

# Yiddish Civilization

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Adult Education Committee Book Review

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Temple Israel Adult Education  
Committee

# First Impressions

- Identification ?
  - Language
  - Stories
  - Anecdotes
  - Relatives

# And the book itself?

- Expectations – p5 author states objective
- Surprises – why did you realize that was unexpected?
- Likes -
- Dislikes -

# Bist a Yid?

- Setting oneself apart – thoughts on this?
- Examples
- Head coverings – type
- Attire – coats, trousers, socks, wigs

# And – what a path they travelled

- Rome
- Mediterranean lands to the Baltic states
- Greek influences – culture, commerce
- Early Christianity effects on Jewish communities
- Jews being accepted, maybe admired a bit in the tribal areas – Khazar kingdom

# Remaking of W. Europe

- Early W. European civilization or a mass of disparate societies (maybe not even that in some cases)
- Early linguistics influences from Latin
- The first split – Roman/Latin and Byzantine/Greek

# Yes, people did travel afar

- From Mediterranean lands: Turkey and Greece
  - up through Crimea
  - West through Hungarian areas
  - North to Germanic provinces
  - West to French territory
- From Italy north

# And also travelling...

- From Spain
  - to French lands
  - And to the lowlands and England

# And eventually east

- From England and France to Germanic lands
- From Germanic lands to Polish lands
- From Polish lands to Lithuania
- And to Russia and Ukraine

# New Yiddish World

- Civilizations are defined by (a number of things) but mostly by their overall character (P105)
  - What about that premise?
  - How does Kriwaczek define character?
  - Does it fit with other thinking about civilizations?

# Badges

- People identified by their badges p110-111
- Is this an honorable symbol in the society or a stigma?
- And where did it lead to hundreds of years later?
- A thought on badges by Clint Eastwood, “We don’t need no stinkin’ badges.”

# Languages

- Might language be, to some, a “badge”?
- What are some of our personal memories about languages?

# Names

- What's in a name?
- Obviously the name's meaning
- Can a name be a “bad” name?
- Don't marry a woman with the same name as your mother? p123
- Does that apply equally regarding men?

# Politics (the price of prosperity)

- Everyone is getting to be “more so” as populations grow
- Germanic, Polish, Lithuanian, Hungarian, etc. all are experiencing nascent nationalism. Why?
  - Culture
  - Civilization
  - Language
  - Religion

# Shall we dance?

- Most definitely – NO!!!
- It might lead to wickedness and temptation of the flesh (a bit of paraphrasing here)  
p137
- How to deal with it? Humor:
  - Why does Judaism forbid premarital sex?  
Because it might lead to dancing.

# Exploiter or Exploitee?

- Inverse order between Christians and Jews
  - Christians: Nobles → peasants & serfs
  - Jews: Proletariat → bourgeoisie
- A few thoughts on the terminology may be in order: why does Kriwaczek choose the terms proletariat and bourgeoisie?
  - Might he be revealing his own personal political thinking?

# Jewish infrastructure

- The kahal – most every community (shtetl) had a kahal
- Larger communities had more extensive structure
- Major centers had full blown bureaucracies – roshim, parnassim, ne'emanim, shamma'im, etc. p144

# The Reformation

- The big upheaval and rift within western Christianity
- Resulted in war after war after war for centuries
- And in times of peace there were intrigues of no trivial consequence
- And who was effected even though had no stake in it? You guessed it – us.

# Moving up

- Life in Poland-Lithuania actually got better for Jews.
- Q: By what measure?
- Ans: Class structure grew to 3-tier p215
  - Nobility (szlachta)
  - Jews ('cause we're educated)
  - Peasants (treated as property by the nobility)
    - (Ever wonder how "noble" came to have a positive connotation?)

# The Modern Woman – Gliki

- A woman writing a book? Yes – it happened long ago and yes, she was Jewish. It was a best seller of sorts.  
P226++
- And coincidentally came the split which was eventually the eastern Chassidic and the western (some might say Germanic and some of them would say cultured) mitnagdim.

# Back and forth and back and forth

- Not that there were states with borders but that hadn't prevented wars
- But now, late 1700s, there are borders (remember that nationalism was growing?)
- But what good is a border if you can't fight over it?
- So take a look at Poland-Lithuania as a good example. Carved up more than a few times by:
  - Prussia (Hohenzollerns) [the von what-ever]
  - Austria (Hapsburgs)
  - Russia

# Where do I live?

- Brest – Poland, Lithuania, or Russia
- Vilno – Lithuania or Russia
- Gdansk – East Prussia or Poland
- What would life be like if Illinois annexed Lake County Indiana? If Lake Cty ceased to exist and was incorporated into Cook Cty. Mayor Daley? Gov. “Blago”?
- Or “South Park”?

# When peasants revolt

- (That could be a good name for a book)
- Poland-Lita – the improved 3-tier society: the Jews who work for the nobles get slaughtered along with the nobles
- Ukraine – everyone kills everyone else though the Jews are common targets
- Russia – these folks gave the world the pogrom but the Reds actually treated Jews better than the Whites
- Germany – after they whipped France in 1870 and unified they thought they were truly cultured, so much so that the Weimar Republic citizens exercised their vote and brought Hitler to power ( Hamas used this very same electoral model)

# Yiddish Culture

- Flourished in the goldene medinah
- Manhattan's lower east side
  - Theatre – drama, comedy, musicals
  - Literature – novels, poetry
  - Music
- Vestiges still exist today – shop signs, conversations
- Recent renaissance
- Other cities?

# Conclusions

- Would you recommend this book?
- Would you re-read it?
- Are you interest in exploring aspects of Yiddish culture?

# Our next session

- Feb 24th
- Perhaps something of more general interest?
- Would another day/time be better? (topical discussions, book reviews, either/both)
  - Sunday early afternoon