GHETTO, SHTETL, OR POLIS: THE EAST EUROPEAN JEWISH COMMUNITY IN THE WORKS OF K.E. FRANZOS, SHOLOM ALEICHEM, AND S.Y. AGNON

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The East European small town has been a favorite subject for writers, historians, sociologists, and even anthropologists. Though there seems to be basic consensus on core culture and relations with the surrounding outside society on whose goodwill it depended, there is nevertheless an enormous range of presentations, interpretations, emphases, and evaluations of those communities' ways of life. Indeed, that range is so wide and includes such diverse presentations that sometimes the same community emerges as an ultimate, perfect society from under the pen of one writer, while another sees it—and well nigh for the same reasons—as the very embodiment of all social evils.

Within this spectrum of approaches and evaluations, three distinct images of the Jewish community can be discerned, images providing guidance for the understanding of this community. These suggestive images can be labeled as ghetto, *shtetl*, and *polis*. The first two, native to Jewish social realities, have been used in reference to Jewish communities. The third one is borrowed, perhaps somewhat daringly, from the ancient Greek world. All three reflect the nature of that community as seen by different writers.

Ghetto is the quarter of a city in which the Jewish population is confined, whether by law, social and economic pressure, or its own choice. The term itself is burdened by the stigma of repression, segregation, poverty, and walled-in stagnation. The ghetto is seen as a social anomaly, a medieval anachronism, culturally stifling and socially obsolete, symbolizing deprivation.

Shtetl, too, is the section of a town to which Jews were restricted. But, in contrast to the ghetto, *shtetl* is a term coined from within, by inhabitants, and is intended to convey affection, vigor, and resilience. It represents a socially and culturally viable, distinctly Jewish collective, evoking some of the fondest associations in Jewish collective memory.

To transplant *polis* to Jewish soil is a risky proposition. The *polis* is a Greek creation. It is a city-state, politically sovereign, making its own laws, socially and economically complex and viable. It is numerically and spacially small, but, within its bounds, free, independent, and unique. Obviously, there are differences between the *polis* and the Jewish community. The latter is not sovereign but politically subject to the law of the country. However, the Jewish community, though abiding by

coercive external law, remains truly loyal to the internal, divine law which regulates every phase of its individual and collective life. Its soul, as it were, is free and independent of alien rule. Moreover, its religious, intellectual, and moral life is steeped in its own sacred tradition; thus, the community is enveloped in an aura of cultural self-sufficiency.

These three communal images found expression in the fictional works of three writers. Their intuitive and artistic work represents a social reality. The present exploration, based on textual analysis, illustration, and comparison, shall touch upon the physical image of the community, its economic aspects, social structure, education, cultural institutions, and, finally, the human types and ideals which characterize it.

The three writers are all Jewish and East European. They are: Karl Emil Franzos, Sholom Aleichem, and Shmuel Yoseph Agnon.

K.E. Franzos (1849-1904) and S.Y. Agnon (1888-1970) were born in Eastern Galicia during the benevolent rule of the Hapsburg Empire. Yet, Franzos, who precedes Agnon by some four decades, is a child of nineteenth century European Enlightenment, an ardent advocate of Jewish emancipation from the past and assimilation into European (specifically German) culture. Agnon, who understood German and spent many years in Germany, is essentially a twentieth century writer—chronologically, artistically, and thematically. Above all, Agnon is steeped in traditional Jewish culture, the mainspring of his literary creativity, which he cherishes with the agonized ambivalence of a rational romantic.

Sholom Aleichem (1858-1916) was born in the Ukraine during the notorious rule of the Romanov tzars. His subject matter is the Pale of Settlement and the Jewish masses who struggled and lived there. Sholom Aleichem is neither reformer nor romantic. He is the greatest of Jewish humorists, observing the brutalizing realities of his people's daily life with bemused detachment. In the crucible of his humor he transmuted their tragedy into a triumphant comedy, where laughter was bitter and tears a gift of God.

All three writers have created fictional communities in which the dramas of their respective worlds are played out. Franzos' Galicia is compressed into his Barnow, Agnon's Galicia is represented by his Szibusz and its environs, and Kasrilevka is Sholom Aleichem's microcosmos of the Russian Pale of Settlement.

Franzos' Barnow is a ghetto: gloomy, dirty, congested, and impoverished, it is a ghetto not only by decree, but also physically, socially, and, above all, spiritually. David Philipson writes:

> The ghetto has been well stigmatized as a "pest-like isolation" .... What a picture the ghetto recalls. The narrow, gloomy streets, with the houses towering high on either side; the sunlight rarely streaming in; situated in the worst slums of the city; shut off by gates barred and bolted every night with chains and locks, none permitted to enter or depart from sundown to sunrise! (Philipson, 1894:21)

This is also the spirit in which Franzos introduces us to his Barnow:

> The segregated ... quarter of the town which sprawls around the unhealthy morasses of the river ... is sad and gloomy, though the sun may shine brilliantly ... the pest-like vapors poison the air, though the valley be submerged in the blossom-scents of spring. This part of town is most densely populated; the ghetto, the Jewish quarter, or as it is called in its own language, the "street." (Franzos, 1877:229-30. My translation.)

Here we have all the components making up a ghetto: segregation, unhealthy location, poor sanitation, population congestion—in short, an eyesore on the majestic panorama of Mother Nature and an inimical intrusion on the eternally changing cycle of cosmic rhythm. In addition to the dissonance and obtrusion which the ghetto's presence introduces, Franzos also injects hints of self-imposed separation, smacking of asocial tendencies, by referring to "its own" language. Thus creating a scenario of repression, isolation, morbidity, and idiosyncracy, Franzos presents us with an ideal stereotype of a ghetto.

But a ghetto is not a ghetto only because it is queer, poor, and segregated. A ghetto is a ghetto primarily because it breeds a specific human type. The conflicts, pressures, limitations, and compensations an imposed or self-willed segregation entail give rise to a peculiar mentality, creating a society distinct in its social, economic, and cultural manifestations. Thus, Louis Wirth writes:

> Isolation has exercised the most significant influence upon the Jew as a physical and social type . . . . The most striking index of the mentality of a community is perhaps to be found in the degree to which the division of labor has been carried, and the number of distinct occupational groupings that the community supports. (Wirth, 1928:75)

The division of labor and the "number of distinct occupational groupings" in Franzos' Barnow reflect a society afflicted with all the evils spawned by a genuine ghetto. Three avenues lay open to youngsters of Barnow: (1) Orthodox scholarship, (2) business, (3) arts and crafts. In a manner typical of the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) movement, Franzos takes up the cudgels against the ghetto's choice of occupations. He blasts the people's preference for, by his standards, alleged scholarship and business, their refusal to engage in those crafts requiring hard physical labor, and their ghetto-nurtured, emaciated bodies. Only a few crafts seem to be popular, with a disastrous oversupply in one field of specialization and scarcity in others:

> Mr. Hirsch Diamant was trained in a middle class trade; he is a tailor. But at the same time there are fifty more tailors in Barnow, and that many cobblers and glaziers, because when a Polish Jew decides to learn a craft he regrettably learns only one out of those three, as these are connected with only very light bodily exertion. (Franzos, 1878:34)

The same deplorable customs are responsible for the collection of odd occupations and caricature-like types earmarking a Jewish ghetto:

> Abraham Veilchenduft . . . had at his disposal not less than four trades—he officiated as a schoolknocker, male nurse, corpse-vigilante, and tailor—and then, oftentimes, in order not to starve, he was forced to take recourse to a fifth one: begging. (Franzos, 1878:34-5)

Abraham Veilchenduft represents the lowest stratum of the social ladder, even by Barnow standards. Above him, though hardly better off materially, are the so-called business people: the peddler, the hawker, and the market woman:

> For one or two *Gulden* they take merchandise on credit such as beads, ribbons, liquor, knives . . . and exchange it for flour, poultry, eggs, fruit, vegetables, especially onions and garlic . . . which they then sell in the market to the middle class of Barnow. (Franzos, 1878:35-6. My translation.)

This primitive barter, backbone of Barnow's economic structure, in addition to the meagre choice of trades and occupations, is responsible for the ghetto's social degradation and economic sterility.

But if those are unproductive aspects of Barnow's economy and easy targets of ridicule, there are those which are outright shameful, branding the ghetto with a stigma of corruption. Two characters whom Franzos christens, tongue-in-cheek, Wonnenblum and Blitzer (Flowerscent and Lightning) represent this aspect. They are, respectively, the *winkelschreiber* and the *faktor*, translatable as community clerk and intermediary between public and officialdom. Legal matters, such as forging documents, changing one's sex at the hour of birth in anticipation of future conscription, spiriting some citizens away and resurrecting others, were the functions of a *winkelschreiber*. What remained for the *faktor* were mere nuances and subtleties attendant on the performance of the former. The *faktor's* duties relied less on knowledge of law than on intuitive insight into the corruptibility of human nature. Those two, and their kind, Franzos maintains, are the product of a ghetto mentality.

But even while he inveighs against "social parasites," a note of apology steals in and his anger shifts from the ghetto to the outside world. It is the hostility of the host government which imposed restrictive rules on Jews, denying them basic civil rights that made such people's talents indispensable to the community's survival:

> And not less does he answer the needs of this Jewish world which, direly pressed, and through pressure intimidated, seeks to achieve its goals through dark ways. (Franzos, 1880:132. My translation)

Franzos' accusation of the ghetto is here mitigated by recognition of a greater evil, not in the ghetto's power to control.

If Franzos is amenable to a measure of understanding of the ghetto's attempt to circumvent the law, he shows neither pity nor tolerance when it comes to ghetto education. His invective knows no restraint when it comes to the philosophy, religious fervour, and cultural values culminating in Barnow's educational system. The concentration on Judaic orthodox studies, completely excluding secular, Western culture, is the scourge of the ghetto, the arch villain responsible for all the evils and hopelessness of its people. Franzos lashes out remorselessly at the institutions—*Cheder, Beit Hamidrash*, and *Yeshivas*—curricula, pedagogical philosophies, and their end results—Talmudic scholars, rabbis, and spiritual leaders, who comprised the ghetto's highest social stratum and, naturally, were the most committed to preserving the status quo. The *cheder* in Franzos' hands turns into a squalid, dingy prison, where children are maltreated, brainwashed, and demoralized. Their teacher, the *Rebbe*, is a sadistic brute, worthy of Dickens' sense of the grotesque. The pedagogical method is confined to birch or ruler.

The curriculum is concentrated on Talmudic studies:

> For example, on what day did Eve pluck the fruit from the tree of knowledge? Sabbath it was not, as on this day it is forbidden to pluck fruit. Or what kind of ladder was it which Jacob saw in his dream? Was it wooden, made of iron, or what? (Franzos, 1905:21. My translation.)

This hairsplitting over trivialities, the futility of speculation, and the devious mentality which such subtleties of logic have begotten are a recurrent subject of Franzos' denunciations.

Beit Hamidrash, the centre of Jewish adult studies and communal prayer, is chosen by Franzos as a symbol of a culture gone to seed. Physical squalor is matched by spiritual barrenness. It holds back the ghetto spirit from contact with light, fanatically clinging to the *"Schmutzige Folianten"* (dirty pages) of the Talmud. German, the language of enlightenment and human redemption, the language in which Schiller and Goethe have laid down foundations for universal culture and brotherly amity, is forbidden in the ghetto on pain of ostracism (*cherem*). Franzos regales the reader with many examples of rebellious souls who defied the ghetto's taboos, and in their quest for true wisdom (*Deutsche Weisheit*) sought German books in monasteries or homes of proclaimed heretics and other means of heroic subterfuge. Schiller, particularly, becomes a source of wisdom and inspiration comparable in its infallibility to the Holy Writ in the eyes of Franzos' ghetto Jew.

In sum, the ghetto is in the deathly grip of a defunct tradition. The people's minds are twisted by the Talmud, their bodies deformed by lack of physical labor, their spirit famished. Franzos calls for an abolition of ghetto walls by discarding the old tradition—Torah, Kaftan, and a separate language—and, short of conversion to Christianity, he urges an adaptation to and merging with the progressive *Deutsche Weisheit*.

The picture changes drastically once we leave Barnow and enter Kasrilevka. Kasrilevka is a tiny hamlet in the Russian Pale of Settlement, confined and repressed by the outside world even more brutally than is Barnow. Sholom Aleichem introduces us to his domain:

> Stuck away in a corner of the world, isolated from the surrounding country, the town stands, orphaned, dreaming, bewitched, immersed in itself and remote from the noise and bustle, the confusion and tumult and greed . . . . Shall I call it a beautiful town? From a distance it looks—how shall I say?—like a loaf of bread thickly studded with poppy seed. (Aleichem, 1946:1-5)

Thus, the ghetto is transformed into a *shtetl*. What distinguishes the two is that "a ghetto is a ghetto because the outside world sees it this way, meant it to be this way: secluded, ostracized, shunned, shut in" (Wirth, 1928). The *shtetl*'s personality, on the other hand, is determined by its people, by their way of looking at it. "My *shtetl*," says Herzog and Zborowski, "is the people who live in it." It is the spirit which makes a *shtetl* what it is, not the locality, the houses, the streets: its physical side is of marginal importance. The house is a temporary dwelling, inhabited for a brief moment of history. Herzog and Zborowski speculate that this attitude may have been the result of Jewish religious teachings that only the mind and spirit endure, that "life is a hallway to heaven," and that therefore material conditions should be taken with philosophical aloofness. This aloofness is translated by Sholom Aleichem into the idiom of a humble people. Their town's personality, determined by the analogy to a loaf of bread, brings associations of congenial domesticity, organic cohesion, affection, and basic integrity, whatever else may follow.

What follows is a veritable slum. "No, the Kasrilevkites have never heard of canals or water works or electricity or other such luxuries" (Aleichem, 1946:6). Here Sholom Aleichem speaks of the same lack of hygiene which concerns Franzos. But, instead of patronizing the *shtetl* with "dene grossere Sauberkeit nicht schaden konnte" (whose greater cleanness could not hurt them), Sholom Aleichem transfers the whole issue *sub specie aeternitatis*: "But what does it matter? Everywhere people

die the same death, and they are placed in the same earth, and are beaten down with the same spades'' (Aleichem, 1946:7). Franzos' ghetto dwellers acquire in Sholom Aleichem's hands a philosophical detachment and moral stamina which help them transcend degrading reality. This does not mean that the crude facts are lost on him. On the contrary! He is aware of them as poignantly as Franzos, but, instead of castigating the people, he joins them in their artless stratagems to outwit and humanize the brutality of their lives. So, for example, the density of the *shtetl* and its planning, or, rather, lack of it, is portrayed in the idiom of the people's mentality:

> Some of the houses are built on the slope of the hill, and the rest are huddled together at the base, one on top of the other, like the gravestones in an ancient cemetery. There are no streets to speak of because the houses are not built according to any plan, and besides, where is there room for such a thing? Why should there be vacant space when you can build something on it? It is written that the earth is to be inhabited, not merely gazed at. Yet, don't be upset. There are some streets—big streets, little streets, back streets and alleys. What if they happen to twist and turn uphill and downhill and suddenly end up in a house or a cellar or just a hole in the ground? (Aleichem, 1946:5)

A philosophy of poverty lurks behind the elaborate rationalization. The town is overcrowded, not because people are insensitive to the niceties of gracious living, as Franzos would have it in his Barnow ghetto, but simply because there is no room to spare, officialdom usually being loath to grant new land for the community's growing needs. Sholom Aleichem's description of congestion may be humorous on the surface; underneath, there is a deep undercurrent of bitterness and despair. The image of a cemetery, injected into the description of an overpopulated town, abruptly changes the train of association from abundance of life and natural growth—established by the analogy of a loaf of bread studded with poppy seed—to that of lurking death. The macabre image of ''houses . . . huddled together . . . like the gravestones in an ancient cemetery,'' establishes Sholom Aleichem's humor: it is gallows humor. But the humor is not directed at the people: it is their destiny, which they only impersonate by playing the fantastic roles apportioned to them, the ultimate target of Sholom Aleichem's arrows of glee. ''What if they (the streets and alleys) happen . . . to end up in . . . a hole in the ground?'' asks a typical Kasrilevkite with a straight face. The rhetorical question is a defiant acceptance of futility. The tongue-in-cheek argument that not every avenue must necessarily lead somewhere is a facetious comment on the absurdity of man's (or just a Kasrilevkite's) tragedy. The existential pathos is experienced in Kasrilevka as poignantly as it was in Copenhagen, Paris, or Prague, but the posture, instead of tragic *Angst*, is that of an antiheroic, comical bewilderment.

For a living the Kasrilevkite did whatever was available which, roughly speaking, coincided with the labor market of Barnow: crafts, business, and scholarship. But the avoidance of those crafts connected with hard physical labor did not apply here. As in Barnow, tailors and cobblers abounded; not because of congenital laziness, but simply because the choice was limited by restrictions, exclusions from the guilds, prohibitions, and other assorted distinctions. Tevye's son-in-law, Mottie the tailor, is a solid instance of the *shtetl's* work ethic and, for all we know, might have been one of the legion of tailors who filled America's sweat shops on his arrival in the New World with wife, children, and father-in-law. Tevye, too, before the ''great miracle'' of his life helped him move up the social ladder and become a self-employed

milkman, loaded logs and carted them to the railroad station in Boiberik, from dawn till dusk, for a ruble a day. An anomaly in Barnow, it is the rule in Kasrilevka.

Besides the tailors and cobblers, Kasrilevka was blessed with the same motley array of mock professions which typified Barnow. We have Berl the Red who made a living by fermenting wine for the Sabbath ("Did I say wine? And did I say a living? May the enemies of Israel drink such wine and make such a living." [Aleichem, 1946:4]), a vinegar maker, a *matzo* baker, and a whole line of hawkers and peddlers, each specializing in a different variety of consumer goods, be it horseradish, parsley, or in Sholom Aleichem's words, "other necessities of life."

Funny and pathetic as this "business class" of Kasrilevka may be, its financial dimensions—a parody of economic thinking—do not diminish the human image. In Franzos' ghetto, poverty corroded the spirit; in Kasrilevka, to borrow Maurice Samuel's words, "it (poverty) was primarily a great calling, an art and a career . . . . A true Kasriel of Kasrilevky meets his poverty like a man and a hero" (Samuel, 1943:24-5). It is in this sense that Kasrilevkites differ from Barnovites, and it is this difference that makes Kasrilevka a lovable, if quaint, *shtetl*.

To be sure, Kasrilevka had its portion of social misfits and delinquents: the unproductive, the dishonest, the corrupt, the Blitzers and Wonnenblums of Barnow. But in Kasrilevka man's corruptibility is not measured by starry-eyed idealists, but by a sympathetic insight into a man's soul and a Jew's peculiar predicament.

One example of social maladjustment is Menachem Mendl, *Luftmensch* of Kasrilevka. Menachem Mendl is fascinated with the world of commerce. The mystery of the stock market, the glitter of the big city, the glory of success which beckons behind speculation bewitch him. Menachem Mendl is unproductive and, strictly speaking, something of a social parasite. He wastes his wife's dowry, neglects his family, gambles on the stock market with borrowed capital, and, finally, takes off to America with vague promises to his wife and children of preparing an earthly paradise for them there. Samuel diagnoses Menachem Mendl as a sick man who has lost "the tactile sense by being kept too long from earth and labor" (p. 256). The diagnosis is practically identical with that of the ghetto Wonnenblums and Blitzers, conceived by Sholom Aleichem as an errant, almost quixotic figure, misled by his own illusions and an unshakeable faith in a benevolent providence. Above all, he is a comical figure, with a touch of tragic greatness—greatness of sheer endurance, affirmation of life's promise, innocence unmarred by contact with corruption, and a heroic loyalty to a dream. Thus, a social failure who in Franzos' ghetto would have earned profound disdain and blustering denunciation is rehabilitated by Sholom Aleichem into a lovable schlemiel, an incurable optimist, and an apotheosis of Jewish resilience.

In the same way, traditional learning and its affiliated institutions, anathemas of the ghetto, turn into a mainspring of spiritual and cultural life in Kasrilevka. True, the *cheder* here is as far removed from the concepts of progressive child psychology and the teachings of Froebel and Pestalozzi as it was in Barnow. It was the same dirty, dingy room, crowded, unventilated, more often than not serving the *Rebbe* and his family as living quarters, besides being an educational academy. Here, too, pedagogical principles were based on the children's sedentary endurance, their phenomenal memory, and the remedial effects of the rod. The hero of *The Penknife* tells us:

> I had only just begun the study of Talmud with Motte, the Death-Angel. The text was: "An ox having gored a cow"—and the first deduction I learned to make was that if an ox gored a cow, I had to get slapped.

Yet, in contrast to ghetto *cheder* children, about whom Franzos tells us that "nobody was never killed in the *cheder* but many a young life must have been slowly stifled by the abominable maltreatment of crude fanatics" (Franzos, 1905:53-5), the children of Kasrilevka's *cheder* emerged particularly stable, emotionally and morally responsible, and intellectually, surprisingly, outstanding. Mottie, son of Peisi the cantor, child of sorrow who gladdened the hearts of those around him, is only one out of the many little Kasrilevkites whom the *cheder* not only did not damage, but probably qualified for many brilliant careers in the world of letters, science, art, and politics which *cheder* children of yesterday took by storm at the first sign—or was it a mirage?—of tolerance. "Look at them!" exclaims Tevye:

> What do they think they're up to? Where will it get them? . . . Sons of shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, God help us! They leave their homes, they sneak off to Yehupetz, to Odessa; they live in garrets, divide a herring between ten of them, and smell a piece of meat once in six months. Halleluiah! We're students! (Samuel, 1943:170-1)

The synagogue and the house of study—in Barnow, centers of regressive forces, maiming and stunting the Jewish mind—become foci of inspiration and consolation to Kasrilevkites. Who better than Tevye symbolizes the fact that preservation of an ages-hallowed tradition and way of life sustained and nurtured a human distinguished by his humaneness, vitality, and indomitable spirit? Tevye, ingeniously quoting and misquoting the Holy Books to suit his arguments, making oblique references to Talmudic sayings, snatches of prayers, Biblical stories, and rabbinical commentaries to prove a point, commenting on a problem, or refuting a maxim; Tevye, both individualist and traditionalist, universal Everyman and ideal Jew, drawing strength from a prayer, refreshment from the "little letters," and a sense of dignity from the weekly portion of the Torah—Tevye, summoning enough moral pluck to challenge his Maker on His own ground, was moulded and nurtured on those same "*schmutzige Folianten*" which Franzos summarily dismisses and holds responsible for the ghetto's degradation.

Moreover, those same "dirty pages" of the Talmud were powerful agents of democratization and equality. Every pauper in Kasrilevka could claim his portion of the Torah and feel equal to the richest in synagogue or house of learning. Learning was interchangeable with piety, moral rectitude, social distinction, and public authority. All values were affected by this cardinal principle, that learning is tantamount to goodness and ignorance incompatible with the idea of man. "Let it be understood," says Tevye in his inimitable way:

> that the first thing I look for in a man is a little learning. I say that an ignoramus is worse than a hooligan . . . . As long as you can read the little letters, and know what's doing between the covers of a book, you are my kind. If, on top of that, you happen to be a rich man, I consider it a minor defect. (Samuel, 1943:169)

Of the three writers discussed, it was Agnon who put into clear-cut relief those aspects of the Jewish community by which it can claim resemblance to a *polis*. Szibusz and other towns of Eastern Galicia enjoy a wide ranging autonomy: they regulate their own social and educational needs, are responsible for their sick and poor, and have a measure of juridical freedom. Above all, however, Agnon's Jewish town is imbued with the consciousness of common history, religious tradition, values, sense of identity, and world view which make it spiritually independent and

autarchic. Also, a sense of common destiny, organic bonds of kinship, and separation from the outside world of gentiles, or goyim, alias *barbaroi*, characterizes the Jewish community. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" asks a stranger of Reb Yudel, hero of the novel *Bridal Canopy*. "Of course you did," is the unhesitating answer, "since all the souls of Israel were present at Mount Sinai when the Torah was given us; so now that our two souls meet again you recognize me" (Agnon, 1967:10). The bonds go deep, beyond temporal and spacial limits. In-group intimacy lies in the mythopoetical consciousness of the people.

A community whose sense of cohesion stems from such deep roots has evolved an image of itself hardly recognizable either in Barnow or in Kasrilevka. The image is dominated by an aura of spirituality and cultural intensity emanating from the many institutes of learning: "And here I must digress to talk about the various houses of prayer—*Batei Midrashot, shtiblech, shilechlech, kloisen,* and *kleislech*—that existed in our town." (Agnon, 1968:191)

The criterion of a community's well-being is in the profusion of its cultural institutions; its sense of authenticity is drawn from a commitment to traditional ways and values. The sanctifying effect of learning is so pervasive that it permeates the simplest and the lowest; thus, even wood-hewers and water-drawers—allegorical figures of ignorance and crudity in Jewish lore—"had their hearts filled with the teachings of the Torah." Conversely, the disintegration of a community is measured by both the falling away from cherished ways and the ruins of its synagogues:

> The old *Beit Midrash* was totally changed. The bookcases, once full, had disappeared, and nothing was left but six or seven shelves. Some of the long, heavy benches, on which the elders once sat, were empty .... The books that were lost will never be restored .... The ceiling and the walls were altered too. That ceiling, once black with soot, was now covered with whitewash, and those walls, which were worn and rubbed, were covered with plaster .... But the soot had come from the smoke of our fathers' candles, which lighted the Torah for their study, and those walls, so long as they were worn, showed the mark of every man who had sat there .... Now the plastered walls look as if no one had ever sat there. (Agnon, 1968:9-10)

Poverty exists in Szibusz as it does in Barnow or Kasrilevka, but is neither demoralizing nor a catalyst to human ingenuity and heroism. Poverty in idyllic Szibusz is a choice, a voluntary renouncement of earthly vanities: "And the city is filled with synagogues and Houses of Study, and renowned men are there who study Torah in dire poverty and distress and solitude and loving-kindness." (Agnon, 1967:97) Poverty is an evil only if it interferes with cherished forms of life and sweeps away emblems and symbols, part of the communal culture:

> Neither the Scroll the cantor was holding nor the Scroll from which the final portion was to be read was adorned with crown or other embellishments, for the precious sacred ornaments, the glory of the Torah, made of pure silver by skilled craftsmen, had been taken by the government during the war to buy guns and ammunition, and the Torah was left without its ornaments. The Trees of Life, the staves on which the Scroll is rolled, protruded sadly, their faded color wringing one's heart. (Agnon, 1968:8)

Another important role the synagogue fulfills is, as in Kasrilevka, that of social leveler. In the synagogue, in the house of study, in the battle of wits around a Talmudic problem all men are equal. Reb Yudel, the semilegendary pauper, whose

"dwelling was underground in a damp, narrow, gloomy cellar lacking seat upon which to sit," studies the Torah assiduously, "to fashion a seat for the Divine Presence, and to no other end whatsoever" (Agnon, 1967:1). It is neither presumptuous nor fantastic on the part of a poor *chassid* to feel responsible for the Almighty's needs, because allegory is reality, reality illusion, and man's faith the most powerful asset. His role in the community is as vital as that of the rich and influential.

Agnon's Eastern Galicia, unlike Franzos' Galicia or Sholom Aleichem's Pale of the Settlement, is presented as a region brimming with vigorous communities, rich in past history and prosperous in the present. Brod, "a great city and mother in Israel" is presented as a thriving metropolis. Its economic status is a far cry from Barnow's "especially onions and garlic," or Kasrilevka's "parsley, horseradish, and other necessities of life." Brod has a complex and variegated social structure. Merchants, bankers, intellectuals, professionals, and industrialists abound. The various communities keep strong ties with each other and with the large centers of Austria and Germany, as frequent references to Vienna, Leiptzig, and Lemberg indicate. Regional fairs (like the oft-mentioned Laskovitch fair), festivals, marriages, and family reunions provided occasions for traveling, visiting, and scholarly encounters and exchanges.

On the inside, cultural activities did not stop at the synagogue or house of learning. A system of self-rule had been evolved which, though obviously not patterned on the democratic institutions of Athens, functioned successfully and no less justly than in the Greek *polis*. Self-rule, as already stated, was confined to community internal affairs. At the head of the community stood the rabbi. His authority was moral and religious. He, in turn, was elected to his office by community leaders: the *parnassim*, or councilmen. The *parnassim* of Agnon's world are well-to-do, but also community worthies and scholars. Like some ancient patriarchs, they command the people's respect, but also carry the burden of administering the many institutions. They are responsible for finding funds to educate the poor, a dowry for an orphan, *matzos* for a widow, for the sick, the destitute, the overnight guest, and the "eating days" of the Talmudic scholars. One example of a typical *parnas* and his household is Rabbi Ephraim, the rich merchant and employer of half the town:

> When his father-in-law died Reb Ephraim enlarged his business, so that there was never a fair in Podolia in which you would not find his agents selling their strings of corals . . . . His fathers before him strung together letters in the Torah and he strung together coral beads and sold them . . . . Half the town made its living at the hands of Reb Ephraim, and he himself used to live just like one of the townsfolk, saving that he enlarged his household through practising hospitality . . . . Even supposing that he lacked erudition and acuity, he still remained possessed of the qualities of charity, righteousness and hospitality . . . . Reb Yudel went along with Reb Ephraim's folk to a big house. There they entered a room full of silverware and copper basins and tin dishes and many books . . . a big table in the middle and the master of the house standing praying the Afternoon Prayers . . . . Upon ending his prayers he ran to greet his guest with joy, and said, Blest is he who comes. (Agnon, 1967:125-6)

Though the *parnassim* held responsibility for, and contributed generously to, all community needs, essentially it was the community itself that supported its needs, through taxation and philanthropy. As had been noted above, hospitality and charity were cherished virtues, cultivated and rewarded by all. By the same token, stinginess

was a detested vice: "Miserly relatives are worse than wild beasts," says Nuta the waggoner.

Even in the sphere of art, Agnon's Galicia achieved its mark of distinction. Though not producing a Phidias, it did produce many an anonymous artist who poured his genius into holy vessels, candelabras, *menorahs*, which embellished the synagogues and households and on holidays and Sabbaths "gladden the eye in their beauty and shine like the moon and stars and brighten the eyes of Israel in their prayers." (Agnon, 1966a:341. My translation.)

By the same token, corruption of aesthetic taste is one symptom of decline. In his novel *A Simple Story*, Agnon tells us that the remodeled synagogue looked more like a railway station than a house of prayer. When the external appearance of a synagogue becomes a tourist attraction, an architectural curiosity, it is a sign that its true function is defunct.

Another acid test of a community's spiritual soundness is the degree of prestige it accords the traditional learning and ways of life:

> In those days the Torah was despoiled of her honor, and the youth of Israel were leaving their books and retreating to the way-of-the-world. The smart ones were going to professional schools and acquiring there a wisdom which provides for its owners, and the less smart engaged in business transactions. There was a third category . . . some of those would while away their days in Zionism and some in Socialism . . . . The first were looked upon with amusement, the latter with fear. (Agnon, 1966b:65. My translation.)

The old pieties no longer hold true. New ambitions replace old, selfless dedication. The young generation is not in quest of spiritual perfection but of practical goals and pragmatic, short-sighted solutions. In modern Szibusz, assimilation and eager adaptation to foreign ways is all-pervasive. Whereas in Franzos' ghetto familiarity with German poetry, particularly Schiller, was a sign of progress and a promise of redemption from an otherwise hopeless state of fall, the same accomplishment in Agnon's Jewish *polis* is a ridiculous affectation, unworthy of the trustees of an old and rich culture:

> It was a custom in this generation, that when a lad and his lass came together . . . they would open up a poem by Schiller, such as *The Bell* or *The Lad at the Lake*. She recites one line and he answers in another, and before they know it the time passes by and the heart feels lighter. (Agnon, 1966a:323. My translation.)

The pathetic pretense is a cover for rootlessness and cultural disorientation.

The strength of the Jewish *polis* was in adherence to its unique culture. With the onset of new ideals and ideas—Zionism, socialism, nihilism, and assimilationism—the fabric of communal life slowly eroded. The old vigor gradually dissipated, eventually degenerating into flaccid conformism, degrading imitation, and final collapse. Hershl Horovitz, hero of *Simple Story*, crowing like a cock in a fit of madness during the middle of a synagogue service, symbolizes this collapse. A world of certainty was replaced by a world of opportunity. As Agnon says about a religious activist: "His grandfather wrote about Torah, his father wrote about the love of Torah, and he wrote about love." Thus falls the curtain on Agnon's Jewish *polis*.

What is the social reality of the East European Jewish community? Which of the three depictions is accurate? It would be misleading to speak of the objective

community on one hand, and subjective interpretation on the other. Each of the writers was deeply involved in his subject matter, his approach colored by his experiences, background, and philosophy, which, in turn, was itself affected by the community he described. It can be said that the Jewish community was all three in one, depending on the perspective from which one viewed it.

Franzos viewed it from the European Enlightenment perspective, finding Judaism emancipated and assimilating. His biographical circumstances determined this. But it would be mistaken to see his approach merely as biographical coincidence. Indeed, his approach represents a trend of thinking widespread in central and Eastern Europe following Enlightenment and Emancipation. His approach was that of many European Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was ultimately proven false to those encountering the fierce wave of anti-Semitism, first in Eastern Europe and then by Nazism. Still, for many, it was a solution. They left their communities and were absorbed by the surrounding culture. Indeed, this trend continues; perhaps its most intensive phase is taking place under our very eyes, in these United States.

Sholom Aleichem came from the people and wrote for them. Traditional education, combined with early hardships and privations, blended into a peculiarity: a Jewish writer of the masses. He sings their songs (or dirges), dreams their dreams (or nightmares), and laughs their laughter—less a diversion than a means of survival and defiance. Sholom Aleichem offered no solutions to the "Jewish problem," as Franzos did. Indeed, the problem seemed to be not Jewish, but rather divine, or perhaps gentile. Sholom Aleichem's Jews enjoy being Jews "as if it were a gift, a marvel, an unending theme of wonder and delight," writes Alfred Kazin. This delight in one's identity is the key to the *shtetl*. Without it, looked at with a cold outsider's eye, Kasrilevka might well have become another Barnow. Were it not for the love and humor of Sholom Aleichem, its quaintness might have dissolved into grotesqueness, the divine comedy transmuted into cruel caricature. Jewish tradition and common historical memory provide every pauper of Kasrilevka with a share in ritual, reaffirming his allegiance and regenerating his sense of personal and communal worth, the brick and mortar of the *shtetl*.

Sholom Aleichem's portrait of the *shtetl* reflects the way in which the bulk of ordinary Jews in Jewish communities conceived and experienced it. The sense of Jewish identity and the warmth of Jewish relations are dominant characteristics of this self-awareness. The *shtetl* existed that way for decades, perhaps centuries, despite outward hostility. Eventually it collapsed, internal disruption caused by emancipation and external forces of physical extermination. This does not diminish the period's significance, a thriving and flourishing era. Moreover, faint echoes of Sholom Aleichem's *shtetl* still can be detected in occasional Yiddish expressions surviving in Jewish communities of America and other Western countries.

Agnon's portrayal of the Jewish community is the antithesis of Franzos', and its points of contact with Sholom Aleichem are incidental. Though the *polis* is not alien to the *shtetl*, its emphasis and central philosophy, prime movers behind each, differ substantially.

Despite early contact with both Western enlightenment and Yiddish culture, Agnon represents the mainstream of Jewish heritage: the pietistic way of life, traditional learning, and Jewish folkloric imagination. Agnon's Jewish community, therefore, lives essentially aloof from its surrounding world. Self-sufficient, viable, and independent, it has a clear sense of direction. In this way it can be likened to a

polis, even surpassing the Greek prototype. For, in some ways, Agnon's community is closer to a city of God, a *Civitas Dei*, than to the Greek secular *polis*. The moral excellence and spiritual intensity, the basis of its existence, elevate it to an idea to be pursued, rather than a reality actually lived. Nevertheless, the closest approximation to this idea are the towns of Galicia of Reb Yudel's days, the Szibusz before the "guest's" belated return, and the stories and folktales from the golden past. This does not mean that the Jewish divinely inspired *polis* is impervious to decline and disintegration. Indeed, Agnon is acutely aware of this historic transition and masterfully depicts it in his various writings. A sense of grief and guilt hovers over the present, a constant reminder of a great loss.

This does not mean that the *Civitas Dei* is doomed. The Jewish *polis* can be reborn through Zionism, through a political as well as cultural and spiritual renaissance. Despite occasional irony addressed at the Zionist activities of Galicia, Agnon is wholly committed to Zionism. Testimony can be found in his writings. A symbolic example is the episode of the loss and retrieval of the key to the old *Beit Hamidrash* in his novel, *A Guest for the Night*. The loss of the key symbolizes the decline of the Galician community, while the retrieval takes place in Israel, upon the "guest's" return to the Holy Land. The "guest," in fact, is Agnon himself who actually made the transition and settled in Israel.

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