

## CHAPTER 2

### JEWES AROUND THE WORLD

Jews have lived in a variety of urban environments and a number of similarities in their patterns of settlement and lifestyles are evident from the literature. Furthermore the main stream of Jewish immigration into the ‘New World’ occurred from Eastern Europe. There seems to be a commonly accepted notion that the origin of the *Ashkenasi*<sup>1</sup> Jewish communities (Jews who are of Eastern European extraction) is that they came from the ideal Jewish world (ideal in terms of the maintenance of Jewish values) – the *shtetl*. The idea of the *shtetl* will be analysed and its nature, as a mythological place or an imagined landscape, will be discussed. The influence of the *shtetl* does not end with it as a nostalgic recreation of Eastern European Jewry’s past but rather is perceived to have been translocated onto the new landscape of the cities in which Jews settled. It is argued in this dissertation that the *shtetl* has never existed anywhere except in the Pale of Settlement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and even then the exact geographical nature of the *shtetl* can be brought into question. The nature of the Jewish urban experience raises questions about the relationship that exists between culture and geography, why a particular area looks and functions the way it does, which are ideas that will be introduced in this chapter and then picked up in greater detail throughout the dissertation.

#### **The Pale of Settlement and the *Shtetl***

To commence the discussion one needs to consider how the Jews came to inhabit Eastern Europe. Although having originated in Judah (present day Israel), Jews were forced on a number of occasions to migrate to other parts of the world. Firstly by the Babylonians in the fifth century Before the Common Era (B.C.E.) and later by the Romans, in the first century C.E., after the destruction of the second temple (Kedourie, 1998). The migrations were spread over vast areas ensuring that Jewish communities were established in places as geographically diverse as Iraq and Spain. The third forced migration in the first century C.E. sent the Jews moving northward towards the Caspian Sea where they settled and thrived. Unfortunately it was a temporary answer and once again, in the middle of the sixteenth century, they were compelled to leave their sanctuary, on this occasion, due to violent massacres and the outbreak of the Black Death that afflicted the area. They moved north and east hoping to find safe refuge, eventually inhabiting what is today Eastern Europe, particularly the part known as Poland.

The reality of why they settled in that part of Eastern Europe is due to the fact that it was ruled by the Khazarians, people who were of Turkish extraction but had converted to Judaism in the late eighth century. They welcomed their co-religionists and encouraged them to stay. Jewish folklore provides a different explanation for their settlement in the area. The generally accepted story tells how the expatriated community was wandering through Europe looking for a place to settle but uncertain of where to live until a piece of parchment descended from heaven bearing the Hebrew words *Po – Lin*, (literally translated as ‘stay here’ but also giving the phonetic origin of the name Poland) written on it. The refugees believed that it was the will of *HaShem*<sup>2</sup> to reside in this area and so they did, as instructions from the Divine were something they found difficult to disobey (Heschel, 1946).

The Khazarian Empire had not only attracted Jews from Asia but Western European Jews had also used the empire as a safe refuge during times of turmoil and persecution (Educators Primer, 1998). The Empire began to crumble at the same time as the Lithuanian monarchy was in the process of expanding its territory, thus by the end of the sixteenth century the Lithuanian Empire included the old Khazarian territory and its population of Jews.

German Jews were encouraged, with the rest of their compatriots, to move to Poland at about the same time, in order to help build the economy. In other parts of southern and western Europe Jews were suffering from persecution and expulsion and by the end of the sixteenth century they could only find refuge in the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom (Poland and Lithuania had been united by a royal marriage in 1386 C.E.) and the Ottoman Empire. The Lithuanian-Polish government encouraged the migration of Jews into their territory for two main reasons: the first was that Lithuania was sparsely populated and apparently needed people to settle on its wild and unclaimed frontiers; and the Jews’ ‘legendary’ ability to make money appealed to the upwardly mobile and highly ambitious Lithuanian-Polish rulers (Schoenburg and Schoenburg, 1991).

In 1772 Poland was invaded and divided up between Austria, Byelorussia, and Prussia but in 1795 Poland and Lithuania were put into the hands of Catherine the Grand Czarina of all Russia (Shamir and Shavit, 1987). Until Russia took control of these areas, the Jewish community had been able to stabilise and to carve out a place for itself in Lithuanian-Polish society. Lithuania and northern Poland had managed to escape the pogroms and massacres that had affected Galicia, Southern Poland, and the Ukraine (Schoenburg and Schoenburg, 1991).

In 1791 when the Czarina Catherine declared that Jews could only settle in a specified area which included parts of the Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Galicia. The area made up only four per cent of Russian controlled land and was known as the Pale of Settlement (Fig. 2.1) (Kaplan, 1979). Jews were, subsequently, forced out of the rest of Byelorussia and resettled in the Pale itself and there the Jews were left in peace for the next 60 years. It was so peaceful that the Jewish community flourished and the population almost tripled between 1820 and 1851 (Gershater, 1955; Schoenburg and Schoenburg, 1991). By the end of middle of the nineteenth century life in the Pale of Settlement became more and more difficult, due to a whole range of factors, which are discussed later in the chapter, and Jews began to leave in the hope of finding better prospects.

### The *Shtetl* in Reality and in Imagination

Over four million people immigrated out of Eastern Europe in the period 1840-1947 (Table 2.1) a vast number of whom came from the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe (Wischnitzer, 1948). *Shtetl* was the name given to the villages in the Pale of Settlement in which the Jews and large numbers of non-Jewish peasants lived. *Shtetls* have been defined in a number of ways over the years; Rothenberg, a notable Jewish author and historian, contends that “a *shtetl* was a small town, servicing the surrounding villages, where the Jewish population was of a size permitting everyone to know everyone” (Rothenberg, 1981: 26). Alternatively it was a “Yiddish-speaking, provincial society, orthodox in its religious practice and traditional Jewish way of life” (Zemel, 1999a: 197). Subtleties and semantics aside, what has become apparent is that the reality of life in the *shtetl* has been transformed into a number of myths and stories, creating a fascinating but not very factual Jewish folklore. The geographical reality of the *shtetl* has been replaced, in the minds of many, by an idealised version of the truth. There is a point of view that the *shtetl* was actually created twice, once by the Russian empire and a second time by the Jews, and their descendents, who had left the Pale (Rothenberg, 1981).

TABLE 2.1: Number of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe for the period 1840 – 1947.

<b>Years</b>	<b>No. of Immigrants from Eastern Europe</b>
1840 - 1900	985 000
1901 - 1925	2 119 000
1926 - 1939	654 000
1940 - 1947	262 000
<b>Total</b>	<b>4 020 000</b>
Source: Wischnitzer, 1948: 295.	

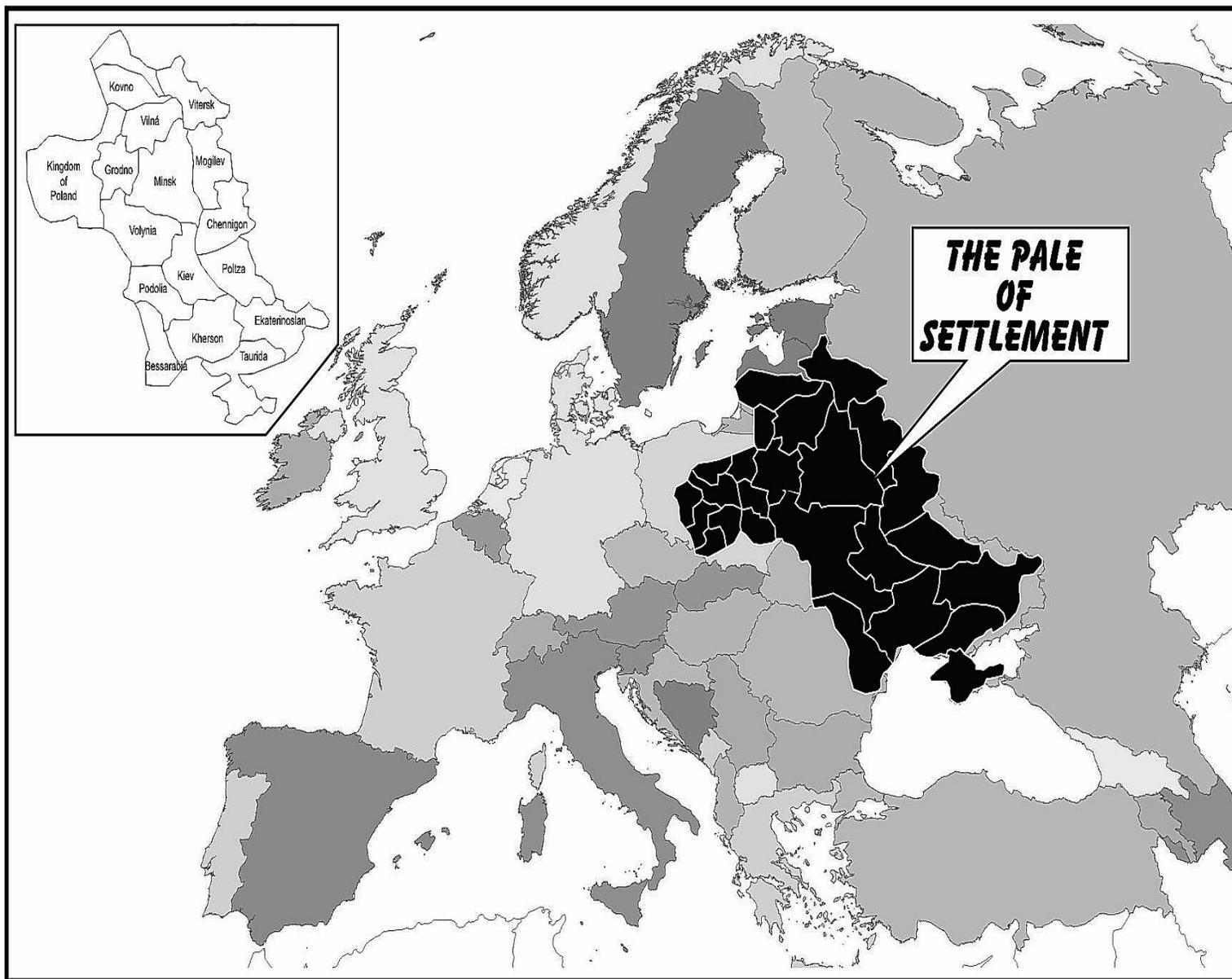


FIGURE 2.1: Map of the Pale of Settlement *circa* 1875.  
(Adapted from: University of Maine, Exhibition, 2002)

Will the real *shtetl* please stand up!

It is difficult to make geographical comparisons between the imaginary landscape of the *shtetl* and its reality as there is not a great deal of empirical work on the latter. Most of the maps that do exist were drawn from people's memory and are largely coloured by time and nostalgia (Herzog and Zborowski, 1952). The *shtetl*, according to the diasporic conception of it, was a uniquely Jewish world. It was well ordered, and structured according to Jewish law, and resulted in a vibrant Jewish atmosphere (Hersch, 1958). The literature creates a sense of a generic Jewish *shtetl*, so that irrespective of the actual location of any *shtetl* within the Pale of Settlement, it was similar enough to the other *shtetls* as to be almost interchangeable (Herzog and Zborowski, 1958). The *shtetls* each had, as it is explained in the mythology, a learned Rabbi, and a kindly *melamed* (Hebrew teacher) who ran the local Hebrew school where young Jewish boys were introduced to the study of religious texts. Jewish women were always good wives, good Jews, and happy with their lot, and Jewish girls were practically bursting with anticipation to follow in their mother's footsteps (Hersch, 1958). Although there was poverty in the community it was dealt with by the charitable organizations that existed within the towns.

The real *shtetls* existed as "scattered islands in a gentile ocean" (Barnavi, 1992: 1). They are described as places where order reigned because Jews led their lives according to the commandments set out in the holy books of Judaism. What is not often revealed are the tensions that lay within these communities. Not all Jews practised the same type of Judaism, there were Jews who followed assimilationist ideals and those who had been influenced by the *Haskalah* (enlightenment movement)<sup>3</sup> that had swept through Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century (Adler, 1980). There were Jews who were Zionists, socialists, and atheists, and there was certainly no universal agreement about anything (Gittleman, 1978). The communities were hardly homogenous and the tensions played themselves out in the form of family feuds and insults with each section of the community claiming its religious superiority.

*Shtetls* are often presented in a fairly utopian light in which the poor and needy are taken care of through the beneficence of the wider community but this is only partly true (Hersch, 1958). There were always charitable organizations charged with the well-being of the poor, as Jewish law and custom demands, looking after the welfare of those who could not take care of themselves, but in a population where as many as one third needed some form of charity obviously not everyone could be helped (Gittleman, 1978). Added to which there were reported

cases of embezzlement and fraud, situations in which people who were responsible for the aid agencies were pocketing the funds, and in extreme and infrequent cases this occurred in collusion with the rabbinate (Gittelman, 1978; Zemel, 1999a).

There are also descriptions of *shtetls* as ‘picturesque’ (Jaffe, 2001) or as places of dreamers and fools (Levi, 1955), and a place of order and reason (Herzog and Zborowski, 1952). These re-creations of the *shtetl* ignore the grinding poverty that existed. “The Jews live in great congestion, very often several families live in one small room . . . There are tradesmen whose families fast the whole day till the breadwinner comes home and brings his earnings” (Mendelsohn, 1991: 2). Howe, a well-respected Jewish scholar, tells of the twisting streets of the *shtetls*, with houses built on top of each other, terribly crowded and quite dirty (Howe, 1976). Many families lived below the breadline eking out a living in whatever way they could (Mendelsohn, 1991). Unfortunately the separation in time and space have nostalgically turned these places into a type of Jewish wonderland.

Jewish boys learnt Hebrew and engaged in Bible studies often from the age of five until at least thirteen, when they were initiated into adulthood through the *Bar Mitzvah* rites (a ceremony which welcomes Jewish boys into adulthood). To study the *Torah* (the first five books of the Old Testament) was seen as an important step in joining the greater Jewish community and it was meant to be an honour and a privilege (Zemel, 1999b). Sadly, the majority of the *melameds*, notwithstanding their kindness, were untrained and ill-paid and the conditions in which the children studied left a great deal to be desired. In a report of 1894 the conditions in the Hebrew schools are described as, “[The] *Talmud Torahs*<sup>4</sup> are filthy [and] crowded from nine in the morning until nine in the evening with pale starved children. These remain in this contaminated atmosphere for twelve hours at a time and see only their bent, exhausted teachers . . .” (Howe, 1976: 9). The *Talmud Torahs* (or schools dedicated to the learning and teaching of Hebrew and Biblical studies) and *chederim* (or afternoon Hebrew and Jewish studies schools) only taught Jewish studies along with Hebrew and generally did not provide a wider education. The result was that very few Jews could read and write anything other than Hebrew and Yiddish. The schools were also the unique preserve of Jewish boys. Girls were not provided with any formal education at all. Jewish custom and law, as well as their domestic apprenticeship, was passed on from mother to daughter.

There are reminiscences, in Jewish literature of the preparation of food for the Jewish festivals



FIGURE 2.2: Two women of the *shtetl*, Lithuania, circa 1880. (Source: Rubin Family Archive)

and for the Sabbath. The women in the *shtetls* woke up before dawn on Friday mornings to bake the ritual bread needed for the Sabbath festivities (Hersch, 1958). These are beautiful memories but they ignore the fact that these women probably then went on to work in the market place and to look after their children and their extended families (Gittleman, 1978; Adler, 1980). Women were expected to take care of all the domestic duties, contribute to the family income, and obey all religious tenets but for all of their contributions to daily and spiritual life the traditions of the *shtetl* did not even accord them a soul and they were typically seen as vastly inferior (Herzog and Zborowski, 1952). The endless grind and unceasing labour of the real world is far removed from the fantasy of the *shtetl* as a utopia for all. The toll that a lifetime of struggle had on the women of the *shtetl* can be clearly seen on the faces of the two elderly women photographed in about 1880 (Fig. 2.2).

#### Reasons for leaving the Pale of Settlement.

Life in the Pale of Settlement was far from ideal. The situation, however, became worse towards the end of the nineteenth century. Not only were Jews restricted to the Pale of Settlement but even within the Pale they could only live in certain towns and villages. Employment was restricted so that Jews were only allowed to practise certain occupations, they were not permitted to either own or farm land, were not allowed to enter the public school system, and the vast majority were barred from attending university (Gershater, 1955). The populations in the Jewish villages were also subject to any number of natural disasters; fires, droughts, and famines were widespread and frequent. By way of example in the two years 1868 and 1869, there was a cholera outbreak in the Pale of Settlement followed by famine, these two successive disasters killed thousands and motivated many people to try and leave as soon as humanly possible (Wischnitzer, 1948).

In 1874 an edict was invoked for the compulsory conscription of Jewish boys into the Russian army (Kaplan, 1979). At the age of 12 the first born son of every Jewish family was

supposed to be taken for military training, leaving their families and homes in most cases, forever. They were known as ‘Cantonists’ and were subjected to compulsory Christian education and a rigorous physical regime. Furthermore Jewish soldiers serving in the Czar’s armies were not granted leave to practise their religion or to return home for holidays or religious festivals (quoted in Gershtater, 1955). To add insult to injury Jews were not allowed to be promoted and often carried out their military service in the most remote and hostile environments in the Russian Empire (Kaplan, 1979). Consequently most of the conscripts were assimilated into the general Russian society thereby forsaking their Jewish roots or through being conscripted at too young an age for Judaism to have had any real meaning for them (Gershtater, 1955). This was an intended consequence of the Russian government and proved to be a highly effective tool in the slow but sure process of dismantling Jewish culture and reproduction.

Restrictions of movement, study, occupation, and the combined threat of conscription and forced assimilation would seem sufficient cause for emigration for any group of people. It was, however, only really in the early 1880s that panic set in and large numbers of Jews began trying to escape from Eastern Europe. In 1881 Czar Alexander II was assassinated, which was conveniently blamed on the revolutionary movement at work in Russia at the time (Shain, 1983). It was also believed that the Jews were in the vanguard of the revolutionary organizations. In response the state launched a series of pogroms (see for example Fig. 2.3) in the southern part of the Pale of Settlement, first in small villages and progressing later to include the larger cities of Kiev and Odessa (Gershtater, 1955). The international press reported on these outrages and paid special attention to the Russian state’s reaction, which ranged from complete indifference to active support and further encouragement of violence against Russian Jews.



FIGURE 2.3: A rendering of survivors from the pogroms in Pale of Settlement. (Source: Wischinitzer, 1948: 39).

Given the deterioration in the political climate, from a Jewish perspective, large numbers of Jews flooded to the west to try and escape the violence within Russia and the Pale. The Russian Minister of the Interior, when questioned about how the Russian government would protect the Jews from renewed bloodshed stated, “The western frontier is open for the Jews. The Jews have already taken ample advantage of this right and their emigration has in no way been hampered” (Gershater, 1955: 65). At the same time even harsher economic sanctions against the Jews were instituted, the liquor trade that had, to a considerable extent, been in the hands of the Jews was taken over by the government. German businesses, particularly those in the textile industry, which for centuries had used Jews as middlemen and facilitators, were given leave by the Russian government to deal directly with the non-Jewish Russian peasants. These actions forced an already impoverished Jewish community into further decline (Hersh, 1958). It must be noted, however, that the harsh conditions within the Pale of Settlement, and the Russian government’s anti-Semitism, did not convince all Jews that leaving Russia was the solution to the problems of Russian Jewry. Many of the more educated Jews felt that staying in Russia and fighting for political enfranchisement was the only way to ensure a better future for Russian Jewry. They argued that by leaving they would seem to be giving in to the anti-Semitic policies and laws of the Russian government (Wischnitzer, 1948). With such goals in mind they held conferences and seminars in which they discussed the issues. Sadly all they were doing was fiddling while the Pale and its people literally burned. The pogroms continued and more Jews died.

Although pogroms did not actually take place in Lithuania itself, a sense of fear and insecurity prevailed. It was fuelled by a series of laws that were instituted in 1882, and that further restricted the movement and settlement of Jews in the region, simultaneously giving the provincial authorities greater control over the Jewish community (Gershater, 1955). Occupational restrictions and economic opportunities became even more limited when, in 1882, the May Laws were promulgated. These laws forced Jews out of the *shtetls* and small villages and into the larger urban areas. The cities were more industrialised than the rural or peri-urban fringes but employment was scarce. As a result many migrants to the cities found themselves unemployed and were soon looking for ways of emigrating (Kaplan, 1979).

Limited living, working, and study opportunities, combined with enforced assimilation through conscription and the threat of violent persecution on an ever worsening scale meant that by the middle of the 1880s the Jews of Russia were more than ready to leave the land of their birth. Many families were making provision to send either their sons or husbands into the ‘New

World' and by then South Africa, with the discovery of its mineral wealth was becoming an attractive destination that they could not ignore.

### **Mythologizing the *Shtetl***

In the above discussions two different conceptualizations of the *shtetl* have been presented. The *shtetl* is depicted as a place of grim poverty, full of politically sanctioned anti-Semitism. Yet contradictions abound within Jewish literature and art. In these cultural artefacts the *shtetl* is a place of order, holiness, and beauty. The reasons for such a notable discrepancy need to be discussed in order to understand the place that the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe have within Jewish history and folklore.

A number of theories have been offered to try and explain both how and why the *shtetl* was transformed into the dreamy image that is so commonly accepted, even in the face of the fact that over four million people left the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe in just under 50 years. Some protagonists argue that it is through the transformative powers of literature and through the work of a number of Yiddish writers that the *shtetl* took on mythical proportions (Gray, 1984). Shalom Aleichim, Y.L. Peretz, and more modern authors such as Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski, told stories for a predominantly diasporic, immigrant Jewish population; people who had been removed from the reality of Eastern European life and who had not really experienced it first hand (Gray, 1984). Yiddish and Eastern European authors reinforced the stereotypes through their works, picking themes, and characters that entrenched the tempered images into the Jewish diasporic consciousness. To a large extent they created the lens through which Jews living in the new world absorbed their history.

Estraikh and Krutikov (2000), in some of the most recent publications completed on the topic, discuss the work of the artist Marc Chagall, with his painted images of life in the Pale. Chagall was a Russian Jew who lived and worked in France for most of his life but was born and grew up in the village of Vitebsk in the Pale of Settlement (Pavlova, 2004). His works are highly fantastical, depicting scenes of surreal beauty, in which folklore and reality are skilfully mixed (Fig. 2.4). He draws on Jewish folklore but mixes it with real images of people and places, giving his work a feeling of authenticity but still reconstructing the reality of the Russian world into something beautiful.

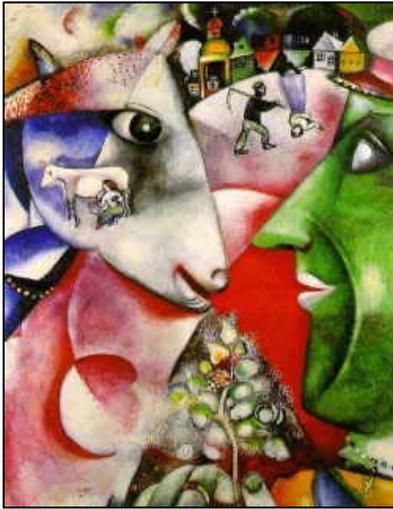


FIGURE 2.4: The Village – Mark Chagall, 1911.  
(Source: Mitrevski, 1999).

The transmutation of the *shtetl* from what it really looked like (Fig. 2.5) compared to its idealised view, did not only occur in art and literature. Zemel (1999a; 1999b), a noted Jewish photographer, highlights the work of Jewish photographers. She argues that pictures taken of the *shtetl* for calendars and books to be sold in the United States, were idealised. Composed to give a very particular image of the *shtetl* as a place of untouched Jewish history, perfect and unique, and it was a project that was successful in the process of ‘idealising’ the *shtetl* in the minds of the diasporic communities.

The modern film industry has also contributed to the transformation of the *shtetl*, films such as *Yentl* and *Fiddler on the Roof* have regrettably provided many people with an idealized conception of life in the Pale of Settlement. Unfortunately, as has been shown above, these sentimentalized and romanticized versions of life in the *shtetl*, to a large extent, misrepresent the real conditions extant in the Pale. The fact that there is such a wide acceptance of the idealized Jewish life in the Eastern Europe seems to imply that there was a demand for the re-modelled *shtetl*, an audience that willingly accepted the romanticized version that was presented to them.

Roskies (1998) in his seminal work, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*, argues that the *shtetl* is a “covenantal landscape”, by which he means that Jews throughout history have made covenants or contracts



FIGURE 2.5: Aryanglia *Shtetl*, Lithuania, circa 1890.  
(Source: SABJD Archives, 2004).

with *HaShem*. These agreements were basically to keep his laws and in doing so to maintain their identity as Jews (Roskies, 1998:2). Later when this was no longer considered desirable, Jews entered into a contract with their pasts. American Jews, he argues, maintained their identity as Jews by never forgetting the past, and have re-created a sanitized or perfect version, of their history from which they can formulate a group identity (Roskies, 1998). Other academics agree to a certain extent, saying that an idealized, and in a sense a stereotypical, image of the past also provides for a sense of a shared legacy (Rothenberg, 1981; Zemel, 1999a; Wettstein, 2002). This endows the community with a mutual banner, or a reason, to feel a connection based on a series of collective ‘memories’. The past, even if it is ‘mythologized’, becomes a way of accessing and maintaining a group identity in the present (Zemel, 1999a).

Another argument is that the idealization of the *shtetl* affords the Jews one part of their history that is not filled with pain and persecution. It is a type of refuge from their past (Gray, 1984). It could be argued further that the ‘transformation’ of the past from its cruel reality into a softened and entertaining memory is tied up with the idea of ‘owning’ a part of history that is not corrupted by external forces. Due to its isolation, the *shtetl* is ‘perfect’ - an uncorrupted landscape; one that has not been contaminated by the society in which the Jews lived, and as such it becomes an important image in a project that seeks to reconstruct history (Heschel, 1946). There are, however, those who believe it is simply a matter of fond reminiscences clouding the memories of those who lived in those places and times, a natural process of nostalgia that has coloured the past (Neugroschel, 1979). Whatever the process was that achieved the transmutation the strange alchemy resulted in an ideal isolated from time and space, awesome in its proportions, unencumbered by history or context, and a link to what is perceived as a common past.

### **Jews in the New World**

Thus far the conditions in Eastern Europe, both real and remembered have been discussed and provide a basis for understanding the motivation for the Jews’ emigration into the New World. Jews immigrated to a wide variety of destinations (Fig. 2.6). Yet there were a number of similarities and differences in the settlement and distribution patterns of the immigrant Jewish communities in their new urban environments.

#### **Jews in urban environments**

The deteriorating conditions and threat of death and disease resulted in the largest outpouring of Jews from Eastern Europe between the years 1880 – 1920 (van Onselen, 2000). It

is estimated that 2 650 000 Jews emigrated from the Pale of Settlement between the years just mentioned (Green, 2000). They went to London, New York, Paris, Boston, St. Louis, Johannesburg, Buenos Aires, and Sydney, to name a few of the more popular destinations in a variety of countries (Figs. 2.6 and 2.7) (Sarna and Smith, 1995; Cutler, 1996; Ehrlich, 1997). The largest number of them went to New York and by 1910 some 795 000 Jewish immigrants from the Pale had settled there, and comprised 14 per cent of the city’s population. London and Paris also had large influxes of Jews but relatively speaking Jews only made up 1-1.3 per cent of the respective populations (van Onselen, 2000). The first census in Argentina, in 1895, showed that there were 6 000 Jews living in the country, a tiny minority when compared with the rest of the population (DellaPergola, 1987). A small number of Jewish convicts, estimated to be about 1 000, were exiled from Great Britain and sent to Australia between 1788 and 1852 but it was only after 1830 that ‘free’ Jewish immigrants arrived as colonists in Australia. The majority of those settlers were British and the Australian Jewish community remained under the aegis of the British Chief Rabbinate in all religious and cultural matters for many years. The expansion of the Jewish community in Australia only really occurred during the 1880s with the influx of Jews from Eastern Europe, a pattern that was repeated in many other countries to which Jews immigrated (Elazar and Medding, 1983).

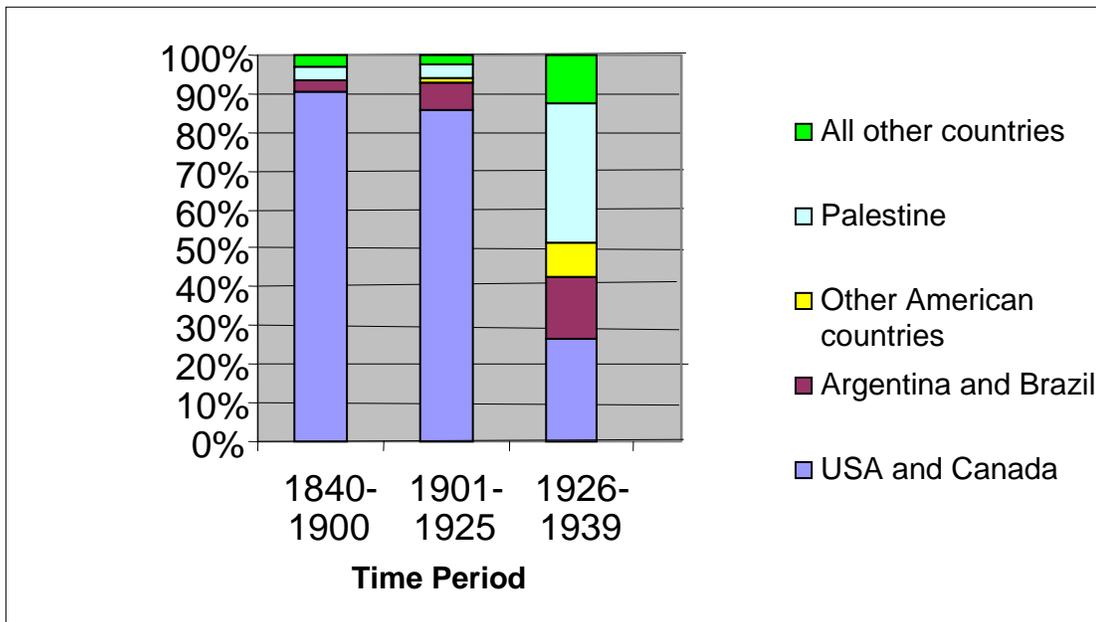


FIGURE 2.6: Percentage of Eastern European immigrants to various destinations. (Adapted from: Wischinitzer, 1948: 295).

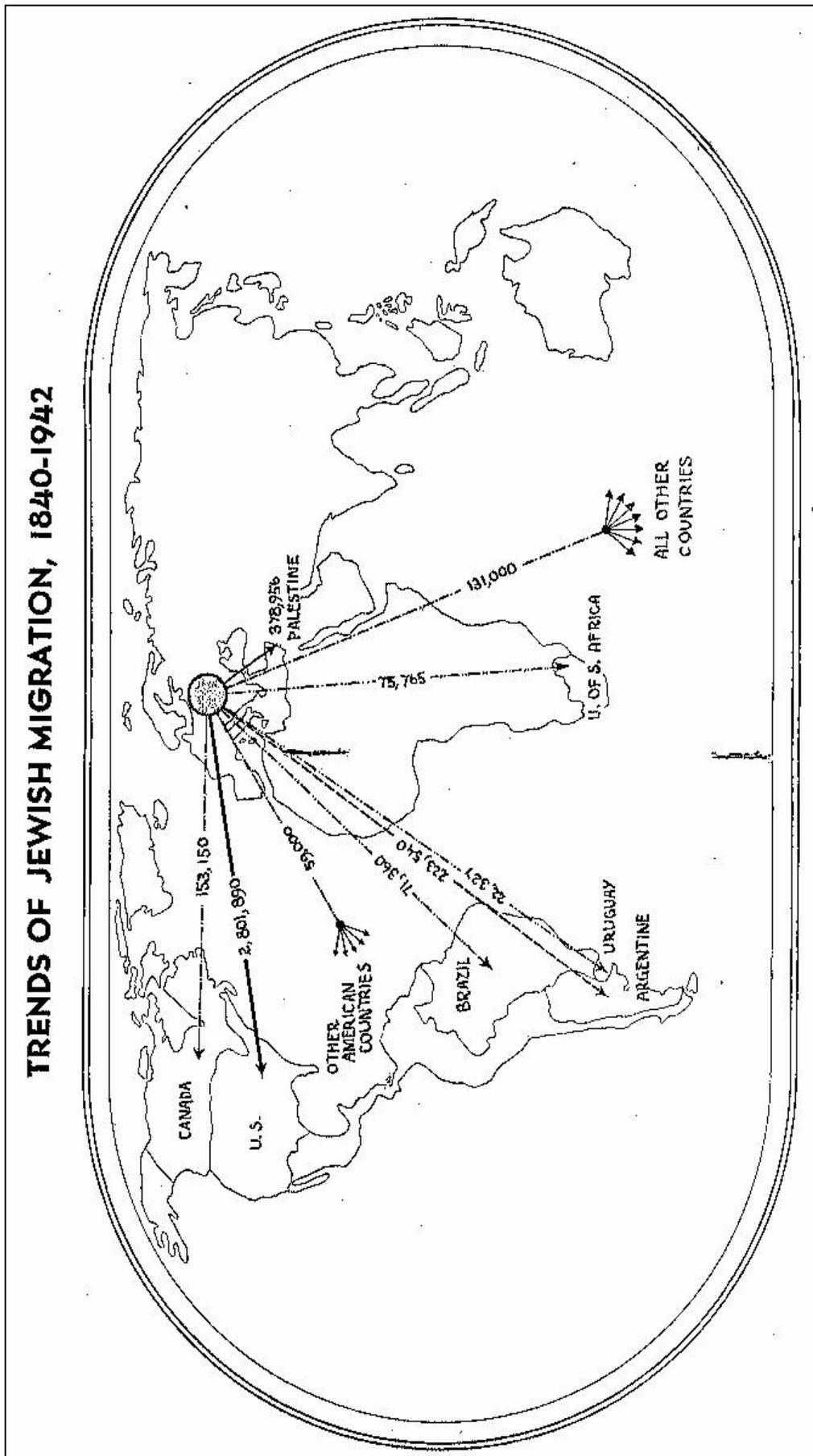


FIGURE 2.7: Trends of Jewish Immigration from Eastern Europe to the rest of the world. (Source: Lestchinsky, 1944: 12-13).

Decisions, Decisions.

Few diaries, journals or other forms of personal correspondence have survived the passage of time. Consequently it is difficult to know exactly how and why individuals made decisions and as a result certain assumptions can be drawn from the evidence that does exist. The decision to immigrate to a specific place was a rational one, Jews examined what was on offer, in terms of which countries would grant them visas or work permits, and made a decision that they thought best for themselves and their families. The choice was further influenced by whether there was work, freedom, safety, and an existing Jewish community, which was taken as a good sign, in the countries chosen as destinations, in short the emigrants wanted to know that they were moving to somewhere better (Metzker, 1971). Letters were sent back to the *shtetls* telling of the conditions in the cities of choice, and people were warned of the difficulties experienced in London and the appalling living conditions in New York (Brown, 1979; Fishman, 1988). How a country was perceived played an important role in the decision-making process (Kabakoff, 1995). Green (2000) quotes from Roger Ikor's book on the immigrants of Paris and looks at the reasons behind the choices,

“Ah! England has a lot of good points . . . but no, not England either. . . And Yankel listed all the reasons for avoiding England. But he forgot the only real one, that England is an island, and he absolutely did not want to settle on an island. You can never get away from an island, and you never know when you might want to leave.

. . . News from New York was encouraging. Emigrant letters talked about masses of money to be earned . . . [what] he wanted was a gentle and humane existence. But he had heard of the harshness [with] which the American officials greeted the new comer. . .

France . . .

When the word was pronounced in Rakwomir, faces lit up. Victor Hugo, Voltaire, the Rights of Man, the Revolution, the barricades, liberty-equality-fraternity . . .”

(Quoted in Green, 2000: 282)

Immigrants made decisions based on all the information to hand, and equally importantly where they could go was determined by the price of the ticket they could afford (van Onselen, 2000). The results of the Eastern European emigration, meant that cities, which originally had small elite Anglo-German Jewish communities, were flooded with poor Jews from the Pale by the beginning of the 1900s.

## Living in the city

Similar to most poor immigrant communities, Jews first tended to congregate in the poorest sections of the cities in which they settled (Howe and Libo, 1979; Fishman, 1988). Their poverty and unfamiliarity with their new environments caused them to cluster together, creating entire Jewish districts (Gordon, 1949). This led an American pro-restrictionist, and closet anti-Semite, to comment that, “. . . centuries of enforced ghetto life seem to have bred in them a herding instinct” and “more Jews will crowd upon a given space than any other nationality. . .” (Waltzer, 2000: 295). The best known Jewish quarters were the East End of London, the Lower East Side in New York, and the *Pletzl* district of Paris (Green, 2000). Less well-known are the Jewish districts that were established in the *barrios* and working class suburbs of Rio de Janeiro and in Leylands, Leeds, which was a well-defined area that was one of the oldest and most overcrowded parts of that city (Gilam, 1981; Vieira, 1995). The Jewish Brazilian writer Samuel Rawet who immigrated with his family to Rio de Janeiro describes how it was only by leaving his Jewish neighbourhood that he was able to hear and later to learn Portuguese (Vieira, 1995).

The areas that Jews resided in were generally over-populated and run down, owing to the poverty of the people and the unfortunate capacity of the better off to take advantage of the dispossessed and vulnerable (van Onselen, 2000). Many of the families rented two rooms, living in the one and subletting the other (Howe and Libo, 1979). If finances were in an even worse state than usual, families were evicted from their homes. They could often be found outside their apartment blocks, huddled together with their worldly possessions, hat in hand, keeping one eye on the passers by and the other firmly on their furniture and belongings (Metzker, 1971). The conditions in these areas were generally ignored by the local authorities until a crisis occurred, such as the cholera epidemic in Hamburg, and the municipal leaders were then forced to respond (Fishman, 1988; van Onselen, 2000).

The many impecunious Jews worked in any number of trades in order to keep body and soul intact. Many of the immigrants had been craftsmen and artisans in their hometowns (Atlasowicz, *circa* 1998). In the less industrialized southern hemisphere, such Jews worked in general stores, way stations, and some became the archetypal figures of later Jewish myth, the travelling salesmen (Mirelman, 1987). In the more industrialized north, Jews worked in factories and specialized shops (Brown, 1979). They were not always well-received and in some cases not received at all into certain local economies. In Detroit, for example, there was an unspoken rule

that none of the 29 motor manufacturing plants in the city would hire Jews (Waltzer, 2000). Jewish women also contributed to the household income, they took in piecework, particularly for the garment and textile industry. The women, generally, worked from home and were paid per item produced (Stedman Jones, 1971; Hyman, 1991).

An interesting distinction can be made when talking about the work situations of the Jews in London, New York, and Paris, that it was more likely for an Eastern European Jew to find work as a tailor in New York, as a boot maker in London, or as a cap maker or carpenter in Paris (Green, 2000). The reason is due to the location of the areas in which the Jews had chosen to settle (Fishman, 1988). The Lower East Side of New York was the centre of the garment industry, whereas Whitechapel and Mile End in London hosted a number of abattoirs, tanneries, and leather works. The Jews, however, were subject to the vagaries and whims of the economy and during times of depression when money was scarce families starved (Metzker, 1971). Jews were also associated with dealings in the illicit liquor and prostitution rackets, with some of them even running international white-slave networks and national liquor syndicates (for further details see van Onselen, 2000).

Gradually, with the passage of time, the economics of the Jewish community changed and their climb up the social ladder grew swifter and swifter. Jews, who had once worked in factories, began to own and run their own businesses, employing other immigrant Jews who in turn eventually established their own businesses. It became a system of mutual upliftment and support, creating, in essence, something very similar to an ‘old boys’ network’ (Neusner, 1981). First generation immigrants tried to ensure that their children were better educated and had greater opportunities than had been their lot and by the second and third generation in their adopted countries many Jews had moved into the ranks of professionals or were working in managerial positions.

### **Reproduction of the *Shtetl* in New Urban Environments**

As has now been shown, there were certain commonalities across many of the new-found communities in the New World. It remains to explore why the commonalities existed. Essentially when one considers the Jewish community, particularly one comprised of immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe, one is focusing on a diasporic community. That is one which “. . . is in the wrong place: it is to be dislocated like a limb out of a socket” (Wettstein, 2002: 1). In point of fact it might be said that the Jews were doubly diasporic, initially because of their forced exile from the Land of Israel and then later because of their migration from their next adopted homeland. Said

(2000), a Palestinian academic who spent most of his life working in the west, knows the feeling first hand and claims that to be in exile is “the unhealable rift forced between a human and a native place” (Said, 2000: 173). In order to survive within the strange new spaces various tactics were adopted to ensure the survival of the migrant’s identity. The first and most applicable strategy when it comes to discussing the Jews is the sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Due to the forms of Jewish religion and culture specific to Eastern Europe, the definition of who is ‘us’, was initially quite straightforward (Herman, 1977). Yet, it was not only a matter of Jews separating themselves from a wider non-Jewish community but also the wider community recognizing that the immigrant Jewish population was not the same as their own. By doing so they in turn constructed their own idea of difference (Silverman, 1998).

Once there is a recognized difference between people, what naturally follows is the erection of boundaries, obvious and unconscious dividers between different groups of people. These boundaries maintain the ideas of difference between the groups and subsequently become spatially manifest and the two groups live apart from each other observing the invisible, but acknowledged, division (Wilton, 1998). In the case of the Jewish immigrants in new cities, they constructed and maintained the ‘us/them’ binary opposition, both socially and spatially but it will be further argued that the nature of the landscapes within the boundaries, that the Jews created for themselves, also preserved and reproduced a particular formulation of Eastern European culture and identity.

In much of the literature surrounding Jews in urban environments, the words ‘*shtetl*’ and ‘ghetto’ are often mentioned. For example the East End of London is described as looking exactly like an Eastern European *town* (Feldman, 1994: 166-167). The Jewish quarter in Detroit, is portrayed as a *ghetto*, whereas Meyer (1979) refers to the burgeoning Jewish area of Boro Park, New York, as a return to the *shtetl* (Waltzer, 2000). There is an implication within the literature that the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe were somehow being replicated or even translocated onto the new environments.

One argument for the ‘apparent’ reconstruction or transference of the *shtetl* to the new world is that migrants of all descriptions need to create a memory of ‘home’ (Rapport; 1995). The way in which they do differs widely from group to group. It is further argued that what happens is that through a series of cultural ‘practices’ a sense of home is maintained. Unfortunately, these practices are often no more than selective nostalgic memories of home, or alternatively are taken from the wider discourse of the migrants’ image, borrowed from the new home. So instead of

creating an authentic ‘home’, what takes place is a constructed culture that is in many ways in keeping with the stereotypes of the migrant population (Rapport, 1995). It can be reasoned that in a sense the immigrant Jewish population bought into the cultural stereotyping of the mythological ‘*shtetl*’, and in doing so, physically reconstructed their conception of the ‘*shtetl*’ or the ‘ghetto’ in their adopted countries.

A slightly more practical insight may be offered by the idea that culture shapes landscape (Crang, 1998). The cultural necessities of any group of people mould their environment to their own needs. Therefore the religious requirements of the Jewish community, ensured that the places where they lived could provide them with the services they required. It seems simple enough but it is not just the physical needs that the landscape must provide but also the cultural ones – in the case of the Jewish immigrants the necessity for the reproduction of Jewish culture. The survival of the Jewish community is a fundamental driving factor in the lives of the Jews (Neusner, 1981). The physical separation of the Jews is not only due to a sense of difference but also to the need to ensure the survival and reproduction of Judaism within predominantly non-Jewish environments. In an essay entitled ‘The Affirmation of the Diaspora’ Simon Dubnov argues exactly that point, “. . . you ask what wall shall we erect in place of the fallen ghetto walls? Every period has its own architecture, and the powerful vital instinct will unmistakably tell the people what style to use for building the wall of national autonomy which will replace the former religious ‘fence to fence’ . . .” (quoted in Zemel, 1999a:198).

The enforced physical partitioning of Jews from non-Jews may have been built out a need for a sense of ‘home’ but it is more likely that the geographical forms, which have evolved within the urban environments, are there predominantly to ensure the survival of the Jewish way of life, culture, and religion. Boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and the certainty of having all religious, cultural, and social needs met within a certain area, means that people do not have to step outside of it to satisfy their requirements, and so the likelihood of carrying on the Jewish faith is far stronger.

## Notes for Chapter Two

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<sup>1</sup> *Ashkenasi* is a term that refers to Jews of Eastern and Western European extraction, whereas Jews who are from Mediterranean countries such as Spain, Portugal, and South America are referred to as *Sephardi* Jews (Ward, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> *HaShem* is the name used in secular texts to refer to G-d, the full name of G-d is reserved for spiritual and religious writing.

<sup>3</sup> The *Haskalah* was an intellectual enlightenment movement that swept through Europe from the 1770s until the 1880s. It inspired rational consideration of religious texts and encouraged Jews to study secular topics and disciplines (Schoenberg, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> There are two different kinds of Hebrew schools, *chederim* and *Talmud Torah*. *Chederim*, were Hebrew classes for young children, whereas *Talmud Torahs* actually refers to the act of studying the Holy Texts of Judaism and can and should be enacted by men and women who are over the age of *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, and are considered to be adults in the community. In the South African context it refers to the schools where people, including children preparing for their *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* ceremonies, could study Jewish lore (Schneerson, 2004).