Maintaining Borders, Crossing Borders: Social Relationships in the Shtetl

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BACKWARD AND FORWARD

In the twenty-first century scholars debate a phenomenon that represented the absolute antithesis of postmodernity. 'Represented' because, though lasting for centuries, it was made abruptly extinct in the mid-twentieth century and is swiftly escaping living memory. Why does one study shtetl communities today?[1] As Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog wrote in their Preface to *Life Is with People*, 'It is a culture that is not remote. On the contrary, it is one with which many have had direct or indirect contact, through its representatives or their descendants.'[2] One might even venture to guess that the majority of those researching the topic have had just such contact, in Jewish as well as non-Jewish families. Increasingly there is a desire to return to one's memories or roots; individuals scattered over various continents are visiting places that were home for themselves or close kin. A new non-fiction genre—from Theo Richmond's *Konin* to Diane Armstrong's *Mosaic* to Shimon Redlich's *Together and Apart in Brzeżany*—serves as partial evidence of this.

Accompanying the nostalgia, however, is a desire to analyse a model of multiculturalism glaringly different from the one popularly propagated today—one in which, paradoxically, segregation instead of integration was the rule. In examining the shtetl, we find ourselves puzzled. Inconclusive are the debates in which historical methodology and thinking are applied to determine whether the shtetl was (to paraphrase Ezra Mendelsohn) good for the Jews or bad for the Jews, good for the Christians or bad for the Christians, or (to paraphrase Joel Berkowitz) a dystopia or a utopia.

[1] In this chapter the word 'shtetl' will refer not exclusively to the town, but inclusively to the whole community formed by the localities ascribed to it by custom and law.

[2] M. Zborowski and E. Herzog, *Life Is With People* (New York, 1952), 22.

Arguments for calling the shtetl 'backward' abound, of course, if one compares its living conditions to those of the Western world. Who would see as 'forward' the rarity of indoor plumbing, the dominance of dirt roads and dirt floors, or the non-existence of mechanized public transportation? Moreover, these unenlightened folk seem to have been content with the way things were and seem not to have wanted to 'progress'. This was a 'traditional' culture: a conservative society in which upholding and safeguarding the status quo was an ideal towards which all members of the group strove.

In it all realms of social life were very much mutually and intricately intertwined. Religion and language, socio-economic status, lifestyle, and ethnic identity—all constituted components of one whole; religious life was home life was social life, and so forth. The public and private spheres of individual lives could barely be distinguished: quite the contrary, this was a world in which 'everyone knew everything about everybody'—something considered unnecessarily intrusive by modern standards.

Still, confusion in judging the shtetl community is aroused more by another aspect: not only fiction, but non-fiction accounts as well, often open with an implication, at minimum, that there was 'harmony', that 'those were wonderful times', that 'all was well until the Germans came'.[3] In fact, as Rosa Lehmann points out, 'Recent studies have come to address the issue of coexistence between Jews and Poles and conclude that, while it is true that Jews and Poles periodically found themselves in confrontation, most of the time they lived in cooperative symbiosis'.[4]

Is this pure idealization? Underlying the debates is an imperative: how can one reconcile memory of the peaceful symbiosis of the shtetl with memory of the horrifying conflagration of the Holocaust? In the wake of that trauma, scepticism is inevitably aroused when shtetl residents recall peace rather than pogroms. Yet if mutual hatred and animosity was the norm, then how was it that Jews and Christians lived side by side for so many centuries in so many different places under so many different rulers? Moreover, how was it that—instead of assimilating—their cultural differences remained strong, grew deeper, and even flourished? How is it that what looms before our twenty-first-century eyes as a retrograde dystopia could have been a romantic utopia?

If we do not immerse ourselves in this world and look out through its eyes, we cannot comprehend how groups that should have lived in conflict according to the prevalent theories of the social sciences built one universe together and lived instead in coexistence. It took the exported and imposed urban and modern ideology of Nazism, executing a premeditated mission with Western technological

[3] See e.g. J. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, 2001), 37–8, 40; R. Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence* (Oxford, 2001); and cases cited in S. Redlich, *Razem i osobno* (Sejny, 2002), 86–95.

[4] Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence*, p. xxi.

advancement, to bring this to an end. That fact alone speaks much in favour of perceiving a societal progressiveness among the residents of the shtetl.

TOGETHER AND APART

Nonetheless, one justification for assessing the shtetl as aberrantly regressive has been the observation that it was not only exclusive with regard to outsiders, but also exclusive between groups of insiders. As described by the title of Shimon Redlich's latest work, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany*,[5] the groups were, indeed, together in one sense while quite apart in another. And it is especially this 'apartness' that bothers the contemporary Westerner. In the post-assimilation era, with the scorning and shedding of the 'separate but equal' motto, no positive value can be perceived in segregation, even voluntary self-segregation. Yet the Jewish and non-Jewish residents of the shtetl are seen as having eschewed each other completely—nothing less than impermeable bubbles rebounding away from contact. The smaller the community of the shtetl and its villages, the more distinct appear to have been the boundaries subdividing it within.

Their worlds were two (or more, depending on the number of different groups inhabiting the area), but these were simultaneously superseded by the one cosmos that they created together. 'What conception could a group have of itself and others, if it never even meets any? Of course, it is clear that the small world of their community is the entire world for them, that they will attempt to encompass and comprehend it wholly . . . it is their world . . . their social group.'[6] More precisely, the entire universe extends only as far as their community:

> 'If you live in Shinohata', wrote Ronald Dore, 'the "outside world" begins three hundred yards down the road . . .'.[7] We do not have to construe community just in terms of locality, but more properly, in the sense which Dore expresses so lucidly . . . the sense of a primacy of belonging. Community is that entity to which one belongs, *greater than kinship* [my emphasis] but more immediately than the abstraction we call 'society'. It is the arena in which people acquire their most fundamental and most substantial experience of social life outside the confines of the home. In it they learn the meaning of kinship through being able to perceive *its* boundaries . . .[8]

A strongly emotional and psychological bond with a specific place (something eliminated by modern mobility) is founded upon the significance with which a specific natural landscape is endowed, the edifices built by its residents or their forefathers, and, above all, the people who are born, live, work, and die there and all the extraordinary and ordinary events they experience individually or together. Of

[5] S. Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany: Jews, Poles, Ukrainians* (Bloomington, Ind., 2001).

[6] J. Bystroń, *Megalomania narodowa* (Warsaw, 1995), 15. See, too, Zborowski and Herzog, *Life Is With People*, 158.

[7] R. Dore, *Shinohata: A Portrait of a Japanese Village* (New York, 1978), 60.

[8] A. P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London, 1985), 15.

such a connection is made a *Heimat*, a *mała ojczyzna* ('small homeland') or *ojczyzna prywatna* ('private fatherland').[9] Its borders become the ones that enclose 'all the world' for all its residents, bringing them together. At the same time, it also allows for perception of kinship or other boundaries that enclose smaller groups within, keeping them apart.

COMMUNITY AND BOUNDARY

How is it possible for identity to be at once durably connected to the same home town and yet to a different group than represented by one's neighbours? As Anthony Cohen points out, 'community' implies 'simultaneously both similarity and difference'.[10] Furthermore, 'Organic solidarity is society constituted *by* individuals, where differences which distinguish them from each other become also the bases for their integration and collaboration in a solidary whole.'[11]

Hence, a single community of place not only permits, but actually requires and thrives on, various sets of similarities and differences. Marek Ziółkowski observes how neighbouring groups each have separate natural correlates (lakes, hills, etc.) and constructed ones (monuments, buildings, art and literature, etc.) that function meaningfully for each group alone; shared correlates which, nonetheless, evoke disparate reactions for each; but, finally, shared correlates which evoke identical reactions.[12] The first two sets comprise the differences upon which their exclusive boundaries will be built; this last set is what comprises the similarities around which their inclusive, common boundary will be built. Nevertheless,

> The important thrust of this argument is that this relative similarity or difference is not a matter for 'objective' assessment: it is a matter of feeling, a matter which resides in the minds of the members themselves. Thus, although they recognize important differences among themselves, they also suppose themselves to be more like each other than like the members of other communities.[13]

Hence, as Ziółkowski elucidates,

> A neighbour is someone found in spatial proximity, but concurrently someone with whom one has a certain kind of contact, about whom one has certain knowledge, and with whom one enters into varied interactions. A neighbour is not one of 'us' and though he may be treated as 'foreign' in the sense of being 'other' or 'emotionally distant', still he is not completely 'foreign' in the sense of being 'unknown'. A neighbouring ethnic group, its products and culture, and the land on which it lives are to some extent the subject of 'our' knowledge (and attitudes).[14]

[9] S. Ossowski, *Analiza socjologiczna pojęcia ojczyzny* (Warsaw, 1967), 203.

[10] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 12. [11] Ibid. 25.

[12] M. Ziółkowski, 'Wspólnota przestrzeni i odmienność tradycji: Sąsiedzkie kultury etniczne', *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 35/4 (1991), 60.

[13] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 20–1.

[14] Ziółkowski, 'Wspólnota przestrzeni i odmienność tradycji', 59.

Despite the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious differences which preclude permeation of one another, the foreign can coexist with the familiar, and there can be permanent and constant exchanges between them.[15] This feeling is what led Polish non-Jews to speak of *nasi*, 'ours', when referring to the whole population or to the groups of the shtetl community—*its* Jews, Poles, or Ukrainians, in contrast with some amorphous body of Jews, Poles, or Ukrainians elsewhere.

Establishing borders—on the basis of and for the maintenance of the above-mentioned differences—is crucial in the building of collective identity. Paradoxically, defining oneself or one's group is always easiest to do in the negative—stating what one is not. We need the 'other' in order to describe and delineate our (collective) 'self', and to establish the borders of what comprises 'us'. All cultural groups on a given territory define and stress who is 'other' for it; they need this mechanism like oxygen, for without it they vanish. 'A certain level of xenophobia is necessary for the very survival of a community, for this protects it from dissolving away: the liquidation of any and all distance with regard to others must automatically mean the liquidation of an attachment to one's own group, i.e. its liquidation.'[16] As Eva Hoffman points out, 'among their fellow Jews . . . their most important task was to maintain the continuum of their laws and beliefs, to uphold the faith that made them who they were, that constituted their very selves'.[17]

In order both to include and to exclude, the community must have 'a sense of discrimination, namely, the *boundary*. . . . [which] encapsulates the identity of the community. . . . Boundaries are marked because communities interact in some way or other with entities from which they are, or wish to be, distinguished.'[18] Some borders do exist physically, but more crucial here will be those that exist psychically. 'At this level community is more than oratorical abstraction: it hinges crucially on consciousness.'[19] Part of this is a compelling sixth sense regarding all the borders—which ones cannot be crossed or can, but only under certain circumstances.

All this is dictated by religion, tradition, and customs, by the geography, and by the group(s) residing in one locality. Everyone knows his or her place within this landscape because it has been designated from birth and should remain so. 'The matter of xenophobia becomes particularly sharp where parallel communities overlap on each other territorially. . . . both sides, for the right and proper arrangement of mutual relations, must meet specific mandatory and demanding conditions.'[20]

The incontrovertible priority is to preserve and uphold the given order through the strict maintenance of set divides. Ironically, the more rigorous this is, and the

[15] M. Grekowa, 'Bliskość przestrzenna bez sąsiedztwa: O stosunkach bułgarsko-tureckich w Bułgarii', *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 35/4 (1991), 118.

[16] Z. Musiał and B. Wolniewicz, 'Ksenofobia i wspólnota', *Arcana*, 43 (2002), 5.

[17] E. Hoffman, *Shtetl* (New York, 1998), 85.

[18] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 12. [19] Ibid. 13.

[20] Musiał and Wolniewicz, 'Ksenofobia i wspólnota', 6.

more partitions there are, the more separate identities can exist concurrently. This is of the utmost consequence for the community: without the borders the long-standing order of its cosmos would spin out of control. So as not to disturb the 'natural' and preordained order of things, crossings had to be limited and controlled, and crossing over had to incur severe sanctions.

From our modern point of view much of the above, though still at the core of modern nationalisms, constitutes unreasonable restriction on individual freedom and the right to pursue individually defined happiness. Yet, for the people living in such a society, a divinely ordained stability rules the world. Close contact with God and nature leads to a 'divine community' and 'unity' on earth.[21]

The modern individual operates relatively alone and uncomfortably in the grey area between mythology and fact, between imagination and reality, and between what is within limits and what is taboo. Individuals, things, and phenomena that are opposites, mirror images, ambivalent, or renegade, will always and within any group arouse tensions. However, in the traditional community the means to resolve these are available—through ritual[22] or by conferring specified and special status upon those people or phenomena kindling disquiet and anxiety.[23] Alongside the hard and fast boundaries are equally hard and fast rules taming contrasts, contradictions, and the in between. Community and boundary reign comfortably over both similarity and difference.

SOME CAVEATS

In recent years a wealth of literature—memoirs, biographies, historical accounts, and anthropological research—has appeared, disclosing more and more of the pre-war social life of shtetl Jews.[24] This material is overwhelmingly from a Jewish perspective; in contrast, the non-Jewish perspective is extremely under-represented. Though research in this area has been and is being done, it should be borne in mind that the majority of surviving non-Jewish shtetl community residents are semi-literate people who continue to maintain a lifestyle not far removed from their pre-war existence.

Though referring to general trends throughout the region of central and eastern Europe, most examples provided in this text will be from Galician Polish Jewish culture and its counterpart, the Roman Catholic one. Though several groups might cohabit with them, these two constituted the paramount, mutually complementary

[21] K. Więcławska, '"... tajemnicze wnętrze ludnego miasteczka ...": Obraz sztetl w prozie Szaloma Asza i Izaaka Baszewisa Singera', *Obyczaje: Magazyn międzynarodowy*, 8 (2002), 6–9.

[22] Cf. A. van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (Chicago, 1960).

[23] Cf. M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London, 2002).

[24] Often, unfortunately but understandably, as a prelude to Holocaust literature. Cf. M. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead* (Syracuse, NY, 1997); Hoffman, *Shtetl*; H. Gryn, *Chasing Shadows* (London, 2001).

'other'.[25] Further, it is recognized that the situation in the Austro-Hungarian empire differed substantially from that in the Prussian, Russian, or Ottoman empires. Nevertheless, changes of political borders and/or regimes in distant capitals usually brought little if any change to the shtetl community.

Finally, Jews are stereotypically seen as having been 'urban', but the territory they inhabited in central and eastern Europe was overwhelmingly rural and agricultural, towns were generally neither large nor modern,[26] and communities were still compact and isolated enough to be encompassed by a network of interpersonal connections. Even in larger localities such as Konin, Jews found themselves in the same types of relationship, and operating under similar restrictions, with their non-Jewish neighbours as in smaller ones.

MAINTAINING BORDERS, CROSSING BORDERS

The borders separating the two communities were tangible and physical, as well as psychosocial and imagined. They were shaped in the collective imagination over the course of centuries and intimately known to all the residents. This was their *mała ojczyzna*, and they knew every corner of it and everyone who inhabited it—who belonged to it and who belonged to which group within it.

On the one hand, a strongly perceived apart-ness, or, at best, beside-ness, is stressed in analyses of shtetl life. On the other hand, even in the most biased literature, example after example is found of close interaction. The bubbles appear to have burst, or at least have been much more permeable than is generally given. Hence questions arise: What borders did exist between the Jewish and non-Jewish inhabitants of the shtetl community? What type of person stood particular guard over them? Who was permitted to cross—how, under what circumstances, and to what extent?

On Religion and Ethnicity

Although crossing the boundary of inter-religious contact is the focus of another chapter in this volume, by Michał Galas, religion deserves special attention because of the central role it played in establishing and reinforcing consequent boundaries. Religion relayed history, dictated traditions and customs, set the sacred language as well as the secular alphabet, framed the group calendar and its holy days, and justified the rules of the community. Both Christians and Jews tended to view their neighbours from perspectives stemming partly from their religious convictions. As Abraham Cykiert notes, 'The *Shtetl* was unashamedly Jewish, with life being

[25] Though Roma were also a diaspora group living throughout Poland, their population was never as high in any one locality; also, because their population wandered, Roma could not be a permanent and stable 'other'.

[26] For a description, see A. Orla-Bukowska, 'Shtetl Communities: Another Image', *Polin*, 8 (1994), 92–3.

ordered foremost by orthodox religious observances and then by the rich cultural traditions that developed. The religion was paramount and the *Shtetl* revolved around the rabbi, the synagogue and the Jewish law.'[27] Directly stemming from religious law was the concept of kashrut, which, more strictly than anything else, separated Jews from non-Jews in their daily lives.[28]

In central and eastern Europe, the land of the shtetl, the concept of separation of Church and State did not take root; but where it did, the goal was to hamper State intervention in the affairs of a Church rather than the reverse. It is more of a social truth that here, under the rule of vast multicultural empires, one's ethnicity and religion were mutually defining. An ethnic Pole was a Roman Catholic and a Roman Catholic was an ethnic Pole in the same way as a Ukrainian was a Byzantine Catholic and vice versa, a Russian was a Russian Orthodox and vice versa, and an ethnic Jew was a religious Jew and vice versa.[29]

In most shtetls non-religious people were nearly non-existent before the 1930s. Secular Jews amid the commonly Orthodox communities were few and generally looked upon with disdain;[30] both Jews and Catholics saw them as renegades breaking unwritten rules. Members of educated elites who had moved into the area might be exceptions. Such people were always 'newcomers', never quite perceived as 'insiders',[31] but therefore allowed more leeway. The situation of the neophyte convert to Christianity was more complex.[32] In the eyes of the Jewish community he or she became wholly excluded, even ethnically, from the old group, while, in the eyes of Christians, a member of the new group would be included religiously, though remaining Jewish ethnically. The latter border was completely impassable from this side.

In any case—despite centuries of proximity, and despite numerous non-Jewish men and women remarking upon the perceived general beauty of Jewish women—intermarriage was not encouraged by either side. Nor was proselytizing conducted among the Jews of the shtetl. The extreme rarity of crossovers leads one to conclude that this border in particular—as the cornerstone of all the others—was fearfully respected.[33] In fact, more than one instance is found of Christians guarding the

[27] L. Wolowski, *Memories of the Shtetl: Sculptures by Leon Wolowski*, with text by A. Cykiert (Fitzroy, 1982), 13.

[28] The segregation was one-way: non-Jews were quite often treated to and consumed kosher food such as matzot, *hamentashen* (special Purim cakes), and wedding or other delicacies.

[29] Here it should be noted that the word 'Jew' describes, in most languages, both a believer in the faith and a person of Jewish descent. This equivalence was natural in the traditional world but causes confusion now.

[30] Orla-Bukowska, 'Shtetl Communities', 93–4.

[31] Nor perceiving themselves as fitting in; see Leopold Infeld's comments in T. Richmond, *Konin* (London, 1995), 105 ff.

[32] The procedure was simpler than conversion to Judaism, and being a member of a Christian group generally offered more advantages.

[33] See the case of Felicja, the Jewish convert in Jaśliska, and the sanctions against her, the priest who baptized her, and her family, in Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence*, 115, 125.

border of Judaism: 'Indeed my mother often told me that she and her sisters were taught their first Hebrew blessings and prayers by their Russian Orthodox maid, who also made absolutely certain that her father's inn was strictly kosher.'[34] Likewise, cases were found of Jews guarding the border of Christianity: 'During the time of the mass, the inns were closed and all the guests chased off to church.'[35] Significantly, each group instilled among its own a certain trepidation towards the religious accoutrements of the other. Leopold Infeld, born in Kraków, recollected that 'He was warned that he would go blind if he gazed at Christian holy images.'[36]

Language

From both sides, another demarcation separating Jews and non-Jews was language. This, on a more daily basis than religion, generally served, purposely or inadvertently, to protect the minority identity against the majority. Minority tongues are something the majority does not generally learn or formally study—out of not only ethnocentric but also practical motivation. As a consequence, however, the minority tongue can serve to keep secrets from the majority.

Nevertheless, even in this sphere there was trespassing. Hebrew remained as enigmatic for the peasant as Latin (another mysterious language of pre-war times); these languages were tightly hemmed in by the sacrum sphere and made it out onto the street only on rare occasions. Yet, on the one hand it was not so unusual for Jews to speak the dominant language; non-Jews consistently claim that their peers had no difficulties. For instance, 'About a third of the population of Vary was Jewish. . . . Many of them knew Yiddish, but all of them spoke Hungarian in and out of the home.'[37] Shraga Bielawski recalled that his father 'spoke Polish and Yiddish fluently, which was necessary for dealing with both the Christian and Jewish populations. . . . Everyone in my family spoke Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew, and most of us could speak some German and Russian.'[38] This opinion is supported by a Carpatho-Rusyn villager who wrote: 'There was no problem at all in understanding one another because Jews spoke in Lemko very well.'[39]

On the other hand, Yiddish is Germanic, and in both the Prussian and Austro-Hungarian empires German was the official language, whose fundamentals were taught or acquired involuntarily, even after the First World War. Knowing some German, one could understand basic Yiddish. Certainly, the marketplace and the Jewish-owned shops gave rise to learning the most important phrases and words—from *ganev* and *złodziej* ('thief') to *ein*, *tswei*, *drei*, and *jeden*, *dwa*, *trzy*—in each

[34] Gryn, *Chasing Shadows*, 53.

[35] A. Krzewniak, 'Żydzi na polskiej Orawie', *Plaj: Zeszyt Krajoznawczy Towarzystwa Karpackiego*, 5 (1993), 47; quoted in Orla-Bukowska, 'Shtetl Communities', 107.

[36] Richmond, *Konin*, 105.

[37] Gryn, *Chasing Shadows*, 63.

[38] S. F. Bielawski, *The Last Jew from Węgrów*, ed. L. W. Liebovich (New York, 1991), 5.

[39] T. Gocz, 'Żydzi w Zyndranowej', *Plaj: Zeszyt Krajoznawczy Towarzystwa Karpackiego*, 5 (1993), 89; quoted in Orla-Bukowska, 'Shtetl Communities', 108.

other's language. Anyone who conducted transactions needed to be fluent enough to negotiate prices.

More interestingly, 'Even the few Catholics in the village spoke Yiddish.'[40] Cases of non-Jews speaking it fluently were perhaps infrequent, but certainly not unknown. A priest, a mayor, a girl apprenticed to a Jewish tailor, and a girl whose best friend was Jewish—all apparently spoke the language well enough that their command of it impressed both Jews and non-Jews.[41] Though out of practice for over half a century, Galician peasants recalled words, numbers, or even sentences; some demonstrated Hebrew letters they had learned from friends. Pride was often expressed at having known it, and regret at having forgotten it.

> Daniel S. (82), when asked to recall the names and professions of the Jews he had known during his lifetime, was visibly disappointed when he remembered only a few of them: 'I used to know the names of these people, but I have difficulties remembering them. . . . I used to know their names like I know my prayers.'[42]

This barrier was not so rigid that crossing it was seen as undermining either community.[43] Nevertheless, certain subsets of each group were more likely to traverse it. On the Jewish side,

> Girls, less cloistered in their education, could communicate more easily with the gentile world. My mother spoke an educated Polish and developed an enduring love for Polish literature, while my father spoke the language awkwardly and felt no affection for Poland. In many Konin homes the daughters spoke Polish while their brothers spoke Yiddish. The Koniners I meet are mostly men and women who attended Polish state schools in the Thirties. They spoke Polish among themselves, Yiddish with their parents.[44]

On the non-Jewish side, the Polska Partia Socjalistyczna (Polish Socialist Party, PPS) in Konin made banners in both Polish and Yiddish.[45] In the Carpathian region in which Hugo Gryn lived, 'virtually everyone spoke both Yiddish and Malorus, or Little Russian, including the non-Jews.'[46] When he returned there decades later, both Gryn and his friend still passed back and forth through the language border: 'We also met Vasily, who remembered me from the time he was a young waiter in my grandfather's inn. We spoke in Ruthenian . . . He wished me and my family—in a Yiddish that he had barely remembered after a lapse of fifty years—*mazel* and *bracha*, good luck and blessing, for the time ahead.'[47]

[40] I. Beller, *Life in the Shtetl: Scenes and Recollections*, trans. A. D. Pannell (New York, 1986), 10.

[41] Cf. Orla-Bukowska, 'Shtetl Communities'; Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence*; and Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany*.

[42] Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence*, 61.

[43] Crossing by speaking an additional language did not constitute crossover; learning solely the language of the 'other' did.

[44] Richmond, *Konin*, 161.

[45] Ibid. 95–6.

[46] Gryn, *Chasing Shadows*, 53.

[47] Ibid. 60–1.

Public Space

The modern world abounds with markers which announce to the passer-by where he is located; shtetl community dwellers did not need signs. 'Town' was where the most important public and semi-private spaces were located: the marketplace, the places of worship, the school, and the cemeteries. The shops, inns, and teahouses served as local news centres as well.

The shtetl's topography was a landscape imbued with deep meaning which brought its inhabitants together. As Cohen puts it, 'The "community", in this regard, is a cluster of symbolic and ideological map references with which the individual is socially oriented.'[48] Researchers observe the sentimental detail with which former residents describe each component of a symbolic geography. The precise portrayal, or, rather, a reconstruction of the shtetl in the mind's eye, has become a key theme.[49] It is not odd that this would be the case: physical things bring to mind memories and emotions attached to them.

Although markers could be 'physical', not all would be evident—and certainly not evocative—to anyone but insiders: an almost dry creek, the bottom or top of a hill, the shrine at a crossroads, etc. These markers also reinforced the psychosocial ones between groups. Long established and long maintained, all residents would be fully aware of the boundaries, and unequivocal in acknowledging them. District boundaries were drawn by official administrations in some distant provincial or national capital (often so as to encompass more Christians), but this had no effect on local knowledge of the 'real' boundaries.

Roads, buildings, and spaces were divided into those exclusively Christian, exclusively Jewish, or mixed. The sacrum of the synagogues, *mikveh*, churches, and vicarages had to be respected, as well as the profanum of the cemeteries, and the most treacherous area: the border of the community demarcating the end of the familiar and the beginning of the strange. Some spaces—the synagogue or the church—belonging to one group were taboo for the other; most spaces were shared wholly or partly.

The *rynek* (the market square) was generally a predominantly Jewish space—the chain of Jewish-owned enterprises perhaps interrupted by a smattering of Catholic-owned ones, and the church. All public areas around the centre were shared at nearly all times by all. During a Jewish wedding or a Corpus Christi procession, however, this space was temporarily transformed into the sacrum of one group.

Nevertheless, the fact that these were held in the open made observation or even participation in the ceremonies less sacrosanct. At times it meant celebrating together. This pertained to non-Jewish guests or observers at a Jewish wedding, but

[48] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 57.

[49] Cf. opening pages in Richmond, *Konin*, and Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany*, or Yehuda Piekarz's map in Gross, *Neighbors*.

extended to other occasions as well. When, in the summer of 1905, the tsar granted permission for elections, Roman Catholics carried the banners of saints, Jews carried the *sefer torah*, and members of the socialist party carried bilingual signs.[50] While Christian processions might evoke fright ('we ran away as though from a fire'[51]) a Jewish informant from Jaśliska recalled the visit of the bishop to the town in a different tone. 'He spoke of the event as a very rare and special occasion during which the Jewish and Polish religious elites met in public. Within the Jewish community the meeting was a topic of discussion long after the event had taken place.'[52] In many places local residents recall joint commemoration ceremonies upon the death in May 1935 of the Polish leader Field Marshal Józef Piłsudski, including stops at both the main synagogue and the church.

Private Space

Those who knew the lie of the land, including the villages, 'like the back of one's hand', also felt an intimate connection to it and the people who lived there. Each home or shop bore not a number, but the name of its owner; residents of former shtetls still refer to a business by its pre-war holder's name.

'Invasions' into more private areas were possible and were even necessitated by normal, recurring situations. As shops were quite often located in the front part of people's homes, entering meant literally crossing the threshold into the space of the 'other'. Additionally, on most weekday mornings Jewish merchants and pedlars needed to ride elsewhere for market days. Not possessing a horse and wagon, and not wealthy enough to afford a driver alone, a group of Jews would set out before dawn, saying their morning prayers en route. Hence, the Catholic peasant's wagon was not only a shared space, but also briefly became a Jewish sacrum.

Wandering pedlars crossed the border into village homes to present goods, conduct sales, and relay community gossip. As welcome guests who saved the Catholic villager a long walk into town, these Jews were invited inside and offered tea served in a cup the pedlar brought himself. Jewish homes were, in turn, entered by non-Jews on a regular basis; a non-Jew might even be a member of the household. There might be the resident wet-nurse, the *shabes goy* who came each sabbath and on other holy days, the apprentice who came nearly every day for instruction, and the tutor who came systematically during the school year.

Finally, it was not uncommon for cases of genuine friendship to develop, especially between young Christians and Jews, entailing daily visits to each other's homes. Sometimes parents would discourage contact: '"My father would not let me bring *shikses* [non-Jewish women; pejorative] into the house," one woman remembers, "and he would not let me go to their homes in case I ate *treyf* [non-kosher food]."'[53] Precisely for reasons associated with kashrut, the Catholic friend generally

[50] Richmond, *Konin*, 95–6.

[51] Ibid. 161.

[52] Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence*, 112.

[53] Richmond, *Konin*, 161.

went to the home of the Jewish one, though this was not the only direction of crossing borders into private space.[54]

Social and Political Organizations

Exclusivity, however, did appear—sometimes by design, sometimes not—in the founding of institutions, agencies, clubs, etc. serving one group solely or primarily, or to which only its members could belong. Most of these would be more social, some more political, in nature. Boundaries thus shaped were built by non-Jews and Jews alike.

Where politicized sentiments and political awareness ran high, Polish nationalism, with a certain bravado once long lost sovereignty had been regained, and Zionism shaped and organized in the aftermath of the Dreyfus affair, would serve to reinforce a sense of need for separate structures.[55] The traditional shtetl, however, did not prove fertile ground for home-grown activism. Socially or politically engaged individuals and local leaders were always few in number and tended to be members of an imported and transplanted intelligentsia, often teachers. Moreover, Zionists could be disdained and harassed by an Orthodox Jewish community, while nationalists promulgating economic boycott would be ignored or derided by Christians.[56]

In Poland a Sokół or Klub Strzelecki troop—patriotic, nationalistic, and somewhat paramilitary youth organizations—could materialize even in the smallest of shtetl communities, though they usually appear and disappear with a specific person's term of residency in the community. In Jaśliska, Jews did not participate in 'festivals or fraternities organised by Poles. The local Hunters Club and Soccer Club, for example, by the nature of their activities, did not attract a single Jewish member.'[57] Yet elsewhere in the former Austro-Hungarian empire there was 'the Berehovo football and tennis club, BFTC, which had its own semi-professional football team and whose players were both Jewish and Christian'.[58]

But the degree of actual engagement is illustrated by examples from Jedwabne. A man there 'usually assisted at ritual slaughter . . . used to speak Yiddish . . . [and] socialised with the family of the Jewish butcher and attended their parties and wedding receptions'. Yet this same person 'was also a member of Związek Młodzieży Katolickiej (Catholic Youth Association), which was hostile to the Jews'. When Marta Kurkowska asked him what activities he took part in within that association, he replied, 'Well . . . we were being taught how to march nicely in

[54] Cf. Orla-Bukowska, 'Shtetl Communities', 99–101.

[55] Elsewhere it could be Czech, Hungarian (cf. Gryn, *Chasing Shadows*, ch. 8), or other non-Jewish nationalism, accompanied usually, unfortunately, by antisemitism.

[56] Cf. Olszański and Schoenfeld, quoted in Orla-Bukowska, 'Shtetl Communities', 93–4, and A. Orla-Bukowska, 'Coexistence: Polish Jews and Polish Catholics, Jewish Shtetl and Catholic Villages', Ph.D. diss. (Jagiellonian University, 1995), 152.

[57] Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence*, 94.

[58] Gryn, *Chasing Shadows*, 45.

fours.'[59] In fact, belonging to this specifically non-Jewish organization does not seem to have influenced the stance or actions of its members at all:

> Another interviewee was Zofia N., born in 1918, who had been head of the women's section of Związek Młodzieży Katolickiej. She remembers taking part in amateur theatricals. She also liked to go to social meetings in the Catholic Community House, but at the same time she also went to meetings in the Jewish club room. She said she became fond of Jewish dancing (*pląsy*), and after the war, as part of her job as a community household adviser, she taught Jewish dances to children in the neighbourhood village schools.[60]

In Brzeżany, however, exclusion could be aimed not only at Jews, but at other non-Jews. 'The Polish scouts, the Harcerstwo, hated Ukrainians. They persecuted us and prevented us from speaking Ukrainian.'[61] The dominant Poles in fact forbade Jewish or Ukrainian pupils membership in the more politically oriented, and therefore unapproved, minority organizations. But Bela Feld knew that her Ukrainian friend Halyna Dydyk was in Plast while she herself was in Hano'ar Hatsiyoni (Zionist Youth).[62] More significantly, however, belonging to apparently rival nationalistic clubs seems not to have precluded close friendship: when Batia Prizand's close girlfriend, a Polish Christian girl, Wikta Jakielanka, wanted to kill herself, a group of Hashomer Hatsa'ir (Young Guard) members hired a sleigh and rode to her home and successfully talked her out of it.[63] Perhaps even more incongruously, the Klub Strzelecki (Shooting Club) in Jaśliska met in a room rented from a Jewish shopkeeper.[64]

Stratification

For many and various historical and social reasons, each ethnic group tended to dominate in a different socio-economic stratum. Irrespective of this, there was a sharp cross-ethnic divide between the tiny elite and the many more poor, and one between the townspeople and the villagers. Among the Jews were to be found *sheyne yidn* (beautiful or upper-class Jews), *balebatishe yidn* (middle-class Jews), and *proste yiden* (simple, lower-class Jews); among the non-Jews there were wealthy landowners, clergy, intelligentsia, middle-class craftsmen, and peasants. Age-old divides existed within the groups themselves: the water-carrier's son not only knew he would not be a schoolteacher, but did not realistically aspire to become a rabbi; the peasant's son not only knew that he would not be a shopkeeper, but neither did he aspire to become a postman.

In the Brzeżany area, nevertheless, it appears that athletic ability could be a ticket into the local, mostly ethnic Polish elite. Such was the case with Natan Goldman, best known for his boxing talents, as well as Adam Goldszlag, who played tennis in the mid-1930s.[65] In Konin there was a Jew known to both Jews and non-Jews as

[59] M. Kurkowska-Budzan, 'My Jedwabne', *Polin*, 15 (2002), 403.
[60] Ibid. 403–4.
[61] Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany*, 65.
[62] Ibid. 66.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence*, 97.
[65] Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany*, 89.

dziedzic—'squire' or 'lord of the manor'—who owned a vast village estate. His son spoke perfect Polish and no Yiddish, learned to ride horses, and enjoyed shooting events.[66] In the village this family's contact would be more frequent with peasants and hired labourers; the father's involvement in the town council and other elite circles also necessitated Polish fluency. Overall, Jews who lived in the villages of a shtetl community—regardless of whether they were innkeepers, landowners, or farmers—crossed borders daily and frequently. Their ties to the Jewish community would be correspondingly weaker: for lack of transport and other reasons, attendance at the synagogues in town was infrequent, limited usually to the highest of holy days; town Jewry also especially looked down upon the *dorfisher*, the village Jew.[67]

GUARDIANS AND TRESPASSERS

Though all groups maintained their boundaries, majority–minority relations were inevitably imbalanced in favour of the former, which had less to fear from outside influences, subsequent change, or even assimilation. As one might expect, then, the leaders of the cultural minority or minorities would be the most fervent guardians of the boundaries.

The rabbi—if he was Orthodox and certainly if he was hasidic—maintained no contact with members of the other group. As sentinel of the minority, he would even protect his brethren from deviation within (e.g. Zionism or Reform Judaism). Likewise the rabbi's wife would stand guard at the border, serving as a model for all Jewish women. In turn, her children would be expected to play a similar exemplary role and might not attend the public school so as to avoid worldly seductions.

Age and Gender

In general—apart from the rabbi and his family—age and gender were the most important factors in guardianship. It was, above all, the elders of the community whose job it was to maintain the borders—especially adult men. They were firm in their convictions and not tempted by any curiosity about each other's faith and customs; interactions would be restricted to the utilitarian or matters of utmost consequence.[68] Furthermore, Christian men served, almost without exception, in the armed services. This not only strained or severed ties with their home community and the Jews in it, but introduced them, if at all, to Jews quite different from the ones they had known hitherto.

Among the adults it was the women in the shtetl community who moved about more freely in both worlds, as Judaism placed little restriction upon female members of the group. Many tended shops and businesses while their husbands studied

[66] Richmond, *Konin*, 51–4.
[67] Orla-Bukowska, 'Shtetl Communities', 96.
[68] Exceptions were made for emergencies such as described ibid. 105–6.

in *shul* (synagogue). They chatted with customers, whom they knew very well, and engaged in everyday conversation with Christian neighbours.

The younger generation, the adolescents—as befits their role in any society—would simultaneously test the strength of the borders and begin to take responsibility for guarding them. Here, as with the adults, it was the duty of young males to secure the borders between the cultures more than young females. As boys, town Jews had to attend *heder* before and/or after public school, restricting the chance to play with their Christian peers. In their teenage years, after their bar mitzvah, Jewish males were already adults in the eyes of Judaic law. They were expected to delve deeper into religious study (sometimes at the price of the secular), and to marry early and start families. These obligations curbed their liberty, limited free time, and thus precluded daily interactions with their non-Jewish peers. Young Jewish women, on the other hand, could continue to attend public school and play or do homework with non-Jewish girlfriends; along with their mothers they often staffed the family shop, resulting in constant exchanges with the Christian clientele. Overall,

> Jewish boys carried the symbols of Judaism, as they dressed differently, wore earlocks, were circumcised, and attended Jewish religious school (*kheyder*). And Jewish boys were the guardians of Jewish norms and values. In other words, the cultural differences that distinguished the two ethnic communities were far more conspicuous with the Jewish boys than with the Jewish girls. This may help to explain why it was the Jewish boys and not the Jewish girls who frequently fell victim to Polish teasing. In like manner, a Polish informant would disapprove of the unfriendly and haughty attitude of her one-time Jewish (male) schoolmates, but at the same time she would judge her Jewish girlfriends as very cordial and sympathetic.[69]

In general, it was the youngest children of either sex who escaped the burden of any safeguarding duties and were thus freest to make all manner of connections. The younger the child, the greater the liberty to traverse boundaries, even of the most private of spaces. They could approach any and all members of other groups—from the nanny to the priest, from one's playmates to neighbours—regardless of belonging. 'Look at me!' exclaims one Roman Catholic informant, 'A Jewish woman carried me when I was still a baby!'[70] On the other side, Miriam Grossman recollects:

> We were a [Gerer hasidic] middle-class family and it was a custom that middle-class families had maids. I remember another non-Jewish woman, who was my beloved nanny for maybe ten or thirteen years, and she had her bed in the kitchen, and I slept many times with her because I loved her, and she loved me too.[71]

It may have been precisely because the children were more naturally curious and likely to break rules that each group instilled in them a little fear towards 'strangers'.

[69] Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence*, 102.
[70] Ibid. 96–7.
[71] Richmond, *Konin*, 261.

Tales of, for instance, Jews or Roma stealing them away would serve to inhibit contact and keep the youngest from crossing borders too freely. In fact, time and time again, when asked whether they believed the 'blood libel' legend, Catholic informants in Galician Poland laughingly discounted it as just 'humbug' intended to frighten children.

All things considered, non-Jewish and Jewish youngsters were much more likely to meet informally, at play and at school, than were their adult counterparts. In addition, children were more easily admitted into the social and family life of the 'other' than were adults. Finally, thanks to their age, children were able to bypass socially accepted norms without serious risk. More generally, they 'gave expression to the social tensions between the ethnic communities by teasing and attacking "the other side". . . . The interaction between Polish and Jewish children, including attempts at provocation and mischief, might very well have stimulated a certain degree of social exchange between both communities.'[72]

Status and Locus

There was another criterion, however, in the granting of passage: the socio-economic status of a person, and where his or her home was located. These were decisive, too, in whether, how much, and within which circles Jews and non-Jews straddled or cleared the walls erected between them.

Most devoted to protecting and maintaining the borders would be the conservative middle-class religious Jews living in the centre of the shtetl (the lower rather than the upper strata), along with the Christian intelligentsia (especially middle-class administrators and teachers) and peasants, especially those living in villages where there were few Jewish families. These men had the least day-to-day contact with their peers from the other group, and such contact as they had was irregular; they had fewer or no social acquaintances among the other group, and were less likely to possess more than a minimal vocabulary in the other language.

Different frames of reference applied to the high elites, to the nobility and the affluent. In central and eastern Europe these were always a mix of various ethnicities—German, Austrian, Russian, Polish, Czech, Lithuanian, etc. It was obvious that individuals of this socio-economic and political class were a separate category to which different rules applied. The prosperous and established *sheyne* Jews were members not only of the *kehilah* but also of the town council. The non-Jewish elite (few though they were) comprised the other half of the council; hence acquaintances and even cordial friendships became matters of fact. The less populated the community, the more political or economic relationships were inseparable from social and cultural ones. Those who sat on the various councils met informally to play cards or chess or simply socialize:

[72] Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence*, 96–7.

The Jewish informant Josko S. (75), for instance, recalled the evening walks of his father with the priest. While walking, both men would discuss all kinds of subjects. Harmonious contacts between the 'learned' priest and 'lay' Jews were customary in other towns and villages in the region as well. Pearl O. (82) recalled the long walks and discussions of her father with the priest. She also remembered the weekly meetings at her parents' home, to which all members of the village elite were invited, among them the priest and teachers of the local primary school.[73]

The upper classes generally interacted with each other, and were held in esteem by the rest, regardless of religion or ethnicity. The Jewish owner of the quarry and forests in Stępina and Cieszyna was spoken of with the same respect as the Catholic owner of the manor in Kobyle.[74]

Weddings and other festivities of a religious origin became occasions to strengthen ties, especially with the nearest neighbours:

During the summer, Jews organised dancing on the fields, which they first decorated with firewood. They put the wood on the ground and danced on it. This holiday was called Haman. They used to offer food and delicacies to the police, border guard, their neighbours and the mayor. They took this food to these houses. Also during wedding parties they invited some Poles, my uncle and father among them.[75]

Everyday relationships became very easy and matter of course when Jews and non-Jews lived under the same roof. One non-Jewish family in Brzeżany rented out rooms in their building to two Jewish families.[76] In Twierdza near Frysztak a wooden domicile was split between a Catholic and a Jewish family.[77] Far away in Konin, Miriam Grossman recalled 'our Gentile neighbour, Mr Wodzinski, the attorney', who lived next door to her family and discussed various matters with her father, and onto whose balcony she and her sister climbed one evening to be able to watch the stars.[78]

Shared interests built bridges, and so the upper and lowermost classes of all groups usually enjoyed the most interaction with peers. Hence it was more likely that a *sheyner* Jew would cross borders and enjoy contact with the local non-Jewish intelligentsia than even with the *proste* Jews of the same community. The same held for the Christian intelligentsia, where class divisions precluded anything but the most formal relationships with peasant villagers. In Szyja Bronsztejn's view, 'Relations were undoubtedly best between the non-Jewish liberal intelligentsia and the Jewish intelligentsia.'[79]

[73] Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence*, 98.
[74] F.G. and A. Orla-Bukowska, interview, Cieszyna, 1990; P.L. and Orla-Bukowska, interview, Kobyle, 1991. Cf. Richmond, *Konin*, 50–7.
[75] Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence*, 97.
[76] Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany*, 61.
[77] Z.P. and Orla-Bukowska, interview, Twierdza, 1991.
[78] Richmond, *Konin*, 260, 262.
[79] S. Bronsztejn, 'Polish–Jewish Relations as Reflected in Memoirs of the Interwar Period', *Polin*, 8 (1994), 86.

Mixing was more likely if someone's profession was outside the traditional socio-economic niche: the non-Jewish entrepreneur and the Jewish farmer continually crossed borders by virtue of their milieu and the lifestyle demands of their work. Their contact with the 'other' was daily and usually became highly typical and ordinary. On the one hand,

When Christian and Jew did try to break down the barriers that separated them, the outcome was not always a happy one, as Jozef Lewandowski relates. Around 1934 his father, an upholsterer in Konin, went into partnership with a Polish upholsterer, his friend Mr Boguslawski:

'. . . the worthy gentlemen failed to take account of social considerations. Father became unacceptable to the Orthodox Jews, Boguslawski non-kosher to some of his Catholic customers. Both went beyond the limits imposed by unwritten but harshly binding statutes. Rich folk such as landowners and industrialists could join forces, but not the poor masses. After a few years they split up.'[80]

On the other hand, more successful in their joint ventures, two Polish Roman Catholic brothers in Frysztak recalled card-playing and drinking with their fellow leather traders who happened to be Jewish.[81] Karol Codogni's father in Brzeżany was a blacksmith who worked with Jewish craftsmen; though they needed one another, they also sometimes, naturally, quarrelled and even took each other to court.[82]

Owing to proximity as well as relative isolation in the physical landscape, fellow villagers bonded with each other rather than with any elite in town. Among other things, Jews here forsook the strict Orthodoxy—impractical in rural life—of those in town; as Eva Hoffman puts it, 'Culturally, these Jewish villagers cum townsmen were a hybrid species.'[83] Less hindered by the social control in town, Jews and Christians in a village were guided more by a sense of belonging to it, and by their own needs and those of their local compatriots. As Henry Kaplan relates:

It was a completely different life from the Jews living in Konin. . . . We participated in country life. . . . We were not very religious . . . we did not go to the synagogue every Friday and Saturday, and my father did not lay *tefillin*. He had seats in the synagogue and Rabbi Lipschitz was a friend of our family. At the same time, my father had seats in the village church near Glinka, for our workers, and his name was on the seats.[84]

The non-Jewish peasants valued their Jewish equals as good, hard-working people not unlike them; it was only natural that the Jew and non-Jew in Cieszyna would hitch horses and plough their respective fields together.[85] Bronsztejn notes how 'Andrzej Burda described the attitude of the peasants to the Jews from the village of Rzeszotary near Kraków as friendly and says that "in the countryside, good will was something quite natural in the common lives of people bound by the land".'[86]

[80] Richmond, *Konin*, 162.
[81] J.C. and S.C. and Orla-Bukowska, interview, Twierdza, 1990.
[82] Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany*, 60.
[83] Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 84.
[84] Richmond, *Konin*, 54.
[85] F.G. and Orla-Bukowska, interview, Cieszyna, 1990.
[86] A. Burda, *Lata walki i nadziei* (Kraków, 1970), 13; quoted in Bronsztejn, 'Polish–Jewish Relations', 78.

Finally, school brought and kept children together—the border here so permeable that schoolmates of different faith and ethnicity sat next to one another, whispered answers, copied homework, and played, teased, and tussled with one another. There was a difference, too, between the school in town and the one-room schoolhouses in the villages: the latter made any segregation irrelevant and contact continuous. School attendance on Saturday meant a need for Jewish children to make up lessons with their non-Jewish classmates; inclement weather would mean that Christian religious knowledge classes could be overheard by non-Christians. Walking home from school meant more time together—play was always outside more than inside. Israel Ne'eman recalled that he went to school almost solely with Ukrainians. 'There were, on average, two Jews in each grade, and the relations were good. A Ukrainian boy whose father was a plasterer and a Communist was my close friend.'[87] His non-Jewish counterpart Karol Codogni spoke some Yiddish and played with Jewish boys: 'Living near and close to Jews was a perfectly normal thing for him.'[88]

CONCLUSION

Indeed, it was only natural. The Jews and non-Jews of a shtetl community could not and did not live as adjacent forbidding fortresses. To paraphrase Roskies and Roskies, what each side wanted in particular was not isolation from the other, but insulation from its religion.[89] As Bronsztejn writes,

> Jewish distinctiveness and difference ought not to be identified with being foreign. When there are no internal tensions, good material conditions, no professional competition, comfort of life, then distinctiveness forms part of the social scenery, is an accepted condition of unity in variety. Distinctiveness can become something foreign when it is in isolation, when there are no professional and personal contacts and no cultural interaction and diffusion of cultures, and when the economic environment turns hostile.[90]

Likewise, Shimon Redlich asserts that, 'Beyond the specific affiliations of culture, language, and religion within each one of these three ethnic groups [Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews], they also shared a tradition of "local" commonness.'[91]

In shtetl communities distinctiveness was very familiar and present on all sides. As Cohen points out, 'The community boundary is *not* drawn at the point where differentiation occurs. Rather, it incorporates and encloses difference and . . . is thereby strengthened.'[92] An illustration is provided from Andalusia: 'The members of a community recognize their common interests and values *vis-à-vis* those of other communities. But, at the same time, they cherish their differences from each

[87] Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany*, 63.
[88] Ibid. 61.
[89] D. Roskies and D. G. Roskies, *The Shtetl Book* (Hoboken, NJ, 1975), 34.
[90] Bronsztejn, 'Polish–Jewish Relations', 74.
[91] Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany*, 61.
[92] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 74.

other for, to a substantial extent, these provide the very stuff of everyday social life within the community.'[93] Groups preserve different religions, different languages, a different style of dress, and some spatial segregation; the distinctions are strengthened and reinforced because this is a mutually desired value.

Living primarily in the very centre of the town, Jews were nevertheless able to build and maintain the strongest border possible between themselves and the others, the non-Jews. Under these conditions their separate cultures could and did bloom and grow; ignoring or destroying the boundaries would mean their self-destruction:

> Yet, in order to survive for centuries in a foreign environment—among people professing a different faith, possessing different customs—one had to maintain one's separateness. The guests could not mimic the hosts. They had to create their own community in the community within which they lived, create it with great effort because societal conventions can be austere (stern, uncompromising). And out of necessity they had—in order to exist—to love their own community more than that of the host and give priority to the interests of their own, internal community. And they created that community owing to this astounding strength of their national bonds.[94]

An unwritten principle dictated that one would and should remain in the community—religious, ethnic, and social—into which one was born. Assimilation of the minority to the majority—or even much acculturation—was neither encouraged nor even desired in the shtetl. Furthermore, as Lehmann argues, 'the strict ethnic boundaries . . . were of crucial importance in the maintenance of a political and social equilibrium'.[95]

There was closure and continuity in this neighbouring with one another. Despite political border shifts, migrations, and slighter or greater conflicts, one's neighbours were generally the same as those one's parents and grandparents had had. And so the terrain which various compatriots inhabited became 'our land', 'our homeland', and its residents *nasi*—'our people'. The Jews and non-Jews saw their countrymen and women as people who differed in faith, language, and custom, but not in their loyalty, connection, and belonging to the community. In the shtetls a Polish Jew was not primarily a Jew: he or she was primarily someone *tutejszy*, 'from here', a *landsman* from the same community like all of its other residents. As Cohen describes it,

> Rural society ('community') was small, parochial, stable, and 'face-to-face': people interacted with each other as 'total' social persons informed by a comprehensive personal knowledge of each other, their relationships often underpinned by ties of affinity and consanguinity. It was a traditional and conservative way of life, in which people valued custom for its own sake and, given a reasonable degree of potential self-sufficiency in the production of their

[93] Ibid. 88.
[94] W. Siła-Nowicki, 'Janowi Błońskiemu w odpowiedzi', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 41/8 (22 Feb. 1987), 5.
[95] Lehmann, *Symbiosis and Ambivalence*, 169.

subsistence, felt substantially in control of their lives, subject, of course, to the vicissitudes of nature and the divine.[96]

Having shaped over centuries a cosmos in which coexistence was possible without blurring and assimilation, preservation of its order and stability was of paramount importance to all its residents. Those of us living in twenty-first-century urban environments find it hard to look beyond the rigid structure of traditional cultures; we see them as limiting. Yet they provided a comforting security not supplied by boundless postmodernity. This sturdy construction was hardly questioned at all until the end of the nineteenth century—and in many shtetl communities not until the 1930s. As Hoffman deduces, 'Perhaps the main virtue of the shtetl for its inhabitants was the extent to which it was a community—small, closely interwoven, reassuringly familiar. Nobody in these rural enclaves needed to suffer from the modern malaise of uncertainty and nonbelonging.'[97]

'Progressive' ideas brought with them secularization, the decline of traditional authority, a rejection of inherent group belonging and preordained individual destiny, and heightened geographical and social mobility. Modern social phenomena such as intermarriage, conversion, or non-confessional assimilation would, in time, place more Jews on the cusp between the traditional Jewish and Catholic cultures; class and spatial mobility would also shift non-Jews across the boundary. All of this undermined the age-old balance of power between the Jewish and Christian communities within the shtetl, and began to erode the borders of the small and comfortable *ojczyzna prywatna*, the private homeland of the shtetl, in favour of the large and unfamiliar *ojczyzna ideologiczna*, the ideological one of a nation-state.[98] Everything that knit the community together unravelled, and insecurity crept in.

The price of this progress was a loss of community and kinship. 'If the members of a community come to feel that they have less in common with each other than they have with members of some other community then . . . the integrity of the "community" they enclose has been severely impugned.'[99] Individuals lost their intimate connection to a landscape and to all those who inhabited it. Until new understandings and new networks could be established, ambiguity and anxiety reigned, tensions rose, and conflicts erupted. Referring to the troubles at the dawn of this process, Keely Stauter-Halsted deduces, 'It is, I believe, this pattern of transitional group identities and parallel but conflicting attempts to bring about economic improvements that confounded relations between peasants and Jews, setting the stage for the violence of June 1898.'[100]

[96] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 25.
[97] Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 12.
[98] Cf. Ossowski, *Analiza socjologiczna pojęcia ojczyzny*.
[99] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 20–1.
[100] K. Stauter-Halsted, 'Priests, Merchants and Political Activists: The Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism in the Galician Polish Countryside', MS, 2002.

By the late 1930s, especially in the two years after Józef Piłsudski's death, and more frequently in the largest metropolises, relations between groups became combustible. Moving up in society was possible after the emancipation of the Jews and peasants near the end of the nineteenth century, especially in the 1930s when the economic depression forced many to consider options outside farm work. It was also then that political and economic antisemitism, rife in the programmes and publications of various conservative parties, began to infiltrate the shtetl. This broad problem deserves separate treatment, but perhaps a few general observations could be made here. For the most part, the peasants were not reading these materials and troubles did not break out in the villages. Rather, anti-Jewish behaviour and actions were apt to take place in town, especially on market day, when crowds appeared and outsiders could incite a riot; the larger the town and the larger the throng, the less social control there was, and the more likely it was that the call would be taken up.[101]

Nevertheless, antisemitic views did not necessarily mean an absence of good professional and personal relationships with Jews known to a person, since stereotypical attitudes did not relate to those who were 'insiders', 'one of our own'. Furthermore, in a major sociological study regarding antisemitism among Poles, 'researchers were surprised to find that the oldest respondents (born before 1923) were more well-disposed towards Jews than younger generations'.[102] These informants would have had less formal, but much more informal, first-hand knowledge of Judaism and Jewish culture, and interpersonal relationships with Jews, than those born later. As Grekowa discerns in her home society,

> In the case of the most general form of the 'familiar'–'foreign' relationship, in . . . a closed traditional community, what was 'familiar' was highly significant. And the meaning and value of this in and of itself could neither be destroyed nor even questioned while the traditional community existed regardless of the strength and nature of the contact with the 'other'.[103]

The Holocaust was in no way an inevitable consequence of the joint inhabitancy of the shtetl by Jews and non-Jews. Even in the opening months of German occupation Jewish villagers continued transactions and contact with their Christian neighbours. Regardless of the outcome, positive or negative, the fact that many Jews left their valuables in the safekeeping of their non-Jewish neighbours meant that the latter were known well and trusted deeply. The Holocaust, however, for ever put an end to the life that such co-inhabitancy entailed.

'The further one moves along [the] continuum from "folk" to "urban" society, the greater becomes the loss of community.'[104] Where they live together today,

[101] Cf. Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzeżany*, 88–9; for an account, however, of the ineffectiveness of a boycott, see p. 92.
[102] I. Krzemiński, *Czy Polacy są antysemitami?* (Warsaw, 1996), 301.
[103] Grekowa, 'Bliskość przestrzenna', 120–1.
[104] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 27.

Jews and Christians find themselves primarily anonymous residents of urban areas; what they know about one another's culture (e.g. customs, religion, language) is superficial and derived primarily from infrequent lessons about groups, not from daily contact with individuals. Connections are more often utilitarian and relationships easy to end. As scholars and public discourse focus on discord, living memory of accord fades ever more quickly into the distance. How did people so different live so closely and know each other so intimately for so long in relative (though admittedly not perfect) harmony?

No matter what the faith or ethnicity of the author, accounts of a shtetl community in memoirs, *yizkor* books, or histories are most often penned in the absence of the 'other'. This fact is a reflection of the boundary between Jews and non-Jews but does not at all indicate lack of a local community, nor lack of border-crossing. Both sides strongly marked themselves off from the other. Borders—visible as the *eruv* (the boundary constructed to permit Jews to carry on the sabbath) and as invisible as the middle of a stream, and built at the levels of religion, history, tradition and customs, language, and geography—were known to and maintained by everyone. It was known who possessed the most unrestricted passport, and who should be the strictest of sentries. Yet numerous people on both sides crossed over—at various levels, by various means, and to various degrees. All in all, however, the golden rule was 'Good fences make good neighbours'.

Why did they live so apart? Because they needed to, they wanted to, and because they could. First, without a strong sense of difference, group identities and the groups themselves would dissolve. Secondly, and paradoxically, the more dissimilar and separate the groups are, the more easily they maintain the boundaries between them; in turn, the more strongly those partitions are protected, the more easily can cohabiting communities feel safe and secure.

Cohen has said:

> The most striking feature of the symbolic construction of the community and its boundaries is its oppositional character. The boundaries are *relational* rather than absolute; that is, they mark the community *in relation to* other communities. It has been suggested that *all* social identities, collective and individual, are constituted in this way, 'to play the vis-à-vis'.[105]

The purpose was to preserve a vital sense of different communities simultaneously: the ethnic, religious, and/or linguistic community to which one belonged from birth, and the community of *tutejszy* to which one also belonged from birth. Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, and other groups were thus able to speak of 'us' and 'ours' when referring to those who believed as they did and spoke the same language as they, and of 'us' and 'ours', too, when referring to those they saw as their compatriots from the same shtetl community.

> Jews trading horses in a small market town, speaking in haphazard Polish—that was the shtetl. Poles gradually picking up a few words of Yiddish and bits of Jewish lore—that was also the shtetl. Jewish bands playing at Polish weddings and local aristocrats getting financial advice and loans from their Jewish stewards—all that went into the making of the distinctive, mulchy mix that was shtetl culture.[106]
>
> The very realm of neighbouring proximity is one of a true celebration of differences; it is a realm in which that which is 'familiar' and that which is 'foreign' mutually grant each other the right to differ. As a consequence, human dialogue is made possible and real.[107]

A peasant born in 1902 who completed his fourth-year education in a one-room village schoolhouse before the First World War made reference in an interview not only to the rabbi and the cantor but also to the *shames* (synagogue sexton). As a hen and her chicks perambulated across the dirt floor of his wooden cottage, I asked him if the Jews were guilty of killing Christ: 'No,' he answered, 'it was the Sanhedrin.'[108] No teacher or priest had provided him with such information and insight; it had come from close relationships and crossing borders with his Jewish friends and neighbours. Without access to formal modern instruction on multiculturalism, the community had found a way to live it: 'In the *shtetl*, pluralism was experienced not as ideology but as ordinary life.'[109] The very fact of physical and geographic neighbouring inevitably leads to some cultural contact, diffusion, and exchange.[110] The Jews and the non-Jews created a 'forward' model of coexistence through (not despite) conservative traditionalism, creating something—at least in this sense—closer to utopia than dystopia.

[105] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 58.

[106] Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 12–13.

[107] Grekowa, 'Bliskość przestrzenna', 117.

[108] J.C. and Orla-Bukowska, interview, Twierdza, 1990.

[109] Hoffman, *Shtetl*, 12.

[110] Ziółkowski, 'Wspólnota przestrzeni i odmienność tradycji', 60.