

The Golden Age Shtetl: A New History of Jewish Life in Eastern Europe
by Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern.
Princeton University Press 2014.

For many Jews, their insight into the fabled shtetlach of Eastern Europe is dictated by the film of *Fiddler on the Roof*, based on Sholom Aleichem's story of Tevye the milkman. The picture it presents, of brave Jews constantly on the edge of massacre or expulsion, nevertheless maintaining their humour, balance and a vibrant family is an image to be cherished, saccharin though it may be.

In *The Golden Age Shtetl* Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, Crown Family Professor of Jewish Studies at Northwestern University in Evanston Illinois, sets out to present a much more complex picture than the cliché. He divides his study into ten chapters, bookended by an Introduction and Conclusion: What's in a Name; Russia discovers Its Shetl; Lawless Freedom; Fair Trade; The Right to Drink; A Violent Dignity; Crime, Punishment, and a Promise of Justice; Family Matters; Open House; If I Forget Thee; The Books of the People; The End of the Golden Age.

The chapter headings represent the wide-ranging nature of Petrovsky-Shtern's study and also hint at the humour with which the book as a whole is laced – how could it be otherwise when so many great Yiddish humourists emerged from the Shtetl?! Yet there is also an underlying sadness in the knowledge that the efflorescence that the author so capably describes was unable to save it from obliteration in the Shoah.

The Golden Age Shtetl is a gem of a book; it is beautifully written, informative, approachable, funny and deserves to be very widely read.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh