THE STUDY OF MAN

HOW THE POLISH JEW SAW HIS WORLD

A Study of a Small-Town Community Before 1939

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FIFTY-FIVE miles from Warsaw in central Poland, the town of Stoczek numbered around 4,000 inhabitants in the period between the two world wars. It had a public school, a sawmill, two flour mills, and an electric power plant, but its only direct communication with the outside world was a rickety bus-line to Warsaw. Without large industries, the town served mainly as a trade and service center for the peasants around it.

Every Tuesday—which was market day—the main square, with its adjoining streets, was packed with the stands of merchants and craftsmen, and with the horse-drawn carts of peasants who brought their produce to town. On Friday nights, however, the streets would be almost completely deserted, and through the windows of the one-story houses one could see candles twinkling over Sabbath suppers. For 2,500 of Stoczek's inhabitants—over half—were Jews.

Despite their numbers, the Jews of Stoczek were always aware of their position as a disfavored, and often a persecuted, minority. The awareness of belonging to a group that had to maintain itself amid a sea of enemies shaped the entire outlook of every Jew in Stoczek.

Anti-Jewish feeling was very strong among the Poles, many of whom still believed that Jews practiced the ritual murder of Gentile children. Such sentiments, rooted in ignorance and resentment, were exploited by an outspokenly fascist and anti-Semitic political party calling itself the "Camp of National Unity," whose agitation bore fruit in bloody pogroms, in university "ghettos" where Jewish students sat apart from others at lectures, in incidents that saw Gentile students pushing Jewish students out of the windows of school buildings, in a boycott of Jewish stores—in short, in a general atmosphere of hatred. Though Jews were in the numerical majority in Stoczek, they suffered under anti-Semitism just as much as Jews elsewhere in Poland did. Gangs of Gentile adolescents would attack Jewish children bodily, throw stones at Jewish grown-ups, and set dogs on Jews in general. No pogrom actually took place in Stoczek, but once one was only narrowly, and by luck, averted.

NO WONDER the Jews of Stoczek felt the present as grim and hopeless. Robert S. Lynd said in *Middletown in Transition*, "One

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THIS sociological picture of the culture and values of a typical East European small-town Jewish community has had in large part to be reconstructed, now that the long chapter of Jewish history which it recalls has come to a tragic close. CELIA STOPNICKA ROSENTHAL, though born in Stryj, Poland (in 1922), lived in Stoczek herself from 1925 to 1938, and draws on her own memories, but she also bases her study (which she hopes to expand into a book) on intensive interviews of ten survivors of that *shtetl*, and on the autobiographies of seven former residents who now live in Israel. Thus the generalizations she offers are not drawn from direct observation—as, ideally, they should be—but from recollection, which can often be treacherous. But fate has, alas, left the student of the *shtetl* no other method. Mrs. Rosenthal, who came to this country in 1938, was educated at Brooklyn College and Columbia, where she received a master's degree in sociology. She is now head of the George Washington School in Cartagena, Colombia, and is doing a study of "social stratification and status in a Colombian City." Articles by her have appeared in the *American Journal of Sociology* and other magazines.

of the most sensitive approaches to the values and 'spirit' of a culture is through scrutiny of the way in which the culture . . . orients itself with regard to the concept of the 'future' as over the 'past' and 'present'. . . ." But the Jews of Stoczek also conceived of the present as a transition period that would eventuate in a glorious future—a future that would see their return to Israel and be a continuation of the proud past. Just as the past itself was not too distant, and such of its fruits as the Torah were still enjoyed, so the great future, too, was not too far off. The Messiah might come any day.

Optimism and confidence as to the future were mixed with pessimism as to the present. That the Jews in Stoczek regarded the present as long-drawn-out and oppressive is reflected in their sayings. An object hard to move because of its weight was characterized as being "as heavy as Jewish misfortunes." If something that people disliked persisted for long, they said that "It is as long as the Jewish exile."

Yet the present did afford some joys and satisfactions—the joy of learning and the satisfaction of rearing one's children. It is significant that the joy which the Jew of Stoczek had in the present was closely tied to the past, and that his hope lay in a less than immediate future. He lived on, sure in the conviction that the Jewish people, though persecuted, would continue to exist. The words of the Haggadah recited at Seder—"More than one man has risen up against us, and in every generation there rise up against us those who seek to destroy us, but the Holy One, blessed be He, delivers us from their hand"—expressed the average Jew's vivid belief.

Thus the Stoczek Jew had two conceptions of the present: one with regard to life in the Gentile world outside, and one with regard to life among his own. While the first "present" was sharply dissociated from the proud past and glorious future, the latter was regarded as an integral link in time's chain.

INDIVIDUAL life, like time "among one's own" generally, was looked upon as a steady flowing stream with no sharp breaks in it. The age of freedom was not differentiated distinctly from that of responsibility, for responsibility began with childhood and continued after death. A man who had failed to discharge his obligations while alive was believed to do so after death. No particular stage of human life was idealized or glorified; each was thought to have its compensations. In childhood one was considered to have freedom from anxiety; in maturity, the joys of building a household; in old age, the respect of others. People looked back with a certain nostalgia on their childhoods, but no one tried to prolong his or her youth, or linger with it. Just as there was no sharp break between youth and maturity, so there was no such break between this world and the next, it being believed that the dead could return, and did.

This notion of life as a continuous process was reflected in many aspects of the Jewish culture of Stoczek. Learning was thought of, not as a process stopping at a given time or point, but as continuing to the end of life. "The Torah has no bottom" went the saying. The conception of learning as an unending process is reflected in the terms applied to a scholar. He was not referred to as a "learned man"—rather, "He knows how to study," or "He is a great learner." That is, one's learning was never complete enough to justify the attribute "learned."

Similarly, the "dominance-submission" pattern was continuous. One had to submit to one's father, but every father was also a son and had to continue to submit to his own father. Although there were discontinuities, especially in sexual behavior, the general trend of this society was to conceive of life as a steady flow without climaxes or sharp breaks. Even such modes of behavior as were not sustained permanently—like the demonstrative affection parents showed their children—did not come to an abrupt stop. The child who "regressed," who, though beyond the age of demonstrative affection, still craved it, was not rejected. Parents continued to bestow demonstrative affection on such a child, and what disapproval they showed was mild and expressed only in words.

The fact that there were few rites of "passage," or initiation, and that even these were not greatly emphasized, fitted in with the Stoczek Jew's view of life as an uninterrupted continuum. Much less, for example, was made of Bar Mitzvahs in this Orthodox community than is nowadays among un-Orthodox Jews in America. A child was not supposed to be responsible for his sins until his Bar Mitzvah, but in practice such responsibility began earlier.

IT WAS required of the Jews in Stoczek that they act in accordance with an unclimactic, steady, responsible conception of life. Temperateness and sobriety were obligatory. Excessive

laughter was avoided, and discouraged from childhood on as a sign of stupidity. "Why do you laugh so much? Is stupidity egging you on?" a mother would say to her children. A similar attitude was demanded toward eating and drinking. It was considered repulsive and un-Jewish for a man to get drunk. Of anyone who did, it was said, "He drinks like a Gentile." Eating was considered to be important because it maintained life, but one was not supposed to "plunge his whole head into it." The term reserved for animals was used when talking of a person who ate too heartily or too much. "He doesn't eat, *er fresst*," was often heard in Stoczek. Another frequent expression was, "He eats like a coarse Gentile," it being assumed that a man of refinement and learning would not eat with gusto.

Thus the Jews of Stoczek rejected any kind of experience that was extreme or cost the individual his self-awareness and self-control. Holidays, however, were an exception, and then spontaneity and self-indulgence were not only permitted but encouraged. Then one could behave in ways set apart from daily life; on the Sabbath one could dwell upon the goodness of food: men of refinement, scholars, and everybody else would smack their lips and exclaim over the fish and the other holiday dishes. "It has every flavor," or, "It has a real holiday taste," they would exclaim. On holidays one could drink, and even the "beautiful Jews," men of eminence, learning, and bearing, did so. To drink a glass too much on a holiday was to express one's joy in it, and in the Torah. For a grown-up Jew to dance on an ordinary day was to incur the suspicion of insanity, but on a holiday he would dance ecstatically with full social approval. At weddings and circumcisions, holiday behavior was in order. It was a sign of great friendship if a guest who was a "beautiful Jew" forgot his decorum and drank, danced, and jested. In Stoczek, Jews distinguished, not between the sacred and the profane, but between the everyday and the holiday, between the Gentile and the Jewish. Experiences and likeable things were called *yomtivdig*, holiday-like; they had *"yidishn chein"*—Jewish charm.

IN STOCZEK, Jewish life had to have rational goals, and all the activities of man had to be motivated by them. Only life with a purpose, *tachlis*, was meaningful; life without it was wanton. The things that gave purpose to life were the same as those that brought prestige. All life and all activity revolved around learning, family, and good deeds—as was vividly expressed in the blessing of the new-born baby at the circumcision ceremony: "May he be raised for the Torah, the wedding, and good deeds." One's duties were three-fold: towards God, towards family, and towards fellow men. To display pride was considered improper, and a person who did so was described as "he blows from himself." However, it was more than fitting to engage in activities and to place oneself in situations that brought prestige and resulted in praise from others. Marriage and children conferred self-esteem; charity and work for the welfare of the community did the same; and learning entitled one to eminence and status.

It was imperative that one fulfill his duties toward God, family, and the community in the prescribed forms, but society also furnished its members with certain props in meeting its demands, with rewards for having done so, and with excuses for not having done so. The culture of the Jews of Stoczek demanded, for instance, feelings of great intensity, but at the same time it provided stimulants to help produce them. Thus the professional wedding jester, the *badchen*, had the function of eliciting tears for the departed as well as laughter for the wedding feast. Many jests were made about how people made shows of emotion that they did not really feel. The story of the bride who sniffed onions in order to cry at her own wedding was proverbial. Such jests and stories indicated the recognition that people could not always summon up the socially required emotions, and that artificial displays of feeling were necessary to keep the social façade intact.

The rewards offered to those who fulfilled their duties were many. Although prestige and recognition were not supposed to be the mainspring of one's actions, there was ample awareness that they constituted, despite ever repeated warnings, a main incentive. What the culture did emphasize was the enjoyment to be gained in simply pursuing the goals it set. People were expected to take pleasure in learning, to rejoice in their children, and to delight in performing good deeds. To a great extent, they did do so, and Jewish life in Stoczek did contain a large element of joy and satisfaction. This was expressed when the writing of a new Torah was celebrated, when one's children said something clever, or when the master of the house tried to "beautify" a poor beggar and make him feel at home at a Friday night meal.

Rewards for doing the expected were many, but the ways leading to success in attaining socially approved goals were hedged with dangers. If one "immersed himself" in the study of the Torah, he risked losing his sanity. The rich man was exposed to jealousy and envy. One heard mothers whose children had died remark, "If he had not been so beautiful we wouldn't have lost him," or, "If he hadn't been so clever he woudn't have died." The dangers to which one was thought to be exposed by success and achievement acted as a reminder of the need for moderation. But not as a deterrent. No one stopped studying for fear of losing his mind. Nor did anyone give up the pursuit of money or the doing of good deeds because they might attract jealousy. Those who were rich tried not to flaunt their riches, "not to gouge people's eyes" with their wealth, but they did not always succeed.

If the dangers inherent in success did not prevent anyone from pursuing it, they at least did provide excuses for failure. Not only those who did not achieve the ideal, also those who did not meet society's more modest demands, had ready justifications to offer others—and themselves. "People envied me"; "You need luck in this world and I have no luck." A man who broke a religious rule excused himself by saying, "The Torah is to be lived with and not to die with."

Duties towards one's fellow men were held to be more important even than those towards God. One often heard it said that on Yom Kippur God forgave sins towards himself but not toward men. Much cited was Hillel's famous saying that the fundamental principle of the Torah is, "Do not do unto thy neighbor what thou wouldst not like to have done to thyself. The rest is commentary."

Even more was demanded, however, than is implied in Hillel's Golden Rule, and there was stress not only on not doing harm but equally as much on doing good. Jews were supposed to show mercy, compassion, and justice to one another. They regarded themselves as *"bnei rachmones,"* children of pity, and saw tenderheartedness as one of the most characteristic of their positive traits. One's obligation to the family came first, but the community was an extension and duplicate of the family. When a man was moved to act harshly towards another Jew he would check himself by recalling that, after all, it was a *yiddish kind,* "a Jewish child," that would be the object of his harshness. Adults as well as children were "Jewish children"—all being children of God. This notion carried much meaning in Stoczek, and one could hardly fail to respond to the plea of a person stressing that he was a "Jewish child." A hard mistress would be indirectly reprimanded by her maid with "One should not forget that I, too, am a Jewish child." As for justice—if one, in dealing with another Jew, felt that the other was driving too hard a bargain, he had only to cry, "Justice!" to give the other pause.

Jews conceived of themselves as being closely bound to each other; the interests of each were thought to be tied to those of all the others, and to those of the community at large. This idea was reflected in the sayings of the people, in the stories they told, and in their figures of speech. "What happens to Mr. Israel happens to all Israel," was a common saying. When talking about something good that had happened to himself or another, one would add: "The same should happen to all Jewish children." One often heard the Talmud story whose moral ran that "All Israelites are mutually accountable for each other." The story tells of men who were traveling in a boat. One of them started to bore a hole in the bottom. On being remonstrated with, he answered that he was only boring it under his own seat. "Yes," said the others, "but when the sea rushes in we shall all be drowned together with you. So it is with Israel. Its weal and its woe are in the hands of every individual Israelite."

With the above in mind, it becomes easier to understand the strong element of compensating personal security felt by the Jews of Stoczek despite the vicious persecution to which they were exposed. The outside world was hostile, but within his family and among his own kind the Stoczek Jew felt safe. Making a living was hard, but home was warm, and the community helpful. People always asserted that they kept an "open door"—that their door was open to everyone—which they meant both literally and figuratively. Doors were seldom locked except when goods of extraordinary value were on the premises.

Any Jew who came to Stoczek, even if he had no relatives there, would find that he could enter almost any house he chose. All knew in Stoczek that if they found themselves in a difficult position the community would not allow them to "go down" but would lend a helping

hand. "Among Jews you cannot get lost," was a frequent saying. To what extent this was true is vividly shown in the way, for example, the community acted when a certain respected and educated man died and left his wife and child destitute. The community council decided to grant the wife a monopoly of the sale of yeast, which was in great demand since most families baked their own *challah* for the Sabbath and holidays. No other store in town sold yeast, and the woman was, therefore, able to support herself and her child without too much trouble.

And not only did people help one another materially; the whole community would try to make it easier for those struck by a misfortune to live with it. Speaking to someone in whose family there was an apostate or an insane person, one was careful not to mention conversion, insanity, or any related subject.

This group consciousness, this sense of solidarity with all other Jews, was a striking feature of life in Stoczek. The lack of a feeling for privacy, for instance, both on the family and community level, can be understood only in terms of this deep and abiding consciousness of familial and communal closeness. It makes it more understandable why a society with such a wide range of acceptable patterns provided so little for isolation and privacy. Even the scholar was interrupted whenever anyone felt like it.

FROM all the above it might seem that the writer sees the Jewish community of Stoczek in retrospect as one of permanent harmony. This is far from so. Though the ideal pattern required solidarity, helpfulness, and a kind heart, actually there was much friction among the Jews of Stoczek. Despite frequent admonitions and strong condemnation of quarreling, much bickering went on. Side by side with the obligation to help those in need, there prevailed the habit of jealousy towards those well off. The commonly repeated dictum, "You must not gouge people's eyes," also meant that one should be careful not to give others the opportunity to be jealous. It is interesting to note that one could put the "evil eye" on someone without intending to do so. Excessive admiration, even by close relatives, was discouraged as inviting the "evil eye." (Sudden fright was second only to the "evil eye" as a "cause" of sickness.)

The Jews of Stoczek were aware of the faults as well as good qualities that made them "different from all other nations." On the positive side they considered themselves distinct in their "Jewish charm," "Jewish heart," and "Jewish head"; on the negative in being quarrelsome, contentious, difficult, over-wary, and fearful. "If Moses, our teacher, could not get along with the Jews, how can a plain Jew?" was often asked. The recognition of their own wariness and timidity found expression in sayings such as: "A Jew answers a question with a question," and "A Jew is afraid of his own shadow." These were a few of the sayings with which these Jews laughed off their faults and misfortunes.

But we find that the imaginary dangers and fears preying on them—such as the "evil eye" and even ghosts—served to mask very real dangers and fears arising from their actual situation as a persecuted minority. They were a projection of the suppressed fear of pogroms and of abuse in general. There was much fear in the atmosphere, but its real sources were seldom identified. People talked about pogroms or persecution only when a pogrom actually broke out in a nearby town. Otherwise, it was better not to dwell on such things, since one did not know how to cope with them.

The conviction that Jews could do nothing about their plight vis-à-vis the Gentile world was widespread. And so one tried to forget. However, danger was not to be banished by its mere forgetting, and fear continued to infect the air. Only it was attached to unreal dangers such as ghosts. After all, there were methods of dealing with ghosts: although Jews did not know how to handle a Polish urchin who threw stones at them, they knew that spirits could be driven away by reciting the *Shema*: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!"

Nor did their quarreling reflect genuine or deep hostility between the members of the community but, rather, suppressed hostility towards their persecutors outside. Jews could not express the resentment they felt toward Gentiles for fear of brutal retaliation, and they did not have the convenience of a scapegoat, so they vented their hostility in petty quarreling among themselves. An indication of the validity of this interpretation can be found in the fact that in these quarrels people usually avoided mentioning things that would really hurt their opponents. One might accuse another of many things and abuse him, but one would refrain from touching his sorest spot. And past quarrels were usually forgotten in time of real need. And no matter how serious the quarrel, one almost never took it to a civil court or reported an opponent's misdeeds to a government agency.

THERE was general agreement that little could be done to better the condition of Jews in Poland, for the Poles were Gentiles and it was natural for Gentiles to despise Jews. It was said that no matter how a Jew tried to please a Gentile he could never succeed for long.

Resignation and passivity were widespread even among children. School children were afraid to report bad treatment at the hands of Gentile fellow students to the school principal because he was Gentile himself. Jews feared the Poles and felt that the only way to deal with trouble was to avoid it. This fear applied even to the Polish language. A Jewish woman dentist came to Stoczek from Warsaw and opened an office. Since she spoke Yiddish and the older people had difficulty with Polish, she talked Yiddish to them at first, but soon discovered that this led her patients to become over-familiar; few paid their bills on time, and almost all haggled over fees. When she decided at last to speak only Polish, her patients soon gave up their free and easy ways with her.

The traditional attitude that it was futile to meet force from the outside world with force conformed to the general pattern of Jewish culture with its rejection of open violence. Jews were not supposed to fight with their fists, and those who did were said to "fight like Gentiles." The "bad" Jews in town were not only those who had money yet spent none of it on charity, but also those who "raised the hand" against others. This deep conviction that Jews must not use force was tied up with the belief that force could not be controlled. The popular tale of the great rabbi who created the Golem from clay and gave him life illustrated this. The Golem was supposed to punish those who injured Jews but soon he was striking everyone indiscriminately. The rabbi himself could not control him, and finally had to destroy him.

IF, DESPITE persecution, the Jews of Stoczek still felt sure that they would survive as a people, quoting the Midrash—"Kingdoms arise and kingdoms pass away but Israel endureth forevermore"—this is made understandable by the fact that the pursuit of their main social ends—learning, family welfare, and good deeds —did, indeed, keep them intact as a group. Learning served to keep the Jewish past alive and help maintain continuity—as was recognized to a large extent by the Jews themselves in Stoczek. "It is not we who keep the Torah, but the Torah that keeps us," they would say.

They did not believe that the bright future they expected would be brought by their own militancy or by their resistance to persecution; but this still did not mean that they were to wait for it passively and do nothing at all to bring it about. By obeying the Torah and the Commandments, every Jew could hasten the coming of the Messiah. Here again we find an identification of the individual and the collective that was characteristic of the Stoczek Jew. If only one Sabbath were kept holy by *all* the Jews in the world, the Messiah would come.

But Zionism had begun to spread in Stoczek with its hope for an immediate return to Israel, and its advocacy of the use of force to meet force in attaining that hope. At first, Zionism met with great opposition in Stoczek, and the first Zionist meeting place was called "Leibele Perkal's church," after the man who, in 1924, started the first Zionist group in town. Referring to it as a church labeled it as non-Jewish. Soon, however, Zionism gained converts among the youth, though it won over few among the middle-aged, and none at all among the old people. Significantly, the only stable Zionist group in Stoczek was that affiliated with Mizrachi, which stood for a synthesis of Zionism and Orthodox Judaism. As for the non-Mizrachi Zionists, they constantly changed their party allegiance, and now one party and then another would attract them, and they would shift over *en masse*.

But the belief that God would redeem his people by himself remained strong in Stoczek, and found colorful expression in a much repeated Talmudic tale. There was once a man who became betrothed to a beautiful maiden and then went away. Time passed and he did not return. Her friends and rivals mocked at her and said that he would never come back. She went to her room and re-read his letters promising to be faithful forever. She wept, read them, and was comforted. Eventually her betrothed did return and when he asked her how she had managed to keep her faith in him over so long a time she pointed to his letters. Such faith was also kept by Israel. "Israel in misery and captivity was mocked by the nations for her hopes of redemption; but Israel went into her schools and synagogues, took out her letters and was comforted. God would in time redeem her, and say, 'How could you, alone among all mocking nations, remain faithful?' Then Israel would point to the Law and the Prophets, and answer, 'Had I not Your promise here?'"