

Shtetl Facts

Of course, certain essential Jewish features were recurrent throughout Eastern Europe. Most important, there was the nuclear religion and its overlay of habits, customs, and traditions, completely ruling the lives of Jews as individuals and as a collective— or collectives. There was the community structure, socializing, protecting, domineering, with its own languages: Yiddish, mainly, but not for only, secular life, Hebrew, mainly for religion and for certain other forms of communication, as in business. And there was the omnipresent Christian world, with its laws, pressures, hostility, friendliness, its commercial and economic relations, and its myriad other energies that were part of an intricate cultural enmeshing with Jews.

But despite the features common to all Eastern European Jews, no two shtetls were truly alike. The personal and public dynamics, the interrelations with non-Jews, the climate, the economics, the politics, even the dialect of Yiddish and the pronunciation of Hebrew varied sufficiently to form sharp differences, often contradictions – a crazy quilt through time and space. For we are speaking of an enormous geographic area, and we are speaking of centuries of Jewish history.

Source: Shtetl, Joachim Neugroschel

Yiddish Word Finder

Melamed	מלמד	teacher
Cheder	חדר	classroom
Shadchen	שדכן	matchmaker
Ziveg	זיווג	a match for a daughter
Badchan	בדחן	the 'official' shtetl jester

Shtetl Superstitions

- In a mourner's home the mirrors had to be covered with black cloth. If one's reflection appeared in the mirror the parting soul might take the person with it.
- To avert an evil eye, *ayn-hora*, one should spit three times and say each time, "Tfu, Tfu, Tfu Kaayn ayne-hora."
- An itching palm meant you would be counting a lot of money.
- Bread falling to the floor butter-side down meant that failure awaited you.
- Counting people was not advisable. If you must, proceed to count negatively: not one, not two, not three, etc.
- To cheat the evil spirits a sick child would be given a second name. The Angel of Death, arriving with a summons for, say Moishela, would get confused if he did not find Moishela at home, but instead found Avroomele.
- One should never refuse charity to a beggar because he might be Eliyahu Hanavi in disguise, or one of the *lamedvavnicks*, the thirty-six just men on whom the existence of the world depends.