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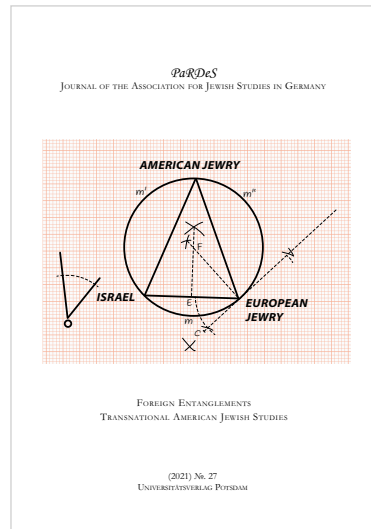
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In Search of Belonging: Galician Jewish Immigrants Between New York and Eastern Europe, 1890–1938

by Oskar Czendze

Abstract

More than 200,000 Jews left the Habsburg province of Galicia between 1881 and 1910. No longer living in the places of their childhood, they settled in urban centers, such as in New York's Lower East Side. In this neighborhood, Galician Jews began to search for new relationships that linked the places they left and the ones where they arrived and settled. By looking at Galicia through the lens of autobiographical writings by former Jewish immigrants who became established residents of New York, this article emphasizes the role of regionalism in the context of transnational conceptions of a new American Jewish self-understanding. It argues that the key to analyzing the evolution of "eastern Europe" as a common place of origin for American Jewry is the constant dialogue between the places of origin and arrival. Specifically, philanthropic efforts during and after the First World War and the proliferation of tourism both enabled these settled immigrants to gradually replace regional notions, such as the idea of Galicia, with a mythical image of eastern Europe to create a sense of community as American Jews.

1. Introduction

Saul Miler, a garment worker and union leader in New York, was born in 1890 in a small town in the Habsburg province of Galicia, Dobromil.¹ In 1907, after a year-long unsuccessful search for work as tailor, he emigrated, arriving in New York, settling on the Lower East Side. Twenty-five years later, Miler portrayed his native Galician town as follows:

¹ The Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria was a crownland of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from 1772 to 1918. Today, the historic region is located in southwestern Poland and western Ukraine.

“The little Jewish shtetl Dobromil was a little shtetl like all the other little shtetls of Galitsia [sic], but yet it lay in a setting of scenic natural beauty. It nestled there in a valley, this shtetl, ringed around with lofty green hills, with bountiful orchards, with flower gardens, an atmosphere fragrant with bracing fresh air.”²

Although Poles, Ukrainians, and Germans made up half of the population of this town before the First World War, Miler draws a picture of a genuine Jewish village in idyllic natural surroundings, a timeless island untouched by the disorder of the surrounding sea.

It is a picture of a Jewish place of origin that resembles much of how American Jewry today imagines the places their families came from. Much of this knowledge about eastern Europe comes via mass-produced cultural “texts” created in the postwar period, such as films, music, photographic and art books, and novels.³ The *shtetl* (small town), with its archetypal figures, has become the mythical model for Jewish communal life in eastern Europe. Monolithic and timeless, it evokes a culture disembodied from any notions of regional distinctions or social, economic, or political reality.⁴

In the same year that Miler portrayed his Galician hometown, 1932, a young woman named Rose Schoenfeld traveled to her native town Drogo-bych in the newly established Second Polish Republic. Twenty years passed since she had left her home and family in Galicia for New York. As she notes in her autobiography, submitted to the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in 1942, she wanted to see her now 88-year-old mother, whom she had not said goodbye to before emigrating to the United States:

“I did not enjoy the trip at all [...] The houses were shot up and the people went around half-naked. [...] The whole city besieged me when they heard that the American had come. Each person cried, pleaded for help, and begged me to look up their friends and their landslayt [people from the same town] in America so they could help them. [...] Poverty showed on everyone’s face. My brother did not even

² Saul Miler, *Dobromil: Life in a Galician Shtetl 1890–1907* (New York: Loewenthal Press, 1980), 3.

³ Markus Krahn, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past* (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018).

⁴ For a detailed exploration of the myth and history of the *shtetl*, see Steven T. Katz, ed., *The Shtetl: New Evaluations* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Antony Polonsky, ed., *The Shtetl: Myth and Reality*, Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry 17 (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004); Jeffrey Shandler, *Shtetl: A Vernacular Intellectual History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

have a tablecloth to lay on the table for the Sabbath. From all his wealth, only a mountain of ash remained, because the Russians had burned his houses.”⁵

Although Schoenfeld herself had experienced hardship and poverty in her childhood in Galicia, she remembered her hometown, like Miler, as a joyful place. After a 20-year absence, she was shocked to see Drogobych and her family in decay. While her emotional ties to Galicia never completely vanished, the visit had revealed how unfamiliar eastern European society and its environment had become, how different from her memories – a strangeness caused in part by her modestly successful life as a resident of New York.

This dialogue between imagination and reality, between life in the United States and the places Jews left, shaped Jewish immigrant life since the beginning of the mass migration in the 1880s. In the Lower East Side, Jews debated what it meant to be “American,” or from “eastern Europe,” or a distinct region, such as “Galicia.” While in the early decades of mass migration, regional labels, such as the *Galitsianer*, served the purpose of maintaining a sense of belonging to places of origin while navigating the densely populated and culturally diverse immigrant neighborhood, the interwar period brought dramatic changes to these affiliations. The First World War, changes in American immigration policy, processes of acculturation, the coming of age of a new generation, and tourism forced the settled Jewish immigrants to rethink their connection to the places they had left. This search for belonging, between New York and eastern Europe, stimulated an important process of modern American Jewry, namely the gradual disappearance of notions of regionalism. It ultimately consolidated an image of “eastern Europe” as a poor, simple, but genuinely Jewish homeland.

2. Regionalism: Jewish Life and the Idea of Galicia

Like the majority of Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Rose Schoenfeld lived in Galicia before emigrating to the United States.⁶ Born Roze Shrayer in 1884 in Drogobych, she grew up in a traditional, religious household. Her

⁵ Rose Schoenfeld, “What Drove Me to America and My Experiences in Europe and America,” in *My Future is in America: Autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants*, eds. Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 160–188, here 186.

⁶ The number of Jews in Galicia ranged between 575,433 in 1869 and 871,895 in 1910 (around 11 percent of the total population at both times). See Klaus Hödl, *Vom Shtetl an die Lower East Side: Galizische Juden in New York* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1991), 21–22.

father Yehude Shrayer came from a family that stood in a long tradition of rabbis, and her mother was related to the Zhidachover Hasidic rabbi Yitzhak Ayzik Eichenstein.⁷ Since the parents did not have a boy until their daughters reached young adulthood, Schoenfeld and her sisters un-customarily attended the *heder* until age 14 to ensure the continuity of a traditionally learned Jewish household.⁸ She later married Reb Hersh Meylekh Shenfeld, a descendent of a rabbinic family. In the United States, she changed the spelling of her originally Yiddish first and married last name into Rose Schoenfeld in order to increase her opportunities to become a professional writer.

Despite imperial pressures of enlightenment and secularization, Galician Jewry retained its religious identity throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.⁹ The Hasidic movement, a mystic-orthodox branch of Judaism that stressed devotional joy, optimism, and spirituality, gained widespread popularity in the late 18th century, with Galicia becoming its center after 1815.¹⁰ Based on this religious and social movement, a distinct notion of the region emerged in the second half of the 19th century. Ironically, it was mostly anti-Hasidic Galician Mitnagdim who, in their writings, tried to transform the region's Jewry in the spirit of Jewish enlightenment but instead helped create the label of a Hasidic Galicia.¹¹ An additional Jewish intellectual elite emerged in the Lithuanian territories of the Russian Empire, who emphasized a scholarly approach to the study of biblical texts and forcefully distinguished themselves from their Galician Hasidic counterparts.

Between the 1890s and 1914, nationhood became another key category of Jewish self-understanding in Galicia. The region served as a venue for modern mass movements and activism for Jews across Europe.¹² In Drogobych, for example, Zionists owned a library from which Schoenfeld started to borrow books, after she had read all the books in the public library. She soon became

⁷ Schoenfeld, "What Drove Me to America," 160–162.

⁸ Schoenfeld, "What Drove Me to America," 165.

⁹ Cf. Rachel Manekin, *The Jews of Galicia and the Austrian Constitution: The Beginning of Modern Jewish Politics* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2015) (Hebrew).

¹⁰ For the Hasidic movement in Habsburg Galicia, cf. David Biale et al., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 262–273, 359–386.

¹¹ Cf. Nancy Sinkoff, *Out of the Shtetl: Making Jews Modern in the Polish Borderlands* (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2004), 225–41.

¹² Joshua Shanes, *Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish Identity in Habsburg Galicia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

invested in local politics, collected ballots for the Zionist party during the Austrian parliamentary elections in 1911, and sent her children to Hebrew school.¹³

Like its geopolitical position between the German and Russian empires, in-betweenness became the defining feature of Galicia, a cultural bridge connecting central and eastern European Jewries. The idea of Galicia as a distinct region emerged at the beginning of its existence, in 1772. Austrian administrators intended this region to be “a non-national formation of a provincial Galician culture,” with a supranational father figure in the emperor, who stood above ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity.¹⁴ This cultural formation outside of any national framework enabled distinctive, hybrid identities among its Polish, Ruthenian (Ukrainian), German, and Jewish inhabitants. As a result, people of Galicia constructed regional identities with different meanings.

Poverty and hardship shaped most people’s everyday life in the Habsburg province and became another important marker of this region. Saul Miler worked in a tailor shop which closed before he was able to finish his apprenticeship. No tailor wanted to hire him again in Dobromil.¹⁵ Schoenfeld’s family moved often between Drogobych and Boryslav, a center of the oil industry where her father worked, while her mother cooked kosher food for Jewish patients in the town’s hospital.¹⁶ Schoenfeld’s husband “used to sit and study and did not want to know what was going on in the outside world.”¹⁷ She had to sew dresses to earn money to care for her newborn children. At the beginning of the 20th century, with development of the oil industry in Boryslav, large companies bought up houses in the city. Schoenfeld and her husband, along with many others in the town, received financial compensation from these firms. But the oil boom was short-lived. As the oil market flooded, some companies stopped drilling, and many other went bankrupt, with workers losing their jobs. Schoenfeld and her husband stopped receiving their monthly checks and ended up in poverty again.¹⁸

¹³ Schoenfeld, “What Drove Me to America,” 179–180.

¹⁴ Larry Wolff, *The Idea of Galicia: History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 110.

¹⁵ Miler, *Dobromil*, 49.

¹⁶ Schoenfeld, “What Drove Me to America,” 163–166.

¹⁷ Schoenfeld, “What Drove Me to America,” 171.

¹⁸ For a detailed history of the oil boom in Galicia cf. Alison Fleig Frank, *Oil Empire: Visions of Prosperity in Austrian Galicia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

3. Galicia in New York's Lower East Side: The Use of Regional Labels

Impoverishment, poor economic conditions, and anti-Jewish riots in 1898 were some of the factors that led to a mass migration from Galicia starting in the 1890s.¹⁹ Schoenfeld's husband, for example, reached out to his aunt in the United States who sent him a ship's ticket and money. Her husband emigrated to New York City in 1907, and five years later, 28-year-old Rose Schoenfeld "decided to flee Galicia" alone, joining him in the big city.²⁰ After staying with Schoenfeld's cousin for five months in Drogobych, their children followed. Her parents vehemently opposed her decision to emigrate to "treyfene [sic], impious, America."²¹ While her father wanted the husband to come back and take over his business in Drogobych, her mother feared that Rose "would die on the ship and would be thrown into the sea."²² She refused to say goodbye to her daughter.²³

Uprooted from their places of origin, Galician Jews, just like other Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants, encountered in all places of migration different languages and cultures. In this contested space, they all faced a common challenge to create a community with a sense of belonging to both the places they left and where they settled. In New York, the center of immigration in the United States, eastern European Jewish immigrants settled on the Lower East Side. An already established Jewish infrastructure, including institutions built and supported by immigrants who had arrived much earlier and experienced economic success, such as German Jews, helped support the newly arrived eastern European Jews, who later created their own cultural and social support systems.²⁴ They established, for example, hometown associations (*landsmanshaftn*) based on the cities and towns of origin. Between the early 1900s and late 1930s, there were thousands of such societies in the New York area

¹⁹ Daniel L. Unowsky, *The Plunder: The 1898 Anti-Jewish Violence in Habsburg Galicia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018). Around 236,504 Jews emigrated from Galicia between 1881 and 1910, about 85 percent of the total Jewish emigration from the Habsburg Empire. The majority came from western Galicia between 1891 and 1900. Cf. Hödl, *Vom Shtetl*, 35–36.

²⁰ Schoenfeld, "What Drove Me to America," 181.

²¹ Schoenfeld, "What Drove Me to America," 170.

²² Schoenfeld, "What Drove Me to America," 181.

²³ Schoenfeld, "What Drove Me to America," 178–182.

²⁴ Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 47–49.

alone, and perhaps 20,000 in the rising industrial centers of the Northeastern and upper Midwestern United States.²⁵ Both the already existing Jewish infrastructure and the newly established networks of support promised Galician Jews a fast rise in economic sectors and supported a sense of cultural community and social stability.

These hometown organizations maintained both ties to and memories of the places immigrants left, while providing mutual help and orientation in the country where they had arrived. Landsmanshaftn created a sense of community not only by cementing the pattern of settling with people from the same place, but also by providing a steady stream of news from eastern Europe. Schoenfeld notes how landslajt approached her immediately after arrival to get news from their families and fellow townspeople. With the help of the landslajt, she started to write for various Yiddish periodicals in New York, such as *Yidisher Amerikaner*, a weekly for which many Galician Jews and representatives of the United Galician Jews of America wrote.²⁶

The density and diversity of people, religious and cultural customs, and languages on the Lower East Side helped to construct and redefine regional labels, such as the *Galitsianer*, as it made encounters between immigrants from various regions in eastern and southeastern Europe unavoidable. In American Jewish culture and memory, the *Galitsianer* evokes a wide series of images and emotions. In general, these vary from notions of backwardness to romantic glorification of an authentic Jewish past.²⁷ For many years, the notion of cultural divisions between regions in eastern Europe was limited to an intellectual debate within isolated circles in eastern Europe. Only the immigrant experience on New York's Lower East Side, beginning in the 1890s, made it possible for Jews to encounter different regional cultures and traditions on an everyday life basis. These regional labels helped Jews to navigate their present life, while maintaining a sense of stability and continuity.

²⁵ Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York 1880–1939* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1997), 201.

²⁶ Schoenfeld, "What Drove Me to America," 185.

²⁷ Albert Lichtblau, "Galitsianer and the Mobility of Stereotypes," *Jewish Culture and History* 11 (2009): 84–105.

4. Galicia Imagined: The Work of Nostalgia

This sense of belonging to a specific region, based on a lived experience with other cultures and customs, experienced a major shift during the interwar period. On the one side, the National Origins Act in 1924 led to a radical decrease in the numbers of migrants from southern and eastern European countries to the United States.²⁸ The immigrant community stopped receiving crucial waves of new members, and thus lost a direct connection to the places from which they had come. On the other side, the First World War caused massive destruction in their former hometowns, especially in the region of Galicia. Famines and pogroms during the Ukrainian Civil War (1918–1919) shattered both communal organization and the possibility for immediate help within the Jewish communities.²⁹ In contrast, Jews in the American diaspora were spared from the experience of these events, which enabled them to be the helpers and rescuers of their former homes.

Being in a comparatively comfortable position, while friends and relatives suffered immensely across the ocean, motivated community organizations and settled immigrants to intensify their contacts and launch an effort to rebuild the Jewish communities in eastern Europe. Rose Schoenfeld, for example, started to receive letters from her family with “loud complaints about their misfortune and ruination.”³⁰ She tried to bring the five children of her sister who died in the war to the United States but succeeded with only one of them. A second child was stopped in the mid-trip and sent back. Schoenfeld helped her family across the ocean with money and packages of clothing and food.³¹ *Landsmanshaftn* mobilized an impressive amount of material help across their ideological, political, and religious differences and together with other Jewish organizations, like the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.³²

²⁸ Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 78.

²⁹ Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration 1840–1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 165–166.

³⁰ Schoenfeld, “What Drove Me to America,” 185.

³¹ Schoenfeld, “What Drove Me to America,” 186.

³² Eli Lederhendler, *American Jewry: A New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 130.

The immediate danger of a vanishing Jewish world brought eastern Europe into a central position in the immigrants' lives. It threatened to create a psychological gap between their life in America and the places they left, a gap perhaps more difficult to bridge than the geographic separation. This sense of a growing distance occurred at a time when the first generation of American-born children of eastern European Jewish immigrants came of age, while the immigrant generation started to project a longing for their youth onto the places they left. In response to this threat of discontinuity with the past, the immigrant generation now emphasized their common bond with the inhabitants, friends, and families in their hometowns. Solidarity shifted its focus from the newly arrived poor immigrants to the United States to Europe.

This turn, however, frequently led to an idealization of a lost past that reflected, as Svetlana Boym describes, a "longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed, a sentiment of loss and displacement, but also a romance with one's own fantasy."³³ Nostalgic images of eastern Europe and a dream of the *shtetl* as a specific form of collective memory started to blur the reality of regional differences and replace them with a monolithic and static vision of "eastern Europe."

Rose Schoenfeld depicts Boryslav, the town of poverty and hardship in her childhood, as a place where:

"some made more, some less, but they did not worry. They were like family. Every holiday was a grand, joyful experience, being together in the synagogue and in the Hasidic prayer house. Those who were not so pious would get together on the porches and tell jokes, anecdotes, and whatever anyone knew that would help them be merry."³⁴

Former Jewish immigrants, such as Saul Miler or Rose Schoenfeld, created positive pictures of their towns, images full of charm, pictures that reflected their desires. A myth of the *shtetl* arose as a lost idyll of a simple and harmonious Jewish community destroyed by the modern world.³⁵

³³ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 19.

³⁴ Schoenfeld, "What Drove Me to America," 172.

³⁵ David Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 43–44.

However, sometimes Jews were conscious of the contradiction nostalgia produced. Joachim Schoenfeld, unrelated to Rose Schoenfeld, reflects in his memoir on his Galician hometown, Sniatyn: “Actually, it may be wrong to call the place a *shtetl*, and not a city as it really was. However, having in mind the core of the city, where the Jews lived on a kind of isle, surrounded by a sea of Gentiles, I call it the *shtetl*.”³⁶ The historical small town, and thus regional and historical characteristics, like those found in Galicia, have to give way to the generic image of the *shtetl*. It is a reconstruction of a past that had never altogether existed, only in the way people imagined it.

Already in the 1920s and 1930s, the idea of the *shtetl* turned into a synonym for a timeless eastern European Jewish community, a world of authentic Jewishness. As a common place of origin, it became increasingly central to conceptions of self-understanding in American Jewry. This imagination of eastern European Jewish culture dominated depictions of the Jewish past in American popular culture after 1945, in fiction, theater, plays, music, paintings, and – best known – in the famous musical, and subsequent film adaptation, *Fiddler on the Roof*.³⁷ However, unlike this later mass production of nostalgia, which owes much of its power to the effects of the Holocaust, the earlier images, created by individuals, mainly expressed a sense of loss born out of an immediate fear of failing to maintain a connection to the places that the immigrant generation had left only a decade or two before. It was a personal story of finding a sense of belonging at a time when the ties to the homeland slowly began to vanish.

³⁶ Joachim Schoenfeld, *Shtetl Memoirs: Jewish Life in Galicia under the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in the Reborn Poland, 1898–1939* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1985).

³⁷ For a detailed description of the invention of *shtetl* images in popular culture after 1945, cf. Shandler, *Shtetl*, 35–49, and Krah, *American Jewry*, 212–240. While Krah places the re-invention of the eastern European Jewish past and its distinctive significance for American Jewry in the decades after 1945, such developments can already be traced in the interwar period. For a more detailed exploration of interwar commemorative practices, cf. Oskar Czendze, “Between Loss and Invention: Landsmanshaftn and American Jewish Memory in the Interwar Era,” *Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 17 (2018): 35–56.

5. Imagination Meets Reality: American Jewish Tourism in the Interwar Period

A key force behind nostalgia is the notion of destruction and loss. While the increasing mental distance crystallized a mythical Jewish homeland in romanticized pictures, tourism to eastern Europe brought this fantasy in contact with the desperate reality of the former Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia, now a part of the Second Polish Republic. In the 1920s and 1930s, American Jewish tourists were part of a general increase in middle-class leisure travel.³⁸

Travelling to eastern Europe was by no means a new phenomenon. During the 1890s and 1900s, immigrants returned because of failure in business or employment, a sense of displacement, or the wish to participate in the politics and culture of the places they left. Some visitors went back to recruit new work forces. Miler recalls a visit of an “ex-Dobromiler” who saw him sewing pants at home and offered him a job as “pants operator” in his factory in New York.³⁹ As Schoenfeld writes, other men traveled to find wives in their hometown and bring them back to the United States. She was introduced by friends to a “handsome, rich young man who had worked his way up in America,” and brought “expensive gifts of fine jewelry and other fine things.”⁴⁰ This man visited his family in Drogobych in the early 1900s and Schoenfeld fell immediately in love with him. However, her parents opposed the relationship, and the young man left Drogobych to go back to New York, alone.

In addition to fears of losing connection with the places where Jewish immigrant communities came from, several other factors contributed to the boom of tourism to eastern Europe in the interwar period. Radical political changes in eastern and central Europe, such as the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the establishment of new nation states after 1919, made Europe an attractive destination for a wildly diverse set of visitors. Tourist agencies, such as Gustave Eisner in New York, specifically targeted middle-class Jews and promoted excursions to the Soviet Union, Poland, Lithuania, or Romania. *Landsmanshaftn* often raised funds to send delegates with financial relief and

³⁸ Daniel Soyer, “Back to the Future: American Jews Visit the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (2000): 124–159, here 124.

³⁹ Miler, *Dobromil*, 50.

⁴⁰ Schoenfeld, “What Drove Me to America,” 170.

personal letters to their hometowns. For some, including pioneers of Jewish labor movements, union presidents, journalists, or outspoken Communists, the Soviet Union represented a dynamic and, in many aspects, more innovative alternative to the monotonous life in the United States.⁴¹ For others, who were able to afford it, these trips meant a journey into one's personal past, a chance to bring the new generation of American-born children to see their hometowns. These personal journeys were by no means a phenomenon that is limited to the American Jewish experience. Irish, Italian, or German immigrants took part in the tourism boom to Europe, and often shared the same fears, hopes, and anxieties.

More than two decades after he emigrated to New York and after years of active service in various Galician immigrant organizations, the Yiddish writer and humorist Chune Gottesfeld made a journey that took him from Berlin to Warsaw, Lemberg, Tarnopol, and finally his Galician hometown, "his little shtetl," Skala, in 1937.⁴² Just like Schoenfeld in Drogobych, he was shocked to see destruction and poverty and wrote about the muddy streets and backward way of life he witnessed. He portrayed his cousin Kalman as a "man with a large, wild beard (the kind of beard you see in America in the movies, on a wild man wrestling with lions in Africa). And moreover, he had an abscess on his cheek and looked ancient."⁴³ Gottesfeld recalls how in his youth Kalman was a womanizer who recited poems by Friedrich Schiller to strangers on the street. Over 20 years later, his appearance had changed. However, both Schoenfeld and Gottesfeld perceived the poverty of people and their surroundings in the former Galicia through the lens of their successful lives in New York. In the end, this personal transformation in the United States shaped the settled immigrants' feelings of displacement and the way they saw the actual fate of the people in the place they had left behind.

American Jewish tourists captured these moments of alienation not only in diaries and travel reports, but also in photographs, which were often shared with family or friends in the United States. In these pictures, they pose, for example, in front of a farm, animals, or together with old friends, relatives, and the townspeople. They mostly depict a rural, religious, and simple life,

⁴¹ Soyer, "Back to the Future," 124–159.

⁴² Chune Gottesfeld, *My Journey Across Galicia* (New York: Signal Press, 1937), 48 (Yiddish).

⁴³ Gottesfeld, *My Journey*, 50.

scenes that were familiar to the audience in the United States from nostalgic accounts they had read and shared in the immigrant community. In addition, these photographs documented their personal transformations in American society and the growing cultural distance between them and the people they left. Likewise, Jews in former Galicia faced the obvious “otherness” of their friends and family members from America. In their elegant clothes and with their modern cameras, many American Jews were regarded as “the other” by their former neighbors.⁴⁴

Some wealthier tourists documented their experience in film. For example, in 1929, Pesach Zuckerman, who was sent as a delegate on behalf of the Kolbushover Relief Committee in New York, made a professional movie of his Galician hometown, Kolbushov.⁴⁵ Even more than photographs, movies could construct a narrative, and Zuckerman reproduced a sentimental image of an eastern European *shtetl* as a shared space of Jewish origin. Scenes of traditional Jewish everyday life appear throughout the film: Jews buying and selling at the marketplace, children going to the *heder*, and Jews waiting in front of the synagogue, often waving, and smiling into the camera. This intimate glimpse into eastern European Jewish culture is further intensified by the filmmaker’s personal appearance in front of the camera praying at the gravestones of his family members. This emotional tribute seemed not only to immortalize the towns as a past that needed to be remembered, but also to reproduce an image of a more authentic Jewish life, a key part of American Jewish nostalgia of the interwar period.

For the settled Jewish immigrants of New York, going back to their places of origin in Galicia was more than a journey across space; it meant travel through time. In an attempt to find a lost past, they faced their friends’ and families’ poverty and simple way of life. They realized how unrecognizable Galicia, which they all shared in their memories, had become. As American Jewish tourists they now encountered their hometowns through a different life. The range of nostalgic images they produced within their immigrant community offered a lens through which to cope with feelings of alienation and to give a meaning to this disruptive experience. In photographs and films, they immortalized a timeless and monolithic vision of an eastern European

⁴⁴ Cf. Roberta Newman, “Pictures of a Trip to the Old Country,” *YIVO Annual* 21 (1993): 223–239.

⁴⁵ Pesach Zuckerman, *A Pictorial Review of Kolbishev, 1929*, YIVO, New York, VM13.

past. Regional distinctions in American Jewish consciousness made place for a mythic image of “eastern Europe.”

6. Conclusion

In her autobiography, Rose Schoenfeld ends with a vision of what constitutes a true Jewish life in the United States in her eyes. She proudly mentions that her son studied at a yeshiva in New York, while her husband “is what he wanted to be. He is a pious Jew who sits and studies with other Jews. And that is his whole life – to be a Jew.”⁴⁶ It is an understanding of Jewish life that strikingly resembles the religious self-understanding of Galician Jewry, including the values upheld by her family. Even though she found comfort in her new role as American citizen and writer in New York, remnants of regionalism, specifically the idea of Galicia, can still be found in her narrative.

A region, such as the former Habsburg province of Galicia, offers a window into how Jewish immigrants and their children constantly negotiated both a reality and a sense of belonging between the places they left and where they settled, between the past and present. While at first regional labels helped immigrants to maintain social and cultural stability in the densely populated Lower East Side, the First World War and tourism made Jews aware of how vulnerable and how distant these regions were. In an attempt to bridge this growing alienation and to give meaning to the disruptive experience of feeling foreign in the places of their childhood, the former Jewish immigrants shaped the contested image of “eastern Europe” as a monolithic Jewish *shtetl*. Unlike regional labels which aimed to resemble life and culture of concrete places, a mythic homeland allowed the settled Jewish immigrants to maintain a sense of belonging and common heritage while accepting the fact that they became Americans. The work of imagining home and negotiating what it means to be a Galician Jew outside of Galicia, in New York’s immigrant neighborhood, continued with the purpose of creating a community as American Jews with a common sense of origin.

This story of searching and finding new belongings between New York and eastern Europe highlights the crucial role of regionalism in conceptions of a new American Jewish self-understanding. Links that Jews forged between

⁴⁶ Schoenfeld, “What Drove Me to America,” 188.

the places they left, crossed, and settled in reveal the complex transformation processes within American Jewry, such as the constant negotiations between notions of American, Jewish, and regional belonging. Illuminating these transnational processes helps to understand the inherent fluidity and plasticity of categories, specifically of “eastern Europe” in American Jewish culture.