

## Walking the “Jewish Street” in 1894

By the end of the 1800s, there was a “Jewish street” in villages and towns across the Pale of Settlement. Many Jews lived in small villages, known as **shtetls**, whose population was almost entirely Jewish; but most now lived in larger towns and cities including Kiev (Kyiv), Odessa, and Vilna (Vilnius). Wherever they were, Jews managed their own affairs through organisations called **kahals**. Although the government had stopped recognising **kahals** in 1844, they continued to coordinate religious activities, burials, education, and care for the sick and poor.

Around one-third of Jews were industrial workers, who suffered terrible working conditions and dire poverty. Most Jewish workers were employed in small workshops, although a growing number worked in large factories in the bigger towns and cities. Around 10% of Jews had no permanent jobs and lived on the margins of society as **Lufmentschn**, “people of the air”, who were forced to find work wherever they could. It was little surprise that many Jews, by the 1890s, were joining radical socialist organisations, including the **Bund**, Russia's first **Marxist** organisation. Many others who could not make a living in Russia chose to **emigrate** for work (and to avoid persecution), including to the USA and Western Europe.

Yet a small number of Jews made a huge contribution to Russia's growing economy, becoming successful businessmen who helped build railroads, water transport, the oil industry, and banking. They were the exceptions. Most Jewish businessmen ran small shops or were **artisans** and **peasant farmers**, who made a living selling what they made or grew with their own hands.

Although over half of ethnic Russians were still illiterate, most Jews – boys and girls – could read and write in at least one Jewish language, either **Yiddish** (spoken by most Jews) or **Hebrew** (traditionally the language of Jewish religion, spoken by well-educated Jews). Some could also read and write Russian. Education was generally conducted in Jewish schools, which were notoriously strict, although many Jews also attended Russian schools.

Greater literacy allowed new Jewish culture to flourish. Jewish writers produced novels, short-stories, and plays, amongst them the famous writer Mendele Mokher Sforim, commonly known as **Medele the Bookseller**, who wrote important works in both Hebrew and Yiddish, as well as translating foreign-language literature into both languages. Literature was often supported by wealthy Jewish business owners, who donated money to support journals and scientific research.

Even for those Jews without an interest in literature and science, there was a cultural blossoming. From the 1870s, Yiddish theatre had begun, with local amateur theatre groups as well as more professional outfits touring to put on plays by Jewish writers. Although it became hugely popular amongst the youth, Yiddish theatre was not always widely appreciated by older Jews and was repeatedly **repressed** by Tsarist authorities. Nevertheless, Jewish actors and writers who emigrated from Russia took Yiddish theatre with them, establishing successful and lasting groups in countries such as the USA.

More successful was Jewish music. In metropolitan urban centres, especially the city of **Odessa**, Jewish violin music developed rapidly, producing half a dozen world-famous violinists, including some who would later make their reputation in the United States. Music also made its way into the **Brody Synagogue** in Odessa, which hired a professional conductor and choir, and later installed an organ – a radical move by the standards of conservative **Orthodox Judaism** at the time!

While many Jews continued to actively practice their religion, beliefs also were changing. From the 1880s onwards, **Zionists**, who argued Jews should seek a homeland of their own in **Palestine**, became more influential. Zionists argued it was impossible to make a successful home for Jews in Russia: repression and antisemitism were simply too severe.

Others disagreed. Some well-educated liberal Jews called for Jews to become an active, loyal part of Russia without letting go of their own cultural and religious heritage. More numerous were Jewish socialists. A number of young Jews had been active in the populist movement, including **The People's Will**, the terrorist organisation which assassinated Alexander II in 1881. After this, however, most Jewish populists had been pushed out of the movement, after populist leaders had praised the pogroms of 1881-84 as a sign that peasants were beginning to fight back against their "oppressors".

Jewish socialists in the 1890s were mostly **Marxists**. Alongside the Jewish **Bund**, which combined Jewish cultural identity with socialism, key members of the **Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party** (RSDWP) were Jewish, including **Leon Trotsky** (born Lev Bronstein), a future leader in the Bolshevik (Communist) Party. It would often be argued (especially by antisemites who tried to blame Jews for Russia's problems) that Jews were the main leaders of the socialist movement. In reality, Jews were a minority in socialist parties, although many did choose to join socialist parties for a variety of reasons.

Adapted and developed from Zvi Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present* (various editions)