

## At Home in the *Shtetl*: Pre-War Jewish Life through Literature

Federica K. Clementi

T/TH 5:30 - 6:45 Classroom: BA 401

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Office hours: T/TH 12:30-3:00 (please, announce your visit by email to make sure I wait for you) ~ One extra hour to be arranged by appointment

Think of this course as a very particular journey. We will move far away in space and time, we will travel back to Europe... but we'll get out of there just before WWII. We will not visit Paris, Berlin, Vienna and its other glamorous capital cities, but we will stop in villages, small towns, and roam the countryside throughout central-eastern Europe where we will look for traces of Jewish life before the war—which is, before the Holocaust brought this vibrant, creative, diverse world to an end.

This course offers you the opportunity to look at a different, probably less familiar, aspect of European and Jewish literature. You will get acquainted with Jewish life (religious, social, artistic, domestic) through the stories of famous Yiddish writers such as Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Perez, but also through folk tradition, visual art, music and film. Who are the Chassids? What are the roots of klezmer music? Who created the Golem? What's a dybbuk? You will learn about Jewish mysticism, kabbalah, and folklore. We will analyze the way in which the Jews of Europe saw and interacted with their non-Jewish neighbors, their capacity to adapt to very harsh economic and social conditions, and most importantly, the way in which out of a long history of cohabitation and adaptation, a rich body of creative work was produced and how this stands in relation to the general majority culture of the period. Our selected texts in English translation will give us a good overview of Jewish humor, superstition, and traditions. We will be able to compare what we find out through this literature with current assumptions regarding European life, country life, Judaism etc. And, in case you were wondering, you will of course also learn what a *shtetl* is.

### READINGS:

*The Golem* Yudl Rosenberg

*The Dybbuk* by S. Ansky

*Tevye the Dairyman* by Sholem Aleichem

*The Shtetl* by Sholem Asch (handouts)

*A Shtetl* by I. M. Weissenberg (handouts)

*My Memoirs* by I.L. Peretz (handouts)

*Of Bygone Days* by Mendele Sforim (handouts)

*At the Depot* by Dovid Bergelson (handouts)

*Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy* by I.B. Singer (handouts)

*The Inn* by Julian Strykowski (on reserve Cooper Library)

*The Wandering Jews* by Joseph Roth

**- Other readings to be handed out by the professor** (Make sure to be present when these are distributed)

- In-class film screenings (*Marc Chagall, Divan, At Home in America, The Last Klezmer,* and others)

### EXPECTATIONS

**PARTICIPATION IS CRUCIAL.** Your role will be a quite active and interactive one: you are expected to think, discuss, bring up issues, teach to and learn from your colleagues. **Your main task will be to read all the required texts. Your central duty will be to talk about them in class.** Reading and participation are expected and considered fundamental to each student's success. **The emphasis is on critical thinking, analysis and oral exposition.**

Quizzes and exams are extremely important factors: you will be tested on your ability to recognize, identify and contextualize a literary work, to explain critical terms and specific terminology encountered during our discussions, and to write about literature in a mature, deep, critical way.

### GRADE DISTRIBUTION

<b>PARTICIPATION</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>TEST(S)</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>EXAM</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>MIDTERM</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>FINAL</b>	<b>25%</b>

### Objectives/Learning Outcomes

Through our readings, discussions, lectures and visual presentations students will:

- Interpret texts in all their facets (literary, narrative, linguistic, historical, etc.);
- be exposed to close-reading and in-depth discussion of the texts;
- learn to critically approach the texts and examine in which relation they stand to one another—they will learn to analyze differences and similarities among authors and texts and relate them to the general cultural context they belong to (Jewish Enlightenment, Zionism, Socialism, Orthodoxy, etc.);
- learn a rich vocabulary pertaining to Jewish religious and secular tradition;
- learn about Judaism (holidays, uses and customs) and Jewish folklore;
- be exposed to Slavic culture and history and the way it affected Jewish history and culture, the cultural phenomena it originated and by extension we will talk about and compare the enormous influence of Ashkenazi culture on post-war American Jewish culture;
- learn to use maps and atlases in order to understand the importance of geography (i.e., geo-politics) in the life of central-eastern European Jews caught among shifting tides of history in that part of the world.

### Our Rules

- ❑ We maintain a respectful, open-minded, tolerant atmosphere in our classroom. Everybody's opinion, point of view, comment is welcome. Disagreement with others' points of view is also welcome, but it must be expressed with intelligence and extreme respect for our colleagues' freedom to think independently.
- ❑ Students must attend lessons, read assigned material and do their homework. Deadlines **CANNOT** be missed.

- ❑ Students are allowed 3 absences (of whatever nature): instructor will exact grade penalties (½ letter grade) for each exceeding absence. (25% absence is automatic Failure.)
- ❑ Thrice late = 1 absence.
- ❑ You will not be allowed to take a test, if you enter the classroom late and your colleagues have already begun working on the quiz or exam.
- ❑ In case of absence, it is **the student's responsibility** to get information about what was discussed in class, as well as copies of hand-outs, and to be up-to-speed with new assignments.
- ❑ **Plagiarism: "Intentionally representing the words, ideas, or sequence of ideas of another as one's own in any academic exercise; failure to attribute any of the following: quotations, paraphrases, or borrowed information" (definition from Webster's English Dictionary). You are responsible for understanding accepted definitions of plagiarism before the first assignment is due. The general rule: if in doubt, ask.**

**If caught plagiarizing (no matter "how much"), students will Fail and report to the Dean.**

- Don't forget two of the most important resources available to students: (1) The Library (USC library system and Public Libraries); (2) The Writing Center (for help with all your writing needs).

Email exchanges between this class and the professor will take place exclusively through university email accounts. If you like your public account better (yahoo, gmail, hotmail, etc.) make sure all correspondence is forwarded to that domain automatically or you may miss important communication, assignments, changes in the schedule, etc.

**NO FOOD. NO TEXT-MESSAGING. CELLULAR PHONES MUST BE SILENCED** during our lessons. Thank you.