

## REMEMBERING THE SHTETL

510:260 (History) / 563:260 (Jewish Studies)

### PROVISIONAL SYLLABUS

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#### Course description

This course examines the history of how Jews have documented and recalled life in the *shtetlekh*, or small towns, of Eastern Europe, once home to the majority of the world's Jewish population. The course both provides students with historical and cultural background on the *shtetl* and traces the dynamics of its remembrance from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Students will examine a wide range of works on the shtetl, including fiction, ethnography, memoir, art, tourism, photography, and film. (All readings are in English, all films have English subtitles.)

#### Learning goals

Students will

- become acquainted with the recent history of Jewish life in small towns (*shtetlekh*) in Eastern Europe, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the Holocaust.
- become acquainted with the range of efforts to represent shtetl life, undertaken from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present.
- understand how the actualities of shtetl life are interrelated with efforts to remember, represent, or imagine it, and understand how these efforts vary in response to the agendas of those who undertake them.

#### Requirements

1. **Class attendance, preparedness, and participation:** Regular attendance of class and active participation in class discussion is required, including individual preparation to lead discussion of readings or other assignments. Students are expected to come to class on time, having prepared the reading or reserve screening due that day, with comments, questions, etc., regarding the assigned material; to respect the protocols of classroom conduct (e.g., turning off cell phones, not eating during class, avoiding distracting chatter); to check their email regularly for class announcements (e.g., changes in assignments); and to turn in written work on the dates due. Students may not use their laptops during class without permission from the instructor. Students with three unexcused absences will have their course grade reduced by one full grade (e.g., from A to B). Students with six or more unexcused absences will receive an F for the course. Students should be prepared to provide the instructor with documentation of excusable absences, such as family emergencies, illness, religious observance; these must be submitted by the due date for the final exam. Students who are unable to attend class regularly for some pressing reason must notify their dean as well as the instructor.
2. **Written assignments:**
  - Guided analyses: Short essays of 2-3 double-spaced pages (ca. 500-700 words) each, in which students write an analysis of a text, film, or other work assigned for class

according to assigned guidelines. Guided response papers are due the day that the work in question is to be discussed and may not be turned in afterwards without penalty, unless students have an acceptable excuse, such as illness or family emergency. Guidelines for guided analyses will be distributed at least one week before they are due and will be posted on the course sakai site. Students are required to turn in four guided response papers over the course of the semester, as indicated on the class schedule below.

- **Midterm and final examinations:** These examinations consist of one or more essay questions.

All written assignments must be submitted in “hard copy” (i.e., a paper print-out) by the date due. Texts should be double-spaced and stapled together, and with the student’s name and page number on the header of all pages, if possible. Email submissions of class assignments will not be accepted without advance permission from the instructor, and then only in extraordinary cases (such as illness).

All written work that a student submits must be his/her own independent effort. Students must cite properly all outside sources consulted in preparing written assignments. Students should review the university policy on Academic Integrity by visiting the website: <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/integrity.shtml> Failure to comply with this policy can result in failure of the course.

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

### **Class schedule**

**NOTE:** This schedule is subject to change. It is the students’ responsibility to check with the instructor if they miss a class regarding any changes in assignments.

**Key to readings:** All readings are available on the course’s sakai website except for the following titles, which will be on reserve in Alexander Library or can be purchased (available at Rutgers University bookstore):

- Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, eds., From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) **ISBN: 9780253211873**
- Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) **ISBN: 9780520249615**

### **Sessions 1&2] Introduction: Historical and cultural background**

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

### **3&4] Memoir and “classic” Yiddish literature on the shtetl**

“My Town,” in Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl: The Memoirs of Yekhezkhel

Kotik, ed. David Assaf (Wayne State University Press, 2002), 109-158.  
Sholem Aleichem, "The Great Panic of the Little People"

**5&6] Two rival shtetl novellas: Asch vs. Weissenberg**

Sholem Asch, "The Little Town"

I.M. Weissenberg, "A Shtetl"

→ Guided response paper #1 (on the two novellas) due

**7&8] Shtetl ethnography**

Hirsz Abramowicz, "A Lithuanian Shtetl"

"Esther" and "G.W." from Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in

Poland before the Holocaust, ed. Jeffrey Shandler (Yale University Press, 2002)

**9] The Shtetl at a distance: from West to East**

Joseph Roth, "The Jewish Shtetl"

**10-12] The shtetl in interwar Yiddish films**

In-class screening: East and West

In-class screening: The Light Ahead

J. Hoberman, Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds (New York:

Schocken, 1991), 59-71, 299-313.

→ Guided response paper #2 (on the two films) due.

**13] The Shtetl at a distance: from New Worlds to the Old World**

Dvora Baron, "In the Beginning"

Fradl Shtok, "Winter Berries," "The Archbishop"

**14] Interwar immigrant travel back to the shtetl**

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

**15] Midterm**

**[SPRING BREAK]**

**16] Postwar remembrance of the shtetl: Memorial books**

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

**17] Postwar ethnography of the shtetl**

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

**18] Postwar shtetl fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer**

"Gimpel the Fool," "The Little Shoemakers," "The Last Demon"

**19&20] Shtetl memory art and narrative: Mayer Kirshenblatt**

Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

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

**21] Shtetl photography remembered**

Jeffrey Shandler, "Szcuczyn: A Shtetl Through a Photographer's Eye," in Louis D. Levine, ed: Lives Remembered: A Shtetl Through a Photographer's Eye, (New York: Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2002), 19-27.

View photos of Szcuczyn at <http://www.szcuczyn.com/kaplan.htm>

**22&23] Re-creating the shtetl in postwar cinema**

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

**24&25] Postwar return journeys to the shtetl**

In-class screening: Marian Marzynski, Shtetl

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

**26] Yaffa Eliach and the case of Eyshishki**

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

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

**27&28] The shtetl in recent literature**

Chava Rosenfarb, Bociany (excerpt)

Melvin Jules Bukiet, "The Apprentice"

→ Guided response paper #4 (on *Bociany* and "The Apprentice") due.