A 21st Century Yiddish Pastoral

Negotiating the Rural/Urban Divide in Max Gross' The Lost Shtetl

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The Rural Dybukk

The 19th century shtetl has become a cornerstone of Jewish-American nostalgia, the fascia of cultural memory. The spatial, linguistic, and political organization of the rural Eastern European Jewish village provide a core to the diasporic nostalgia of the Ashkenazim (Jewish people whose ancestors lived in central and Eastern Europe)[1] in the United States. This shtetl as it is written in the works of, among others, Shalom Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer is a fiction, what sociologist Ruth Gay describes as a »dybukk, a lost spirit changing its form as it changes the body in which it lives« (Gay 1984: 331). Its importance as Jewish cultural heritage is without question but it is just this importance that has left it an idealization of its historical existence, an »invention« (ibid.: 329) of American Jews.

The destruction of the shtetl as a spatial and cultural arrangement and the murder or displacement of all its inhabitants throughout the latter part of the 19th century through the first half of the 20th century – the pogroms that swept through the Pale of Settlement (the region in the Russian Empire where Jews were allowed to reside) were a major factor in the immigration of Jews out of Eastern Europe[2] and the Holocaust all but completely wiped out the Jewish population which had remained in Europe thereafter – allowed for this idealization to crystallize into a central tenet of Jewish-American cultural memory because no comparisons could be made to any contemporary reality. An added dimension to this physical displacement is the landscape which the Jewish-American diaspora comes to inhabit; urbanity is central to Jewish-American life for »more so than

1 According to Pew Research 66 % of Jews in America identify as being Ashkenazi or having Ashkenazi ancestry where only a combined 7 % consider themselves to be Sephardic, having Iberian ancestry, or Mizrahi, having Middle Eastern ancestry (Mitchell 2021).

2 The United States saw the mass migration of over two million Eastern European Jews between 1880 and 1924, »having been pushed out of Europe by intense nationalism, overpopulation, oppressive legislation, and poverty, they were pulled toward America by the prospect of financial and social advancement« (Williams 2018: 88).

many American religious groups, Jews cast their lot with American cities« (Dash Moore 2014: 1). In this understanding there are two spatiotemporal centers at play: contemporary urban America and the 19th century shtetl. These centers, separated by time and space, relate to one another through a diasporic nostalgia, that is, through the cultural memory of the Jewish-American diaspora, but are vastly different in their temporal and spatial organization.

The term diaspora, though its definition has been expanded to include other cultural and ethnic groups who have been displaced from their spatial origins, has always been deeply tied to the Jewish people, as »diaspora referred to a very specific case – that of the exile of the Jews from the Holy Land and their dispersal throughout several parts of the globe« (Safran 2005: 36). The definition of diaspora has broadened since[3] and thus requires clearer definition in order to properly pinpoint its critical utility. Sociologist William Safran sketches several criteria for defining a group as diaspora, the first two being:

> »1. They, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original ›center‹ to two or more peripheral, or foreign, regions. 2. They retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, achievements and, often enough, sufferings.« (Safran 2005: 37)

For the Jewish people, particularly observant Jews, the original center of the collective imagination was ancient Israel. גלות (Galut) describes the diasporic condition of the Jewish people whose twofold exile from ancient Israel led to their dispersion throughout the globe and the eventual settling of the Ashkenazim in Eastern Europe following the expulsion from England in 1290, from France in 1306, and from Spain in 1492.[4] What occurred following these expulsions, the movement of the Jews to Eastern Europe where Jewish life rooted and flourished, and the destruction of this life and culture at the hands of the Third Reich, created the conditions for a new center of Ashkenazi life to emerge within the collective memory and myth of the diaspora: the shtetl.[5]

Max Gross' debut novel The Lost Shtetl (2020) imagines a contemporaneity between the 21st century urban landscape of Jewish-America (substituted with Polish urban environments which are nearly indistinguishable from any other Western metropolis in the novel) and the 19th century rural landscape of the shtetl. Kreskol, a shtetl which lost contact with the outside world around the outbreak of the first World War and thus was spared the destruction that the 20th and 21st century wrought, is – after a messy divorce in the village leads two young Kreskolites to venture beyond the forest surrounding it

3 See Aviv/Shneer 2005 for a detailed look at the development of the term diaspora and its shifting meanings throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

4 For an in-depth look into the history of these expulsions and the scholarly discourses surrounding them see Kedar 1996. For more on the settlement of the Jewish people in Eastern Europe see Stampfer 2012.

5 See Pinchuk 2001; Klier 2000; and Roskies 2000 for a survey of the shtetl's history and its development from lived spatiality to »a ›state of mind‹, an idyll, an exercise in nostalgia, [and] an artistic construct« (Klier 2000: 23).

– rediscovered by the modern, 21st century world. The only outsider to find Kreskol before this moment was a Holocaust survivor, Leonid Spektor, who catalyzes the village's complete separation from the outside world. What ensues is an exploration of the idealization of the shtetl which Gay describes and an attempt to test the capability of the imagined shtetl to withstand the onslaught of modernity. As the city encroaches further and further into the village, each side of this posited rural-urban binary takes up arms to defend itself against the other. This is the core of the novel, the tension between this rural, Jewish existence within Eastern Europe and the surrounding, secular world which, for its own historical and political continuity, seeks to discredit it.

Discussing rurality in this way is decidedly old fashioned and Gross' novel stands out as decidedly old fashioned in its treatment of rural/urban spatial constellations, resulting in »normative rural/urban binaries such as ›rural = peace/urban = noise, rural = slow/urban = fast, rural = clean/urban = dirty‹« which perpetuate the clear division and separation of these two spatial arrangements (Wilson/Noble/Currie 2025: 1). Despite this it is clear that even in these differences, these spaces are »in Wechselbeziehung zueinander und auch historisch wie strukturell aufeinander verwiesen«[6] (Baum 2014: 113). This differentiated perspective on modern spatiality has also made its way into literary representation of rural space, with both literature and its study moving away from a »neatly teleological progression from a rural ›before‹ to an urban ›after‹ of late nineteenth-century history« (Storey 2010: 195). Against this backdrop of differentiation in contemporary rural and literary studies,[7] Gross' novel stands out as decidedly unreflected. It is exactly this outdated approach that makes The Lost Shtetl such a fruitful object of study. It is an instance of contemporary Jewish-American fiction which maintains an outdated perspective on the rural/urban divide even as it seeks to articulate a contemporary perspective on the shtetl as an object of Jewish-American cultural fascination.

Given that Gross' text deals in these somewhat outmoded spatial binaries, the following study will explore the dispersion and disruption present in the novel utilizing the concepts of Walter Benjamin's writings on the industrial and historical shifts that occurred at the turn of the 20th century. Benjamin's writing on industrialization and its effects on consciousness are observations on exactly those changes which Kreskol never takes part in – he is writing at the moment of transition from one form of spatiality, the rural, to another, the urban. It is important to note that Benjamin's Berlin, even prior to full industrialization, was not rural in the same way that Kreskol is. However, it is historical rurality overtaken by contemporary urbanity which Gross explores, and which is most important for a differentiated understanding of his novel which has, heretofore, received no academic attention. It is not just the spatial constellation of Kreskol but also the historical constellation it is embedded in, its temporality and the ways in which history introduces an entropic force into the village, pushing it toward dispersion, disorder, and destruction that is in question in the novel. This question engages with an understanding of rural space that is exactly *not* nuanced in the ways that contemporary rural studies have come to understand it, but this lack of nuance creates the foundation for fruitful study of

6 »are dependent upon one another and both historically and structurally intertwined«.

7 For several examples of this differentiated understanding of space and its representation in literature see Weiland/Nell 2014.

this cultural artifact. The cultural imagination of the shtetl, as it is represented in Gross' novel, is very much so stuck in an early 20th century imaginary (thus the reliance on Benjamin's theories regarding this divide) even as the contemporary perspective on rurality has become more nuanced and shifted to a differentiated understanding of these spatial arrangements. Therefore, what is won from the study of this particular novel is a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which old fashioned perspectives on rurality still permeate the imaginary of the shtetl even as much other literature has moved beyond such accounts.[8]

In order to elucidate the presence of rurality and urbanity in The Lost Shtetl, the mutual antagonism of both urban encroachment on rural spaces and rural encroachment on urban spaces will be explored as it is represented in the novel. After a brief discussion of exactly these concerns within the work of Benjamin this study will explore the shocks for both Kreskol and the world it comes into contact with, the discontinuity which this display of the destructive character triggers, and the responses of both the rural and urban communities to this discontinuity. This study ultimately looks to explore the ways in which the diasporic cultural imagination imagines rural space and the ways this imagination does not comport with the realities of said space.

Walter Benjamin on Destruction

The two urban centers of primary interest to Walter Benjamin are Berlin and Paris, and the sociopolitical implications of their shifts further and further toward industrialization and automation his primary concern. He writes of the evolution of experience as instances of modernity which provoke physical and perceptual discontinuity within a subject, presented as »unrelated occurrences constantly interven[ing] in one's life without warning, threatening its unity and tranquility and making it impossible to lower one's guard without inviting pain« (Cassegard 1999: 237). These provocations catalyze a destructive force, at the same time material and metaphysical, which through sheer will of dispersion seeks to destroy all that which stands in its way. For Benjamin, modernity is akin to destruction, for as perceptual discontinuity becomes the norm so does the possibility for this entropic dispersion to take hold.[9] The following will explore these ideas in works of Benjamin within a framework of the rural-urban binary at play in Gross' text. Though not explicit in his writing, this binary is present in his thinking on the shift toward full industrialization and therefore a fruitful entrance into a discussion of space and its impact on consciousness under exactly these altering circumstances.

In his philosophical writings he explores the cultural implications of this movement toward industrialization, arguing that it is characterized primarily by a shift from what he terms »Erfahrung«[10], the continuous experience of life, toward »Erlebnis«[11], an experi-

8 See, again, Weiland/Nell 2014.

9 See Wohlfahrt 1978.

10 »long experience« (Benjamin 2003: 319).

11 »isolated experience« (Benjamin 2003: 319).

ence pregnant with discontinuity and a resulting »Erfahrungsarmut«[12] (Benjamin 1991c: 615). *Erfahrung* here is experience »based in habit and repetition of actions, without conscious intention. These experiences are bound to traditions, the socially constructed and legitimated ways of acting, which gain their authority by their uniqueness and specificity« where *Erlebnis* is »instrumental reaction«, a response to the stimuli of industrialized environments (Savage 2000: 37). Thus, *Erfahrung* is inherently tied to a pre-industrialized world and *Erlebnis* to an industrialized world. Benjamin contextualizes this difference further by way of World War I, describing veterans who return »verstummt aus dem Felde[.] Nicht reicher, ärmer an mitteilbarer Erfahrung«[13] (Benjamin 1991b: 214). What has robbed them of this *Erfahrung* are the »Chocks«[14] of modern, industrialized warfare (ibid.: 396). The first World War, considered the first modern war, utilized technology and tactics which obliterated the perceptual and physical continuity of the men fighting in it. Shocks are »antithetical to ›experience‹ [*Erfahrung*]« (Cassegard 1999: 237), products of industrialization and catalysts of *Erlebnis* which »[ist] zur Norm geworden«[15] (Benjamin 1991c: 614). The fits and starts of the industrial machinery of factories which employ the urban worker, and the technology which permeates the cities themselves – the railroad, automobiles, telephones etc. –, interrupt the experience of continuity through their repetitive and abrupt actions. That which incites this interruption is the ›shock‹. The effects of these ›shocks‹ are traumatic as one »surrenders to the immediacy of it, become[s] a passive victim of it« (Avishai 2014: 112). Worth noting, however, is that the ›shock‹ loses its traumatic capability the more its presence can be anticipated, »je geläufiger ihre Registrierung dem Bewußtsein wird, desto weniger muß mit einer traumatischen Wirkung dieser Chocks gerechnet werden«[16] (Benjamin 1991c: 613). This anticipation does not suggest that the discontinuity of a shock is not felt but rather that the disruption this discontinuity causes is no longer of primary importance. As continual experience, *Erfahrung*, is no longer anticipated, isolated experience, *Erlebnis*, becomes more tolerable. The anticipation of discontinuity is thus vital to staving off the traumatic aftereffects of it. In this line of thinking two things become clear. The first is that the city-dweller lives in a constant state of dissociation incited by shocks which saturate their lives, temporal detachment is central to the urban experience; second, the less prepared one is for the shock, the less urbanity one has experienced, the more traumatic potential the shock has.

Read as a critique of the early 20th century, this is an observation of the evolution of the shock from an exception in everyday life, as would continue to be the case in rural communities, to the basis of everyday life, as is the case in urban communities. This shift

12 »Poverty of experience« (Benjamin 1999a: 734).

13 »Wasn't it noticed at the time how many people returned from the front in silence? Not richer but poorer in communicable experience?« (Benjamin 1999a: 731)

14 Because he is writing about the instances of this modernization in the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin uses the French spelling of shock, *Chock*, instead of the German, *Schock*. For the sake of clarity in the following text the English word shock will be used when discussing this phenomenon.

15 »which has become the norm« (Benjamin 2003: 318).

16 »The more readily consciousness registers these shocks, the less likely they are to have a traumatic effect.« (Benjamin 2003: 317)

is not without consequences. The shock is deeply tied to the idea of the destructive character, an a-subjective force which Benjamin sketches as an embodiment of entropic dispersion. It is a force which can manifest itself in human action but exists wholly outside of its bounds. It drives to destroy for the purpose of space: »Der destruktive Charakter kennt nur eine Parole: Platz schaffen; nur eine Tätigkeit: räumen. Sein Bedürfnis nach frischer Luft und freiem Raum ist stärker als jeder Haß.«[17] (Benjamin 1991a: 396) Benjamin understands this destruction as a core force working within the world, a tornado of destruction whose motives are neutral – apathy is central to this figuration, the destructive character avoids all that would create order, »er vermeidet nur das Schöpferische«[18] (ibid.: 397) – but whose effects are total. It is also tightly aligned with the shock: »je härter der Chock ist, der ihm so versetzt wird, desto größer sind damit seine Chancen für eine Darstellung des destruktiven Charakters«[19] (ibid.: 396). What is clear then is that although the destructive character itself is apathetic as to whom or what it targets, it is not without direction; shocks are able to catalyze the destructive character, to manifest it within a subject in which, without the introduction of discontinuity, it would not so readily be manifested. Thus, it is important to understand the shock as an active force and one which can be utilized to manipulate the otherwise directionally passive destructive character. That is to say, the destructive character can be directed, generated, and altered even as the act of destruction itself remains directionally apathetic. It is also important to note that Benjamin does not posit this destruction as wholly negative: »Die Destruktion kann eine positive Konstruktion ›voraus-setzen‹ und ihr ›zu-sagen‹«[20] (Costa 2011: 183) insofar as it creates space for emergent entities otherwise foreclosed upon by that which was destroyed in this manner.

The confrontation of rurality and urbanity in The Lost Shtetl catalyzes moments of shock providing the ideal environment for the destructive character to take effect. The novel offers a number of ways in which this destructive character manifests itself, the traumatic experience of shock for both the Kreskolites, whose continuity has been interrupted by the introduction of both modern technology and modern history, and the contemporary world, whose understanding of history and spatiality has been shattered by their confrontation with the customs of the 19th century. Each side attempts their own form of defense against the destructive character brought on by these shocks, their own »Chockabwehr«[21] (Benjamin 1991a: 615), but given the urban understanding of the shock, the contemporary world fares much better under these conditions than does Kreskol.

17 »The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred.« (Benjamin 1999b: 541)

18 »the only work he avoids is creative« (Benjamin 1999b: 542).

19 »the heavier the shock dealt to him, the better his chances of representing the destructive character« (Benjamin 1999b: 541).

20 »Destruction can ›presuppose‹ construction and ›ensure‹ it« (author's translation).

21 »Shock defense« (Benjamin 2003: 319).

Kreskol – The Found Shtetl

Kreskol, the lost shtetl in question, escaped notice from the outside world through a series of incidents which both intentionally and unintentionally kept it hidden away. Its complete disappearance was precipitated by Leonid Spektor, a villager who found Kreskol after having survived the Holocaust. Back in a world he thought destroyed, he himself destroys all roadways in and out of the village, completely cutting it off from contact with the outside world. Despite their intentional and unintentional isolationist efforts, Kreskol is returned to the map by Yankel Lewinkopf, a young Kreskolite sent in search of the recently disappeared Pesha Lindauer, who, after wandering through Smolskie, the nearest city to the village, ends up institutionalized as he is, according to the doctors, living under a delusion. His delusion is described as follows: »he thinks he's an 18th century Orthodox Jew from an imaginary shtetl in the forest« (Gross 2020: 94) though of course for all intents and purposes Yankel *is* an 18th century Orthodox Jew from the very real shtetl of Kreskol. This fact reads to the modern world as fiction because the idea that a village of traditional, religious Jews in the Polish hinterland survived into the 21st century is understood to be impossible. After many other happenstances Yankel is at least momentarily believed and sent on a helicopter with journalists and bureaucrats in search of the shtetl. Thus, Kreskol is found. The two central shocks that the Kreskolites experience following this rediscovery are the shock of technology and the rapid industrialization which follows their introduction to modernity, and the shock of contemporary history – the 19th century shtetl did not change, as other rural spaces, with the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, it disappeared.

The clearest shock to the shtetl's system is the introduction of technology through a form of expedited industrialization which mirrors the industrialization Benjamin explores. The first of these technologies to be introduced is the helicopter: the

> »iron chariot appeared in the sky, thrashing its metal wings in the air like the sound of a thousand scythes at work. It came with a great gust of wind which blew a cloud of dust up in the air that sent some of those who had gathered in the town square doubling over in fits of coughing and wheezing.« (Gross 2020: 24)

There are two important aspects of this moment that should be discussed: the first is the use of antiquated terminology to describe the machine, a »chariot« which sounds as a »thousand scythes«, indicating a translation of the unknown into a language legible to the rural population (ibid.). This practice of translation may soften the blow of the shock but does not impede its manifestation; the villagers are quite literally choked by technological advancement entering their rural landscape (asphalt, concrete or other ground finishings do not give off the same dust as unworked, unaltered land does when in contact with this technology). This choking, the visual disturbance of dust and the physical disturbance of coughing, creates a moment of disruption, a break in perceptual and physical continuity, a shock.

This disruption also has religious consequences, many believed that »the Messiah was flying into Kreskol!« (Gross 2020: 24). The messianic quality of this future is furthered by Yankel's proclamation that »›The end of days has come and gone already. We missed it.

[…] The Messiah came many years ago, […] his name was David Ben-Gurion‹« (ibid.: 25f.). This presents a further break integral to understanding the effects of the modern world on this religious rurality: a core belief of Judaism is that the Messiah has yet to arrive, and so the believed arrival of the Messiah, as errant as that belief may be, has a profound impact on the experience of the Jews of Kreskol. This is another of Benjamin's shocks at play, religious continuity has been broken, a new era has, after millennia, been reached. Of course the proclamation of David Ben-Gurion as Messiah brings to the fore the third center of the Jewish diasporic imagination, ancient Israel, here translated into the modern State of Israel. The news that the end of days, the Holocaust, had arrived, that Kreskol was passed over, and that their supposed Messiah had left them in the lurch, not allowing them to take part in this supposed miraculous rebirth of a Jewish state in Israel, is met with decided displeasure: after a long silence the villagers give a collective and anticlimactic »Oh« (ibid.: 26). For the Kreskolites, the double displacement characteristic of the Jewish-American diaspora has not occurred and therefore the center of their diasporic cultural imagination remains ancient Israel. Inherently tied to their new understanding of the Israeli state is thus a disappointment that they have been left behind by exactly that which was meant to deliver them to salvation.[22]

In a single moment, Kreskolites experience the physicality of modernity meeting with their rural landscape, experience religious revelation, and learn of the history of destruction which they escaped. Each of these are moments of shock, interruptions of perceptions of reality – whether they be physical, religious, or historical – that arouse the destructive character. In these moments, that which is being interrupted, bodily integrity, religious dogma, historical continuity, is still reversible: the villagers recover from their coughing fits, the idea that the Messiah has come and gone is never taken up as essential to the further religious life of Kreskol, and the Holocaust is little understood and if it is, promptly ignored by the villagers:

> »Most of the Jews of Europe perished. But [Rabbi Meir Katznelson] didn't say much more and nobody seemed very interested in it. Rather, there was a much more overwhelming spirit of wonder among the Kreskolites. Flight was what the populace wanted to talk about. Photography was what the people wanted to talk about. The State of Israel was what the people wanted to talk about.« (Gross 2020: 269)

22 This mirrors the phasing out of Yiddishkeit within modern day Israel. Although the upper echelons of Israeli society were and remain largely Ashkenazi, Yiddish and its linguistic center, the shtetl, never took hold as national-cultural touchpoints within the state. Yiddish was ultimately rejected as a national language in favor of a modern(ized) Hebrew, a language seen as better suited to represent the *nation* of Israel and unassociated with »Eastern European Jewish immigrants who were coerced, ridiculed, and repressed« (Halperin 2015: 14). Thus, the language of the shtetl was suppressed within Israel whereas it flourished in diasporic centers, most notably New York and Montreal (see Bar-Am 2017). The shtetl was also rejected as a manner of conducting rural Jewish life and was instead replaced by the Kibbutz, i.e. agricultural, communal settlements in Israel. Sociologist Stanley Diamond argues that the Kibbutz is the antithesis to the shtetl, »the profoundly felt rejection of certain basic features of shtetl life, […] served as the primary source of Kibbutz institutions and values« (Diamond 1957: 71).

However, as Benjamin argues, »je härter der Chock ist, der ihm so versetzt wird, desto größer sind damit seine Chancen für eine Darstellung des destruktiven Charakters« (Benjamin 1991a: 396), and therefore with each introduction of modernity, the possibility of returning to pre-discovery normalcy in Kreskol diminishes exponentially and the likelihood of a destructive force sweeping through the village increases exponentially.

Deeply tied to the perceptual destruction brought about by the shocks of technological advancement is not only a destruction of the historical understanding of the villagers who have newly received news of the Holocaust but also of their physical safety as the antisemitism which they had been sheltered from in their insular community begins to encroach on the town. As buses of Jewish-American tourists pile into the town »with the animation of Norman invaders« (Gross 2020: 250) business begins to boom. With this comes the incentive to expand access to Kreskol, to urbanize it. A post office is set up and a census taken, names written down »in the Latin alphabet as well as Yiddish« (ibid.: 249) – as just one sign that the language of the shtetl is being encroached upon as well as the Latin alphabet becoming prioritized as a form of communication in Kreskol – and roads in and out of Kreskol are built and maintained. There is even talk of a railroad being constructed to run directly through town to better facilitate movement of tourists, but as the landscape shifts so does the opinion of Kreskol. Accused of faking their quite remarkable story of rurality by Dr. Zbigniew Berlinsky, a »professor of modern history and Judaic studies at the University of Krakow with degrees from Cambridge and Hebrew Universities, [. . .] one of the foremost experts on contemporary Jewish history« (ibid.: 299), and with access broadened through modern infrastructure, antisemitism begins stomping into Kreskol. The first instance involves an older man who travels to Kreskol in order to admonish the »dishonest and treacherous« Jews of Kreskol, spitting on a villager and decrying that »Jews never change« (ibid.: 304). Following this incident, a swastika is found painted on a home in town.

The logic of this is clear, urbanity brings with it a host of ideas and materialities which are dangerous for the physical wellbeing of the rural, Jewish population. With discovery come the shocks of antisemitism. This particular form of antisemitism is altogether new to Kreskol for even though the shtetl's inception was deeply tied to a desire of the gentile population to keep the Jewish population separated from their own,[23] its isolation since the early 20th century meant that the kind of antisemitism represented by the

23 The shtetl was largely a phenomenon within the Pale of Settlement, an administrative region encompassing modern day Belarus and Moldova, and large sections of Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland in which Jews were permitted to maintain permanent residence in the Russian Empire. Its origins were in the rule of Catherine the Great whose predecessors had barred Jews from economic activity (and therefore any meaningful chance at residence) within Russian borders. The Pale is in many ways, therefore, a symbol of the loosening of restrictions on the movement of Jews within Russia, however its existence is still deeply rooted in the idea that Jews were somehow other and backwards. In fact, the Pale's confinement allowed for further restrictions to be placed on the Jewish population, it »institutionalized ways of thinking and speaking about Jews that motivated the state to enact myriad additional limitations – on property ownership, occupations, educational opportunities, even on places of residence within the Pale« (Geraci 2019: 778). For an in-depth discussion of the inception of the Pale and its effects on Jewish life in Eastern Europe see Geraci 2019; Deutsch 2011.

swastika painted in town was wholly unknown to the village and therefore the possibility of defense from its effects are wholly foreclosed for Kreskolites. Here, the antagonism between rurality and urbanity, Jewish cultural purity and the antisemitism of the contemporary world, is clearest. This is in keeping with the literary history of writing on the shtetl which, in order to be »portrayed nostalgically and romantically as the quintessence of spirituality and communal intimacy« had to be homogenized, »presented as purely Jewish« despite its heterogeneity in both religious and social structures (Miron 1995: 4). Thus, the shtetl's spatial insularity (i.e. its rurality – in this line of logic) is mirrored in its religious insularity.

Despite this insularity, Kreskol is not entirely defenseless against the destruction which each of these shocks brings about, however, because the village is unpracticed in its defense, the mechanisms by which it is able to stave off the onslaught of the destructive character are unrefined and therefore not successful. In fact, the greatest defender of Kreskol, Leonid Spektor, is also the only villager to have experienced the shocks of the 20th century – the Holocaust was the complete destruction that the industrialization of death brought to the Jewish people[24] – and therefore the only person with knowledge enough to set up protections against further urban encroachment. Over the course of several weeks, Spektor, after arriving at Kreskol in the late 1940s, sneaks out in the middle of the night to destroy »the modest dirt passage connecting the paths out of Kreskol with the asphalt-and-concrete highway« – it had been »deliberately sabotaged« (Gross 2020: 209). Trees were felled and »pits and trenches had been dug in the once smooth ground that hardened with the spring rains [...]. Only a very determined visitor would bother to traverse this path. Someone had formed a moat around Kreskol.« (Ibid.: 210) Spektor's moat, itself an act of destruction, kept the asphalt and concrete world at bay, in its wake protecting Kreksol, at least for a period of time, from further destruction. In fact, the same process of destruction happens once again in the 2010s, after Kreskol has been »debunked« and the visitors are no longer pouring into the village to marvel at the oddity of it all; the newly laid roads that led to Kreskol are destroyed and with that Kreskol is cast »back into oblivion« (ibid.: 394). The defense of Kreskol is therefore not to fend off the destructive character but to redirect it. This work of redirection, the turning of this entropic force toward a new target is only possible after a process of familiarization with the shocks which caused it in the first place. The villagers move from passive receptors of perceptual destruction as the helicopter lands in the center of Kreskol to active participants in their future interactions with the shocks as they carve a moat into the landscape surrounding the town. Thus, the village is fundamentally changed.

24 It is important to note, and not without mention within the novel, that Jews were not the only population to suffer extermination at the hands of the Third Reich. This is touched on briefly with the introduction of Roma travelers into Kreskol with whom Spektor discusses the war – »They know what it was like. The Germans treated them as roughly as the Jews« (Gross 2020: 205) – but this fact is never picked up as a central feature of the novel's positioning in reference to the Holocaust.

Urban Armament

The intermingling of the rural and urban also has implications for the shock-worn populations of the modern world, though their desensitization to the shocks (through extended exposure) helps to fend off any »Darstellung des destruktiven Charakters« (Benjamin 1991a: 396) which would otherwise result from them. The urban world experiences a kind of shock that directly counters that of Kreskol. Whereby Kreskol is shocked by the continuation of history outside of its walls, the urban world is shocked by its complete standstill within the village. The following explores the reaction of the urban population to Kreskol, the shock that is historical *dis*continuity and the ways in which it, more successfully than Kreskol, fends off the destruction that is prophesized to follow in its wake. These shocks function both in the colloquial sense and also in the way Benjamin elucidates, »threatening [life's] unity and tranquility and making it impossible to lower one's guard without inviting pain« (Cassegard 1999: 237). The defensive tactic which the modern world makes use of is one which does not foreclose on all possibility of destruction but rather redirects this destruction back onto that which catalyzes the shock. Historical discontinuity is a shock, for Gross, that leads to a rejection of the shtetl as a viable way of life in modernity.

The historical discontinuity which Kreskol represents is profound; Yankel is assumed insane when he arrives at the hospital because

> »the doctors all told themselves that it was impossible for a Jewish village to have survived the onslaught of World War II in one piece. It was a preposterous story. The Germans were simply too efficient; too attentive to detail; too committed to whatever otherworldly voices induced them to conquer and exterminate to allow an entire town to escape their notice and remain untouched through the ensuing decades.« (Gross 2020: 77)

The impossibility of Kreskol's survival – not only of the Holocaust but of the Cold War, the fall of the Iron Curtain, and the globalization of the 21st century – and its survival in spite of this march of history, in spite of the destruction which the destructive character had inaugurated, is completely unimaginable. Thus, its existence, exactly because of its inconceivability, is a shock not just to the doctors who finally understand that Yankel is not, in fact, delusional, but to the rest of society who are confronted with the physical embodiment of the people and culture which was exterminated in that exact spot. One doctor describes the experience of telling Yankel about the Holocaust as »telling him that overnight his species had gone extinct« (ibid.: 84). Even in this otherwise benign moment of education lies an othering of the Jews of Eastern Europe who are reduced to the animalistic, to a species, thus stripped of their humanity. Having to review the gruesome history of European Jews and having to do so to a person embodying this anachronism is a shock, a forced confrontation with the historical discontinuity of Kreskol, a forced confrontation with an object which threatens the continuity of consciousness or knowledge of the modern world.

The impact of this shock manifests itself most clearly as antisemitism – as is seen in the implications of this didactic moment – a destructive force which the urban pop-

ulation uses to redirect burgeoning entropy back onto Kreskol. The first instance of antisemitism occurs well before Kreskol is ever discovered, while Yankel is still wandering Smolskie, further showing that it is the people of Kreskol, Eastern European Jews living in rural Eastern Europe, which triggers this shock rather than the discovery of the town itself. While looking for assistance in the town, Yankel is confronted by an older man, after all »the greatest sense of menace came not from the young, but the old«, who yells that he »thought the krauts took care of all of you«, finishing off his invective asserting that this extermination was »the only thing the Germans ever did right« (Gross 2020: 67). That, in fact, it is the old who are to be feared is central to the logic of antisemitism within the novel: the destructive character which the Holocaust represents has not finished its work, it is waiting for the right moment to destroy Kreskol just the same, and the old are the custodians of this force. Thus, this blatant, rampant antisemitism, the praising of the Holocaust, is a response to the shock of Yankel's existence within his urban, gentile landscape. In a way this antisemitism is a shield, the shock of the historical responsibility which Yankel represents for this older generation of modern Europeans must be countered by a rejection of the humanity of the Jewish person in their midst. This moment in no way looks to justify this antisemitism, in fact much of the novel works to dismantle the antisemitic notions tied to the diaspora and its connections to Eastern Europe. However, the logic of the text understands this antisemitism as the result of miseducation[25] and unfamiliarity, two factors which make Yankel's appearance intensely shocking and thus unnerving to the modern gentile population.

Blatant antisemitism is, however, not the only form of *Chockabwehr* which the urban world engages in although it is that which informs all other defensive tactics it undertakes. The intradiegetic Berlinsky paper is another instance of defense of the modern urban world against the encroachment of a rural past. Berlinsky claims that »Kreskol is a sham. [...] Kreskol is the greatest lie ever perpetuated on academia in the forty years since I handed in my dissertation.« (Gross 2020: 300) This disbelief, a product of the shock already observed in the medical staff treating Yankel, is turned against the town. The financial assistance that the state had been providing for the building of streets, railroads, and the post office is slowly rescinded while more and more people begin to question the verity of the shtetl's fantastical story. As the story spreads that Kreskol is a sham, more antisemitic incidents begin pouring into town. A group of people from Smolskie traveled into Kreskol on the newly built roadways in order to accuse the Kreskolites of treachery: »You Jews never change do you? [...] always figuring out some new way to pick a pocket. It's pure horseshit.« (Ibid.: 304) It is within this context of disbelief, distrust, and antisemitism that graffiti is found on the side of Kreskol's synagogue: another

25 The novel, in fact, takes a didactic approach to the intricacies of Judaism which the author, or publisher, believe not to be common knowledge. It is littered with footnotes translating the few Yiddish words that make their way into the text, defining certain terms for the various religious and administrative sections of the shtetl, and providing basic information on any Jewish historical figures who appear in the text. There is even a glossary tacked onto the back end of the text (Gross 2020: 397–401). This didactic approach provides a helpful reference for those otherwise unfamiliar with the ins and outs of Judaism and the ins and outs of shtetl life, however it also others Jewish life, presenting it as something which is opaque, incomprehensible, and needing of detailed explanation.

swastika accompanied by »Go back to Israel« (ibid.). This call for the displacement of the Kreskolites is the core of the urban defensive strategy against rural encroachment: this territory must be returned to the gentiles and this allegedly forged history forgotten. The Polish government goes so far as to strike the existence of Kreskol from the public record: »a few nationalist members of the Sejm introduced a bill rescinding official recognition of Kreskol« (ibid.: 389) which is passed narrowly but firmly. This, again, shifts the destructive forces of discovery back onto the town itself. It also illustrates the importance of diaspora in this novel; Kreskolites are not from Israel, they are from Kreskol – their lives, histories, and families are all rooted both socially and geographically in the shtetl.

The urban response to Kreskol illustrates the ways in which Jewish life in Eastern Europe has been so thoroughly erased from its originary topography and the implications this has on any meaningful return to this way of life. The shtetl is framed as an unimaginable form of contemporary existence, certainly within Eastern Europe, and yet, Gross argues, it exists and persists in the imaginary of the urban diaspora (though its relation to any historical reality remains nebulous).

Conclusion. Rural Imaginings of the Urban Diaspora

In the The Lost Shtetl rurality and urbanity do not act as two dialectic poles of utopia and dystopia, but rather exist within a spectrum of possibilities, both productive and destructive, which must be negotiated with each step Kreskol takes into the urban world. Despite this spectrum, Gross concludes with an understanding of spatial organization that foregrounds the division between these spaces and perpetuates the binaries which contemporary rural studies has sought to dismantle. Gross relies on »the symbolic and fantastical« rather than the historical and in doing so is part of a pattern central to the Jewish-American imagination of the shtetl already pointed out and criticized by Gay in the 1980s (Aarons/Patt/Shechner 2015: 7). It is without question that Gay's analysis of the use and misuse of the shtetl remains valid: Kreskol is wholly idealized, altered to fit the needs of this particular argument. On the one hand, the outlandishness of the novel's conceit shows that this is done quite consciously, that the idealized Kreskol is a complete fiction. On the other hand, its handling of this concern is muddied at best and thus the village remains relatively unchanged in its final form in the novel. The process of de-idealization which would have to occur for a fiction which is true to history does not take place. Kreskol is just another »Dybukk« (Gay 1984: 331).

Leonid Spektor, stumbling upon Kreskol, was not looking for »the chance to start anew. [. . .] Rather, he was aiming to pick up in the middle.« (Gross 2020: 201) The impossibility of this is clear to Spektor and clear to Gross. Despite this, patterns of understanding which foreground separation and binarism are reproduced instead of dismantled. In this instance, the cultural imagination of the rural diaspora draws borders instead of blurring them. Thus, the shtetl remains fruitful ground for further study and literary treatment as a space of plurality, integrated into wider socio-historical happenings and not segregated from them.

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