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 20th 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 19th century until the Holocaust.
• become acquainted with the range of efforts to represent shtetl life, undertaken from the turn of the 20th 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):


Sessions 1&2 Introduction: Historical and cultural background

3&4 Memoir and “classic” Yiddish literature on the shtetl
“My Town,” in Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl: The Memoirs of Yekhezkel
Shandler/Remembering the Shtetl


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
→ 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

17] Postwar ethnography of the shtetl

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

21] **Shtetl photography remembered**  
View photos of Szczuczyn at [http://www.szczuczyn.com/kaplan.htm](http://www.szczuczyn.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*  

26] **Yaffa Eliach and the case of Eyshishki**  
website: [http://www.shtetlfoundation.org](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.