just a bunch of corrupt opportunists. The Berdichev Jews had to go from one town to another for documents once in three years. Should they establish their magistrate in Berdichev, local Zhitomir merchants were likely to lose their privileged businesses. The entire town would suffer, since Zhitomir merchants brought more than 120,000 rubles to the town treasury per year, they argued.

Levashov found the appeal of Berdichev Jews undeserving and harked to the pleas of the merchants of Zhitomir. Civil Governor Rimsky-Korsakov agreed with him. Berdichev Jews were engaging in all sorts of wrongdoing to damage Zhitomir Jewish society; I will not issue any passports for them; they will not be able to go to St. Petersburg and complain.
The battle between the two towns had just begun. It lasted for more than a decade and involved some insidious doings and backdoor arrangements on both sides. The Zhitomir merchants bent over backward to find fault with their Berdichev colleagues and prevent them from establishing an urban self-governing institution of their own. In turn, the Berdichev merchants pointed out their several thousand townsfolk, including ten first-guild, eleven second-guild, and five hundred third-guild merchants. They emphasized that the town provided 10,000 silver rubles in taxes to the state, more than enough to establish a local magistrate. Prince Radzivill himself asked the government to reclassify Berdichev as a town in the Makhnovka district, noting how inconvenient it was to make transactions in Berdichev and legalize them in Zhitomir. He also realized that this was about Russia being against the shtetl with its Jewish trade and a Polish town-owner, not only about Zhitomir versus Berdichev.

The case reached the ministers, the Senate, and the tsar, who supported a broader political agenda: bend the szlachta-owned shtetls down to the state-owned towns, subjugate the residue of Old Poland to the Russian Empire, and suppress the uncontrolled prosperity of the shtetls. Government bureaucrats vacillated, suggesting either that Berdichev be reclassified in Kiev province or suppressed altogether. The opponents of Berdichev emphasized that it was a powerful and lawless town. Its fairs attracted suspicious Poles from Galicia, Poznań, and the Kingdom of Poland. These gatherings were reminiscent of the violent and disordered Polish Sejm. Poles came together "to play cards, talk, sin, and dream of the reconstruction of the Polish republic."

Most notoriously, they argued, Berdichev had turned into a center of Jewish fanaticism. When a rabbi arrived in town (most likely when Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin arrived in town for his betrothal to the daughter of Moshe Halevi Efrati), they unharnessed his horses and carried him through the town on their shoulders with unheard-of religious enthusiasm.\(^\text{99}\) No state bureaucrats were capable of suppressing these outrageous deeds. Jewish trade and Judaism had become a threat.

The overplayed critique of Berdichev by Zhitomir supporters made Nicholas reclassify the town in Kiev province and ascribe its dwellers to a nearby Makhnovka magistrate.\(^\text{100}\) In the late 1850s the authorities transferred the police and fire station to Berdichev, endorsed the establishment of the town's artisan guilds, and established the town offices in Berdichev proper.\(^\text{101}\) In the 1850s, after multiple attempts to suppress Berdichev, the governor of Kiev, Volhynia, and Podolia provinces reported that trade on his territory "was concentrated in Kiev and Berdichev." He mentioned that these two towns—one of them under imperial control, the other still a shtetl in the private ownership of the magnate's family—traded in grain products, cattle, horses, sheep, leather, tar, iron and wooden utensils, salt, fish, cloth, wood, and textiles, amounting altogether to about 2,000,000 silver rubles' turnover.\(^\text{102}\)

Berdichev was diminished but not defeated. The local fairs continued to buttress the town economy, but it already resembled the clumsy fictional Kasrilovke of Mendele Moykher Sforim rather than the shtetl in its glory.\(^\text{103}\) At mid-century, the banking house of the Galperins almost collapsed, while the banks of the Trachtenbergs and the Efrussis (Efratis) already had one foot in Odessa, which came to replace Berdichev as the center of Russia's southwestern trade.

Elsewhere in Volhynia, Podolia, and Kiev provinces, the confiscation of the towns from the Polish magnates, together with the resettlement of thousands of midranking landlords and the subsequent impoverishment of all those who remained, contributed to the deterioration of trade in the shtetl. "All those Jews who had dealt exclusively with the landed gentry remained altogether without any means of making a living," insightfully observed Yelkezkel Kotik, pondering the fate of his own Belorussian shtetl Kamenets.\(^\text{104}\)

Furthermore, Russia did its best to erode the strong Catholic presence in the western provinces. Dozens of monasteries were closed, thousands of Catholicos of non-Polish ethnicity joined the Eastern Orthodox Church, and so did the Uniates, Eastern Orthodox who reported to the pope, once Nicholas legally banned them in 1839. The monastic treasuries, from which the Jews had always borrowed money for trading purposes, now became educational funds. These newly established funds demanded from the Jews the principal the Jews had borrowed, even though the arrangement was that Jews would pay only the interest over a long unidentified period.\(^\text{105}\) Relatives of the borrowers who had been dead for years,
the synagogues, the kahal members, and even entire communities were deemed responsible for the debts.

Not only did Jews lose their permanent source of liquid funds for transactions, they now found themselves deeply in debt. The triangle of power—the Russian administration, the Jewish economy, and the Polish owners—which greatly benefited the Jews was replaced by a dual model in which only the Jews and the Russians remained. And the Russian authorities had a very peculiar attitude to the trading towns, free retail trade, and economic competition.

THE PEOPLE OF THE GESHEFT

When all was said and done, Russian police envoys traveling to Balta and Berdichev found almost no suspicious activity at the fairs they visited. Gavronsky discovered that the Poles viewed Russian policy in the western borderlands as attempts to further humiliate the glorious Polish people. Radischev established that the Poles spent most of their time in the inns, cursing Russia, but were not scheming anything subversive. And von Gidebrant most likely had nothing to report, once he found out that babagola was the Yiddish for cabman, and that most cabmen were simpletons engaged into all sorts of gossip about Jews, Poles, and Russians while driving their customers around. The only two significant ramifications of the envoys' trips were their detailed reports about the fair trade.

Trade transformed the shtetl into a fascinating economic center and propelled the exchange not only of commodities and money but also of words. The shtetl enriched the languages of its merchants as much as it enriched the merchants themselves. If we dig into Yiddish and Ukrainian vocabulary as an archaeologist digs through cultural layers, we encounter intense linguistic exchange between Jews and Slavs. In the Dubno region, Ukrainians used the Yiddish word babagola for a cabman. The Ukrainian for "it is not really so great" and the Yiddish for "a bargain" came together in their popular expression to ne velyka metsiya. Ukrainians routinely used the Yiddish handel for "trade"—and owing to such writers as Oleksandr Zderkowskyi and Olha Kobylianska, this word entered the Ukrainian vocabulary. Jews, on the other hand, used the Ukrainian kashene (pocket and wallet, Ukr: khyshnіa), holobe (yoke, Ukr: holobiа), halme (brake: halma), and skrynje (trousseau, Ukr: skrynia), which became indispensable in Yiddish everyday usage.

Together with the produce they bought from peasants, Jews also appropriated Slavic expressions concerning trade. They wed Slavic verbs and Yiddish numerals to convey a profoundly Jewish meaning: kupil fufiska, prodal za fertsiker, abi svezhi grosh: "I bought it for fifty, sold it for forty, just to have fresh money"—or to stay in business. They took the verb yarmarkuvaty, Ukrainian for trading at the fair, and copied it into the Yiddish verb yardeven. And exactly like the surrounding Slavs, the Jews mocked those who were trying to zayn mit ayn takhes af tseyn yarida—"to sit on one backside at two fairs."

Russian officialdom did not like the shtetl trade, and instead of helping it become the cornerstone of the borderland economy, the new Russian Hamburg or Breslaw, it chose to suppress it. And with the shtetl trade, the regime denigrated trade in general. Russia continued to develop, and
quite successfully, both its internal and especially its state-controlled wholesale trade, particularly along the Volga River in the interior Russian provinces. As far as the western provinces and the market town trade was concerned, however, the Russian administration was adamant and chose ideology over profit. The regime endorsed the opinions such as that of Prince Repnin, scandalized by Jews who "sell cheaper than the [Russian] merchants."180

The Russian regime did support, reform, and accommodate its guild merchants engaged in wholesale trade.181 Yet simultaneously the regime adopted the anticapitalist and xenophobic myth of Jews as a people of commerce, lovers of gandel and gesheft, hence cunning, dishonest, swindling, untrustworthy, and unreliable. Pavlo Chubynsky, sympathetic to the Jewish traders, still allowed himself the following observation: "Gan-
del for the Jew is his most cherished occupation from childhood to the grave."182

As a result of the tireless efforts of Russian soil-bound writers with their anti-Western phobias, this Jewish gesheft came to signify what was alien and despicable about the immoral Jews, associated with the shtetl—a threat to Russian statehood. The more palpable was the fall of real wages in Russia the 1860s to 1880s, the more vociferous became the Russian xenophobes eager to blame the entrepreneurial profit-oriented Jew.183

The xenophobic writer and journalist Vsevolod Krestovsky put the word gesheft into wide circulation, using it in his diatribes against Jewish emancipation. He argued that a Jew could be neither a Russian officer nor a Russian patriot since Jews thought only about their geshet and bowed down to the opportunities of the gandel, not to the holy task of defending their motherland.184

Under the prolific pens of the Russian xenophobes, some of them famous writers, gesheft turned into an essential Jewish ethnic feature. Nikolai Leskov claimed that any little Yid, if he had half a brain, could get a substantial amount of money through a safe gesheft, a sign of disgustingly low morality.185 For Dostoevsky, the Jews and sleazy gesheft were synonymous. When his Christian Orthodox Grushenka, lover of Fedor Karamazov, engaged in a questionable business that Dostoevsky calls gesheft, people start to consider her "a genuine female Yid."186 Chekhov considered gesheft as something despised, akin to the deception of one's brethren and to promiscuity.187

At the turn of the nineteenth century, negative ethics became negative politics. The rejection of the Jew morphed into a rejection of the capitalist way of life. With Lenin, gesheft acquired the antibourgeois semantics of class hatred, not without some moderate antisemitic overtones. Lenin cursed his opponents not only for being "skeptics" but also for being treacherous bourgeois—gesheft-makers, as he put it.188

The Soviet imagination amalgamated "Jews," "business," "trade," and "treason" into one nasty concept. Valentin Pikul, the author of popular pseudohistorical novels, discussed in one of them the 1911 assassination of Prime Minister Stolypin as a successful gesheft of the murderer Bogrov, who happened to be of Jewish origin.189

Russian dictionaries introduced this word often, without indicating its Yiddish origin but almost always pointing out its negative meaning. One dictionary defines gesheft as meaning "salary" or "business," which Russians use either ironically or "regarding the Jews."190

Most recently, this myth informed a reductionist and essentialist vi-
sion of the Jews as a tribe of service nomads, the people of Mercury, thus reenacting Russian anti-Judaic myths of Jews as a clan and a tribe whose God dwells in the spirit of exchange.191

Once the vision of the Jew as a sleazy gesheft-maker dominated Rus-
sian discourse and the government was seeking out the best ways to un-
dermine what it saw as Jewish trade, instead of liberating and benefiting from it, the era of the golden age shtetl came to a halt, and with it the great promise of the Russian Jewish encounter. The shtetl marketplace emptied, and a premonition of bloodshed permeated the air.
Meilakh Goldfeld, while driving his wagon, reveled in his recent deal. He was bringing three barrels of fruit wine and two barrels of absinthe to the inn he ran from the cellar of his house. Avrum Khodorkovsky, one of the top Cherkas tavernkeepers, had sold it to him dirt cheap. The wine was beautifully balanced, with a bittersweet finish. Meilakh would no longer have to sell the sour wine of that blockhead, Kvitsynsky. Meilakh smacked his lips. He was proud of himself, of his negotiating skills, and of his barrels.

He had no idea that he had become a pawn in a game involving all the bigshots in town: the Cherkas governor; two leaseholders of the liquor trade, Lubarsky and Khodorkovsky; and liquor sales monopolist Fishel Kvitsynsky. Fishel had paid the Russian state treasury up front and obtained a liquor monopoly license. Now only Fishel was allowed to sell wines locally. All tavernkeepers had to buy from him, and no one else could import wine or vodka.
The liquor monopoly was a tasty business in need of surveillance. One day in 1821, Fishel intercepted Meilakh Goldfeld, who was bringing wine to his inn. Where is your wine from? Khodorkovsky? How dare you! If everyone purchased outside alcohol, Fishel's monopoly would become obsolete, and he would not be able make back what he had paid the treasury. Fishel turned to the governor: Khodorkovsky and others were undermining his state-supported business!

There was little the governor could do. Khorodkovskyy and Lubarsky had purchased a privilege from the Polish magnate Prince Sanguszko to lease the town taverns. The shtetl was split in half: one Jewish leaseholder reported to the Russian state treasury; the other two reported to the Polish magnate. Jews traded in liquor; liquor reeked of politics.

If the tavernkeepers purchased Kvintitsky's alcohol, they would have had to raise their prices, would have lost clientele, and would not have been able to pay their dues to Sanguszko. They would have been out of business. Nobody could bring together two incompatible laws, one protecting the privileges of the gentry and the other protecting the state treasury. While the Russian regime and the Polish gentry stayed above the fray, the competing Jews decided to destroy the competition.

And destroy the competition they did. Khodorkovsky arranged for the illegal sale of alcohol through a number of innkeepers, Meilakh Goldfeld included. Fishel's trade shrank, and he started losing money. His petitions to the governor fell on deaf ears. Nobody could force Khodorkovsky to purchase from Kvintitsky. The local gentry, government clerks, officers, and the provincial governor general all visited Khodorkovsky's cozy establishment, described in documents as "the best tavern in town," enjoyed his services, and did not care about the source of his liquor. The enraged Kvintitsky then filed an accusation with the district prosecutor. Khodorkovsky's attorneys counterattacked: Kvintitsky, they explained, was a liquor monopolist in control of wholesale trade, not of tavern-based retail trade, and thus their patrons could not be accused of undermining his business.

Meilakh's absinthe was flammable and could have sparked a vodka war between Sanguszko, who still owned part of Cherkas, and the Russian authorities, who managed the other part. Smoldering in Cherkas, the conflict exploded elsewhere. It turned into an exhausting vodka war in which everyone had a stake: the Russian authorities, liquor monopolists, tavernkeepers, Polish landlords, and especially ordinary Jews, who were pivotal to the liquor trade and tavernkeeping in the shtetl.

**LIQUID HARD CURRENCY**

"Jews are fools," goes a Ukrainian proverb. "They have vodka and they sell it." This centuries-old piece of Slavic wisdom might not be accurate anthropologically, but historically it is, particularly the second part. Some Jews drank vodka, yet a disproportionately large number of them dealt in the liquor trade. This marriage of convenience between Jews and alcohol goes back to the early sixteenth-century manorial economy. To secure their well-being, the magnates granted Jews the privilege to produce and sell liquor, called a propinacja. Peasants on the magnate's estate could purchase liquor only in the local taverns and inns.

Since the manorial economy drew on serf labor, grain was cheap and stable, but vodka increased in price. While annual fairs attracted trade to the towns, vodka helped convert grain surplus into local assets. People came to the fair, traded, and went to the taverns to celebrate their deals. Vodka became for the magnate economy what the Polish złoty was for the crown treasury: currency. The magnates deemed Poles capable of producing but incapable of selling vodka, and Ukrainian peasants incapable of either. Somebody else had to help them translate grain into money. They leased their privilege to the Jews.

The Russian clerks in charge of shtetl inventories referred to inns, bars, and pubs as "Jewish taverns." This was also true in the Old Poland, where Jews dominated the liquor trade. Around the 1750s, 55 percent of the taxpaying Jews in Podolia were engaged in the liquor trade. By 1795, about 85 percent of Jews permanently residing in rural areas of Eastern Poland (outside the shtetls) were in this or that manner involved in tavernkeeping: practically all the rural Jews. By the time of the partitions of Poland, the liquor trade had become the Jewish occupation par excellence. For the founders of Slavic Romanticism such as Nikolai Gogol, Adam Mickiewicz, and Taras Shevchenko, the quintessential Jew was a tavernkeeper.
The Russian authorities were very curious about this situation. They tried to look into the entry ledgers, forcing some information out of the magnates. Sanguszko, for example, shared the shetl Cherkas (population around 1,370) with the Russian state treasury. The treasury received 1,765 rubles in taxes from town dwellers and merchants, while Sanguszko obtained an income of 15,874 zloty from the liquor brewers and tavern-keepers. Cherkas was in the southeast, and the situation in other parts of Ukraine was similar. Taverns along the Austrian border in the Dubno district belonged to Count Miączyński, who received a handsome 18,000 zloty income annually. Boguslaw, belonging to Count Poniatowski, boasted 406 houses, which brought 1,263 zloty in taxes, whereas the beer brewery made him 3,000 zloty and the sale of liquor another 5,500. The shetl of Mezhirich, confiscated from a Polish magnate, had 1,514 inhabitants and yielded an income of 4,298 rubles, of which the income from Jewish breweries and taverns—3,300 rubles—constituted 78 percent. In Starokonstantinov, the possession of Countess Rzewuska, about fifty inns and taverns, yielded 67 percent of the town revenues. The situation was similar in shetls belonging to such Polish landlords as Ganski, Branicki, and Radziwiłł. Let us take a look at the Polish landlord Jablunowski, owner of Chigirin, a small town of 694 souls. These 694 townsmen paid 6,926 rubles to the state treasury and 2,429 zloty (about 600 rubles) in taxes to the town-owner. However, the mere thirty-two Jews in charge of local tavernkeeping provided Jablunowski with an income of 9,000 zloty (2,250 rubles)!

In the mid-nineteenth century, the entire Kiev province made 3,482,906 rubles in taxes, of which 494,028 came from breweries and 1,065,300 from excise taxes—that is, 45 percent. Compare these numbers with the amounts of money the landowners received from their serfs: 10 percent of their entire income at best. Even if the Jewish population in some shetls was small, the Jewish liquor trade yielded 65 to 80 percent of the magnates' income.

The more economically attractive the shetl, the more liquor it sold, and the more it sold, the more economically attractive it became. Taverns hit their highest sales rates during fairs. Jews, Russians, and Poles measured liquor in barrels holding forty buckets (160 gallons) each, in buckets...
holding 12 liters (four gallons) each, and in shtofs, bottles holding about 0.6 liters or five ounces each. Small towns and villages with no fairs but with a shinek, a low-key pub, sold 200 to 600 buckets of vodka annually. The shtetls with established fairs, however, sold as much as 1,200 buckets every two weeks. Kamenka and Makhnovka, with inns on the roads leading from Berdichev to Odessa, sold 1,800 and 2,500 buckets monthly, while Chernobyl sold 2,000 buckets biweekly during fairs.

The Boguslav district boasted 116 annual fairs and sold 43,000 buckets. In the Uman district there were 189 taverns and 22 roadside inns, which sold about 64,000 buckets of wine and vodka annually. The Lipovets district with its 238 urban taverns and 287 rural inns sold 65,000 buckets annually, 3,500 of which were sold in the shtetl of Lipovets alone. Of course, most consumers came from elsewhere in the province to trade at the marketplace. Still, according to the figures, every dweller in the Uman district drank on average one bucket of vodka per year, and in Lipovets three.39

The shtetl was as much a market town as it was a liquor town. In this way, shtetls differed radically from villages, which sometimes had an inn or a pub, but often no inn at all. Several dozen villages around the Kagarlyk district southwest of Kiev—together with all the roadside inns between villages—sold about 5,000 buckets of wine per year. The shtetls, however, in the mid-1820s in Kiev province belonging to Countess Branicka, Bishop Czyzewski, and landlord Rulikowski, boasted twenty-two wine cellars, eight hotels, seventy-one restaurants, one coffee house, twenty-four roadside inns, six canteens, and 738 taverns. Kiev province had 264 taverns selling 49,000 buckets annually, a figure most likely underreported.41 For this reason, the Polish landlords sought to transform their villages into a mestecko. They were very well aware of what that implied economically and did not need all the data. Yet the data was eloquent. The Radomyshl district, for example, with its 275 taverns and fifteen inns, sold only 13,500 buckets. No fairs, no business.

Jews had to pay upfront to lease a tavern. From 1807 to 1811 in Ushitsa, Zelman Abramovich leased a tavern for 53 rubles in banknotes per year; Gershko Iosovich in Gaisin and Itsko Srulevich in Vinnitsa, for 33 rubles each, and in Letichev, Leiba Aronovich paid 53 banknotes, equal to one quarter of the price of a decent shtetl house.42 Gedalia from Brailov leased a Medzhbozh roadside tavern for 15 silver rubles per year.43 The Uman Jewess Perla Peiarovskaia leased her tavern for 150 rubles a year. When the Russian authorities arrested Michal Glebocki and confiscated his estate, including a house and a winery and inn, only Jankel Karman made a bid on it, readily putting down 109 rubles in banknotes.44 The maintenance of their taverns cost the landlords very little: labor was cheap, and revenues were astonishingly high.

Tavernkeeping was much more profitable than serfdom, the cornerstone of Russia's rural economy. The liquor business shaped the shtetl industry, trade, and finance. Vodka became the shtetl's source of energy. Its steady flow was responsible for most of the town's economic well-being. Whoever controlled the liquor trade controlled the shtetl.

The Russian authorities sought to impose the principles of an absolutist economy on the liquor trade and found themselves in a trap. Trade for them was harmful, and the vodka trade was a social ill. Senator Derzhavin visited famine-stricken Belorusia and claimed that Jewish leaseholders and taverners had ruined the peasants. Enlightened Polish thinkers such as Stanislaw Staszic and Hugo Koffontaj vociferously argued against Jewish tavernkeeping.45

However, Alexander I and Nicholas I realized that their enlightened zeal was at odds with their sober economic management. The laws reflected the domineering absolutist ideology, whereas the economic realities reflected its mercantilist goals. As long as the Russian regime maintained this paradox, the shtetl enjoyed its privileges, revenues, and a good drink.

Russia's concern for the peasants, disapproval of the arbitrary landlords, and desire to make Jews productive brought this period to an end. Under the influence of Derzhavin, Alexander I in his 1804 Statute on the Jews outlawed Jewish tavernkeeping in rural areas. He planned to move Jews to urban centers and thus prevent the ruin of the Russian peasant, so prone to drunkenness. With the same enlightened goal in mind, the Senate in 1807 ordered the eviction of all Jews from rural areas in Volynia and Podolia, particularly emphasizing the ban on Jewish rural tavernkeeping.46 In its special 1808 regulation, the Senate again forbade brewery, innkeeping, the liquor trade, and the lease of those trades in rural areas. None of
these orders took effect since, as one historian stated, the magnates "struggled to preserve life as it had been."[17]

The minister of finance also realized that removing Jews from the liquor trade was counterproductive: Russia could not afford it. The Senate remained pragmatic and went so far as to allow a hundred Jews to manage, although not own, breweries and produce wheat vodka outside the Pale of Settlement, "until Russian artisans appear there to take over this trade."[18] Nicholas I permitted Jewish tavernkeeping in towns and within two miles around the towns. By "permitting," Nicholas merely left things the way they were. Vodka won—but not forever.

4.2. The 1818 brewery in Slavuta.
1b, f. 9, apc. 11A, ark. 1. Courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine.

**THE REVEALER OF SECRETS**

The tavern was as important for ordinary Jews as the synagogue. What Jews could not discuss freely in the synagogue they could easily chat about in the tavern. Despite its unhealthy environment, ordinary Jews liked their taverns. Jews gave them proper names—feminine, tender, diminutive, almost erotic: "The Little She-Dove" (Golubka), "Vydmunka" (Fantasy), "Chubataia" (With a Forelock).

For shtetl dwellers, the tavern became the nexus of all secular networks, social, psychological, economic, financial, and informational. The tavern functioned as a psychiatrist's office, a want-ads page, a club, and a pub all in one. In taverns, Jews discussed business, looked for and found jobs, cut deals, compared commissions, traded in commodities, purchased groceries and haberdashery, engaged in matchmaking, changed and fed horses, repaired wagons, lent and borrowed money, spent the night on their way to a fair, shared news, hired servants or peasants as part-timers, played billiards or cards, listened to the Russian officers and Polish gentry gossip about politics, observed gentle fashion and Christian wedding celebrations, sang songs, and listened to music, and, yes, they also ate, drank, smoked, and danced.[19]

From the brief notes of travelers, one can glimpse what could be obtained, seen, or heard at the tavern. Grand Duke Nicholas, the future Nicholas I, had coffee in a Jewish tavern in Lithuania and borrowed a wagon with horses to continue on. The Decembrist Lorier, one of the participants in the 1825 rebellion, learned top-secret information from Jews in a tavern about the arrest of his accomplices.[20] Poles spent their time in the inns and taverns during annual fairs: they played cards, bet on horse races, and spoke Polish among themselves.[21] The Pole Jankowski from Vasilkov parish, a renowned klezmer musician, participated in a Purimspil performance at a Jewish tavern.[22] The story of Mordko Portnoy from Zvenigorodka makes clear that the tavern also served as the local source of classified job ads: Mordko went to Kiev in search of part-time employment and stayed at the Rishishchev inn, where traveling Jews told him that there was nothing to be gained in Kiev and he should not go there.[23]
Taverns were many, so tavernkeepers had to be inventive in order to attract clients. Some installed billiard tables and clavichords. Many tavernkeepers sold barrels, half barrels, and shrots—rectangular heavy glass bottles with the Russian tsars’ insignia. Some taverns provided breakfast or dinner, others a bed without meals, but they all offered a wide variety of drink. In some cutting-edge taverns one could sample sherry and French vodka, rum, absinthe, local and imported fruit and grape wines, fashionable coffees and chocolate, pekoe tea, and tobacco. In some fancy centrally located taverns the authorities forbade selling cheap drinks: root beer (kvass), brandy, beer, and mead. For that one had to go around the corner to a regular pub or buy a glass from a private winery in a shitetl house cellar.

Taverns provided relief for the repressed libido of the shtetl. Russians, Poles, and Jews sought an escape in the tavern from all sorts of religious, social, and cultural prohibitions. Hasidic masters, the spiritual authorities for many shtetl Jews, understood the enormous psychological power of the tavern. They could have legitimately argued that immersing oneself in the blatant physicality of the tavern was incompatible with Judaic piety, but instead they chose to uplift and spiritualize its pleasures. They even claimed that what Jews did in the taverns could bring them closer to God. Rabbi Pinhas of Korets considered drinking a positive and even a mystical experience. Jews, he said, came from a world of ahidus, unity: this was their main secret, and the secret comes out when wine goes in, to quote a well-known Jewish proverb. Therefore, when Jews drink, the secret becomes apparent—and the sense of unity and fraternal love brings them closer to one another.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav encouraged dancing and singing. Joy, he claimed, is an expression of gratitude before the Almighty. Dancing and singing from joy sweetens the divine punishment of the Jews. Apparently, the endorsement of drinking and dancing in the court of a Hasidic master was an effective way to compete with the attractions of the tavern—and a way to transform its irre sistible corporeal fun into a spiritual quest.

Let us enter the tavern. If it had massive iron-coated gates on the ground floor or a fenced-in adjacent yard with thatched stals, a traveler could drive through. There, members of the tavernkeeper’s family would unharness the horses and unload the wagon. This was a drive-in tavern. A non-drive-in tavern was smaller and less profitable. The former served as a hotel for travelers, envoys, clerks, and merchants. The latter had a more modest function, providing drinks and snacks.

The shtetl Khodorkov, for example, boasted at least twelve drive-in and thirteen non-drive-in taverns. Taverns also served as homes. Just one door separated the tavernkeeper’s bedroom from the guest dining room. Privacy was as problematic for the guests as for the tavernkeeper’s family. The blurring of public and private space was the everyday reality of the tavern, making secrets impossible.

Beirish Kova’s tavern in the shtetl of Poritsk in Volhynia was also his home and a hotel. This tavern was nothing unusual, neither better nor worse than hundreds of others. Kova’s tavern was a large building, about seventy feet long and thirty feet wide. To get into, one had to pass between two wooden poles supporting an old shingled roof, go through the iron-coated gates, and traverse the tavern entryway with its shabby stone ceiling. Here one could leave the carriage. On the left side of the entryway were two guest rooms for visitors. The ceiling was wooden and stucco-covered, the wood floor unpainted.
The rooms had four doors leading in all directions, four windows, and, quite impressively, two stoves, one Dutch for heat and one Russian for cooking. Some of the rooms of the tavern didn’t match—it had been smaller, but Beirish had enlarged it with what materials were available, not matching the initial design. The second guest room had a stone ceiling, old wooden floor, one door, two windows, and a heating stove. At the back of this room was a small storage room, four feet long and two feet wide, where traveling merchants could store their belongings. On the right side of the entryway was a store, with a stone ceiling and walls, wood floor, and one window. It was not particularly impressive, but functional.

Beirish Kova could not make a living just by selling liquor; he was also a storekeeper. Behind his store was another room, eleven feet long, with a plastered wooden ceiling, a heating stove, and a trapdoor on the floor covering the entrance to the basement. Down the ladder was a huge stone cellar as wide as the entire house. This is where the food was kept—herring, cabbage, potatoes, and pickles, but also barrels of grape wine and rye vodka. The Kovas resided in the attic. Behind the house were stalls for horses, made of stone, with roofs. The house and stalls needed considerable repair. Poritsk had half-dozen taverns like this one.37

Beirish's tavern was the Hermitage Museum compared to Kvitnitsky's tavern in Uman from earlier in this chapter. The only good piece of furniture he had was his billiard table. The rest was shabby: a rotted-out floor, rickety chairs, broken windows and shutters, flaking plaster, spiderwebs in the corners, a crude stove, and gloomy walls, as noted by a commission of inspection. Kvitnitsky served his drinks in eleven pieces of glazed earthenware, which was all he had. His stock was mediocre: sixteen bottles of rum, eighty-one bottles of regular grape wine and twenty-right of sour red, and twelve bottles of brandy. The members of the commission took a bottle of brandy with them "for inspection" and ordered Kvitnitsky to quit selling his low-quality red wine.38

Still, the shtetl taverns were better than the roadside inns. In his story "The Steppe," Anton Chekhov has his travelers go to a Jewish roadside tavern—dirty, with a suffocating heavy sour smell, warped chairs, holes in the floor, a dirty oilcloth on the table, and fly-specked pictures on the walls. The flowers on the velvet jacket of the innkeeper, reminiscent of huge bedbugs, eloquently round out this caricature.39 The Ukrainian realist writer Hanna Barvinok (pseudonym; real name—Oleksandra Bilozers'ka-Kulish) also portrayed the Jewish roadside inn as a cold, reeking, unwelcoming, and strikingly poor place.30 These fictional portrayals are echoed by the real observations of a contemporary inspector: "There is nothing on earth worse than a roadside inn in the backwoods of Lithuania and Polish Volynia—yet the inns of the Ukrainian steppe are no better when it comes to dirt and bad construction."31

The travelers of Chekhov and Hanna Barvinok expected to find in a roadside inn the coziness of a hotel in town. They were asking the impossible. The inn near Belaia Tserkov, on the road from Kiev to Uman, had a straw roof, a chimney and a stove, four small windows, an unplastered wooden ceiling, and wooden doors. A cellar and a granary dug in a nearby hill and covered with earth show that this had definitely been a peasant hut. Like the Belaia Tserkov inn, the Dobranskaia roadside inn on the road connecting Kiev and Berdichev was also in a former peasant hut.

The tavernkeeper made most of his income from the various food items he sold to travelers and from the pastures belonging to the inn. He charged for food and for grazing. So did the leaseholder of the Tseberman road inn, which had a big cistern with water for cattle and a pasture for the bulls and horses of the Ukrainian chumaks, who traded in salt between the Crimea and Kiep province.32 Unlike shtetl taverns, roadside inns kept a low profile.

The inhabitants of the shtetl liked the taverns precisely because of the blurred line between home privacy and public exposure. For one night, a traveler became a member of the household, and the Jewish family listened to the conversations of the visitors and become part of the larger world of politics. A place where wine went in and secrets came out, the tavern was what in the Judaic mystical tradition is called a revealer of secrets. Jews needed neither yellow press nor mystery novels; they had the tavern. They had no desire to part with it, although envy and xenophobia led some to spread calumny against Jewish tavernkeepers.
**TASTING JEWISH VODKA**

Accusations against tavernkeepers selling low-quality liquor made the business unprofitable. Russian contemporaries bemoaned the low quality of vodka of the liquor monopolists, who were interested above all in a quick return. They were notorious for diluting vodka, not distilling it properly, and destroying the market for cheaper port and beers. While this happened mostly outside the Pale of Settlement, the wholesalers in the shtetls were not much better. In the shtetls, however, some minimal quality had to be maintained because of the competition—the leaseholder of the landlord's tavern. The constant threat from the much better protected wholesalers left the private tavernkeepers with only one option, to sell a quality product. Good vodka helped outdo the columnies.

The case of Moshka Telezhinetsky, a tavernkeeper from Shepetovka, is revealing in a number of ways. In 1836, Doctor Kirichenko of Zaslav accused Moshka of poisoning the peasants, and the clerks on the Volhynia provincial commission rigorously investigated the charges, which were serious: homicide. The investigation found that the priest of a village church in the outskirts of Shepetovka decided to drink in honor of his deceased relatives. He came to Telezhinetsky and purchased seven buckets of vodka (twenty gallons). The next day he invited the clergy and peasants from his parish to join him. They started around 10 a.m. and stayed until after 3 p.m., finishing two buckets of alcohol. Mikhail Andreev, a peasant prone to drunkenness, liked free vodka. He barely made it home. A few hours later he was not feeling well, and by evening his condition worsened. The next day he was dead.

Doctor Kirichenko of Zaslav managed to see Andreev still alive and later came to testify to his death. Kirichenko’s diagnosis, along with some nasty xenophobic comments, and dispatched it to Zhitomir. Peasant Mikhail Andreev, he wrote, “died from vodka bought in Shepetovka from a local Jewish tavern belonging to Moshka Telezhinetsky.” Provincial authorities jumped on the case; too many peasants had been at the party. Besides, a few years before a Jew had been suspected of ritual murder in nearby Zaslav. If Telezhinetsky was guilty, they would have an excellent explanation for the peasants’ mortality rate other than serfdom.

The Zhitomir police sent orders to Shepetovka: arrest the tavernkeeper and conduct a search of the tavern.

The police discovered four things that seemed suspicious. They opened a chest and found some strange white powder. In the kitchen, they spotted some herbs of unknown provenance. From Telezhinetsky’s purse they pulled a strange note with Jewish inscriptions, which they identified as kabbalistic. And finally, the vodka: three barrels sealed by the leaseholder’s stamp. They filled a bottle of vodka from one of the barrels and sent all four items—vodka, herbs, the note, and the powder—to Zhitomir for investigation. The case seemed promising; this Moshka was obviously a necromancer out to poison the Eastern Orthodox clergy and peasants.

The Volhynia provincial commission contacted local chemists, who tested Telezhinetsky’s vodka and, to the commission’s dismay, discovered no “narcotic, mineral or metallic ingredients.” They not only found it “absolutely harmless” but added that it was of good quality. The result: the police released Telezhinetsky and accused the doctor of “poor care and...
behavior." Unfortunately, Doctor Kirichenko was not the only one making such accusations.

**Belligerent Parties**

No matter what the quality, vodka prices were low, but the tensions they triggered were very high. Take Istokovich and Leibovich, who leased state treasury taverns in Rzhishchev. Three other Jews leased taverns in the part of town belonging to landlord Berezowski. Naturally, the two parts of town, "Russian" and "Polish," competed for clientele. Istok Nemirovsky from Vinnitsa found himself in a similar situation. He saw how his neighbors, not burdened by special state taxes, sold cheaper cherry and grape wines by the glass. He complained that he had been betrayed by landlord Jozef Lubiszewski, but his appeal was useless. Istokovich and Leibovich also accused the landlord of ruining their state-supported business, also in vain.29

Unlike the treasury tavernkeepers, the gentry tavern leaseholders didn't have to make special duty payments; furthermore, the landlords allowed other shtetl dwellers to retail liquor from their cellars. In towns shared by the Russian state treasury and the Polish gentry, the Russian liquor monopoly clashed with the Polish leaseholding.30

This clash was deep-rooted. Polish magnates retained their monopoly on the liquor trade, whereas the new Russian liquor monopolists were also seeking profits: after all, their investments yielded on average a 300 percent return! Among the 216 liquor monopolists across Russia, twenty-nine managed liquor trade on the state lands of the Pale of Settlement.31 Only out for themselves, the liquor monopolists brutally suppressed individual brewers and aggressively took over their assets. Like Jewish liquor leaseholders, the liquor monopolists introduced fixed prices, and fixed meant high. With a monopoly of the market, the liquor monopolists cared little about the quality of their wine and vodka; their only concern was quantity.

Tens of millions of rubles in state revenues were at stake. The tsars mobilized state institutions to protect the monopolists from interlopers. Alexander I and Nicholas I allowed the liquor monopolists to use the army to protect their trade. Clandestine bartenders, brewers, and taverners undermining the local monopoly were brutally suppressed. Armed guards prevented residents and travelers from bringing liquor purchased elsewhere into the towns. Outside the Pale of Settlement, the guards protected entire cities from vodka smugglers, while inside the Pale they controlled the entrances to shtetls and villages.40

The disparity in prices turned competition between the state liquor monopolists and the magnates' tavernkeepers into a vodka war. Jews involved in the liquor business found themselves in two belligerent camps. The vodka wars involved everybody—Polish magnates, governors, ministries, the Senate, the tsar, and ordinary Jews. With varying intensity, this war played out almost in every shtetl.

In 1824, merchant Leiba Barsky signed a contract with the state treasury to be a liquor monopolist in the district of Zvenigorodka. He promised to pay the state about 12,000 silver rubles per year, established fixed prices, and expected to make a lot of money. We can imagine his annoyance when he realized that Countess Branicka, the owner of lands nearby, had leased out four small inns only two miles from the taverns that he controlled. Formally, that was her land. To Barsky's dismay, the liquor in her inns was cheaper than in his taverns. Naturally, the peasants and townsfolk flocked to Branicka's inns and brought bottled liquor back home.

Business in Barsky's taverns dropped precipitously. Facing bankruptcy, Barsky pleaded with the minister of finance for help, but Kankrin could do nothing: the state department of crown assets had no jurisdiction over Branicka. "Send your people to prevent anyone from buying from those inns," was the advice. "The local guards would help you." Perhaps they would have, but ordinary shtetl dwellers gathered in gangs, beat up Barsky's guards, and continued to frequent Branicka's inns.41

Barsky was not alone in his frustration. Before him, Berko Gedaliovich from Bershad had a similar problem with wine retailers in Zvenigorodka in 1803 and failed to pay his monopoly duties.42 In the late 1820s yet another monopolist, Froim Zaslavsky, competing with Branicka's taverns, found himself in the same predicament. As a second-guild merchant, Zaslavsky was extremely wealthy. He purchased a liquor monopoly license for the entire Tarashcha district and planned to collect duties from
dozens of local tavernkeepers. Naturally, he locked in prices for all the taverns under his control.

The inventive Branicka pursued her own profit. She ordered the establishment of inns between villages, on the trade roads, and in farming areas. Zaslavsky considered this illegal. Landlords could have their inns only in the villages and hamlets, not in between. His monopoly benefited the state treasury, and he pleaded with the state to protect him. The court found itself in a legal quandary. As in Barsky's case, the judge recommended that Zaslavsky appoint "mounted inspectors and guards to make sure no wine from elsewhere is brought to town." That is to say, since we cannot enforce legislation, you must resort to violence.

The shtetl dwellers disliked fixed prices, particularly on alcohol. Drinking was a moment of freedom, although very few used this word, forbidden in early nineteenth-century Russia. At their secret parties, Alexander Pushkin and his school friends would raise their glasses "to her." Likewise, the shtetl dwellers could not pronounce the word "freedom," but they could raise their glasses. Now they could not afford even that. Locking in prices restricted the freedom to drink, turning ordinary Jews into rebels.

In Uman, the Jews succeeded in nearly bringing down the business of Grossman and Berenshtein. These two liquor monopolists controlled sales of vodka and rum, paying about 2,000 rubles to the state treasury. They also owned a pub in the cellar of the town prison. To control their monopoly, they established guarded checkpoints at the entrances to the town. As in Troianov, Kremenets, and Berdichev, guards stopped and checked anyone entering the town on foot or by wagon, and their baggage was inspected to make sure they had no liquor on them. Meanwhile, Uman tavernkeepers paid the monopolists 0.45 rubles in taxes for a bucket of rum and 0.15 rubles for a bucket of vodka. Town prices on liquor rose sharply, the guards detained retail smugglers, and the situation became increasingly tense.

In the 1830s, however, Uman was no longer a private town; the state had purchased it from the Potockis and turned it into a military training center. The authorities did not like the volatile situation in town; they agreed with the protesting Jews and abolished the checkpoints. By doing so they de facto introduced free trade in liquor. Berenshtein and Grossman could not pay their arrears, and petitioned Kankrin to release them from payments. Ordinary Uman dwellers rejoiced; they had got what they wanted—the freedom to drink a cheap shot.

Unlike Uman, Troianov had no military to help the Jews out. And Berdichev, a local leaseholder of the liquor trade reporting to Count Belinski, was no better than the monopolists in Uman. He ordered his guards to attack a competing tavern, physically humiliating its leaseholder, and search the houses of local townspeople suspected of purchasing vodka elsewhere. The court and police preferred to keep out of it: after all, Beliand served the landlord. His guards, the court acknowledged, were "illegal but efficient." For ordinary shtetl dwellers, purchasing outside the leaseholder's jurisdiction was an act of defiance. Other shtetls moved from defiance to outright rebellion.

NEWS FROM THE FRONT

Berdichev Jews started their rebellion with the herem, Hebrew for the ban of excommunication. It appeared on the doors of the Great Synagogue and outlawed alcohol "made in Berdichev." The names of Rabbenu Gershon and Yehoshua bin Nun, invoked in the ban, left no doubt: to drink Berdichev-produced vodka meant being banished from the Jewish community forever.

Berdichev townsfolk could hardly survive Shabbat without a shot of brandy. They found it excruciating to have to refuse liquor available in any local pub, and needed an extraordinary incentive to make the boycott work.

The entire Jewish population took part. Nobody wanted to pay an exorbitant sum for a bottle of wine or a shof of vodka. In addition to economics, religious arguments also played a role: Rubinstein, the leaseholder of the local liquor trade, had converted to Christianity. As a Christian supervisor of the production of Jewish liquor, he dismissed Judaic dietary stringency, not always applicable to brandy but obligatory for wine made from grapes. For this and other reasons, the Jews of Berdichev committed themselves to the ban. They allowed themselves the dispensation of consuming outside vodka if they could get it out of town and bring it in.

Chapter Four: The Right to Drink 139
Rubinshtein could not contain his anger. In a short period of time he lost 10,000 silver rubles in duties. He complained to everyone—the Senate, the governor general in Kiev, the police chief in Zhitomir, and the town-owner of Berdichev. He convinced Prince Radziwill to make a complaint too. Radziwill appealed to the bias of Russian statesmen: Jews, he said, had used their religious laws to harm the loyal owner of the town.

Radziwill’s claims might have touched on a sensitive issue, yet Rubinshtein knew that the Russian government was often unable to exercise its power. The only power that could crack down on Jewish resistance, Rubinshtein decided, was that of religion. An apostate himself, he turned to Mordkehai Twersky, a Hasidic master of enormous clout, and pleaded with him to persuade the Jews to cancel the ban. We have the police to thank for recording that these two had a meeting—most likely a very brief one.

Berdichev was too important a town for the Russian authorities to feign neutrality. Grudgingly, they had to intervene. They decided that the town tavernkeepers should recompense Rubinshtein 15,000 rubles, which the tavernkeepers, the first victims of the boycott, could not afford under any circumstances. Then the authorities ordered an investigation and arrested the alleged group who had set the ban. Three respectable town merchants, Abram Brodetsky, Sheftel Berlinbug, and Mosheh Varshavsky, were thrown into a detention cell. The detainees dispatched a protest from prison to the investigator, insisting that they knew nothing about the boycott. Puzzled, a government detective turned to people in the streets.

Local vodka, they replied, was “much too expensive.” In violation of state regulatory politics, Rubinshtein had shamelessly raised prices. In addition, he sold vodka by the Polish quart, which was smaller than the Russian quart, but priced it higher than the Russian measure. Russians reported that Jews threatened to stop drinking vodka for one year, unless it cost 20 kopeks a quart. Catholics claimed to have heard Jews saying they would never drink the vodka of the vile convert Rubinshtein, whatever the price. But these were just rumors; the Zhitomir magistrate could not prove the guilt of the detained Jews and transferred the case to the Volhynia court, then to the Senate.44 Meanwhile, the flow of vodka in Berdichev miraculously stopped.

Rubinshtein realized that the Senate could rule in favor of the townsfolk and against the Polish magnate, which he needed to prevent at all costs. Rubinshtein harnessed his horses and rushed to St. Petersburg. There he shoved bribes at several statesmen and made sure they would approve a decision favoring him and not the town dwellers. He succeeded, and on his return tripled his grip on liquor sales. Still, he acquiesced to popular protest and fixed the price in the amount of 20 kopeks per quart of wine.

Rubinshtein also made some harsh decisions. Since all taverns in town belonged to Radziwill, he ordered Radziwill’s insignia placed on the doors. The Volhynia civil governor asked him to take them down—why should there be a reminder of the Polish szlachta in a Russian town?—but Rubinshtein disobeyed. He had his mounted guards controlling checkpoints and road boom-barriers: do whatever you deem necessary, but protect my monopoly. Berdichev turned into what a contemporary called a “serf town.” Radziwill was the alcohol king. Rubinshtein his liquor minister, and ordinary townsfolk were liquor serfs.

Witnesses observed how the mounted guards would surround anyone coming through Berdichev on a wagon and shout, “Do you have any vodka?” They even had the nerve to stop a retired Russian officer in a coach, found several bottles on him, and demanded excise payments. As the officer had no money on him, they took his horse as collateral and put him under arrest until he paid. The townsfolk voiced protests and the governor sent inspectors to check out the situation on the ground, but Rubinshtein swiftly dismantled the checkpoints. Once the inspectors went back to Zhitomir, the guards were back in place.

The guards went so far as to stop a governmental envoy carrying mail through Berdichev. The mailman resisted. The guards pulled swords to make him obey and check his mailbags. It is no surprise that the mounted guards with szlachta insignia were also Jews. Except for the town-owner, almost everyone involved on either side was Jewish. What is surprising, however, is that the guards had good reason to detain the mailman. It turned out that two Jews, Borui Raiker and Slioma Parshchik, had invented a way to punish Rubinshtein’s greed and obstinacy. You deny us an affordable shot of vodka? We will smuggle.
Borukh and Shlioma were extraordinarily resourceful. They purchased special government mailbags, commissioned uniforms, and hired Leibko Prilutsky to be in charge of mail transfer. They looked like normal Jews leasing Russian post services and driving express mail through Berdichev. The difference between them and genuine Jewish postmasters was in the quality of their mail. It was liquid and measured in buckets. They could carry about eight hundred buckets of express mail at a time.

Rubinstein himself beat up Prilutsky when he discovered the fraud, and he had the authorities forbid the smuggling of vodka under penalty of law. Popular protest, however, continued for years. Jews would leave Berdichev before sunset for out-of-town taverns and come back at night with a bottle of vodka sticking out of every pocket. Some went individually, trying to circumvent the checkpoints on the way back; others returned in crowds to confront the guards and break through.

Berdichev set a precedent replicated elsewhere. As in Jersdichev, one day in the mid-1830s the Kremenets dwellers found a herem in the form of Yiddish handwritten leaflets on the doors of the town synagogues: under threat of excommunication, nobody should drink local vodka. Russian town clerks called these leaflets “sheets with horrible oaths” in the “Jewish language.”

Everybody knew what the ban meant. The ordinary Jews of Kremenets had declared war on Pinkas Bronshtein, a wealthy liquor monopolist. Just like Rubinstein, he had single-handedly fixed high prices on vodka and had closed the town to any outside liquor. Before his stool pigeons could scratch the leaflets from the doors of synagogues, dozens of people managed to read them.

In the oral culture of East Europe, news traveled fast. By midday, the entire town knew what was going on. Jews enlisted the support of the Christian population. The taverns were empty. The town became sober. Bronshtein, facing ruin, filed a report with the governor. The boycott undermined his calculations with the state treasury and was a “harmful action directed against state interests.”

While the authorities were considering what action to take, Bronshtein and his associate Iosel Gintsburg went to see the rabbi of the town and tried to intimidate him. Without his signature or approval, the rabbi mentioned, the ban was just a piece of paper. Still, he murmured the classical Talmudic dina de malkuta-dina (the law of the state is the law for the Jew) and promised to make an announcement in the synagogue over Shabbat. However, on Shabbat he made no mention of the matter. Bronshtein assumed that his competitors had conspired against him, and he rushed to Zhitomir.

As a guild merchant, Bronshtein was confident that the Volynia governor would meet with him; as a monopolist, he also knew that he had many enemies. In Zhitomir he discovered that Aizik Brodsky and Gershko Goldenberg, high-profile tavernkeepers in town, had already filed charges against him. Bronshtein returned to Kremenets and changed his tactics. He filed another complaint with criminal charges, in which he accused Goldenberg and Brodsky of being responsible for the boycott. Those who had rebelled, he argued, did so against an obedient servant of the Russian tsar, second-guild merchant Pinkhas Bronshtein.

As a trustworthy person in his own eyes, Bronshtein promised to bring witnesses to court to testify against the enemies of his business and of the state treasury. He also requested rabbincourt hearings. The accused responded that this was fine, provided that the witnesses were not Bronshtein’s relatives. The rabbi agreed, as this was the accepted practice of Judaic law: relatives were not acceptable witnesses. Then Bronshtein requested that the witnesses testify in the synagogue without taking an oath. Goldenberg and Brodsky refused. During this exchange, Bronshtein’s income plunged to a ten-year low.

The authorities finally came to the rescue. The governor ordered that Goldenberg and Brodsky explain themselves. The two admitted that they had a grudge against Bronshtein since he refused to sell them high-quality vodka, preferring to sell it just through his taverns and offering them only half-distilled vodka. It was not a stretch for Bronshtein to suspect them, honest taverners, of masterminding the boycott. But what boycott, the two asked, was Bronshtein talking about? A certain Grinberg had bought two buckets of vodka for a wedding; Berenshtein and Fishman had purchased two buckets for circumcision ceremonies; they themselves had also purchased and sold ten buckets. There was no ban in effect!10
Yet there was a ban, of course: the liquor monopolist used to sell about three hundred buckets per week. The two taverners cleverly mis-guided the investigation. The ten to fifteen buckets now sold weekly rep-resented a 90 percent loss; Goldenberg's and Brodsky's explanations were laughable. Furthermore, we do not know if the figures that they gave in order to distance themselves from the boycott were even accurate. It was very clear, however, that the entire town, Christians and Jews, was ready to protect its modicum of freedom: inexpensive vodka. Bronstein either had to revoke his fixed prices and give in to his ordinary out rebellious brethren or face bankruptcy. The Jews had won their right to drink.

"MAKING RUSSIAN PEASANTS DRUNK"

The regime considered the vodka conflict an anomaly and sought to re-solve it. The best bet was to make the Polish gentry surrender and keep them from infringing on Russia's treasury revenues. The landlords' inns in the proximity of state-owned taverns were an affront. A list of sub-ver-sive taverns lay on the desk of the minister of finance. Kankrin looked into the matter and realized that the problematic taverns were new, not mentioned in inheritance papers, lay far beyond the landlords' inhabited areas, undermined state trade, and should be liquidated.

The landlords protested. Tyszkiewicz, Krasnicki, Kruzelnicki, and others sent back the paperwork with counterarguments. Their taverns were old, inherited mostly from the Potockis; there were no other inns in close proximity to their taverns and the state-owned lands were at a dis-tance of six to seven miles. They had inherited from the Potockis the right to deal with their new possessions as they deemed necessary. The inns served travelers on the trade routes; it would be pointless to shut them down.30

The Russian administration discovered that the taverns in question were in fact in a strategically favorable position. Located on the roads connecting the key market towns, they allowed purchasing cheaper vodka. The ministerial commission ordered that the distance be measured from the landowners' possessions to their taverns and from their taverns to the state-owned territories and inns. The result was shocking: to cover that distance one sometimes had to walk a mere fifty steps!

This was an outrage, but it would be difficult to lay blame on the gen-try. The head of the Kiev provincial economy department helped the ad-ministration find a scapegoat. The rising Russian nationalism praised the "official nationality" at the expense of all others. Hence Russians could not be responsible, but the religiously alien Jews could. "The Jews lease taverns from the gentry and the gentry established these taverns close to state land leased to liquor monopolists," he claimed. These Jews "sell alco-hol and beverages much cheaper than in the state-controlled estates." And finally: "this undermines state trade."31

Bound by their commitment to the landlords, the Russian authorities looked into the monopoly problem, and made several discoveries: Jews thought "only of their own benefit" and had no desire "to follow the will of the government." They sold vodka cheaper than the established price and provided free fish and salt, attracted Christian peasants, make them purchase on credit, and ruined them. Christian peasants flocked to Jew-ish inns because "in many districts they cannot buy lower than the estab-lished state price." Finally, the authorities stated that removing Jews from the taverns would undermine the income of the gentry.32

Since the town-owners in the Pale were mostly Polish, undermining their income was tantamount to reducing their political significance. The impoverished gentry would not have money to purchase horses, organize cavalry, and rebel against Russia. Instead, they would have to beg the state for help—which they would receive in exchange for loyalty. It was not nec-essary to ruin the gentry completely, but merely to remove one of their main sources of income: the Jewish tavernkeeper.

Instead of introducing a free liquor trade, the Russian regime sought to make the liquor trade free of Jews. Nicholas undertook a number of decisive steps to banish Jews from this business. He attempted but failed entirely to remove the Jews from the area within fifty miles of the border with Austria. It turned out that Podolia province alone had more than 170 taverns within fifty miles of the border. The state was unable to com-pensate all those who would lose their taverns. In the 1840s the govern-ment did succeed in evicting those Jews who lived in rural areas. The state also nullified the peasants' debts to Jewish tavernkeepers and forbade Jews from selling on credit.
This eviction resulted in the rapid expansion of the shtetl population and the worsening of its economy. Thousands of former innkeepers and their family members, now unemployed Jews, made their way back to the shtetls and established dozens of new prayer houses, but also contributed to the subsequent unemployment in and impoverishment of the shtetl. Simultaneously, the regime endorsed the notion that Jews forced the Russian peasant to drink, which became one of the key points of late nineteenth-century anti-Jewish propaganda. The later antisemitic image of the overcrowded shtetl and the Jew destroying the Christian peasantry were among the consequences of the campaign of the Russian regime against the Polish gentry. The shtetl and its Jews became the immediate victims of this campaign.

Much later, the Jews were removed entirely from the liquor trade in Russia. The state abolished serfdom in 1861, launched rapid industrialization in the 1880s, and introduced a state monopoly on the liquor trade in 1894. The claim of biased ethnographers that Jews made the Russian peasants drunk prompted a final governmental decision. All liquor trade was now a state monopoly; the Jews were out. Although tavernkeeping was a risky profession riddled with economic and psychological conflict, Jews and Slavs benefited from it over several centuries.

The removal of Jews had dreadful consequences for everybody. The introduction of a state monopoly made several hundreds of thousands of Jewish families destitute overnight. One Russian historian observed that at that time, some “200,000 Jews were deprived of the scanty livelihood they had derived from the taverns.” Several years later, antisemitic propaganda used the liberalization period in the wake of the 1905 Russian Revolution to incite peasants (and soldiers of peasant stock) against the Jews, who allegedly corrupted Russian peasants. The Jews filed for foreign passports and started packing.

State prices on alcohol, now without any competition, only caused people to drink more, not less. The credulous population was easily incited against the eternally guilty Jewish innkeepers, which preserved the shaky balance of social stability. Although the regime won the war against an affordable drink, destroyed the Polish magnates’ liquor economy and Jewish tavernkeeping, the shtetl dwellers—Ukrainians, Russians, Poles, and Jews—still had the last laugh. They immortalized the freedom to drink in East European popular culture across the religious, linguistic, political, and ethnic divide.

**BOTTLED FREEDOM**

Samuil Marshak, a leading Russian children’s poet, wrote an adult epigram on drinking: “Here are some reasons to get drunk: a divorce, a funeral, a wedding, a departure, a success, an award, a promotion—and simply getting drunk for no reason.” Drinking for its own sake takes Slavs away from the controlled realm of officialdom with its imposed festivals and ideology.
It also frees them from poverty and distress. A Ukrainian female peasant song praises vodka, as nourishing as porridge: "Hey, ha-vika, bila-bila, ia b tebe lozhkoiu tila"—"Hey, vodka, very white, I would eat you with a spoon!" A Ukrainian folksong has its rebel peasants calling for "pouring vodka over the rim," so that "life in the world will be better."59

Aleck the Mechanic, a tailor from a short story by Sholem Aleichem, stayed sober all year round since he could not afford brandy. But on Simchat Torah, the day when the annual cycle of Torah reading is completed, he would reward himself for his enforced sobriety. Sholem Aleichem wondered "how such a small man can pour so much liquor into himself."60

Drinking "for the sake of rejoicing" became so widespread at the Hasidic courts that Solomon Schechter in his Vienna years concocted a Hebrew parody: his Hasidim cannot tell tikkun, soul-improving, from a bottle of brandy. His main character, a novice, spends days learning how to drink without measure "for its own sake" and feels it incumbent "to drink with every effort I can make until I fall down wherever I sit—so that no one, God forbid, suspects me of not being an accomplished Hasid."61

Adam Mickiewicz's Poles went to relax after Mass to a Jewish tavern: "z kaplicy, že byla niedziela, Zabawic się i wypić przyszł do Jankiela": "after church, since it was Sunday, they went to have fun and drink at Yankef's." They had fun in the Jewish tavern—of course, they had little any fun in church!62

Drinking as a path toward personal freedom permeated East European culture from the top down. Though drinking contributed to the state treasury, it also challenged state ideology. "Open the cellars—the mob is having fun today!" wrote Alexander Blok about the inebriated 1917 Russian Revolution.63 To drink whatever one wants and wherever one wants became an act of defiance. "We could drink no more," a Russian poet ironically swears, "But we could drink no less."

The revolutionary Vladimir Mayakovsky described the netherworld with the scornful word, "temperance."64 In his canonic poem, "A Confession," Czeslaw Milosz ironically questioned his status as a prophetic figure since he indulged in the only-too-human "well-chilled vodka, herring in olive oil."65

The main character in one of the most subversive Russian novels, *Moscow to the End of the Line*, by Venedikt Erofeev, drinks rosé wine, lotion, eau de toilette, and cologne, and in complete delirium derides communism, the Slavic soul, and Russian chauvinism. Ready to drink his glass straight down, he pronounces, "Share with me my repast, Lord."66

Russian satirist Igor Guberman, exclaimed, "A tavern, a brothel, a pub, a bar—may our feast be blessed amid the fumes of divine grace."67 However, East European tradition joined together not only drinking and freedom, but drinking and creativity. Bulat Okudzhava, the famous Russian bard, placed a red rose, the symbol of poetry, in a dark glass bottle of imported beer. It makes perfect sense that Mikhail Bakhtin, a leading Russian twentieth-century thinker, saw Rabelaisian excessive drunkenness through the East European lens, as a popular expression of freedom. The Russian proverb puts it best: "Have a drink in the morning and you will be free all day."

Of course the drinking shtetl, though "free all day," could be pretty violent.
The golden age of the shtetl was over by the second half of the nineteenth century, yet the shtetl did not disappear overnight. Let us make no mistake: Belaia Tserkov, Berdichev, Medzhibož, Ostrog, Radzivilov, Sharhorod, Shepetovka, Slavuta, Talnoe, Uman, and Zaslav all remained where they had been before. Two hundred years later they are still there with now emphatically Ukrainian names such as Berdyčiv, Bila Tserkva, Medzhybžzh, Ostrog, Radyvlyiv, Sharhorod, Shepetivka, Skvira, and Izyaslav. Of course, these localities are very different now from what they were two hundred years ago. Their recognizable yet altered names do not convey the magnitude of the changes they have undergone.

FORCED DECLINE AND FALL

Scholars of Russian imperial history portrayed the geopolitical know-how of the Russian Empire, which by and large had less developed urban infrastructure, economic networks, financial system, and self-governing
The educational reforms of the 1840s, including the establishment of state schools and rabbinic seminaries, pursued the same goal: to transform what Moshe Rosman called "the lords' Jews," the Polish magnates' Jews, into Russian imperial Jews and useful subjects of His Majesty the Russian tsar. Included in these reforms was a not always successful yet consistent effort to squeezing the Jews out of the rural areas, a movement that took a particularly aggressive form in the 1840s and culminated in the 1880s, the setting of Sholem Aleichern's Tevye, who sells his belongings for pennies and leaves his beloved Anatevka for good.

These and many other reforms had multiple goals. The attempts of the regime to forcefully russify the Jews by integrating them into the Russian version of the well-managed state is only one of the contexts in which to consider the Jewish nineteenth-century transformation. Another context is Russia's no less consistent attempts to obliterate the Polish legacies—political, administrative, social, cultural, and economic—in the western provinces, particularly in such well-to-do ones as Kiev, Volhynia, and Podolia. These attempts became particularly intense after the 1863-1864 Polish rebellion, when the imperial officialdom incorporated the anti-Polish invectives of the Russian xenophobes, making them part of the government's political discourse.2

The regime used every opportunity to purchase the shtetls from the Polish magnates for the Russian treasury. It moved the trade centers and major annual fairs out of the previously thriving Polish towns in the Pale of Settlement and into interior Russia. It economically supported Russian administrative centers at the expense of the towns still in the possession of a Polish magnate. It put the towns in the western borderlands under the control of the Russian administration, if not the Russian gentry, organized mass resettlement of the impoverished members of the Polish szlachta, and broke the spine of the local economy, dependent on Jewish mediation between the rural and the urban. These measures were much more nationalistic than enlightened.

Russian industrialization also delivered a heavy blow to the shtetl. If a shtetl was lucky and had the newly established Russian railroad passing through, it would years later resemble a big village with some residual institutions than the peoples in its western territories it conquered. Capturing new territories, the regime first empowered local elites and preserved the status quo of the institutions of local self-rule. Then it assimilated, ruined, and harnessed the elites and leveled local traditional social institutions, replacing them with the Russian administrative system.3

Russia thus suppressed and supplanted the Ukrainian autonomous Hetmanate on the left bank of the Dnieper River in the eighteenth century—and the imperial administration likewise subjugated suppressed, and eliminated the Polish legacy on the right bank of the Dnieper River in the nineteenth century. The method was the same: not to assimilate Russian urban infrastructure into the social institutions in the newly appropriated territories but to bring those institutions down to the level of the underdeveloped and inefficient Russian administrative ones. Russian state-based nationalism and far-fetched ideological priorities had the upper hand over the country's immediate economic growth. Full control over the shtetl turned out to be more important than the shtetl's vigorous productivity. Paternalistic enlightenment of Catherine II transformed itself into the barracks enlightenment of Nicholas I.

Although in the western provinces the regime sought to put down the Poles and win over the Jews, Jews paid a high price in the Russian appropriation of its western lands. The regime radically limited the activities of the kahal in 1797 and then in 1844 curtailed it, getting rid of the communal umbrella organization not only as a corporate entity incompatible with the well-managed state but also as a legacy of the previous Polish regime. In 1827, Jews found themselves in the conscription pool—together with the Russian peasants, since Nicholas I saw the army as an institution teaching useful skills and reorienting Jewish loyalties from the Polish magnates to the Russian tsar. In 1836 the tsar outlawed the effervescent Jewish printing presses and introduced the strictest control and censorship over the only two state-endorsed printing presses. What had previously benefited the shtetl Jewish population— and, of course, the shtetl's Polish owners—now came to benefit the administrative towns such as Zhitomir in the southern and Vilna in the northern part of the Pale of Settlement.
urban infrastructure: a department store, a railway station and depot, and a couple of factories. The railroad communication relocated the market centers moving them elsewhere. If the shtetl did not get the railroad, it would turn into a village resembling Anatevka. Only the rains of the magnate’s castle, a desolate Catholic monastery, or a pompous synagogue building now functioning as a local museum are reminders of the shtetl’s glorious past. Yet its industrious Jews, its inns and taverns, multiple stores and artisan shops, ubiquitous prayer houses, the pompous residence of the tsadik, and, of course, its bustling marketplace were no more. Of course, the shtetl had lost its unique economic status long before the two world wars, and the Holocaust finally stamped out its Jewish life.

The shtetl’s fall from grace took almost another fifty years. The Russian regime managed to create robust internal markets, which competed with and in the long run suppressed the shtetl marketplace. The regime placed its bids on the state-owned towns that had never been in private Polish possession, even though they had been under the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. Instead of following the market, the Russian regime made the market follow the administration. The empire needed strong governmental centers entirely under its control; it abhorred the many independent towns with the dubious legacy of the previous regime and unruly economic potential. They were too Polish—and too Jewish. Besides, the Russian state capitalism of the second half of the nineteenth century did not like competition, particularly internal. Even without government-orchestrated political and economic regulations aimed at suppressing the burgeoning towns, the shtetl was doomed.

The regime forcibly moved the fair trade to administrative centers such as Kiev and Zhitomir, which successfully outplayed the surrounding shtetls economically, debilitating their markets and weakening trade networks. The introduction of rigid border controls, the disruption of Jewish-driven international trade, and the establishment of a new center on the Black Sea coast, Odessa, made trade move away from Brody, Dubno, Berdichev, and Uman southward, leaving the shtetls in dire straits. With the railroads connecting St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, Kharkov, and Odessa, it was easier and more profitable to do business along the new transportation lines. Only the grain trade, now centered in the new international port of Odessa, still used the old Dnieper-based water routes.

Following the confiscation of their towns by the Russian imperial treasury, the Polish magnates with their lavish lifestyle and their entourages were seen no more. The shtetl market for French and Austrian goods disappeared. Numerous members of the Polish szlachta that had served the magnates in various administrative positions lost their livelihoods and had no better a fate than the impoverished Jewish urban dwellers who lost their trading opportunities. The Jewish elites who used to contribute to the urban development of the shtetls moved from Starokonstantinov to Zhitomir to Kiev and from Berdichev to Odessa. Those few who could pay the dues and join the merchants’ first guild, those who obtained the exclusive rights of excise monopolists, and those who converted moved to Moscow or St. Petersburg. The market slowly declined, not only because of governmental restrictions but also as a result of the waning number of high-ranking consumers. Still, until the late nineteenth century the
shtetl remained a key player in the exchange of agricultural products between rural areas and urban centers in the western provinces, and traded in grain as it had done for centuries. Of course, its market was no more a place where one could purchase “whatever one’s heart desired.”

Some shtetls, such as Shargorod, persevered in their capacity as centers of exchange between the town and the village, and their architecture retained (even today!) its unique shtetl flavor, whereas many more shtetls were obliged to follow the newly imposed architectural patterns and introduce brick buildings resembling any Russian provincial town.²

The Jews who were forced to obey the new law forbidding them from residing in rural areas resettled in the shtetl, contributing to its skyrocketing competition and further economic decline. The 1861 liberation of the Russian peasants slowly brought the Ukrainian peasants into the shtetls, where they became competitors of the Jews at the already decaying marketplace, which turned from a nineteenth-century version of a super-market into a village bazaar. Thousands of Jews had to abandon trade and go into artisan labor, creating a growth of 30 percent in this economic sector, but they soon realized that the shtetl no longer provided them with a viable market, and their output could no longer compete with industrial mass-produced ready-made clothes, shoes, gloves, and hats. Jews took to the road, which led them to bigger towns and cities.

In the cities, often unable to establish themselves, Jews became blue-collar seasonal workers or red-shirt full-time proletarians, joining groups they previously had had little in common with. The introduction of the state monopoly on liquor production and the reclassification of hundreds of shtetls as villages where Jews were not allowed to reside pushed thousands of penniless Jews, artisans and petty merchants, tailors and watchmakers, leaseholders and tavernkeepers, out of the former shtetl in search of the means of survival—and about two million of them left for Argentina, South Africa, Canada, and the United States.

The Hasidim, together with their Hasidic masters, followed the market and moved to bigger cities, where they forged new identities combining urbanization and political orthodoxy. Although the same religious symbols were still visible on the shabby synagogue’s Holy Ark, the shtetl no longer made its dwellers think of Jerusalem, particularly since the real Jerusalem had become a viable option, no longer just an unfeasible idea tantalizing the Jewish religious imagination.

The Jews who saw their towns descending into economic collapse were unable to protect themselves, let alone play their part in the daily model of shtetl violence of old. Previously billeted in the shtetls, the troops were moved into barracks, and no one but the undertrained, understaffed, and corrupt police were left in the shtetls to protect the Jews in the revolutionary times of mass violence. The ruined marketplace could not support extended Jewish families, and they either moved to more urbanized areas or turned into the shabbily dressed and strikingly poor Jews deftly portrayed on stage by S. Ansky, caught on camera by Roman Vishniac, and epitomized in Fiddler on the Roof.

In addition to these many economic and political causes, there was also a natural reason for this turn of events.
A NATURAL DISASTER

When things began changing for worse, there came the fire, to paraphrase a traditional Passover song, which swallowed the shtetl. The fire was a calamity that caused more damage than all the enforced integrationist reforms of Nicholas I or the segregationist, antisemitic laws of Alexander III put together. Unlike the government-imposed regulations, a fire in the shtetl left its dwellers with almost no choice and little, if any hope. As a result of the fire, we can suggest the dates for the beginning of the end of the shtetl's golden age. For Shepetovka, Sudilok, Gaisin, Litin, Yampol, Letichev, Bila, and Starokonstantinov, it happened around 1835. In other shtetls and towns, from Khmelnik to Mahnwova to Verbovets, it started several years later, in 1838 or in 1841, while in Chemerovtsi, Ostrog, and Zhvanets, it happened in the late 1840s.

In the aftermath of the fire, once the blaze had destroyed from half to two-thirds of the shtetl, the panicked townsfolk went to great lengths to find the guilty parties and bring them to justice. Sometimes the shtetl dwellers managed to catch a migrant worker, sometimes a runaway criminal. The wealthy merchants naturally suspected their debtors arrivals. The kahal did not hesitate to blame the communal outcasts, offenders of public morals, and informers, just to get rid of them by accusing them of arson.3

Documentary evidence proves that the causes of these fires were natural, and in most cases no arsonists were involved. Summer droughts and dry gusty winds, extremely flammable clay-coated wood, wooden shingles and straw-roofed houses—the very materials of which the shtetl was constructed—in combination with little fire control and the absence of appropriate tools to extinguish fires, brought much more devastation than any alleged scheming outcasts or underpaid hired workers. The fires, “part of the cycle of rural existence” in Russia, were also very much part of the shtetl cycle as well because of its unique semi-rural, semi-urban nature.5

As a rule, the first blaze sparked toing to a violation of elementary precautions. In Bar, somebody left an outdoor stove unattended. In Starokonstantinov, the chimney in one of the Jewish homes did not reach the roof, and the sparks flew straight into the straw stockpiled under the roof. In Bar, firewood piled near the monastery triggered a fire. In Shepetovka, someone in Gershko Kucher’s house had apparently red-hot coals near the heating stove.4 The construction of the shtetl house, with its additions, hangars, dens, attached storage spaces for dry goods, grain, wood, and straw, fostered the rapid spread of an initial blaze.7 For example, it took a fire just forty-five minutes to destroy more than forty houses in Medzhieboz.8

A fire could erupt at any moment, day or night, yet there were several patterns common to Volhynia, Podolia, and Kiev provinces. In most cases the fires started on hot and dry summer days, around evening time, when male Jews left for afternoon and evening prayers. Some fires occurred during the spring or fall holidays, when most Jews were warming food in the oven while they flocked to the Great Synagogue for the long prayer services.9 When the fire spread to the roof of a house, be it in Mahnwova or in Khmelnik, the wind would pick it up from there and then continue, magnifying the disaster and consuming the town.

The police, fire brigade, and even specially deployed regiments could do little against the elements. Water pumps often did not work or produced insufficient water. The firefighters’ horses, which dragged the wagons loaded with huge water barrels, did not want to go through the shtetl streets, which were in flames. Among the townsfolk there was no sense of a common task: people tried to save their own belongings, and the policemen were more often seen trying to save documents from blazing government buildings rather than checking the flames. Besides—and it appears in the primary sources as a profoundly tragicomic moment—the shtetl dwellers flocked to the scene of the fires, where they stood mesmerized by the magnitude of the disaster, watching the devastation as it happened, for example, in Radomysl.10 During his lifetime and in his multiple posthumous publications, the Maggid of Dubno scolded the Jews for reckless selfishness and the absence of a sense of a common task during the fire, but his rebukes could do only so much.11 In addition to many other hindrances, the firefighters could not operate normally under these circumstances. Nor did they have adequate equipment, as was the case in Ostrog, where the administration stood idle and the blaze was not completely extinguished seven days after it had erupted. As a result, 25 percent of the town burned down.12
Unlike in rural fires, human casualties in the shtetls were relatively small, and most people managed to escape. However, three Jewish women and a Pole died in Sokal, two male Jews in Staro Konstantinov, and two in Verbovets. One Jew lost his life and several unidentified people were badly burned in Kremenets, and one member of the Polish clergy and one Jewish woman perished in Khmelnyk. Sometimes neighbors rescued Jews and Jewish children, as for example in Chemerovtsy, where the Pole Gaetski saved six Jewish children.\(^{13}\)

Those who escaped witnessed the total devastation. In Ostrog, 160 houses burned down, resulting in a total of 230,000 silver rubles' damage. In Shepetovka, fire consumed forty-two Jewish houses, leaving 143 men and 150 women without shelter. The blaze destroyed forty Jewish houses, ten Christian ones, and ten various government buildings in Sudilko. In Belogorodka, forty-two houses were destroyed in the blaze and eighty-nine families were left without a roof over their heads.\(^{14}\)

In Yampol, a fire leveled thirty-eight houses, three hangars and fifteen stalls and stores.\(^{15}\) A devastating blaze in Khmelnyk destroyed thirty-six Jewish houses, two prayer houses, a synagogue, a Catholic church, and the building of the town police, resulting in 11,840 rubles in damages to Jewish private property, 3,450 rubles in damage to Jewish public property, and 2,300 rubles in damage to Christian property.\(^{16}\) During a fire in Litin, fifty-three houses and fifty-eight wooden stores burnt down, causing an estimated 122,120 rubles in damage.\(^{17}\)

Since the fires destroyed not only homes but also stores and storages, it was not easy to rebuild the towns after the disasters. In Vladimir-Volynsk, about a thousand families were left without shelter, and several stores with between 1,200 and 4,000 rubles' worth of goods burned to the ground. Jews were enormously overrepresented among those victimized by the calamities: in the same town of Vladimir-Volynsk, 144 Jews and five Russians signed a petition asking for social relief.\(^{18}\) The local administration was powerless, and the neighbors were also of little help. In Belogorodka, only sixteen houses in the town were untouched by the fire. Hence, other shtetl dwellers could not have physically accommodated victims of the fire even if they had wanted to.

The stockpiled goods in shtetl houses—textiles, grain, flour, groceries, wine, vodka, cattle, books—were irretrievably lost. More often than not the shtetl was able to rise from the ashes, yet the price its dwellers had to pay was exorbitant. Lutsk, although not a shtetl, is representative of what it meant for any town to survive a fire: before the fire its marketplace turnover was about 385,850 rubles; after the calamity, about 174,870 rubles.\(^{19}\) A fire in the shtetl, like fires in rural areas, dramatically limited "the ability of communities of entire regions to move into a period of sustained economic development."\(^{20}\)

The government ordered any deployed army battalions and the town administrators into the premises of nearby Catholic monasteries (if they were untouched by the fire), but the Jewish victims of the disaster had nowhere to go. The police reported hundreds of Jewish families left homeless with nothing to sustain themselves. They needed blankets, clothing, and bread. This kind of help took weeks to arrive, and when it did reach the victims it was sorely insufficient. Many Jewish families were allowed to resettle temporarily in nearby villages, but they had to leave these same villages soon, since the government did not want to see Jews resettling in the rural areas.\(^{21}\)

The Sanguszkos and the Grocholskis, the Polish owners of the shtetls Shepetovka and Sudilko, were nowhere close in terms of their wealth and influence to the eighteenth-century Polish magnates, who could defer Jewish taxes and even extend significant financial help to the Jews in their private towns. They provided one korot of grain per Jewish family (about eight to ten pounds) at best, and let Jews cut down trees in the forests they owned to rebuild their houses, but that was the most they could do.\(^{22}\)

The Polish town-owners could no longer provide the help that was needed, whereas the Russian government did not rush to the rescue. The Russian administration was, of course, deeply saddened by the events, yet it was not particularly interested in rebuilding the shtetl economy, the backbone of the vanishing Polish presence in the Russian borderlands. After all, the worse the shtetl situation, the easier it would be to purchase the town from the bankrupt Polish gentry. It was a cynical but not an impractical decision.
suppressed Jewish trade, and pushed thousands of Jews out of the shtetls
to big towns and cities, it was a natural disaster like fire (and famine, in
northern areas of the Pale of Settlement) that forced Jews to resettle.

The government, the military, and the financial administration still
considered these Jews as members of their community of origin years after
they had left, for tax and conscription purposes, registering them as the
Derazhnia or Ostrog townsfolk, even though they had already lived for
years in Berdichev and Kremenets, Zhitomir or Kamenets-Podolsk. The
streets were wider there, sanitary conditions much better, and fire bri-
gades more effective. Christians were also more influential and well-off in
bigger towns, and as a rule, they were more eager to help, as for example
in Kremenets, where local Christian authorities managed to raise 4,400
rubles for eleven Jewish families who had lost their belongings and homes
in a fire.28 But that was already a different story about Jewish encounters
with urban spaces beyond the shtetl.

A CULTURAL ARTIFACT

Once the energetic and entrepreneurial Jews left the shtetl, it turned into
a real village, with small Jewish grocery and kerosene stores surrounding
the empty marketplace, which was filled with puddles and mud. Other
shtetls were purchased by the crown treasury and became district or prov-
icence centers, growing into towns that no longer depended on the market-
place, and with an infrastructure very different from that of the shtetl.
The shtetl lost its Poles and its Jews—and the incoming Christian, pre-
dominantly Ukrainian, population reinforced the shtetl’s rural elements
but reaped no benefit from retaining its urban features.

With a few very rare exceptions, these towns today have almost noth-
ing in common with the shtetls they once were. Only the name of the
shtetl is still a reminder of its past. We now evoke the shtetl names with
reverence and fascination, as the Jews of the shtetls once evoked the
names of the great Hasidic masters. The shtetl irreversibly turned into
a cultural artifact, a magic lantern with faded pictures of the lives of the
Jewish forefathers.

Mendele Moykher Sforim used to say that every Jew had Glupsk in his
veins—Glupsk was for him a quintessential and imaginary shtetl. Indeed,
wherever the Jews arrived, they brought their shtetl with them. And with the shtetl came its idiosyncratic Slavic features, which shaped the Jewish identity for a century to come. In Jaffo, Buenos Aires, or New York, they were convinced that if the laws of a country went against common sense, then doing things illegally would not only make sense but also prove that they were smart. They realized that to survive in austere circumstances, Jews needed to be multitaskers, and that alacrity was the key to success in any economic or social pursuit. They also realized that petty crime was bad but organized crime was better. Even in what one can call civilized countries they retained their Slavic predilection for the forbidden.

The shtetl Jews had lost their inns, but gossiping at the dinner table on any subject became an embedded tradition. The family remained for them one of the highest positive values, while being a bachelor, one of the most negative—to the extent that remarrying became a kind of sport, second only to gossiping. Even if they could neither read nor understand them, Jews knew that Hebrew books, particularly on Kabbalah and Hasidism, had redemptive value, and they kept them on their shelves. Jews could move as far as Johannesburg, yet they still added the summer bles-

ing over dew to their winter prayers, because for them the sky was always over the land of Israel. They readily raised funds for their brethren in the land of Israel—but were in no rush to join them there. And a good drink for them was, naturally, a precious moment of freedom, particularly when it coincided with the spiritual uplift of the Sabbath day.

The shtetl and its Jews did not disappear but entered a new era, a new iron age with anti-Jewish violence, political and practical antisemitism, revolutions, wars, and the total extinction of the Jewish presence in the shtetl. This era firmly associated the shtetl, the _mestechko_, with provincialism and backwardness. The shtetl as we have seen it at its height was no longer there. It vanished, like an East European Atlantis, together with its unique dwellers, their pursuits, their material culture, and their dreams.

We can, and perhaps will, mourn its demise, its descent into oblivion, its complete destruction in the fires of the Holocaust. We will cherish the precious fragments of memories retained by the few survivors, but we can also tell stories of the shtetl’s greatness, of its vibrant life and fascinating verve. We can—and should—explore what the shtetl was in its moment of glory, which is exactly what this book is all about.