



## **Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews**

*Eva Hoffman*

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An unforgettable evocation of the lost world of Polish Jewry, Shtetl is a "beautifully written" (Village Voice) mining of the deep rifts in Polish-Jewish relations in the small town of Bransk. With understanding and sensitivity, Shtetl limns the culture that influenced Christian villagers' decisions to conceal or betray Jewish neighbors when the Nazis invaded. A New York Times Notable Book.

## **Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews Details**

Date : Published October 2nd 1998 by Mariner Books (first published 1997)

ISBN : 9780395924877

Author : Eva Hoffman

Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Literature, Jewish, World War II, Holocaust, Cultural, Poland, Judaism, Judaica



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## **From Reader Review Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews for online ebook**

### **Galicius says**

The author is objective on her main concern to explore the relationship between Poles and Jews over the span of some 800 years. She gives credit to the record that more Jews lived in Poland than any other European country because they found it a more acceptable nation to maintain their separate culture, language, and religion.

She is very brief about German Nazi anti-Semitism. She describes the German soldiers' "frightening hard faces". They "were hardly individual; they were embodiments of an abstract force". (p. 245)

Credit is due to the author to set the record straight to the more recent media created perception that refers to "Polish concentration camps". This falsifying of history is difficult to understand. But it comes up still. Even President Obama referred to "Polish death camps" while awarding a medal of honor to a Polish hero of WWII in May 2012. The author explains that the only thing Polish about the camps is German decision to locate them where their victims lived so they wouldn't have to transport them to Germany, Austria or elsewhere.

Her research is quite extensive and her background is impressive. The early history part is a bit muddled. I wish it were better organized.

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### **Connie Ostrowski says**

Hoffman effectively presents "the story of Polish-Jewish coexistence [which occurred over about 1000 years] as a long experiment in multiculturalism *avant la lettre*" (9). Her claim that "from the perspective of today, aspects of Eastern European history are beginning to look presciently relevant, and to foreshadow some of the dilemmas with which advanced contemporary societies are struggling. This is particularly true of the problems of pluralism and ethnic coexistence" (9)--along with specific details from both the general history of Poland and the eastern Polish town/shtetl of Bran'sk (the accent goes over the "n")--successfully refute the unfortunate popular belief that Poles are inherently anti-Semitic.

Her argument offers sociological and psychological perspectives on the story of the relationship of the two groups, as well as some impressionistic characterizations (the last when she's trying to get us to imagine some aspects of life in Bran'sk). She handles the very complex subject without the oversimplifications or overgeneralizations that have often been used to excuse, condemn, or idealize.

As a non-historian, I can't speak to the appropriateness of the book being categorized as "history"; I know that to the extent that I wanted it to be history, I wanted to see far more primary historical sources (though she lists a respectable number in the bibliography) and a wider variety of secondary sources on the history of Poland. However, based on her other works that I've read, I don't know that she was trying to write a "history"; rather, I think her book defies being straight-jacketed into any one particular genre. Perhaps that's more appropriate for a book intended for the general public rather than a specialized academic audience.

I strongly recommend that people read this work for a variety of reasons, one of the most important being her comment in the epilogue:

"If we are to live together in multicultural societies, then in addition to cultivating differences, we need a sense of a shared world. This does not preclude the possibility of preserving and even nurturing strong cultural, spiritual, and ethnic identities in the private realm, nor does it suggest collapsing such identities into a universal 'human nature.' "

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### **Elaine says**

Somewhat disappointing mainly because I am interested in the period between 1905 and the onset of WWI, and Eva Hoffman's focus is on very early (17th C. ) history and WWII. Understandable because the primary source of information is the Yizgor book from the Polish shtetl of Bransk, but not as useful to me. Hoffman is the former editor of the NYTimes Book Review, so her language is fluid and the writing is complex but very comprehensible. A good history, just not what I needed.

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### **Jonfaith says**

Jake Pfau selected this book on samizdat and then never posted again. Forgive my snark, but it sucks being him. This book inspired some decent discussions and was appreciated by all. You still suck, Jake.

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### **Lewis Weinstein says**

I've read about half of the book; will finish later.

Eva Hoffman has written a very balanced and nuanced presentation of life for both Jews and ethnic Poles in the years between the wars and during the holocaust. It was a very tough time for Poland. Nobody behaved perfectly. They had their differences and difficulties. In the 20 years of independence (1919-39), they came a long way, albeit with some reversals. But for the Germans, who regarded both Jews and ethnic Poles as subhuman, they might have worked things out.

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### **Dagmar Cunningham says**

interesting view on Eastern European History and Multiculturalism.

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### **Natalie L. says**

Excellent! Eva Hoffman is well researched and writes beautifully. This is a historic overview of the the Polish shtetl from its beginnings through the present. Hoffman artfully takes the read from the broader

historic perspective to a personal account of the shtetl, Bransk.

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### **Julie says**

Non-fiction about the history of the Polish people and the Jewish people in a small town (a shtetl) in Bransk, Poland. The history helps illuminate the relationship between the two groups during WWII. It reads like a text book, but it is very informative and interesting.

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### **Alana Cash says**

This is a short book (258 pages + notes) to cover 800 years of history, but it's focused on one little town in Poland - Bransk - and the Jewish experience over that period of time. Hoffman uses a book, the Yizkor Book that was maintained by the Bransk Jewry down the ages, as well as interviews with residents still living, and archival research to delineate the history.

The author is blatantly honest about what she learns and any reader can gain a perspective on the historic relationship with Poles and Jews - their rivalries for power, jealousies, cooperation, and friendships.

Most enlightening was the end of the book. World War II. Poland had been partitioned between Germany, Russia, and Austria for over 100 years, restored as a country only in 1918 at the end of WWI. When WWII started, Poland was faced the Germans to the east and the Soviets to the west both trying to take control again. Poland had no real army, so the Soviet-German front was back and forth through Poland. 3 million Poles died.

The infamous death camps were built on sites convenient to the Nazis in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Poland - all across Europe. They were built by the Nazis and forced labor and 11 million people died in them. Many Poles were sent to the camps by the Nazis. Other Poles were sent to Siberia by the Soviet Army.

There were many Poles who harbored Jews and many too afraid of being murdered to do so. As Hoffman says, [Bransk became]... "a zone in which the indigenous population, not very sophisticated or educated was rewarded (poorly) for selling the lives of its neighbors and killed for helping them." And Hoffman further states, "There are Jewish survivors honest enough to say that if the roles had been reversed, they cannot vouch for how they would have acted toward people whom they still call 'the goyim.'"

The book provokes the question: What would you do?

PS - this book needs an index

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### **Seth says**

A nuanced look at the history of the Polish shtetl, with a particular focus on one town in eastern Poland.

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## **Jenel says**

"from the perspective of today, aspects of Eastern European history are beginning to look presciently relevant, and to foreshadow some of the dilemmas with which advanced contemporary societies are struggling. This is particularly true of the problems of pluralism and ethnic coexistence"

Worthy of a read even decades after its publication.

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## **Bibliophile says**

In *Shtetl*, Eva Hoffman attempts to tell the troubled and complex story of relations between Poles and Jews from medieval times until the Holocaust through the lens of one small, not particularly famous Polish village called Bransk. Hoffman's writing is superb, and approaches the subject with a calm even-handedness that tries to dig deeper than the stereotypes that modern-day Poles and Jews have of each other. I've actually read this twice, and it was well worth the re-read.

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## **Mike Goldstein says**

I want to read twenty more books like this. There should be a book like this for every Jewish community in Poland.

I've always craved this kind of glimpse into day-to-day life. And I really, really needed this added nuance to my view of the Polish-Jewish relationship. It's easy to view Eastern European Jewish culture as purely smothered and oppressed. But that takes away the agency of the Jews who lived there, and it turns the non-Jews in the surrounding communities into cardboard cutouts. Eva Hoffman takes square aim at that kind of reductiveness, leaving plenty of room for both ugliness and a tentative (and lost) sense of community.

In a strange way, this was also one of the most affecting Holocaust narratives I've ever read. I think it's because "Shtetl" didn't make the Shoah seem as inevitable, as much of a foregone conclusion as books solely about that event will. After reading through hundreds of years of sporadic violence, natural disaster, invasions and mundane persistence and co-existence, the Holocaust as a completely external event, as a happening of pure evil that came with an invading army and moral chaos, sort of felt like an act of God. The complete destruction of this community somehow felt even more powerful for the fact that it came from the outside, and because it tore apart the fabric of a surprisingly durable community with such ruthless efficiency.

All that said - still four stars. The book takes 50 or 60 pages to really get started, with the whole first section being an overview of the history of Polish Jews up until 1800 or so. That history was really interesting to me, and I learned all sorts of facts, but it still felt a little rushed and dense and was really just a prelude to the author's true story. So one star lost there.

PS: The small interactions the author has with amateur Polish historians and average Polish townspeople are completely complex and tense and fascinating too. I'd definitely like to read more about the current dynamic.

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**Anna says**

Obligatory read for those who think that anti - Semitism is a part of Poles. Helping Jews was punished by death of helpers and often their families. To hide one Jew at least few people were needed. Poles are the biggest group of Righteous among the Nations (*Righteous Gentiles*). For those who believe in all that crap like Polish death camps, come to Poland, meet people, learn their part of story.

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