

# Nostalgia for the Slaughterhouse



Director Norman Jewison, at right, and star Chaim Topol on the set of *Fiddler on the Roof*

by Phyllis Chesler

Prick me, will I not bleed? Tickle me, will I not laugh? And so yes, I loved the movie [Fiddler on the Roof](#); I also loved it on stage in [Yiddish](#). And the new documentary about the making of the musical, *Fiddler's Journey to the Big Screen*, is as warm, charming, informative, and enjoyable as the movie itself. [Watch it](#)—you'll enjoy it. It's filled with great Hollywood trivia.

Guess who wanted to play Tevye? None other than Frank Sinatra!

Guess who directed the movie with Topol? Norman Jewison—who laughingly tells us that, despite his name, he’s a “goy!” But the “goy” and his team magically transport us back to the shtetl we still seem to long for, and his fiddler is even more haunting than Chagall’s since Isaac Stern is the off-camera violinist.

The film premiered in 1971 and won three Academy Awards. The direction (Jewison), music (Jerry Bock), lyrics (Sheldon Harnick), production (Robert Boyle), art (Michael Stringer), editors (Antony Gibbs and Robert Lawrence), acting and singing (Topol, etc.), costumes (Joan Bridge and Elizabeth Haffenden), sets, cinematography (Oswald Morris), choreography (Jerome Robbins) left nothing to be desired. The reviewer at *The Hollywood Reporter* [wrote](#) that it “ranks high among the best musicals ever put on film.” Pauline Kael, at *The New Yorker*, called it “the most powerful movie musical ever made.”

*Fiddler’s Journey to the Big Screen*, produced by Sasha Berman and directed by Daniel Raim, is filled with delicious behind-the-scenes reminiscences and clips of Harry Belafonte, Judy Garland, Alan Arkin, Robert Kennedy, Golda Meir, and David Ben-Gurion, as well as interviews with the cast. The film critic, Kenny Turan, tells us that this musical is “almost like *Brigadoon*. It exists in and of itself.”

Turan is right. *Anatevka* is so very dreamy and we are so fond of it and its inhabitants. And yet, as Tevye himself might ask: What is this Jewish nostalgia for the Old Country, or specifically for the Ukrainian/Russian shtetl really about? What exactly do we miss? The unpaved muddy roads? The freezing winters? The year-round poverty? Are we repenting our own loss of faith by honoring *Anatevka*’s Jews for their loyalty to religious Judaism? Or is this our way to connect to the grandparents we never met—the ancestors whose faces we cannot even visualize (we have no paintings, no photographs), and whose names we may not even know?

How many more charming and fanciful novels, such as Max Gross' recent [The Lost Shtetl](#), will be published? Gross artfully imagines a shtetl that has remained unchanged and hidden in the Polish forest for 100 years. And when the modern Poles discover it—there's nothing but trouble. In 2010, Dara Horn published a short story, [Shtetl World](#), in which a *World of Our Fathers* shtetl functioned as an exhibit in an amusement park, with “audio-animatrons of people acting out various moments in Eastern European Jewish history on a loop (Cossacks and all), while the visitors sat in little book-peddler carts on a slow-moving track”—until one day it all burned down.

In a sense, the idea of a shtetl has been Disney-fied, becoming Hollywood set in our imaginations. It's a high-end tourist attraction, functioning in a way much as Holocaust museums and memorials do, attracting both reverence and commerce.

In researching this piece, I [discovered](#) Ruth Wisse's 2014 critique of *Fiddler*, the musical. Although she also loved it (who doesn't?), nevertheless, she had her reservations.

*“Tevye does not sanction love over the integrity of the Jewish people ... Fyedka (Tevye's Ukrainian Christian son-in-law) dares to equate Tevye's refusal to accept (his daughter) Hava's conversion to Christianity with the Czarist persecution of the Jews. This accusation is outrageous ... charged with bigotry for upholding the integrity of the Jewish people, he (Tevye) ends by endorsing the young couple's intermarriage ... We might be tempted to turn Fyedka's accusation against the accuser: some drive the Jews out of Russia, others drive Jewishness out of the Jews ... (this) includes the authors of Fiddler, who demolish the dignity of their hero without any apparent awareness of what they have done.”*

Wisse quotes Alisa Solomon, a theater critic and journalism

professor, who penned a study which, according to Wisse, documents but does not castigate “the path by which Aleichem’s drama of Jewish resistance (to Communism, materialism, atheism, Zionism, intermarriage) evolved into a classic of assimilation.”

Wisse has a point. The musical does turn Tevye into a “universal” hero. In the documentary, Jewison says: “The theme of family is universal. Everybody has a family. We all end up sitting around a table. It happens in *Moonstruck*.” (Jewison directed that film, too.) In the documentary, musical director and conductor, John Williams, tells us that “Topol was a universal Jew. He was a Jew from everywhere.” And Topol himself says: “I saw (the musical) in Yugoslavia. I saw it in Turkey. I saw it in Tokyo. I mean, over one billion people saw the film. So they couldn’t all be Jewish.”

This is Hollywood, this is what sells. The Anne Frank story also “sells” because she was also increasingly rendered “universal,” a girl who, “In spite of everything ... still believe[d] that people are really good at heart.” The fact that we now know that Frank believed no such thing doesn’t seem to matter.

Here’s what I can add to Wisse’s critique of this much-loved musical. In a major academic study: [\*Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917-1921\*](#), the author, Irina Astashkevich, shares the following, uncannily familiar conversation, which she found in the Elias Tcherikower Archive at YIVO:

*“I am sorry for you Moishke, but there is nothing to be done, a Ukrainian man said to his Jewish neighbor around the first week of May 1919, when Grigoriev’s regiments had captured several towns nearby and moved close to Dmitrovka, a small town in the Cherkassy region of Ukraine to the southeast of Kiev, where neighbors were now discussing the inevitable: a pogrom. The Christian neighbor probably felt pity if not*

*sympathy for Moishke, who would be subjected to looting, humiliation, torture, and violence, but at the same time this likely meant a rather lucrative affair for a non-Jew ... As armed forces moved, pogroms and 'excesses' happened: Jews were robbed in their homes and on railway stations, Jewish women were raped, and Jewish men were tortured and subsequently killed."*

Remember the wedding scene in *Fiddler*? Tevye is warned by a friendly, local official that he was ordered to disrupt, make a little trouble, nothing too serious ... but the real pogroms were all too serious. According to Astashkevich, pogroms came in waves, one after the other, and each one may have "lasted for ten days while the town changed hands ... (then) the pogrom would start over with the most vigorous brutality."

In this time period (1917-1921), there were "over a thousand pogroms in about five hundred localities." Astashkevich considers this a "genocide" and the frequent, systematic use of rape as a weapon may be considered "genocidal rape." Lives—as well as minds—were lost, entire communities were erased, some women attempted suicide, some succeeded, others stopped menstruating, some had to be psychiatrically hospitalized, most were afraid to go out forever afterwards. Such "violent riots" were scripted and "aimed to ensure social death along with the physical extermination ... many shtetls were destroyed never to be rebuilt."

The details are painful, difficult to read about even at a safe historical and geographical distance. Forgive me for sharing them with you, but I really want you to understand what a pogrom, in a place like Anatevka, was truly like. For example, after every home and shop was thoroughly looted by both the local population and by the Cossacks, the "entertainment" would begin.

*"The carnival of violence, complete with scenes of torture,*

*rape, and murder, played out on the second day of the pogrom as 'celebratory street theater.' Pogrom perpetrators purposefully drove Jews into the streets and hunted down their victims ... acts of torture took place in front of an audience of pogrom perpetrators, the local population, and frightened Jews. The ritualized violence reiterated the previous pogroms, but often in a more grotesque and horrifying form. The elderly couple, Yudko Gurshevoy, aged seventy-five, and his wife Bruckha, mad with fear, were stripped naked and forced to run through the streets as hunted animals, cheered by the Cossacks. Pogromschiki bayoneted their victims, careful not to kill them, but to leave the wounded to suffer and bleed to death in agony that lasted sometimes for several days. Elderly parents were left to die, while their families were not allowed to help them ... Pogromschiki made sure that all the apothecaries were wrecked, and there was no medical assistance; the only remaining non-Jewish medical practitioner was strictly prohibited to provide any help to the Jews on pain of death."*

Remember: This all took place in Ukraine, in suburbs of Kyiv such as Makarov, and in Berdichev, Zhitomir, and Proskurov (now Khmelnytskyi), in western Ukraine which is where "the most violent attack on Jews took place, taking the lives of an estimated 800-1,500 Jews."

I will spare you further details—and many more exist.

Of course, there is one song whose lyrics reveal the poverty and misery of the shtetl, a song which Anatevka's residents sing on their way out into exile: "Anatevka."

"A little bit of this / A little bit of that / A pot / A pan / A broom / A hat / Someone should have set a match to this place years ago ... What do we leave? / Nothing much. Only Anatevka. Underfed, overworked Anatevka / Where else could

Sabbath be so sweet? ... Where I know everyone I meet. / Soon I'll be a stranger in a strange new place / Searching for an old familiar face / From Anatevka / I belong in Anatevka / Tumble-down, work-a-day Anatevka. Dear little village, little town of mine."

This chorus does not quite rise to the level of Verdi's Jews in Babylon in the opera *Nabucco*, who are longing for Jerusalem, but it is a dirge of sorts. How many places have Jews had to flee—that is, if they were lucky enough to do so? Nevertheless, the leave-taking here is almost peaceful, at least unhurried. Anatevka's residents envision bittersweet but new beginnings. We recognize ourselves, or at least our ancestral past in their exile, and our hearts go out to them.

But, I must ask: What other group has a need to romanticize or soften the terrifying violence against them? Does this function the way Jewish humor does—to lessen the sting of shame or bitterness?

Can we imagine African Americans waxing nostalgic about being in chains on board a ship during the Middle Passage? Or romanticizing lynching or rape on a plantation? Or the sale of children away from their mothers? I'd say that the pornography of slave violence in 21st-century movies (such as portrayed in [Django Unchained](#)), is meant to shame white viewers. The sadistic punishments and sadism are not softened. On the contrary. The cruelty is magnified. It is meant to be highlighted and condemned, not softened and overlooked.

And yet, despite (or likely because of) its many omissions, we all love *Fiddler* and stories about shtetl life. You'll love the documentary as well. We are hopelessly nostalgic for Anatevka.

According to [Dr. Krystine Batcho](#), nostalgia is a form of homesickness, a longing for a simpler, easier, time and place—even if it never existed or we've never been there



ourselves. This is a way of connecting to our ethnic past and thus honoring it. As Jews, we want to at least symbolically hold onto a certain “togetherness,” and to a certainty that we may no longer have.

I think that such nostalgia also expresses a desire to undo or redo the past, to soften, at least in retrospect, the violence and humiliation. We are reaching back with love to comfort our ancestors.

As ever, we're also longing for Paradise.

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