

As published in the [New Jersey Jewish News](#)

Remember- Fiddler is Fiction

by Allan Chernoff

For many members of the audience, *Fiddler on the Roof*, now playing again to rave reviews on Broadway, is more than mere theater; it's a cultural immersion in their lost history. As an author who has painstakingly researched and shared the history of his Eastern European ancestors, I have a problem with that.

Fiddler, a fictional musical based upon Sholem Aleichem's fictional "Tevye der Milkhiger" ("Tevye the Dairyman") stories, taking place in the fictional town of Anatevka, is so memorable, so beloved, so embraced that for many Jews this fiction has come to serve as a historical icon. For those who lack detailed knowledge about their own European ancestry, *Fiddler* can seem to be an authentic representation of Jewish society in the "old country," a myth I've discussed with audiences at my lectures on the subject. To some, the play can even serve as a stand-in for the absence of family history, as if Tevye, Golde, and their daughters were distant, long-lost relatives. Indeed, Jews have become so possessive of *Fiddler* that the last revival, whose director and star were both gentiles, received significant criticism for not being "kosher" enough!

But the fact is our ancestors did not come from Anatevka and few came from anything quite like it. *Fiddler on the Roof* is great entertainment, but it is not a substitute for history, and certainly not for the heritage of our own families. Yes, some lived in shtetls, if we can agree exactly how small or large a shtetl is, but most were quite different from the mythical Anatevka of 1905, located somewhere in the Russian Pale of Settlement.

My ancestor's hometown, Tomaszow-Mazowiecki, Poland, was certainly no Anatevka. Though it was economically backward, the Jews created a thriving community with a rich culture that supported its own theater companies, orchestras, newspapers, athletic teams, social clubs, political parties, and, of course, religious institutions.

There was drama aplenty in Tomaszow, including a wedding that was the subject of as much gossip as Tzeitel and Motel's in *Fiddler*. It was Great Aunt Eva's marriage to the "Don Juan" of Tomaszow, Mailech Plachta. My great-grandparents, Hersh and Raizel Machel, overcame their objection to the

engagement and agreed to host the wedding in their home. Two real fiddlers, Avraham Bass and Yaakove Shaul, accompanied Joseph Marshalik, a *badchen*, or wedding singer, who customized his lyrics for the couple. The drama peaked when the singer crooned to Mailech to seek repentance for his sins. This elicited cries from the groom, which in turn triggered loud weeping from relatives and guests. Upon seeing tears rolling down from the groom's eyes, the *badchen* and his fiddlers picked up the tempo and proclaimed that the groom's tears had caused heaven above to forgive all his sins and cleanse his soul. He and his beloved would live in happiness to a ripe old age!

As wonderful as it is to know the stories of one's family, not everyone is able to recapture those pages, particularly since so many of our ancestors were killed during the Nazi genocide. Holocaust education necessarily focuses on the destruction of the six million Jews of Europe, but prewar Eastern European Jewish society should not be a footnote in history. Indeed, it deserves its own chapters of inclusion in Holocaust education programs.

It is critically important for all, Jews and gentiles alike, to study the Nazi horror, most importantly to help prevent such genocide from ever occurring again. But for Jews, it is also essential to study the lives that our European ancestors lived, not merely because it is our heritage, but also because those societies are now extinct. Study is our best way of preserving the culture.

The new production of *Fiddler* acknowledges as much, opening with a modern-day person looking at an "Anatevka" sign hanging above an empty expanse, indicating that the shtetl is gone forever. The message from *Fiddler* is clear: We need to learn and remember all we can, not just about the death of the Jews of Europe, but also about the lives they lived. So, by all means, go and enjoy *Fiddler*, but please don't confuse its fiction with fact.

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