



**Reappraising an American Jewish Nostalgic Image:  
The Old World as Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Visual Experience**

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# **DECLARATION**

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the preface or acknowledgements and specified in the text. It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface or acknowledgements and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Faculty of Divinity Degree Committee.

# ABSTRACT

## **Reappraising an American Jewish Nostalgic Image: The Old World as Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Visual Experience**

In the mid 20th-century, American Jewish communities were participating both in an unprecedented level of social integration and an accompanying uncertainty regarding their personal and communal heritage. Jews were increasingly becoming like mainstream Americans, but processes of suburbanization and integration left the survival of their traditions, culture, and social cohesion an open question. Within this context, there was a marked surge in attention to the Eastern European Jewish past, valorized as “the Old World,” as a source of heritage and a stable point of reference for American Ashkenazi identities. A plethora of books, plays, films, and other cultural materials emphasize that, while Jews certainly belonged in the American middle class, their values were drawn from a different wellspring.

There is growing scholarly attention to the relationship between these two intertwining phenomena in the American Jewish mid-century: the integration of Jews into the American mainstream and their simultaneous turn to nostalgic history. However, the direction of the current conversation firmly attends to either historical or literary dimensions of nostalgia for the Old World. What is overlooked is the manner in which many of these media – particularly photobooks, stage plays, film, and museum exhibitions – are visual in nature, and communicate their nostalgic message through their constitution as an image.

This thesis contributes novel considerations for the discussion of mid-century Jewish nostalgia by examining the Old World’s representation between the 1960s and the mid-1980s through the lens of visual culture, foregrounding Jewish audiences’ experiences of images as fundamental to understanding the value of this nostalgia. Ultimately, this attention to experience leads to rethinking the way in which American Jews were interacting with their surrounding spaces in the mid-century, especially in suburban environments, and explores the meaning of the Old World’s nostalgic image as a meaningful vision of imagined Jewish heritage and cultural autonomy.

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# INTRODUCTION

On 22 September 1964, *Fiddler on the Roof* made its Broadway debut. As the curtain raised on the shtetl of Anatevka, audiences came face-to-face with the protagonist Tevye, played by Zero Mostel, who described the town to them in one word: “Tradition.”<sup>1</sup> Anatevka is built on this idea, and, as the musical progressed, audiences saw Tevye and the shtetl around him folding to pressures which demanded the adaptation or abandonment of those traditions. However, while Anatevka itself is dissolved at the end of the musical, this shtetl managed to emblemize something important for its Jewish audiences; the kind of lives, traditions, and values represented in *Fiddler* lodged a specific image of Eastern European heritage in American Jewry’s collective imagination.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of the next two decades, that image was increasingly reinforced through an outpouring of media which followed *Fiddler* in presenting Eastern Europe as the former site of American Jews’ own cultural authenticity. While this perspective is more nostalgic than historical, it is nonetheless dominant in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American Jewish popular culture. Through reading about and seeing the Old World in literature, photobooks, exhibitions, plays, and films, American Jews were deeply engaged in reflecting on the traditions and experiences represented therein. Being able to see these lives vividly represented on the stage, screen, and through photography helped connect these audiences with nostalgic depictions of Old World Jewry in especially resonant ways.

These nostalgic images’ impact is also due to a particular moment in American Jewish history. Even before *Fiddler* became iconic of Jews’ Eastern European heritage, American Jewry was undergoing intense developments in their everyday and communal lives. In the 1960s and through the 1970s, American Jews were coming to terms with post-war developments which had effected a sea-change for their relationship with broader American society. In the years after World War II, rates of anti-Semitism decreased, families’ average income increased, and Jews soon found themselves more secure in America than ever before. As the historian Edward Shapiro puts it, this was a

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Stein, Sheldon Harnick, and Jerry Bock, *Fiddler on the Roof: Libretto Vocal Book* (New York: The Times Square Music Publications Company, 1964), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Markus Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 5; see also Alisa Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof* (New York: Picador USA, 2014), 220.

time “unprecedented in American history” for these communities.<sup>3</sup> New opportunities, opened on the basis of this success and its accompanying integration in American society, ranged from educational institutions to professional careers to settling in emerging and desirable neighbourhoods. The last of these three things – suburban possibility – proved especially controversial for Jews’ cultural identities and communal cohesion. While Jews were setting their sights on suburbia alongside the majority of white Americans, what impact those novel environments would have on Jewish American life was often unclear.

This did not deter the increasing pace of suburbanization. From the post-war period onward, more and more Jews were leaving cities for roomier, accommodating middle-class homes in the surrounding areas. This newfound access to the middle class was not unique to Jews – as will be seen in chapter one’s historical discussion, many ethnic minorities, and particularly white ethnic minorities, were joining the American mainstream in the post-war era – but Jews in particular embraced this possibility. By 1960, an estimated two-thirds of American Jewry had moved into suburbia.<sup>4</sup> While in many communities only a surplus of Jews moved out of dense urban centers, in others this trend emptied entire Jewish neighbourhoods into suburbia’s winding streets. This had obvious and widespread effects on urban Jewish communal cohesion, but, even when urban communities were not threatened by out-migration, the geographic reconfiguration of American Jewry had wide-reaching ramifications.

These ramifications represent a broader context of coinciding developments at the time of Jews’ large-scale movement into suburbia. In addition to the demographic changes which accompanied suburbanization, the 1950s and 1960s saw reconfigurations of long-standing communal networks, the challenges of raising a new generation of Jewish youths, and the navigation between American civic values and a minority ethnic consciousness. As Laura Levitt highlights well, and as will be discussed later in this dissertation, access to these middle-class and mainstream American spaces intensified these developments by encouraging American Jews’ conformity to whichever conceptions of their identity fit best with the pre-conceptions of the American mainstream. For instance, in conjunction with Protestant-led ideas about religious identities, American

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<sup>3</sup> Edward S. Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jewry since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 28.

<sup>4</sup> “Two-Thirds of America’s Jews Now Live in Suburbs, Expert Estimates,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, October 16, 1959, <https://www.jta.org/1959/10/16/archive/two-thirds-of-americas-jews-now-live-in-suburbs-expert-estimates>.

Jews' identity similarly shifted from being an ethnic to a religious designation: "Jewishness" was redirected through the category of "Judaism," as will be explored further in chapter one.<sup>5</sup> This religious emphasis for Jewish identity was one way among many in which that identity was being reconceptualized. In many ways, its earlier forms of particularity could not fit viably with the expectations of the American middle class. Thus, much as with other white minorities in this period, Jews were reshaping their socio-cultural appearance so that they could participate in the socio-economic profile of mainstream American life.

The suburbs seemed to exacerbate the speed of these social and cultural shifts in Jewish communities, and thus became the locus for the uncertainty of the times. "Where does Judaism go from here?" was an open question which brought with it a sense of danger. As William Haber, then the president of the American ORT (Organization for Rehabilitation through Training) Federation, wrote in 1960: with Jewish immigration at a near-standstill, and American Jewish youths being removed from personal ties to Europe and its customs, "we can no longer rely on automatic kinship and organic identity" to strengthen Jewish communities.<sup>6</sup> Alongside the shifts that accompanied suburbanization, there was a deep questioning of what would be necessary for shoring up Jewish identities for future generations. Despite increasing levels of explicit affiliation in the 1950s, active participation in Jewish communities was beginning to take different forms and anxiety was correlatively rising as to how Jewish communal life would be able to adapt to those changes.<sup>7</sup> A gap had opened between what suburbanized Jewry had come to resemble in the mid-century and the vision of vibrancy to which those same Jews looked as a marker of sustainable and cohesive communities. It seemed that American Jewry had rushed to the suburbs without considering the costs of that mainstream integration.

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<sup>5</sup> See Laura Levitt, "Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 2007): 822.

<sup>6</sup> William Haber, "The Question Is: The Older Generation of U.S. Jews Had Organic Link with Jewish Past, but Will Today's Youth Feel Same Commitment?," *The National Jewish Monthly*, September 1960, 18, 22. ORT will be discussed further in the following chapter, especially with relation to the social changes that were occurring alongside suburbanization, with familial networks shrinking and charitable organizations taking on increasingly social communal roles. For noting the expansiveness of ORT in American Jewish communities, see Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier: A Study of Group Survival in the Open Society*, Second Edition (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 260.

<sup>7</sup> See Rachel Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 70–71; Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 163.

Reports from suburbanization's front lines echoed this sense of peril. While in most cases suburbanization did not come at the expense of stable demographic populations within urban centers, certain neighbourhoods were hard-hit by large-scale movements of their Jewish residents. The Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan neighbourhoods of Boston were extreme but attention-catching examples for what has been called an "urban exodus."<sup>8</sup> As Jews left those areas in increasing haste, the institutions that remained were forced to either adapt or relocate. Synagogues closed. The question of how communities would reconstitute themselves in newfound locations was open and uncertain. It was clear that the communal and institutional lives of Jews would not look the same in suburbia as it had in its urban environments; that had been established by the mid-1950s, as new forms of Jewish institutions began cropping up in response to emerging suburban needs.<sup>9</sup>

It was not only the novelty of their destinations that gave American Jews pause in thinking through their religious and cultural engagement at this time, but it was also the significant and unavoidable questions surrounding social and cultural integration in those communities that brought into view American Jewry's "question of survival." In a straightforward sense: if Jews were abandoning the neighbourhoods which tied them to the immigrant histories, cultural traditions, and memories of their Jewish pasts, what would ensure the viability of a Jewish identity in suburbia? As will be seen in due course, many expressed anxieties regarding Jews' ability to build coherent communities in these neighbourhoods. Similarly, some were questioning the viability of Jewish life in integrated environments, such as on university campuses, where the "secularist life-style of the university is highly destructive of the remaining particularistic, ethnic loyalties of the student."<sup>10</sup> More than just an exceptional environment, this trend was seen as "clearly an exaggerated version of the problem of Judaism in a free and open society."<sup>11</sup> The mass integration of Jews into primarily non-Jewish neighbourhoods had left their religious and cultural identity afloat. In the place of its moorings were broad anxieties which gazed uncertainly into what may or may not have been a Jewish future.

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<sup>8</sup> See Gerald Gamm, *Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> See Abraham A. Fleischman, "The Urban Jew Goes Suburban," *The Reconstructionist* 19, no. 2 (March 6, 1953): 22.

<sup>10</sup> Irving Greenberg, "Jewish Survival and the College Campus," *Judaism* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1968): 265.

<sup>11</sup> Greenberg, 264.

At the same time as these social and cultural problems were emerging to face an increasingly suburban American Jewry, a great cultural phenomenon surged in response to these Jewish concerns: American Jews found attachment, certainty, and sympathy in looking back at their Eastern European heritage. When *Fiddler on the Roof* swept onto Broadway in 1964, it was hailed not only as an artistic success but as a source of historical testimony — a production which “touches honestly” on the lives of Old World Jews.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of immediate and contemporaneous criticism which pointed out the contrary, suburban Jewry was culturally emboldened by the moving presentation of their heritage.<sup>13</sup> As one *New York Times* writer put it in 1994, throughout the later 20<sup>th</sup> century the anthem of American Jewry became not “‘Hatikvah’ or the Internationale, but ‘Sunrise, Sunset.’”<sup>14</sup> It is understandable how American Jews, in the midst of their own socio-cultural changes, attached themselves to this strong affirmation of Jewish culture.

However, *Fiddler* was not just about providing an affirmative model for American Judaism. The play also struck to the core of uncertainty regarding the challenges that its later audience was facing. At the same time as suburban Jewry was wrestling with a sense of shifting communal identities, the disintegration of Jewish neighbourhoods, and the question of group survival, *Fiddler* was representing precisely the same questions. It is a musical about the “dissolution of a way of life.”<sup>15</sup> While presented in a new, compelling light, this was still a narrative with which American Jews were well-familiar. Although America did not have Cossacks or pogroms, there was a sense of imminent loss that was shared on the grounds of spatial and social shifts. *Fiddler* speaks, on those terms, to the same sense of irrevocable change that suburban Jewry experienced in reflecting on their communities from within the American mainstream.

This narrative was put forward in many iterations in the decades after 1964. If, as Markus Krah writes, the immediate post-war period was one in which questions of the Eastern European past were particularly open, then the period after 1964 is one in which

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<sup>12</sup> Howard Taubman, “Theater: Mostel as Tevye in ‘Fiddler on the Roof,’” *The New York Times*, September 23, 1964, 56.

<sup>13</sup> For a key critical response to *Fiddler on the Roof*, see Irving Howe, “Tevye on Broadway,” *Commentary* 38, no. 5 (November 1964), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/teveye-on-broadway/>.

<sup>14</sup> David Margolick, “Jewish Comics Make It a Not So Silent Night,” *The New York Times*, December 24, 1994, 23; see also Rachel Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 35.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Altman and Mervyn Kaufman, *The Making of a Musical: Fiddler on the Roof* (New York: Crown, 1972), 31; see also Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders*, 220.

a replicable narrative regarding the role of the Old World had reached maturity for American Jews.<sup>16</sup> After *Fiddler*, “Jewishness had a narrative with a beginning and tentative endings in defined places of reference”.<sup>17</sup> However, that stability did not stop an outpouring of cultural texts which represented this narrative from different angles. In terms of visual representations, the shtetl enjoyed widespread dissemination in photobooks such as Abraham Shulman’s *The Old Country* (1974), Raphael Patai’s *The Vanished Worlds of Jewry* (1980), and Roman Vishniac’s *A Vanished World* (1983). This presentation was bolstered by exhibitions such as *Image Before My Eyes*, a photographic history of Polish Jews which opened in 1977, and *The Lower East Side: Portal to American Life*, which opened in 1966. Adding to this plethora of visual nostalgia, *Fiddler on the Roof* returned to the scene as a three-hour epic film in 1971.

As one will have realized with the inclusion of *The Lower East Side*, it is notable that not all of these images took Eastern Europe as their primary setting for the Old World. Some, such as that exhibition, or as Joan Micklin Silver’s *Hester Street* (1975), transposed Eastern European characters into America and used that contrasting setting to demonstrate the features of European Jewish culture that were supported likewise by other nostalgic representations. In those texts, the dominant image of the shtetl nonetheless holds sway on the basis of those supporting representations; the same features that one finds in shtetl narratives are present in the slightly-newer-Old World of the immigrant neighbourhood. Later in this dissertation, in chapter two, it will be discussed further how the idea of “the Old World” is expanded to include unique Jewish immigrant spaces in America, such as the Lower East Side, though for now it suffices to note that the scope of the project includes representations of those immigrant neighbourhoods as part of the overarching nostalgic image of Ashkenazi heritage.

In appraising these visual depictions, this dissertation will look at the period between 1964 and 1983: beginning with the year that *Fiddler on the Roof* exploded onto Broadway and ending with when *A Vanished World* produced some of the most popular and recognizable shtetl images to date. This period encompasses a confluence between American Jews’ engagement with a consistent nostalgic image of the Old World, following *Fiddler*’s lead, and those audiences’ negotiation of their social and cultural position within

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<sup>16</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 15, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Krah, 240.

the American suburban mainstream. Both second- and third-generation American Jews – as called in relation to an earlier period of mass immigration<sup>18</sup> – were engaging with this nostalgia as a language for their contemporaneous experiences, challenges, and aspirations as communities and as an American minority.

This dissertation will focus on a relationship with nostalgic images as the basis for exploring how representations of the Old World possessed compelling contents for their American Jewish audiences. This matter is primarily one of rhetoric, though not in terms of an author or artist arguing in favour of specific messages or ideas. Rather, this dissertation's grounding in visual culture will emphasize how images possess their own rhetorical force through experiences of spectatorship: the way in which viewers encounter and perceive images is what makes them compelling in and of itself. This comes down to interactions between viewers and images. As will be seen, visual cultural experience brings into view the connection between images' contents and their interpretive contexts, highlighting how those two things are linked. The nostalgic Old World resonated well with Jewish suburban audiences because it engaged those audiences in conversation with its visualization of communal heritage and its representations of their identity. One will see, in chapter two, that the image of the Old World became increasingly homogenized throughout the post-war period, resulting in a stable presentation of its contents and a constant way of talking about them. This common nostalgic rhetoric dominated images of the Old World throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and was the product of a dynamic connection between American Jewish communities and the imagined contents of their Eastern European heritage.

The significance of this nostalgia, then, is not only about what is present within a given representation of the Old World, but how that representation exists within visual cultural relationships, and how it is experienced. As will be explored more fully throughout this dissertation, audiences' spectatorship brings with it their contemporaneous participation in determining the form and significance of the nostalgic past. This balance – between images' rhetoric and audiences' interpretation – thus emphasizes that meaning is wholly produced neither through authorship nor through reception. It is the product of continual hermeneutic experiences which depend on both

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<sup>18</sup> See Deborah Dash Moore, *Urban Origins of American Judaism* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 131.

of those things. This is the crux of a visual cultural approach to the nostalgic Old World: that it is this shared relation with images that forms and informs the face of Eastern European heritage for American Jews.

This exploration of this visual cultural relationship between nostalgic images and their American Jewish audiences will illuminate important ways of understanding those images' value within the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is necessary to first situate this discussion within current approaches to American Jewish nostalgia and visual culture. These topics will help to establish the scope of this dissertation by identifying key referents for discussing Jewish nostalgia, as well as recognizing where a visual cultural methodology helps to fill in overlooked aspects of this discussion. By recognizing the role of viewers' relationships with images, one is able to attend to visual culture's experiential considerations which are currently left out of present scholarship's main approach to nostalgic images on textual or historical grounds. This methodology will thus establish different terms for approaching the conversation at hand. The way in which visual cultural studies talks about viewers' experience of images is integral to recognizing how mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American Jewry perceived and related to their nostalgia as a form of heritage. After discussing current scholarship, this dissertation's scope, and the basis of a visual cultural methodology, the overarching structure of this analysis will be laid out to clarify how these ideas of heritage, experience, and relationality will feature in the remainder of this discussion.

### *Current Approaches to American Jewish Nostalgia*

In thinking the connection between American Jews and the prominence of Old World nostalgia in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, current scholarship has delved at length into discussing the shtetl in particular as a mythologized site of memory, a construct of identity, and a response to contemporaneous social and cultural issues facing American Jews in the mid-century. This way of describing the imagined shtetl has been crucially useful in understanding how these American Jews signed on to certain a narrative about their past, as well as proving constructive in exploring the qualities of that narrative itself.

There have been two major avenues for this discussion. In one approach, scholars have sought to answer the questions of nostalgia through exploring the historical context

of its audience. In this regard, Rachel Kranson's work on Jewish responses to mid-century economic ascendancy and Hasia Diner's discussion of the Lower East Side stand as key accounts of where and how Jewish nostalgia gained appeal.<sup>19</sup> There are also other important historical texts that are slightly more general in nature, such as Deborah Dash Moore's seminal study of second-generation New York Jews or Edward Shapiro's review of post-war American Jewish history, which provide important contextual insights into how Jewish identity and communal belonging were shifting in 20<sup>th</sup>-century America.<sup>20</sup> These historical works are supplemented by the accounts of more specific nostalgic texts, such as Alisa Solomon's examination of *Fiddler on the Roof*, which provide concentrated case studies in understanding how nostalgic images connected with their audiences.<sup>21</sup>

Simultaneous to these works, other scholars have looked at nostalgia through the lens of literary criticism, analyzing the authors, ideas, and components of nostalgic texts and their narratives. Dan Miron's investigation into the literary structure of the shtetl, Steven Zipperstein's reading of American nostalgic texts, and David Roskies' contextualization of Jewish historical consciousness effectively delve into where shtetl narratives originated and how they support clear, compelling features that become read onto Old World nostalgia at large.<sup>22</sup> More recently, two publications have engaged fruitfully with both of these approaches. Eliyana R. Adler and Sheila E. Jelen's edited collection, *Reconstructing the Old Country*, gives voice to concentrated topics surrounding how historians, writers, and communities were thinking about and memorializing the Old World in the immediate post-war period.<sup>23</sup> More directly related to the development of a nostalgic vision, Markus Krah's publication of *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past* gives context both to nostalgic literature and its audiences in the 1940s and 1950s, charting how nostalgic media functioned as discursive engagements with American Jews' contemporaneous issues.<sup>24</sup> As Krah argues, this ultimately facilitated

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<sup>19</sup> Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*; Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*.

<sup>21</sup> Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders*.

<sup>22</sup> Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl: And Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000); Steven Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999); David G. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> See Eliyana R. Adler and Sheila E. Jelen, eds., *Reconstructing the Old Country: American Jewry in the Post-Holocaust Decades* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*.

the naturalization of a home-grown American Jewish culture and constructed a new “community of memory” through the results of that discourse around nostalgia.<sup>25</sup> This way of engaging with nostalgic heritage is echoed more broadly among other American groups within the 1960s and 1970s, as Matthew Frye Jacobson discusses in *Roots Too*, though it is notable that Krahn locates the roots of this discourse, for Jews, in the immediate post-war period’s earlier reflections on nostalgic identity.<sup>26</sup>

Although the body of literature established by these academic studies is expansive in its scope and treatment of Eastern European nostalgia, some notable considerations remain unexplored in thinking about representations of the Old World in this American period. Notably, the question remains: What is the place of images in these literary and historical discourses? Of course, visual culture is considered as a source of analysis, since no-one can deny that such representations of Eastern Europe as *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964/1971) or *A Vanished World* (1983) are integral parts of the mid-century nostalgic canon. Yet upon further reading, one senses that these representations of the Old World have been overlooked in terms of how they are part of meaningful visual experiences. Matters such as authors’ intents or intertextuality are often privileged above whether audiences would have encountered these images through those frameworks. In certain ways, this is understandable. Some of the most notable works on this topic, such as Dan Miron’s *The Image of the Shtetl*, are themselves literary studies, and it makes sense that they would privilege literary depictions of the shtetl as the core of this nostalgic discourse. Similarly, while Krahn acknowledges the materiality of images at a number of points in his expansive discussion of Jewish nostalgia, and engages with that side of them, his main focus in approaching the topic lies with questions of authority and discursive communities.<sup>27</sup>

The result of these scholars’ handling of visual sources means that certain qualities of images remain understated and certain opportunities for analysis are left untouched when images are brought up within the discussion of nostalgia. For instance, Steven Zipperstein does discuss *Fiddler on the Roof* as an important conversationalist with other

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<sup>25</sup> See Krahn, 243–46, 249–53.

<sup>26</sup> See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006); Krahn, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 5–7.

<sup>27</sup> See Krahn, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 15; for some selected points at which Krahn approaches matters of materiality in nostalgic media, see 135, 169–76, 250.

primary sources in American Jewish culture, but his approach does not quite reach the full extent of how *Fiddler* is presented, or represented, in terms of its own visual articulation of the ideas in that conversation. Zipperstein's focus remains very much on literary aspects of images – such as themes, symbols, and narratives – whereas other facets of visual culture, such as the viewer-image relationship or the immediacy of visual experience, are not part of the discussion.<sup>28</sup> Zipperstein's handling of visual cultural sources is echoed across much of contemporary scholarship's approach to nostalgic media. This is certainly understandable in line with having a discourse that includes a plethora of significant written texts, as the discussion of mid-century Jewish nostalgia is, but the dominance of that relationship with literary analyses nonetheless highlights the necessity to inquire further into what meaning visual images can uniquely provide. To draw on W.J.T. Mitchell's discussion of the "pictorial turn" in understanding visual representation, the crux of that shift has yet to occur when discussing Old World nostalgia: there is not yet the "realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or 'visual literacy' might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality."<sup>29</sup> In this direction, the present dissertation responds to limitations of the literary and historical models through which Old World nostalgia has previously been examined.

In terms of literature, the focus on assessing textual sources in the canon of nostalgic Jewish texts has produced an attitude toward images that handles them in one of two ways. On the one hand, they are often perceived as visual representations of their own literary precedents. It is in this regard that *Fiddler on the Roof*, as a depiction of imagined shtetl life, is treated as though it were tied to the yoke of Sholem Aleichem's short stories, published in English in 1949.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, for early immigrant experiences, *Hester Street* (1975) is often mentioned in the same breath as its literary progenitor, Abraham Cahan's *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896). There is, of course, ample reason for studying these works in this way, but the textual relationship between source and adaptation still only gets at one avenue of analysis. In this framework, where later

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<sup>28</sup> See Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry*, 33–38.

<sup>29</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16.

<sup>30</sup> See Markus Krah's discussion of *Fiddler*, which consistently refers it to its literary underpinnings, in Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 157, 187–88, 234–40.

representations are overshadowed by their literary ancestors, the relationship between those visual texts and their audiences is often not broached in relation to the complex spectatorship that Mitchell mentions.

On the other hand, in addition to this bias toward representative explanations, images have also been treated in scholarship and popular reception alike as source material for understanding representations of the Old World historically. This is especially common in reference to certain media, such as photography, in which there are often documentary assumptions at play. Suffice to say at this point, this treatment of images as fodder for analysis is limiting. In a documentary perspective, images' more complex aspects are moved out of the picture. Curatorial decisions, questions of appeal, and other factors in images' depiction are set aside through defining the contents of a representation as the basis for later discussion. For example, to think of Roman Vishniac's photographs as visions of the shtetl, and to read his descriptions as factual narratives for each image, ignores the manner in which the entire presentation of those photographs is phrased to evoke specific emotional responses in support of ulterior aims.<sup>31</sup> Anke Hilbrenner's discussion of Vishniac's ethnographic style is a particularly elucidating example of how images – even those which themselves purport to be documentarian – are more than merely representative; conventions such as genre inform how these images are presented and, most importantly, how their viewers interpret them.<sup>32</sup> Yet this attention to genre, style, and artifice is not often part of the way nostalgic primary sources are discussed by those who link them with American Jews' relationships to their past. This issue is not only the case with someone like Vishniac, whose work was expressly staged, but is part of the treatment of many primary sources, such as the work of Jacob Riis or Arnold Eagle, whose significance is chiefly tied to what they appear to be documenting.<sup>33</sup> Recent scholarship has shown how even something as seemingly testimonial and depictive as memorial books – specifically, their non-stylized maps of shtetl streets – cannot be read

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<sup>31</sup> Vishniac took these photos on consignment by the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and they were thereafter used in JDC fundraising, seeking to engender support for aiding Eastern European communities. See Jeffrey Shandler, "Behold a Vanished World," in *Roman Vishniac Rediscovered*, ed. Maya Benton (New York and Munich: International Center of Photography and DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2015), 135–38.

<sup>32</sup> See Anke Hilbrenner, "Invention of a Vanished World: Photographs of Traditional Jewish Life in the Russian Pale of Settlement," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 57, no. 2 (2009): 173–88.

<sup>33</sup> It is notable, as will be discussed later in the dissertation, that Vishniac is currently being reassessed in relation to his documentarian pretense and his photographic considerations. See, for instance, *Roman Vishniac Rediscovered*. However, other sources still do not have the benefit of this critical examination.

simply as documentarian sources; the reality is invariably more complex than the nostalgic image reveals.<sup>34</sup>

In response to the limitations of these textual and historical approaches to nostalgic images, this dissertation's approach builds on current conversations within art history which address the more general need to consider viewers' experiences as parts of images' contents and meaning. In addition to Mitchell and other scholars of visual culture, writers such as Margaret Olin, Jennifer Barker, and Vivian Sobchak argue that art becomes meaningful, impactful, and relevant through the dynamic relationship between an image and its viewership.<sup>35</sup> As Olin writes, "If art fails, it is for want of giving us...a relation demanding the copresence, in time and space, of real people".<sup>36</sup> This way of thinking about successful art will be key for this dissertation's methodology, as interpersonal relationships are core to how experiences of spectatorship and interpretation take place within a nostalgic context. Especially as that nostalgia takes on functions of heritage – becoming a link with one's familial and communal histories, as will be seen in chapter three – nostalgic audiences enter close relationships with images which can be understood through these art historical and visual cultural conversations.

In the same way that visual cultural thinking steps away from traditional literary or historical approaches to images, this direction within art history highlights a different approach to how Jewish art is often discussed. Once again, thinking about a relationship with images highlights questions of images' own rhetoric over and above matters of their authorship. What is most important is not the intention or context behind the production of an image, but what is resonant for viewers within their experience of that image and its visual language. This contrasts notably with common approaches to Jewish art which look at those images in relation to the context of their production. Scholars such as Matthew

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<sup>34</sup> See Sheila E. Jelen, "A Treasury of Yiddish Stories: Salvage Montage and the Anti-Shtetl," in *Reconstructing the Old Country: American Jewry in the Post-Holocaust Decades*, ed. Eliyana R. Adler and Sheila E. Jelen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 81–84.

<sup>35</sup> See Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 24–27; Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) 2; Vivian Sobchak, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 23, 41.

<sup>36</sup> Olin, *Touching Photographs*, 23.

Baigell or Carol Zemel, among others, discuss art in close connection to its originary context, with the hand and vision of the artist remaining present.<sup>37</sup>

Those approaches pose issues for thinking about spectatorship as an involved engagement with images. For example, Zemel notes how Roman Vishniac's photographs capture an idealized and constructed type – the “Ostjude”<sup>38</sup> – but simultaneously refuses to interrogate that type as a construct of viewership: she relies on Vishniac's own documentary claims and maintains that these images are a historical record.<sup>39</sup> For Zemel, the Ostjude is an emblem of the past that has become prominent in the present, rather than being constructed contemporarily. Zemel's emphasis glosses over how such emblematic figures develop over time, especially in connection with their audiences, and how Vishniac's photographs have held different meanings within different contexts. Rather than being guided by authorship in such a manner, this dissertation will approach images' meaning with an eye to those audiences: it will look less at Jewish artists and more at Jewish experiences of seeing, especially as those experiences are informed by the context of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America and the priorities, values, and identities which inform the significance of Eastern European heritage therein.

In summary, what these considerations mean in terms of Old World nostalgia is that matters of audience and visual experience must be brought into the discussion of these images' significance. It is not just about specific figures or themes that are present in images. As those like Mitchell and Olin attest, the matter of “how” a viewer engages with images affects “what” they find significant therein; viewers' relationships with images is a core part of how those images become meaningful. In terms of the relationship between suburban Jewry and the Old World, it is important to think not only about what is explicitly present in these images, but also about matters of viewership and interpretation. It is necessary to view nostalgic images of the Old World not as art or documentary, but as the medium for a continually-developing visual cultural experience.

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<sup>37</sup> See Matthew Baigell, *Jewish Art in America: An Introduction* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), xiii-xxiv; Carol Zemel, *Looking Jewish: Visual Culture and Modern Diaspora* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015), 1-6.

<sup>38</sup> Zemel, *Looking Jewish*, 98.

<sup>39</sup> Zemel, 84, 85-89. It is notable that Zemel has chosen to view Vishniac's work in this way, as her writing on these photographs was published a number of years after important scholarship cast doubt on Vishniac's claims to historical representation. That conversation is ongoing and prominent. See Alana Newhouse, “A Closer Reading of Roman Vishniac,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 2010; Maya Benton, “Vishniac on Assignment,” in *Roman Vishniac Rediscovered*, ed. Maya Benton (New York and Munich: International Center of Photography and DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2015), 108–20.

In this regard, existing approaches to the Old World's nostalgic image leave some important possibilities wide open. In reducing images to representative articulations of literary antecedents or documentary sources for historical discourse, images are taken away from their relationship with other visual representations, material conditions, and immediate presence. Matters of authorship and intention similarly overshadow matters of images' relational rhetoric. This will be noted shortly in reference to the contemporary theory surrounding images and its contributions to how visual media come to bear on cultural and communal discourses. Although this dissertation is, in the end, not about that theory itself, exploring the idea of the image further will elucidate how its investigation outside of primarily historical and literary approaches can draw attention to features – such as “the gaze” and its hermeneutics – in which such approaches would often be less interested.

Ultimately, thinking about Old World images through the lens of visual culture will help locate how American Jews in mid-century suburbia connected with this nostalgic world and fashioned it into a meaningful vision of heritage. Through a visual cultural lens, this dissertation will demonstrate the relevance of this nostalgia as a mode of cultural meaning, especially insofar as that nostalgia encompasses dynamic, interpretive relationships with images of Jewish heritage and mediates the representation of communal identities. This perspective will become clearer as a visual cultural methodology is laid out later in this introduction, but it is first necessary to establish the precise scope and intention of this dissertation's inquiry.

### *The Boundaries of This Dissertation*

In responding to the challenges posed by textual, historical, and artist-centric analyses, what does it mean to look relationally at images and audiences in the discourse around Old World nostalgia? What might attention to visual culture provide that has not been gleaned from the expansive discussion of literary texts, artists, or specific representations? This dissertation will reorient the current conversation regarding images of American Jewish nostalgia toward the experience of spectatorship and, in doing so, will highlight the space between the image and its viewer as a space of possibility for understanding why nostalgic rhetoric was pervasive and compelling for many Jews in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century

America. This attention to visual culture will scrutinize how such rhetoric reflects the relationship of those American Jews to their concerns, values, and heritage.

In addition to giving room to sources which have been crowded out of view, there are other dynamics exhibited through visual culture that are best discussed by looking at images and their viewers. This dissertation aims to bring visual cultural sources to bear on questions of group identity, communal development, and cultural spaces through these means. Specifically, it seeks to adopt Krah's focus on nostalgic meaning as primarily developed through discourse, but to focus on visual representation, spectatorship, and hermeneutics as intrinsic parts of American Jews' thinking around this nostalgia.<sup>40</sup> This means that the way in which American Jews see images of the Old World is as important as the contents those images communicate. Questions of significance are necessarily tied to matters of interpretation here. In this way, the most important consideration is not one of authorship but one of viewership: rather than examining the ways that images are constructed in direct response to contextual issues, what this nostalgia is "about" hinges on the experiences of its audience in developing its meaning. The main issue is not about how a photograph of a shtetl or a stage production comments on its audiences' contemporaneous concerns, but about how those viewers' concerns interpretively enrich such nostalgic depictions and link them to forms of valued communal heritage.

There are some core challenges that are implicit to this approach and which must be acknowledged, as those challenges significantly qualify Old World nostalgia and the way one can talk about its viewership. First and foremost, in terms of the historical context of these American Jewish communities, there are problems inherent to describing American Jews as "an audience" for nostalgic images. This suggests that they are a cohesive, unified group. The tendency to view American Jews in this way is implicit in the mid-century rhetoric of Old World nostalgia itself: as will be seen in the first and second chapters, American Jews were coalescing under a newfound white identity in post-war America and championing an amalgamated Eastern European heritage in line with the demands of that identity. Yet this movement into the white mainstream excluded Black, Sephardic, and other Jews who did not fit into the white Ashkenazic majority or who simply had a different relationship to Eastern Europe. There is little room for them in the rhetoric of Old World nostalgia, which itself speaks broadly of American Jews without

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<sup>40</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 15.

nuance or accommodation. As Rachel Gross rightly points out, the prevalence of Eastern European immigration narratives, and of the kind of imagined Jews who populate those narratives, is challenging for gender nonconforming, non-white, and non-Ashkenazic Jews — and even those Ashkenazim who simply have a different immigration history than the hegemonic narrative.<sup>41</sup> On the basis of this issue, it is crucial to keep in mind that the relationship of American Jewish communities to images of the Old World is both fluid and rigidly exclusive: as some Jews were actively defining and redefining themselves in post-war America, other Jews were both included and excluded, voluntarily and involuntarily, in those newly-formed identities. Inflected histories and reconstructed places, such as “the Old World,” were part of these dynamics.

It is thus necessary to keep in view the fact that Eastern European heritage is not the same as American Jewish heritage, even as the Old World possesses a prominent place in the perception of American Jews as an imagined community within the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. On this basis, it will be especially important in chapters one and two – where the historical backdrop and narrative elements of Old World nostalgia will be discussed – to recognize racial and gendered dynamics within a context of shifting American Jewish identities. Those tensions will highlight how the imagination of a white, European, and male-dominated heritage was part of a broader way in which American Jews drew lines around their involvement in the white, Eurocentric, and male-dominated American mainstream. Naturally, those lines exclude as much as they include. Issues of gender and race will thus help to maintain clarity regarding who the audience for the Old World actually is, who it is not, and how that exclusion reflects on the dynamics of American Jewish identities in this period.

However, with this matter in mind, it is also important to be frank that this dissertation will mainly focus on the white American Jewish majority as the main viewership and conversationalist for the form and contents of Old World nostalgia. The rhetoric of an Eastern European Jewish heritage exists in relation to whiteness, not least because racial identity was the key to both American Jewish post-war identity politics and middle-class suburban privilege. While it is true that white Ashkenazic communities are often uncritically placed at the center of “American Jewry” writ large in conversations of American Jews, those same conversations do represent both a notable number of Jewish

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<sup>41</sup> Rachel Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue*, 16–17.

communities and a public engagement with Jewish identities within broader American society in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. To that extent, this Ashkenazic majority sits at the center of nostalgic rhetoric, and to understand the messages and values reflected in that nostalgia it is necessary to focus on their circumstances and concerns. This dissertation will approach their place in this conversation critically, but also must acknowledge that their communities represent how American Jewry was identified and discussed by many Americans in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish and non-Jewish alike.

In addition to critical caveats regarding American Jews as a cohesive category, there are also nuances for how nostalgia must be understood in relation to ideas of memory and history. A reader familiar with current studies of Jewish historical consciousness will note in this dissertation the absence of some writers who they may expect to appear. The discussion of collective memory, particularly, is one that is relevant to the topic at hand yet will not be approached here. This is because, when reviewing the discussions of collective memory and Jewish historical consciousness – through works such as Amos Funkenstein's *Perceptions of Jewish History* or Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* – it becomes increasingly clear that those discourses' contributions are not necessarily aimed at the same terms on which nostalgia is predicated. This is to say that suburban Jewish nostalgia has surprisingly little to do with Eastern European history: memorialized, historiographic, or otherwise. Rather, as will be seen in chapter three, these images' position as heritage detaches them from historical memory. As authors such as Krah and Kranson point out, the nostalgic Old World exists in relation to the contemporaneous concerns of its audience and directs its historical attention toward those concerns.<sup>42</sup> While earlier memorializing sources such as shtetls' *yizkor* books do form part of the literary grounding for the nostalgic Old World, and although many nostalgic texts are historical in their focus – such as Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* (1976), David G. Roskies' *The Shtetl Book* (1975), or Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski's *Life is With People* (1952) – the question of experience in the presentation of this nostalgia points to a different discourse in this way. The ahistorical program of this contemporaneous heritage is particularly evident if one considers that the overarching affinity of Jewish nostalgia in this period is not toward an historical fidelity to detail – as shown clearly in the embrace of *Fiddler*, and even of Roman Vishniac, as will be discussed

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<sup>42</sup> See Krah, 3, 74; Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 18.

later – but to the “spirit” or “values” of the Old World. The concern is not with the historical shtetl, but with the “every-shtetl,” much as how Tevye, as an everyman, is meant to embody the cultural core of Jewish values.

These reasons for setting aside ideas of collective memory and historical memorialization are important for setting the boundaries of this particular visual cultural conversation. As has been touched upon briefly, and as will be evident in further discussing visual cultural studies’ conceptual approach to images, the aim in this dissertation is to view nostalgic representations more in line with suburban identities and their accompanying experiences than with the memorialization of a distinct Jewish history. In this manner, the principal relationship at play in assessing visual cultural sources is not between Jewish audiences and their pasts but between those audiences and these images themselves.

In the same fashion as this dissertation’s focus on a present-tense spectatorship and the rhetorical dynamics therein, nostalgia itself is also understood on contemporaneous and communally-focused terms. This runs against many of the ways that nostalgia as a general concept is discussed in current academic conversations. Prominent authors such as Svetlana Boym and Susan Stewart approach nostalgia with a focus on individual experience and narratives of irrevocable, past-facing loss. Nostalgia, for them, is a feeling that the individual experiences in relation to the impossibility of recovering certain experiences, values, or lifestyles.<sup>43</sup> However, as will be seen more clearly in chapter three and expanded upon in chapter four, American Jews’ connection to Old World nostalgia draws in matters of heritage which makes the content of that nostalgia both contemporary and communal: it is about identity here and now. While prominent voices – such as Boym or Arjun Appadurai – consider this contemporaneous emphasis to outline an “ersatz” or “armchair” nostalgia which lacks actual experience, this dissertation is most interested in how this form of nostalgia can be taken more seriously.<sup>44</sup> In particular, Rachel Gross’s recent 2021 monograph, *Beyond the Synagogue*, provides a way to think about how

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<sup>43</sup> See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 8, 13, 50; Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), xii, 135.

<sup>44</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 76–78, 82; Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 38; for the role of communal concerns in nostalgia, see Suzanne Vromen, “The Ambiguity of Nostalgia,” *YIVO Annual* 21 (1993): 79–80; Stefanie Armbruster, *Watching Nostalgia: An Analysis of Nostalgic Television Fiction and Its Reception* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016), 23–24, 47–50.

nostalgically-tinged experiences – such as eating certain foods or conducting genealogical research – can lack originary, historical experience and yet possess communal value.<sup>45</sup> Thinking about American Jews' nostalgic engagement with the Old World thus productively explores how this kind of nostalgia provides a language for one's experience of heritage, in its presence or absence alike, rather than simply being about past and individual memories.

Although there seem to be many points where this dissertation diverges from various conversations regarding American Jews' nostalgia, it is worth noting that this approach needs not come at the expense of those other conversations. This dissertation's scope and methodology, while taking a different methodological tack to many current approaches to the same subject, continues to simultaneously rely on the results of those approaches and those conversations. Outside of visual cultural studies, contemporary historical and literary scholarship is crucially valuable for tracing the formation of the nostalgic Old World and for noting how American Jews were responding to this developing image. This scholarship remains foundationally involved in approaching the context and construction of nostalgic texts, including images. Thus, even as this dissertation seeks to move the conversation in an image-oriented interpretive direction which differs from other studies, its approach must stand on the contributions of literary and historical analyses. There are two particularly salient reasons for this.

Firstly, in relation to studies of the shtetl as literary construction, it is undeniable that much of the primary source material for early- to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American Jewish nostalgia is indeed literature: from memorial books to shtetl fiction, the lens of memory was focused on writing in those decades. As was mentioned previously, Dan Miron and Markus Krah explore these literary roots well, noting respectively how nostalgic representations were shaped through textual conventions and how these foundational sources set the direction for later American Jews' nostalgic culture, both for texts and images alike.<sup>46</sup> It would be counterproductive to assert that visual texts should not be held in relation to their own literary sources or historical context, and, although they will not be the analytical focus of this dissertation, those sources will be important in recognizing the developmental paths of nostalgic images' key depictions.

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<sup>45</sup> See Rachel Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue*.

<sup>46</sup> See Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl*, 1–48; Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, especially chapters 1-5, 7-9.

Secondly, it is also necessary to recognize that literary and historical approaches to mid-century Jewish nostalgia *do* establish a good understanding of the dynamics between nostalgic texts and their audiences. Many of the general themes and supporting narratives for a nostalgic understanding of the Eastern European past are present both in constructed images and written literature, and so it is possible to arrive at similar and constructive conclusions through attending to visual, literary, or historical studies. Krah's skillful reading of *Fiddler on the Roof* – in which he assesses the musical's relationship with its contemporary circumstances and the manner by which it imagines the Old World through mid-century American concerns – is one example of how a comparative, literary approach can bear significant fruit for one's understanding of historical context and nostalgic images alike.<sup>47</sup>

So, given this understanding, what is there to gain from looking at images outside of literary analyses? What is different about a visual cultural approach? Crucially, as noted previously, discussing only images' historical or literary context overlooks important hermeneutic and interpretive considerations. It is necessary to acknowledge how viewers interact with the nostalgic Old World in order to talk about the meaning and resonance of that represented heritage; after all, that significance develops along with a consistent viewership in the first place. On that basis, a visual cultural approach differs from the type of literary contextualization which takes place in many scholarly works – where the Old World's represented themes and ideas are paired with similar concerns for American Jewish audiences, as will be discussed in chapter three – since images' ongoing relationships with their audiences signify that literary connections and historical contextualization are only pieces of the puzzle. Far from being conclusive, such emphasis on images' relationality points out how the nostalgic Old World has a dynamic and open-ended resonance with its audience: it both reinforces and challenges its viewers' thinking about the value they invest in this nostalgia. This is especially important when thinking about these nostalgic media as representations of communal heritage, as will be seen later on in this dissertation. However, in order to utilize these methods in discussing mid-century Old World nostalgia, it is first necessary to be clear about what images are, how they are encountered, and how they connect with their viewers.

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<sup>47</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 234–40.

## *Methods: Looking at the Experience of Looking*

This dissertation will utilize a visual cultural methodology to provide novel analyses of nostalgic images which, in current scholarship, are otherwise discussed within historical or literary frameworks. By joining W.J.T. Mitchell and others in focusing on spectatorship, analyzing the interactions between images and their audiences will help to reconsider how American Jews looked to the nostalgic Old World as a significant site of their culture and identities. Rather than thinking about images as authored or curated representations of nostalgic meaning, visual cultural studies emphasize how that meaning is bound up in its rhetoric and relationships: those images' significance is continuously developed through what resonates within audiences' interactions with them. Discussing these ideas further will principally involve looking at questions of how those interactions take place, what their experience entails, and what results from those experiences.

In order to explore these visual cultural processes further, it is necessary to briefly establish a basis for understanding images and how their audiences relate to them. This topic will be explored in greater depth in the third chapter, but it is important to establish a common understanding for certain key terms from the outset. After touching on "images," "encounters," and "the gaze," one will be able to see how these ideas are applied throughout this dissertation. Each of these terms are part of a hermeneutically-focused understanding of visual culture which focuses on two related things: how the experience of images comes to bear on viewers' interpretations of their messages and how those interpretations affect the contents of such messages. This framework stresses that the act of interpretation is a representation of the relationship between a viewer and an image, as well as an event which affects and develops that relationship. Hans-Georg Gadamer's work on hermeneutics and art is foundational in this regard, as well as the way in which more recent scholars of anthropology and performance – such as Diane Taylor, Jeffrey C. Alexander, and Jason Mast – have applied hermeneutic thinking to particular communities and cultures.<sup>48</sup> This dissertation will build on these perspectives and apply

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<sup>48</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Second Revised Edition (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), esp. 278-306; Diane Taylor, cited in Jeffrey C. Alexander and Jason Mast, "The Cultural Pragmatics of Symbolic Action," in *Performance and Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 23; Alexander, *Performance and Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 57–58; Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Iconic Power and Performance: The Role of the Critic," in *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Dominik Bartmański, and Bernhard Giesen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 27.

their attention to hermeneutics toward mid-century American Jews' experiences of the nostalgic Old World. The matter of how viewers, audiences, and communities encounter and engage with images is at the core of later chapters' analysis of that nostalgia.

Within the context of a broader hermeneutic approach to visual culture, thinking about these experiences begins with a single question: What is an image? This is easier asked than answered. As W.J.T. Mitchell points out, an image is an ambiguous construct, denoting "both a physical object...and a mental, imaginary entity" as well as the entirety of the representation as an "overall formal gestalt".<sup>49</sup> This is the difference between a specific photo, painting, or stage production and the overarching image of "the shtetl" which is present in all of them. Simultaneously, these various kinds of images are represented through a variety of media: they can be a static, like photographs, or represented by the convergence of audio and visuals in film or theater.<sup>50</sup> They may even be a spoken image which, while based in language, still participates in acts of visual imagination.<sup>51</sup> These are all kinds of images in either the material or imaginary senses that Mitchell discusses. From this flexibility of media and form, Mitchell notes "what" images are is not so important as what images "do": images participate in their viewers' experiences and form hermeneutic relationships with their audiences.<sup>52</sup> This means that images' significance for those viewers is continuously part of various kinds of visualization and visual experiences, even when the image itself is not immediately perceptible. This consideration will be especially pertinent in the third chapter, where viewers' impressions of visual experiences will be discussed as images in their own right, alongside other kinds of imagined images such as Mitchell's "formal gestalt."

Although images are not always part of immediate, concrete representations, viewers nonetheless rely on those particular representations to explicitly visualize the respective images or gestalts which stand behind their meaning. One must acknowledge that visual culture remains grounded in materiality, even when it concerns immaterial or imaginary images. As Julia Sonnevend puts it in her own conversation regarding spectatorship, "In the center of this theory is the encounter among images, viewers, and spatial and social

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<sup>49</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of multimedia's place in the encounter with images, see W.J.T. Mitchell, "There Are No Visual Media," *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, no. 2 (2005): 257–66.

<sup>51</sup> See Mitchell, *What to Pictures Want?*, 2.

<sup>52</sup> See Mitchell, 47.

settings.”<sup>53</sup> This “encounter” forms the basis for thinking about how images and viewers produce meaning. It is the tangible lynchpin of hermeneutic processes, the point of contact through which audiences perceive, access, interpret, and develop the meaning of nostalgic images. After all, *Fiddler on the Roof* is silent without a Broadway ticket or the recorded album, and Roman Vishniac is only beautiful if you can pay for the book or the exhibition. In that regard, the material matter of how American Jews encounter nostalgic images is important for thinking about those images’ significance.

Authors in visual cultural studies and art history alike have noted the importance of this materiality for understanding how images connect with their viewers. For instance, Olin and Mitchell have respectively argued that images necessarily exist as multisensory experiences. Although spectatorship appears to principally privilege sight, viewers access images through their presence, surroundings, emotions, touch — what Olin calls a “physical visuality.”<sup>54</sup> This perspective grounds hermeneutic experiences in the encounter with images, foregrounding ways in which that immediate encounter affects interpretation. As Elizabeth Edwards and Julia Sonnevend respectively note, both the materiality of the image and the material surroundings of its viewers are parts of how meaning is made.<sup>55</sup> On these terms, spectatorship is not reducible to sight, nor to a purely conceptual interpretation of experience. This is not to say that spectatorship is wholly sensory — abstract images exist beyond the encounter and play a crucial role in developing meaning, as will be seen in chapter three’s discussion of “gestalt” images — but this perspective demonstrates the necessity of grounding visual cultural processes within holistic material experiences. The encounter with images occupies this role in visual cultural interpretation.

In addition to scholarship of visual culture and art history, this materially-oriented thinking is also part of how Jewish studies has developed in its approach to heritage and culture. There is growing recognition that, as Ken Koltun-Fromm writes, “Jews visualize [themselves] materially, and do so in ways that situate identity within material things and

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<sup>53</sup> Julia Sonnevend, “Iconic Rituals: Towards a Social Theory of Encountering Images,” in *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Dominik Bartmański, and Bernhard Giesen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 223.

<sup>54</sup> Olin, *Touching Photographs*, 17, see also 9; Mitchell, “There Are No Visual Media.”

<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, “Photographs as Objects of Memory” in *The Object Reader*, ed. Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 332–33; Sonnevend, “Iconic Rituals,” 223–24.

practices.”<sup>56</sup> Most recently, Rachel Gross’s aforementioned monograph, *Beyond the Synagogue*, brings an attention to materiality to bear on forms of American Jewish nostalgia.<sup>57</sup> As with visual culture’s emphasis on images’ tangibility and presence, both Koltun-Fromm and Gross emphasize that Jews’ identities are rooted in complex, sensory experiences.<sup>58</sup> While this dissertation will focus more on spectatorship than other cultural practises, these material cultural touchpoints are very much a part of the hermeneutic relationships which are central to the discussion of Old World nostalgia. As Jews find significance in foods, activities, and images, they are engaging in processes of interpretation which concretize their connection to those parts of their broader identities.

In all of these conversations – whether in Jewish studies, art history, or visual culture – the crux of the matter is that material experiences engender hermeneutic relationships. The way that Jews encounter food, objects, or images creates moments of interpretation, but also the opportunity for Jews to be affected by these encounters: the way in which the nostalgic Old World is represented, for instance, or placed in connection with other representations, can alter, subvert, or inform its viewers’ understandings of Jewishness. This is especially relevant for this dissertation’s focus on visual culture and nostalgia. It is on the basis of this interpretive potential that writers such as Vivian Sobchak and Jennifer Barker connect the experiential elements of spectatorship with significantly relational ways of seeing: as noted earlier in this introduction, the image becomes a participant in the development of its meaning.<sup>59</sup> Yet this interpersonal aspect also connotes another kind of connectivity, within and among audiences. A viewer’s interpretations are articulated, shared, and developed through their communities, especially when those ideas concern matters of identity and heritage. Thus, the way that audiences engage with images is, as Margaret Olin writes, not only “interpersonal” but also “communitywide.”<sup>60</sup> The

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<sup>56</sup> Ken Koltun-Fromm, *Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 226; for further examples of how Jewish identity is imagined through music, art, and material culture, see also Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jeffrey Shandler’s special issue of *Material Religion*: Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jeffrey Shandler, eds., *Material Religion* 3, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>57</sup> See Rachel Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue*.

<sup>58</sup> See Gross; Koltun-Fromm, *Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America*, 199, 222–23, 240–41, 265–66; for connections regarding food heritage and visual culture, see also Ken Koltun-Fromm, *Imagining Jewish Authenticity: Vision and Text in American Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 76–116.

<sup>59</sup> See Sobchak, *The Address of the Eye*, 23, 41; Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 2, 12–13.

<sup>60</sup> Olin, *Touching Photographs*, 17.

materiality of an individual's encounter necessarily participates in these communally-relevant and communally-mediated dynamics.

This connection between individuals' experience and communities' values is reflected in hermeneutic approaches to spectatorship. In addition to material considerations, visual cultural hermeneutics highlight that viewers bring their own dispositions and pre-conceptions to moments of interpretation: where an audience comes from, on what terms they come in contact with these images, and the ways that such experience inform later encounters with other, similar representations are all dynamic processes which evidence ongoing hermeneutic factors for what these images depict.<sup>61</sup> This is notably a reflexive process as well. While the sorts of impressions and meanings which are communicated through encountering images do rely on the mediation of specific representations – that is, the connections they invoke and the sorts of impressions that they leave – they also involve a broader array of hermeneutic considerations regarding a viewer's own context.<sup>62</sup> In this regard, what connects the viewer and image is not just a direct experience of spectatorship, but a “gaze,” which David Morgan defines as “the visual network that constitutes a social act of looking.”<sup>63</sup> Insofar as it is involved with multiple sources of meaning and the fluid development of those meanings in the act of looking, the gaze incorporates not only the viewer's perspective, but those of their peers, the image, its context, and conventions of interpretation.<sup>64</sup>

The relevance of acknowledging this complexity behind visual cultural experiences lies in how these considerations best approach images' ongoing relationship with their viewers. In thinking about nostalgic depictions of the Old World, it is not only the case that these images were meaningful in relation to their authors' intentions or their audiences' contexts, but also that such meaning developed through those audiences' engagement with all kinds of nostalgic media, whether in individual depictions or imagined gestalts. As much as Jews' historical context, social discourses, or cultural conventions play into their nostalgic gaze, so too do these various images factor into how American Jewry was thinking about related representations of their heritage. This

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<sup>61</sup> See David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 76–83.

<sup>62</sup> See Sonnevend, “Iconic Rituals,” 219–20.

<sup>63</sup> Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Morgan, 3–4; see also Sonnevend, “Iconic Rituals,” 219, 223; in a slightly different context, Jeffrey C. Alexander discusses a similar hermeneutic complexity in terms of performative actors, of which images are one: see Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Performance and Power*, 25–81.

inclusion of images as participants in the gaze is important; it establishes a key difference from how contemporary scholarship of Old World nostalgia views images' connections with their audiences. While literary or historical approaches look at nostalgic meaning as invested in the Old World by audiences who apply their values onto images, visual cultural studies maintains a focus on the gaze's dialectical and relational elements which instead emphasize how those images are necessarily developing in connection with their viewers' experiences.<sup>65</sup>

This attention to hermeneutics within the gaze will enable this dissertation to approach questions of resonance and value in American Jews' nostalgic relationship with Old World images. Particularly in chapters three and four, looking closer at visual cultural considerations within Old World nostalgia will provide the means to assess why these images connected particularly well with visions of American Jews' communal heritage, as well as how these images motivated meaningful reflections on American Jews' lived experiences. This is because audiences' relationship with images of all kinds – whether individual representations or broader *gestalts* – speaks to their consistent and close engagement with visual culture. As much as American Jews were defining the contents of their nostalgic Old World, they were also developing alongside it, and so looking at the way in which they were engaging with visual culture forms the basis for better understanding how that nostalgic gaze affected them.

It is important to recognize that, although this analysis of audiences' engagement with nostalgic images does involve American Jews' responses to their nostalgia, the present visual cultural methodology will attend primarily to questions of rhetoric rather than matters of historical reception. As noted earlier, what is most relevant to this inquiry is how these images resonate with certain constructions of Jewish heritage. This dissertation will analyze these connections by examining the way in which the Old World's nostalgic images exist in relation to the common communal concerns for Jews who, in the context of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America, had recently joined a white, suburban, and middle-class mainstream. Examining the way that these communities' values and identities engage with the Old World's visual cultural rhetoric – that is, these communities' hermeneutically-laden spectatorship and the nostalgic meaning that develops through these interpretive processes – will provide an avenue for recognizing how these images

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<sup>65</sup> See Mitchell, *What to Pictures Want?*, 49–50; see also Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 3–4, 75–112.

play an important role in the conversation around American Jewish identity in this time. Rather than focusing on matters of authors' intentions or audiences' reception, this attention to rhetoric within the context of a visual cultural relationship will emphasize that it is crucial to attend to images themselves on hermeneutic terms. The dynamics involved in American Jews' spectatorship and interpretation of the Old World reflect significant ways that these Jews were navigating relationships with both their heritage – however nostalgic – and their surrounding American society.

Ultimately, this focus on hermeneutics will map out a different way of thinking about how American Jews encountered the nostalgic Old World as a form of communal heritage. Contemporary scholarship often sees this relationship as affirmative, noting how the Old World articulates a beacon of Jewish vibrancy and a robust, authentic culture. However, especially in chapter four, looking at experiences of seeing images will make it clear how the idealization of an Eastern European heritage demands that nostalgic Jewish audiences reflect on the gap between the shtetl and the suburb, and between the types of lives that Jews lead in those places. In this way, while these images' resonance does return to an analysis of mid-century American Jews' historical situation, the important factor for defining images' significance in this conversation is a visual cultural relationship rather than a correlation with historical context. It is about how images communicate values. By seeing images in this way, one can better recognize that the nostalgic Old World's appeal for its Jewish audiences is part of an ongoing conversation: that World and its specific representations go beyond responding to contextual tensions which American Jews were facing in the mid-century, instead participating directly in how their audiences were thinking about those dynamics. Nostalgic images bring together both suburban Jewry's desire to enact such a heritage and their reflection on their inability to do so.

These considerations will help to reassess mid-century American Jewish nostalgia, demonstrating how the Old World's image participates in a dynamic relationship with its nostalgic audiences and gains meaningful resonance through that relationality. This will ultimately fill the oversight in current scholarship which has privileged textual readings of the Old World as either a literary construct or an historical idea — in both cases, a static point of reference for American Jews. However, in order to move toward that reconsideration, this conversation will still begin with the historical context of mid-century American Jews and the grounding of their nostalgic vision in specific representations. This

will provide the primary sources and background knowledge which enable the sort of considerations that have been discussed here. When taking a bird's-eye view of the dissertation at large, one can more clearly see this course toward the analysis of visual cultural experience.

### *The Structure of the Present Discussion*

The structure of this dissertation is divided into two halves, each with two chapters. The first half will be exploratory and descriptive. In it, the historical context and depicted content of nostalgic Jewish imagery will be laid out. Then, in the second half, issues concerning spectatorship will be explored through questions of American Jews' visual cultural experiences. What does it look like for American Jews to be encountering the Old World in hermeneutic terms? And how can these experiences shed light on what resonates most for mid-century Jewish audiences within those nostalgic images? This discussion's fundamental claim is that the nostalgic Old World sustains a resonant relationship with its Jewish audiences in a way that both emboldens and challenges American Jewish identities. The Old World itself is idealized, desired, and relegated to the past through its dynamic and ongoing relationship with its mid-century audiences; that connection is where these images become a meaningful vision of Jewish heritage.

Of course, in order to understand the relationship between these images and their Jewish audiences, one must begin with the facts on the ground. In chapter one, the focus will be on the process of suburbanization. What factors led to this dramatic shift in American Jews' lives? Where were Jews moving to, and what did their communities look like once they got there? What compromises were involved in suburbanizing and how did they affect Jews' public and communal identities? All of these questions will set the stage for understanding how American Jews were experiencing the dynamics of their suburban environments, and how those dynamics often led to anxieties regarding the long-term viability of their traditions. The crux of the matter is that, as American Jews were achieving unprecedented levels of acceptance in American society, they were also increasingly having to adjust their culture and communal structures in order to conform to the expectations of the American mainstream.

Chapter two will focus on the nostalgic image itself, looking at how it developed in parallel to the suburbanization of American Jewish communities and the particular forms that it takes. This chapter will outline the primary features of nostalgia for the Old World: What did American Jews think that previous Eastern European Jews were like, and how were those features articulated in specific visual representations? What are some of the dominant trends in representing Old World Jewry at this time? Due to the significance of literature, both in scholarship and in its direct relationship with later visual representations of the shtetl, this chapter will focus both on what these images articulate about Jewish heritage and how that articulation is drawn from literary antecedents which define those features as common for Jewish nostalgia. Defining the shtetl as a place of piety, hardship, and authenticity was an endeavour that took place over multiple decades.

In outlining these qualities, chapter two will consist of close analyses of selected visual resources. The lineage of those images' ideas is certainly significant, but the focus will be brought back to the distinct nostalgic features which are replicated throughout the 1960s and 1970s. By surveying the way that various nostalgic sources present windows into the larger idea of a shtetl, the overarching image of "the shtetl" and of "Eastern European Jews" who live there will be outlined as it stands in relation to the material circumstances noted in chapter one.

This will establish the basis for the subsequent analysis of nostalgia which will begin in chapter three. As previously noted, this dissertation is ultimately not about the development or background to these visual sources, but focuses on what new considerations visual culture can bring to the conversation around those sources' audiences and resonance. In this regard, rather than focusing on the connections between the nostalgic image of the Old World and its literary or historical antecedents, the question of relationality will once again be foregrounded. That is, what is the connection between the imagined Old World and its mid-century Jewish viewers? How is that nostalgia being valued, and where is that value placed?

These considerations will highlight the importance of hermeneutics for understanding American Jews' nostalgic gaze. In doing so, they will respond to a present gap in scholarship. As will be seen in chapter three, many current thinkers see the nostalgic image as a functional, direct means of responding to surrounding socio-cultural tensions in American Jewish life: it echoes the concerns of suburban Jewry and, in representing

those concerns alongside a vision of strong Jewish identities, functions to alleviate the anxieties which surround suburbanization and the American mainstream's socio-cultural pressures. However, by looking at images' experiences and the ways in which they are involved in hermeneutic processes, one can see that their relationship with their audiences is not so clear-cut. Images' contents are constantly developing, as their rhetoric and meaning responds to their audiences' expectations, values, and concerns. Thus, the visual cultural relationship between mid-century American Jews and the nostalgic Old World indicates that these images' meaning is neither stable nor functional, but is discursively engaged in ongoing interpretive processes. These processes can be both encouraging and challenging for their audiences. In that regard, the role of nostalgic imagery comes to resemble a form of cultural heritage for American Jews; it is a point of reference they engage with in navigating the substantial changes to their everyday lives in the mid-century.

Chapter four will expand on this analysis to examine how American Jews' hermeneutic relationship with the Old World, as well as their experience of its images as heritage, indicates an important discourse about America's suburban spaces. In the same way that Jewish communities were questioning the socio-cultural concessions they had made in joining the American mainstream, it is important to reflect on how their imagination of the Old World represents a set of possibilities for different Jewish lifestyles, experiences, and communities. The shtetl comes to represent a space wherein one can live Jewishly, as opposed to Jews' constant encounter with non-Jewish socio-cultural pressures within mid-century American suburbs. In this way, American Jewish audiences were not only seeing strong Jewish communities within nostalgic images, but they are also seeing the kinds of environments which could support those communities by sustaining meaningful everyday experiences which reinforce Jewish identities.

Overall, this dissertation brings visual culture into view as a necessary part of how American Jews were reflecting upon and engaging with their heritage. These images occupy a nuanced and complex place in cultural discourse. On the one hand, the Old World represents authenticity and reassures suburban audiences that their identities are robust, rich, and generative. However, on the other hand, the location of that heritage in a different space and a different time highlights the distance that American Jews have come in departing from those Old World environments. The same audience that

valourized *Fiddler on the Roof* also recognized that *Fiddler* is the closest they could get to its depicted lifestyles and experiences. To that extent, far from this being a simply functional or ameliorative response to the anxieties of mid-century suburbia, the nostalgic Old World pushed American Jews to reflect on the possibilities for Jewish vibrancy which were present in their own day-to-day lives; they often had to acknowledge the lack thereof. This issue emphasizes the significance of visual culture as a means of socio-cultural engagement for its audiences. Although textual sources are frequently privileged as particularly engaged with contemporaneous discourses – discourses which, themselves, are often represented textually – looking to experiences of spectatorship reveals that images are equally ingrained in their audiences’ ways of thinking. This issue comes back to the relationship that American Jews developed with their nostalgic heritage: thinking about visual culture, hermeneutics, and experiences of spectatorship will help to better recognize nostalgic images’ resonance and appeal for their Jewish audiences – as the contemporary academic discussion emphasizes – but also the socio-cultural challenges out of which American Jews staged their concerns and nostalgic desires. Mid-century suburban Jewry was constantly negotiating this relationship with their own nostalgic heritage.

# CHAPTER ONE: SUBURBAN JEWISH NOSTALGIA IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Old World's nostalgic image is a distinctly 20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon whose development has hardly been linear. Multiple writers have noted how American Jews' perspectives on Eastern Europe could have easily been different: up until the early mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and throughout prior decades, dissenting voices consistently displayed ambivalence about the world that they and their parents had left behind.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, it is necessary to recognize that the warm, nostalgic image and its accompanying themes resonate within a particular historical context. They must be understood within that context both with attention to their production – in terms of what factors, concerns, and aims led to their form – and their consumption – in terms of how they would have been received and by whom. Within the scope of America in the 1960s and 1970s, and in particular in terms of Jewish communities at that time, this means taking a look at suburbia.

The aim of this chapter is not to provide a complete, in-depth discussion of mid-century American Jewish nostalgia from a historical perspective. Rather, it is to account for the elements of that historical background which will be pertinent to the conversation in later parts of this dissertation. The main exploration here thus focuses on the relation of post-war and mid-century American historical developments to Jews' lifestyles, culture, and identities. More specifically, this chapter will examine changes affecting the majority of American Jews who became defined as white within the post-war period, thus joining an American mainstream that, despite its religious inclusivity and tolerance for Judaism, nonetheless maintained a racially-exclusive status quo. As noted in the introduction, not all American Jews were part of this white-defined group. It was the Ashkenazic majority who could leverage their whiteness to access mainstream American privilege, which not only involved ascendancy into America's middle-class but also participation in patterns of suburbanization which were restricted to white Americans. For those Jews who left for

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<sup>1</sup> See Irving Kristol, "Elegy for a Lost World," *Commentary* 9 (May 1950), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-earth-is-the-lords-by-abraham-joshua-heschel/>; Daniel Bell, "Reflections on Jewish Identity," *Commentary* 31 (June 1961), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/reflections-on-jewish-identity/>; David G. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 42.

the suburbs, that movement was thus connected to a plethora of implications which affected not only how they lived on a day-to-day basis, but also how they and other Americans thought about their identities as Jews.

In looking at the pathways that these American Jews took toward suburbia, what compromises they made to get there, and the dynamics of those environments, one will better recognize from which position American Jews encountered and valued the nostalgic Old World within the 1960s and 1970s. The main theme throughout this period is change: from the immediate post-war years onward, Jews and Judaism were undergoing significant cultural, social, and demographic shifts which reshaped both their socio-economic profile and their relationship with mainstream American communities. In some cases, these changes were the results of developments on the national scale that were felt within Jewish communities, while at other times these were particularly related to the construction and maintenance of those communities or to the conception and articulation of distinct Jewish identities. This chapter will survey those dynamics and, by exploring their impacts on American Jewish communities, one will get a clear overview of how Jews joined the suburban mainstream and took in its associated cultural, social, and religious implications.

The effect of these changes is significant for understanding American Jews' relation to the nostalgic Old World. As will be seen, the ways in which these communities entered the suburban mainstream meant that, alongside their novel environments, they were also developing new ways of networking with other Jews and new ways of expressing their Jewish identities to America at large. These developments accompanied anxieties about the long-term viability of these novel modes of Jewish living, particularly since the terms of those developments were often dictated by the expectations of the non-Jewish American mainstream rather than extending from Jewish communities' own values and priorities. The image of the Old World exists in relation to this. It connects directly to the question of internal and external influences on American Jewish lifestyles. Particularly toward the end of this dissertation, one will see how it engages with questions of socio-cultural autonomy by representing environments based on Jewish particularity. While this does not necessarily ameliorate the anxieties stemming from Jews' developmental deference to external influences, that representation does introduce an important relationship between American Jews' context and their contemporaneous nostalgia. Understanding how certain historical factors placed pressures on Jewish communities is

key for recognizing the value and resonance of a nostalgic Old World which had developed in a very different direction.

In order to survey these historical dynamics and to note their significance for mid-century American Jewish communities, this chapter will approach the state of Jewish suburbanites through five main topics: integration and access respectively, as well as national, suburban, and communally-focused Jewish issues. These distinctions are largely artificial, but they are nonetheless helpful in summarizing the dynamics surrounding Old World nostalgia. In that regard, these categories will approach Jewish communities by examining historical changes within a narrowing scope: moving from the national to the particular. First, one will see how broad changes in American society enabled Jewish integration in the post-war period. These developments were mostly general, affecting Americans at large, but also tell a story about how Jews were able to join the American mainstream. Second, one will see how this integration allowed Jews to enter cherished suburban spaces which were otherwise the province of white Christian populations. These changes mostly occurred in the immediate post-war period and within the context of the 1950s.

Moving on to look at suburban environments, the subject of this chapter will shift slightly. The periodization up to this point will have focused on the “second generation” of Ashkenazi Jews, who are defined by their proximity to the waves of Eastern European immigration between 1881 and 1924; these Jews were actively involved in synthesizing their minority identities and their American milieu, having grown up in urban environments with immigrant parents.<sup>2</sup> As Deborah Dash Moore notes in her landmark book on second-generation New York Jewry, this is not a temporally concise cohort – since Eastern European immigration spanned several decades – but rather is a term that denotes this common set of experiences.<sup>3</sup> To that extent, second-generation Jews are a product of the 1920s, maturing in the late 1930s and continuing to dominate Jewish culture in the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> It is the second generation that engaged with important post-war developments on the front lines of American Jewish thought, and who first entered suburban environments. However, moving forward, this chapter will look then at suburban Jewish

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<sup>2</sup> See Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 9–11; Eli Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950-1970* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 204–5.

<sup>3</sup> Moore, *At Home in America*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> See Moore, 16–17.

life with an emphasis on the context surrounding third-generation Jewry: those who emerged in the 1950s and came to cultural maturity within the suburbia of the 1960s. This cohort is especially important for thinking about Old World nostalgia in later mid-century decades. This is because third-generation Jews lived within a suburban culture that the second generation had shaped through their post-war climb into the American mainstream. Having grown up in suburbia, rather than urban Jewish neighbourhoods, this younger generation represented both the culmination of American Jews' post-war socio-cultural developments and the future of American Jewish identity. The way in which they engaged with the nostalgic Old World as a site of heritage says much about how American Jewish culture responded to suburban neighbourhoods' dynamics and challenges.

The later avenues of approaching mid-century American Jewry will thus focus more specifically on the experiences particular to third-generation Jews from the 1950s onward. This will first involve dynamics felt at a national scale, once again focusing on the main topic of "change." To that extent, one will see how Jews fit into an increasingly narrow "religious" identity alongside other American groups, and how surrounding social, political, and cultural pressures encouraged them to rephrase their identities along these lines. Ultimately, this gives way to a reclamation of ethnic identities in the 1960s, though still in relation to the expectations of broad American discourses.

This sense of external determination will then be located more specifically within suburban spaces. One will see how these environments made demands on the social and institutional lives of Americans therein, particularly with regard to Jewish suburbanites and other ethnic minorities. Then, lastly, this historical chapter will conclude by looking at some dynamics unique to those Jewish communities. Although many threads of suburban discourses encompassed multiple groups' experiences, such as questions surrounding acculturative authenticity, many others unfolded more specifically among Jews. With that in mind, this chapter will conclude by looking at the conversation around group survival and the image of Israel in Jewish communities. These issues demonstrate Jews' responses, in the 1960s and onward, to the 1950s' redefinition of minority and suburban communities. The turn to Israel, alongside the ethnic revival, was a way of responding to the anxieties about Jews' socio-cultural survival in American mainstream environments. Nostalgia for the Old World is also one such means of response, emerging in relation to this historical moment's dynamics and tensions.

It is in this manner that the scope will narrow throughout this chapter, arching toward the particular concerns of third-generation suburban Jews who endorsed a specific nostalgic vision of their heritage throughout the 1960s and up to the 1980s. This will provide a backdrop for how mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American Jews were relating to the Old World and developing its image, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

However, this relationship must be received critically. In responding to the pressures and tensions of America's suburban mainstream, integration-minded Jews both advocated for their place in that mainstream and acquiesced to the expectations of their surroundings. As will be seen, this meant taking on a hegemonic identity as "an American Jew." In the same way that this dissertation's introduction noted challenges inherent to viewing American Jews as a coherent group, this broad and indiscriminate label overshadows meaningful differences among American Jews' experiences: it places the expectations of both the American mainstream and the Jewish majority over and above those Jews with different heritages or different engagements with the suburban mainstream. In this way, how many American Jews imagined the nostalgic Old World echoes the internalized prejudices of a public American Jewish identity in this time. Simultaneous to the definition of American Jewry as primarily white and religiously-defined, the Old World's image was populated with white religious men, though their central position in Old World nostalgia is often articulated through more general and universal values as "tradition" or "piety." There is thus exclusion baked into the identity politics of this nostalgia, drawing lines not only between Jews and other American minorities but within Jewish communities as well — between white and non-white Jews, male and non-male Jews. These dynamics are as much a part of the mainstream's expectations as other changes in Jewish identity.

With regard to this chapter's scope, the focus of this historical discussion will remain on white Ashkenazim, but with an eye for the dynamics which inform their identities as "American Jews" writ large. The tensions inherent to that articulation of American Jewish identity are part of the dynamics, dimensions, and dissatisfactions of suburban Jewish life insofar as they lead to a nostalgic desire and the particular representations of heritage which will be discussed in chapter two. The way in which American Jews were able to control and express their identities amidst a radically changing society is of primary note here. Yet, this discussion will also critically touch on how this American Jewish identity is

connected to racialized and gendered issues – both among Jews and non-Jews – particularly when it comes to acknowledging the effects of suburban conformity and Jews’ deliberate participation in whiteness.

With this in mind, this chapter will historically contextualize America’s mid-century Jewish nostalgic audience and foreshadow topics in the rest of the dissertation. As noted, it will foreground the issue of how post-war and mid-century changes were motivated by the American mainstream and, on that basis, placed external pressures on Jewish communities. The ways in which American Jews reshaped their identities, made compromises in their relationship with the mainstream, and took on new forms of suburban socialization are all part of a dynamic response to these pressures. In that respect, Jews were developing through conversations with others and the expectations placed upon them by those non-Jewish communities. This matter of socio-cultural influence is crucial for understanding where Jews are placing value in the nostalgic image, as their interactions with Old World heritage speaks to a different set of relationships at play. The vision of a vibrant, viable, and autonomous Jewry is drawn into a significant contrast with the anxieties of Jewish survival which will be discussed at the end of this chapter. The root of those anxieties, however, is an important place to begin: the way in which Jews’ entrance into the American mainstream entailed compromise and developmental negotiation.

### *Joining the Mainstream*

In the years leading up to the bulk of mid-century suburbanization, American Jewry entered a notably new relationship with broader American society. The developments surrounding these communities in the post-war decades enabled Jews to both access the means of suburbanization – as they gained newfound financial ability and an affiliation with middle-class white Americans – and to integrate with suburban communities. To this extent, in asking how Jews came to suburbia in the mid-century, the matter of joining mainstream American society is a central part of that story. Looking at American Jews’ place within post-war and mid-century American contexts paints a crucial picture for understanding how Jews stepped into the suburban dynamics that will be discussed in this

chapter, as well as for recognizing the experiences and tensions which were involved in this transition.

In the early days of the post-war period, American Jewish demographics were comparable to what they would have been in the interwar period, the formative years of the second generation. The majority of Jews lived in urban settings, although most had since left the immigrant neighbourhoods which would later become an object of suburban nostalgia.<sup>5</sup> While a small amount of suburbanization accompanied movements in the inter-war period, up through the mid-1940s American Jews still largely lived in neighbourhoods such as New York City's Washington Heights, Boston's Dorchester, or Newark's Weequahic.<sup>6</sup> These are the sites which emptied when Jews began to suburbanize. In recognizing the impact of those movements on American Jewish society and culture, it is important to understand that these urban neighbourhoods were strongly identified with their Jewish populations. Through that identification, they embodied a certain set of relations with both their surrounding non-Jewish environments and the experience of Jews living within them.

The culture and character of the second-generation was shaped in relation to American urban neighbourhoods. Because the majority of Jews lived in these areas up to the cusp of mass suburbanization in the later 1940s, dense Jewish neighbourhoods were typified as "natural" Jewish settings, home to a plethora of various institutions and a strong sense of cultural particularity. However, simultaneous to this urban particularity, second-generation Jews were still negotiating processes of Americanization. As Harry Gersh writes in 1956, reflecting on the movement out of Jewish neighbourhoods, his second-generation cohort grew up between Jewish insularity – "the family and the *landsman*" being their immediate social milieu – and the intensifying reality that, "Even in our ghettos we lived in a non-Jewish world."<sup>7</sup> While urban Jewish neighbourhoods

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<sup>5</sup> See Henry L. Feingold, *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920-1945* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 75, 87-88; Moore, *At Home in America*, 20-22.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of early Jewish suburbanization in the 1920s, see Gerald Gamm, *Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Harry Gersh, "The New Suburbanites of the 50's: Jewish Division," *Commentary* 17 (March 1954), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-new-suburbanites-of-the-50sjewish-division/>; for further discussion of Jewish neighbourhoods' relationship with non-Jewish spaces, see also Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 222-26; Markus Kraus, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 23.

themselves remained Jewish spaces, Gersh attests that his generation's experience of negotiating Jewish and American identities was rooted in the motley urban assembly of many ethnic enclaves and in the second generation's distinct position between their American future and their immigrant parents.

From this minority position, second-generation American Jews were acutely conscious that they remained outside of the American mainstream, even as they embraced Americanization. Markus Krah notes how this moment of transition “resulted in the emergence of an ‘anxious subculture.’ Intent on becoming Americans and remaining distinctly Jewish, American Jews created structures and institutions paralleling those in the mainstream society from which they were excluded.”<sup>8</sup> It is precisely in this way that class-based and social dynamics permeated the second generation's experience of America. Hasia Diner describes how Jews in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century were balancing the needs of their communities and their place within broader society: Jews were continuously wrestling with the ramifications of social exclusion which, often anti-Semitic in nature, amounted to systematic alienation.<sup>9</sup> In response to these tensions, American Jews were developing new institutions within their own communities, including but not limited to synagogues, B'nai B'rith lodges, chapters of Hadassah and other Zionist organizations, and community centers which had developed out of earlier Young Men's Hebrew Associations.<sup>10</sup> In part, these organizations constituted the possibilities of strong Jewish neighbourhoods and the desire for community within years of American change, but they also attest to the inability of Jews to participate in other areas of American social life, such as certain clubs or careers, and thus they must be mentioned in the same breath as experiences of exclusion.

However, as American society emerged into the late 1940s, Jews' relationship to their environment underwent radical changes. Jews were increasingly welcomed into American society at large. Edward Shapiro goes so far as to write that, extending into the 1950s, the lowering of economic and social barriers for Jews was “unprecedented in American history.”<sup>11</sup> Shapiro notes how World War II forms the basis for this shift in attitudes toward Jews, since the intolerance of fascist regimes led to a reactive,

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<sup>8</sup> Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> See Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 228–29, 236.

<sup>10</sup> Diner, 247.

<sup>11</sup> Edward S. Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jewry since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 28.

aspirational pluralism for most of American society.<sup>12</sup> The outright anti-Semitism that became associated with the Holocaust and mass murder could no longer persist in the public sphere. While it was replaced in many cases by a quieter, genteel anti-Semitism, it was simultaneously vocalized and realized to a much lesser extent than had previously been felt by many Jews.<sup>13</sup>

This change in the public perception of Jews also accompanied developments in their racial affiliation which were central for their entrance into the mainstream. As David Roediger notes, the decades prior to World War II saw American society understanding race in complex and messy ways: whiteness was no less coveted nor was America less racially divided, but rather those divisions extended to more shades of racial difference and greater degrees of fluidity than a simple white/non-white binary.<sup>14</sup> These racialized identities were the basis for substantial discrimination against Eastern European immigrants, including many American Jews, further emphasizing that the American mainstream was a white mainstream.<sup>15</sup>

In the post-war period, these racial categories shifted for many minorities, such as Italians, Jews, or the Irish. Previously distinct groups became able to lay claim to mainstream whiteness. On a cultural and social level, this shift necessitates that American Jews' position in their post-war society must be understood in connection to the legacy of such racialized thinking: both for how American Jews were seen by others in their society, and for how American Jews constructed and developed their own identities. It is no accident that the Old World grew in prominence as a monolithic American Jewish heritage at a time when Eastern Europe was newly recognized as a white region and as many American Jews, too, were redefining themselves as part of a white mainstream. Even as whiteness was a work in progress for many Jews, this racial identity was a key part of how they formed new relationships with American society, and especially the suburban mainstream.<sup>16</sup> Whiteness is part of the socio-economic

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<sup>12</sup> See Shapiro, 16.

<sup>13</sup> See Shapiro, 44–45, 50–51.

<sup>14</sup> David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 35–45.

<sup>15</sup> See Roediger, 49–50.

<sup>16</sup> Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks: And What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 9–11, 23, 25, 153; for a description of how Jews were marginally white in relation to racially-exclusive loans in suburbia, see also Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 36.

package by which swathes of American society accepted American Jewry — though, more specifically, accepted light-skinned Ashkenazim with a willingness to integrate.

Overall, mainstream Americans' orientation to an inclusive tolerance – or at the very least to its face-value enactment – opened novel opportunities for the majority of American Jews. At this time, local and state governments began repealing university quotas on Jewish students and preventing discrimination in hiring and housing practises.<sup>17</sup> While none of this actually guaranteed Jews' involvement or success, those gestures and their accompanying attitudes did open the doors for Jews to take advantage of a broad array of jobs, networks, and neighbourhoods from which they were previously excluded. The significance of these possibilities cannot be understated, either in terms of what they allowed American Jews to do, or in terms of how they affected American Judaism. As will be seen throughout this chapter, joining the mainstream through these various means – economic, social, and spatial connections with American society – had considerable ramifications for the experience of American Jewish life. Both in order to suburbanize and due to the pressures of suburban environments, as well as the effects of national discourses at large, Jews were reshaping themselves and their identities: they were changing economically, culturally, religiously, and racially, to name a few key junctions of these dynamics. One must keep in mind that, while Jews were able to join the mainstream by participating in these developments, they were also weighed in relation to the expectations of that American standard.

It is thus that, as Jews took advantage of novel opportunities throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, changing perceptions of Jews compounded alongside their integration with the American mainstream. They were brought further in. By the mid-1950s, American Jews were broadly associated with being an upwardly mobile group whose working class was disappearing amid a new generation of professionalized individuals, with younger Jews building upon and exceeding the standard set by their parents and grandparents.<sup>18</sup> The now-tired stereotype of “doctors, lawyers, and investment bankers” was based on such changes, and formed a distinct image of this developing economic profile. William Attwood, writing a cover story for the widely-read *Look* magazine in 1955,

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<sup>17</sup> Shapiro, 39.

<sup>18</sup> See Rachel Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 100; William Attwood, “The Position of Jews in America Today,” *Look*, November 29, 1955, 27.

rattles off a list of possible Jewish professions at the time: the American Jew is “a businessman, a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, possibly a farmer”, though this last mention seems to be thrown in for breadth.<sup>19</sup> He goes on to note that “American Jews have a larger proportion of business, professional and white-collar workers than do either American Protestants or American Catholics. They also have superior earning power”.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, “The Jewish working class has all but vanished, having ascended into the middle-income bracket.”<sup>21</sup> This does not actually mean that there were not working-class Jews, but Attwood’s perspective indicates how Jews had changed in the eyes of the American public. Their broad identity was middle class, and middle class meant mainstream.

This economic shift also had social counterparts. Industries and universities which dropped discriminatory barriers connected Jews with careers and positions which afforded them upward mobility. Attwood’s article about Jews’ status in America is a prime example of this: his description of Jews’ economic success bears with it a sociable admiration for this group. There were also tangible factors which drew together economic and social forms of integration. After all, one cannot be involved within prominent American workplaces without being also involved, to some extent, in the social contact occurring therein. It is to this extent that Shapiro writes, “As Jews moved up the corporate and financial ladder, they came into closer social contact with non-Jews.... it was impossible for successful Jewish businessmen to remain within a hermetically sealed Jewish social environment.”<sup>22</sup> In terms of entering the mainstream, what this means is that one can take the economic success of American Jews in the mid-century to indicate a heightened level of social acceptance as well. Jews were increasingly able to identify with a class profile which signalled to other Americans that they were in the same circles.

Of course, this is not to say that barriers between groups fell completely. Many observations from the mid-century, while noting increased social connections among Jews and non-Jews, observe also how these groups existed in cordial yet separate spheres throughout the 1950s. There was a separation among neighbours along ethnic and religious lines, dubbed “the 5:00 shadow” or “the invisible gate.”<sup>23</sup> As the pseudonymous

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<sup>19</sup> Attwood, “The Position of Jews in America Today,” 27.

<sup>20</sup> Attwood, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Attwood, 30.

<sup>22</sup> Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 121.

<sup>23</sup> See Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 158–59.

Evelyn Rossman wrote in a 1954 issue of *Commentary*, “The Jewish community [in the New England town of “Northrup”] seems to be developing alongside, separately, rather than within the larger community.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, James B. Ringer, assessing Jewish integration within an anonymous mid-western suburb in 1959, describes both the overarching tolerance of this community – its “live-and-let-live” character<sup>25</sup> – and the self-isolation of its members along ethno-religious lines, particularly with regard to social contact outside of public non-sectarian organizations.<sup>26</sup>

These barriers were not all self-imposed. Despite increased access to many economic and social opportunities, Jews continued to be explicitly excluded from many others. Attwood, imagining the position of an American Jew, aptly writes that even for those who have enjoyed integration, “you feel that you belong here in America—up to a point. That point may be the gates of the local country club, the portals of a medical school or some real-estate broker’s office.”<sup>27</sup> External constraints were as much a part of Jewish life in the post-war mainstream as were self-imposed limits.

It is in this regard that one must recognize that the economic and social shifts of the post-war period were not a sudden or mutual acceptance. Even in 1959, Jews were still in the process of settling into an integrated society. In terms of the ways in which Jews were perceiving their own place within the mainstream, the intense anti-Semitism of the 1940s and its persistent legacy of exclusion meant that American Jews did not necessarily see their non-Jewish surroundings as hospitable, even if they were inclusive. As Karen Brodtkin aptly notes, “Jews had a justifiable wariness about the extent to which America’s embrace was real.”<sup>28</sup> A full 50% of Ringer’s Jewish respondents reported that, in his words, they were “apprehensive, defensive, or otherwise ill at ease in the company of Gentiles.”<sup>29</sup> And furthermore, one must keep in mind that, as noted previously by Attwood, there were still many arenas in which Jews were not permitted. The legacy of anti-Semitism persisted in these forms.

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<sup>24</sup> Evelyn N. Rossman, “The Community and I: Belonging: Its Satisfactions and Dissatisfactions,” *Commentary* 18 (November 1954), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-community-and-ibelonging-its-satisfactions-and-dissatisfactions/>.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin B. Ringer, *The Edge of Friendliness: A Study of Jewish-Gentile Relations* (New York and London: Basic Books, 1967), 21–23.

<sup>26</sup> Ringer, 122, 145.

<sup>27</sup> Attwood, “The Position of Jews in America Today,” 27.

<sup>28</sup> Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folk*, 139.

<sup>29</sup> Ringer, *The Edge of Friendliness*, 138.

Nonetheless, American and Jewish attitudes alike were changing. Integration and acceptance, and Jews' amenability to that integration, was moving forward. On the part of the American mainstream, the decline of anti-Semitism had clear effects within the 1950s: in 1948, 20% of Americans reported that they did not want Jews as neighbours, falling to just 2% by 1959.<sup>30</sup> This trend only increased throughout the following decades: in the later 1960s, Morris Kertzer claimed in his book *Today's American Jew* (1967) that "traditional clubhouse fraternalism" was becoming replaced by meritocracy, with the ultimate effect of enabling further Jewish integration.<sup>31</sup> Thus, both economically and socially, Jews were an increasingly firm part of an integrated middle class. As will be seen in the following section, Jews were able to access suburban environments on the basis of this position.

Yet, much like mainstream integration, one must recognize that this process of suburbanization was similarly gradual. At a certain point, Jews' socio-economic profile had sufficiently changed that they were able to join suburban communities – something denied to various other American minorities, especially racial minorities – but the changes they underwent to get there remained an ongoing dynamic within those environments. As will be seen in later parts of this chapter, this means that Jews were continuously navigating ways of expressing their social and individual identities in relation to their non-Jewish suburban surroundings. Especially in relation to the ethnic and religious dynamics of mid-century suburbia, Jews were working to determine the implications of that geography for them, their communal organizations, and their relationships with others in the same spaces.

American Jews' introduction into the mainstream sets the stage for the tensions and issues facing third-generation suburban Jewry. The various racial, gendered, religious, and political ways that the American middle class exerts pressure on its constituents forms the framework within which mid-century American Jews were trying to articulate their identities and communal values. As Lila Corwin Berman notes well, it is also this environment which provides the language for contemporaneous American Jewish

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Herbert Stember, "Attitudes toward Association with Jews," in *Jews in the Mind of America*, ed. George Salomon (New York and London: The American Jewish Committee and Basic Books, Inc., 1966), 95–99.

<sup>31</sup> Morris N. Kertzer, *Today's American Jew* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 23; see also Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 115–17.

anxieties.<sup>32</sup> In many ways, as will be laid out in later chapters, the nostalgic Old World responds to such pressures by advancing a vision of an autonomous and uncompromising Jewish world. However, what is evident from the historical picture is that most American Jews' daily lives were increasingly beholden to the expectations of their mainstream context. Third-generation Jews who grew up in suburbia felt these dynamics acutely.

### *Accessing Suburbia*

Before looking directly at the experiences and dynamics of suburban environments, it is necessary to briefly discuss what the process of suburbanization looked like. The ways in which Jews were able to take advantage of their mainstream status in accessing suburban environments tells an important story about what suburbia meant to Americans and how Jews fit within that vision. Even though more work remained in Jews' further economic and social integration within the American mainstream, as was previously noted, enough had been done by the 1950s to connect them with the prospect of suburbanization. The question of suburban access – where that threshold lies – will highlight how those spaces were, themselves, constructed along lines of race and class, and will frame how various mainstream minorities conformed to the expectations of their environments. After all, as will be seen, mortgages were often given or restricted depending on the lender's perception of an applicant; it was crucial that would-be suburbanites could satisfy certain identity-laden criteria in order to cross such barriers to mobility. The way in which Americans were accessing suburbia thus implicates how their identities developed in response to mainstream pressures. American Jews were only able to participate in post-war suburbanization alongside white, middle-class Americans by similarly emphasizing their racial status and newfound economic profile.

Suburban access thus constitutes a window into how these pressures came to bear on American Jews and other ethnic minorities. Even though the scale of suburban migration was massive within the 1950s – suburbs' growth rate was ten times larger than that of cities<sup>33</sup> – and reached even-greater proportions in the 1960s, there were very clear

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<sup>32</sup> See Lila Corwin Berman, "American Jews and the Ambivalence of Middle-Classness," *American Jewish History* 94, no. 4 (December 2007): 426–32.

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 238.

restrictions on who could join suburbia.<sup>34</sup> Real estate developers and the United States government alike spurred on this legacy of exclusion. This section will turn first to the restrictions which were in place throughout early mass-suburbanization in the 1950s. As noted, this is largely a matter of gatekeeping: measures which excluded some were often the same as those which granted access to others. In this regard, one will see how those restrictions created racially- and culturally-homogeneous suburbs. Looking lastly toward the specific course of Jewish suburbanization, one will see where Jews were able to harness mainstream privileges and, in the remainder of this chapter, how their resultant mobility involved a continuing relationship with these homogenizing norms.

The bulk of 1950s suburban gatekeeping was facilitated by selective mortgages which governed financial access to emergent neighbourhoods. In addition to certain geographical developments which affected mobility in post-war America – including factors such as the development of interstate highways<sup>35</sup> – the path into suburbia relied heavily on federal subsidies and private enterprise meeting individuals' financial means. After all, while the government partnered with real estate developers to fabricate suburban neighbourhoods, the basic barrier to access was one's ability to buy a house. It is in this regard that the role of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) was both crucial and formative in establishing and promoting suburban communities. Aiming to raise the number of homeowners across the country, FHA policies pushed the owner-occupied single-family home into the grasp of America's white middle class. It did this by backing mortgages which met certain requirements, such as financial risk, building regulations, and, most crucially for the present topic, the qualities of prospective homeowners.<sup>36</sup> So long as one could secure an FHA-backed mortgage, it was often cheaper to buy a house than to rent one.<sup>37</sup> As a direct result, there was a marked uptick in suburban homeownership throughout the 1950s for those who could meet the FHA's criteria.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Becky Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese, "Suburbanization in the United States after 1945," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, April 2017, <http://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-64>.

<sup>35</sup> See Nicolaides and Wiese; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 11.

<sup>36</sup> See Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 204–5.

<sup>37</sup> Jackson, 205.

<sup>38</sup> Nicolaides and Wiese, "Suburbanization in the United States after 1945"; see also Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 215–16.

Of course, there were also many who could not meet these requirements, and, as noted previously, often those difficulties had nothing to do with financial ability. FHA policies throughout the 1950s were unabashedly discriminatory. Applicants who were not “white” – which, as Diane Harris points out, is a category involving class implications as well as outward appearances<sup>39</sup> – were often unable to access FHA-backed loans. Kenneth T. Jackson, in his landmark work on American suburbanization, lays out some of the rationale for this discrimination: the FHA “was extraordinarily concerned with ‘inharmonious racial or nationality groups.’ It feared that an entire area could lose its investment value if rigid white-black separation was not maintained.”<sup>40</sup> Especially in the earlier years of suburban expansion, this policy established exclusively middle-class white suburbs. The discrepancy in access to loans between different racial areas is well-documented and drastic: for example, David Roediger points to rates of FHA approval for loans from 1934 to 1960 in white-defined St. Louis County, which were 6.3 times higher than the nearby city of St. Louis, a racially mixed area.<sup>41</sup> The FHA’s perception of racially-mixed areas manifested in similar results across America: white Americans were given the means to suburbanize and non-white Americans were not.<sup>42</sup>

This attitude was replicated within suburban developments as well, where private developers could enforce their own discriminatory regulations. For instance, Levitt & Sons – one of the most prominent of post-war suburban developers – issued a housing covenant in 1949 which restricted residents of Levittown, Pennsylvania, to “members of the Caucasian race.”<sup>43</sup> It would be seven years before the first non-white family moved into Levittown – eventually being forced out by race riots – and suburban environments as a whole were not able to stably diversify until the 1970s.<sup>44</sup>

This meant that, in order to access suburbanization in the immediate post-war decades, Jews’ presence in the American mainstream was key. As Diane Harris puts it, “To be identified as white and to be among the middle majority was to benefit from a

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<sup>39</sup> See Harris, *Little White Houses*, 39, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 208, see also 209.

<sup>41</sup> David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 231–32.

<sup>42</sup> See Nicolaidis and Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945.”

<sup>43</sup> Levitt & Sons, *Covenant & Restrictions* (1949), quoted in Bill Griffith, “Levittown, My Levittown,” in *Second Suburb: Levittown, Pennsylvania*, ed. Dianne Harris (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 65.

<sup>44</sup> See Thomas J. Sugrue, “Jim Crow’s Last Stand: The Struggle to Integrate Levittown,” in *Second Suburb: Levittown, Pennsylvania*, ed. Dianne Harris (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 175–99; Nicolaidis and Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945.”

range of societal privileges” which included access to the means of suburbanization.<sup>45</sup> Conversely, such identification bears with it a number of significant ramifications for American Jewish culture, its articulation, and its self-perceptions. In the same manner as Jews moved into new social and economic profiles in the lead-up to post-war suburbanization, participation in those neighbourhoods and communities identified Jews further with the white American mainstream in return.<sup>46</sup> As Shapiro points out, the fact that, in the post-war period, larger numbers of Jews were raised in the suburbs, spoke less Yiddish, and moved away from “traditionally Jewish” professions such as the garment industry continued to transform “the social and economic profile of American Jews...into one that closely approximated the American ideal.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Lila Corwin Berman notes how the popular image of Jews also shifted on the basis of this participation to more closely approximate an Americanized, suburban society.<sup>48</sup>

Jews were not alone in benefitting from the reflexive reinforcement of their mainstream status through accessing and adopting a suburban identity. Nicolaidis and Wiese also note how other newly-white groups – such as Italians, Poles, Greeks, and the Irish – were engaging with the same symbols of economic and racial status in suburbia. As they write, “Mass suburbia tied these benefits together in a coherent spatial package, providing a setting for common experiences, aspirations, and interests. And because these communities were prefaced on the principle of racial exclusion, the new suburbs reinforced solidarities of race” while downplaying other differences.<sup>49</sup> This means that the firm entrenchment of Jews in America’s mainstream was particularly bolstered by their ability to participate – by coexisting and by raising families – in normative social and cultural environments. As previously noted, suburbia became a key part of what it meant to be accepted in America.

With their mainstream status in hand, Jews took advantage of their access to suburbia and wholeheartedly participated in American post-war mobility. Although instances of anti-Semitic resistance moved certain suburbs out of reach, since Jews were still in the process of integrating with mainstream communities, a migratory trend was

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<sup>45</sup> Harris, *Little White Houses*, 85.

<sup>46</sup> See Harris, 18.

<sup>47</sup> Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 125.

<sup>48</sup> Berman, “American Jews and the Ambivalence of Middle-Classness,” 419.

<sup>49</sup> Nicolaidis and Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945.”

firmly present among American Jewry.<sup>50</sup> By the 1960s a large portion of Jews had moved into suburbia: estimates range from between one and two thirds the total American Jewish population, which in all cases is described as an exceptional level of suburbanization in comparison to American mobility at large.<sup>51</sup> In some areas, the rate of Jewish suburbanization was slowed, but in others it far outstripped the national average. In Cleveland, 85% of Jewish residents had moved to outlying suburban areas by 1959, while in Boston entire neighbourhoods in Roxbury and Dorchester emptied their Jewish communities throughout the 1950s.<sup>52</sup> In this regard, although suburbanization was prominent in post-war America, Jewish suburbanization was especially notable in its scale.

This pattern of outsized suburbanization is notably connected with American Jews' racial recategorization in this period. As many American Jews took on a newfound whiteness, and as they were faced with aforementioned means of housing valuation which embraced racist discrimination, Jews' residence in growing non-white urban neighbourhoods precipitated widespread white flight to the suburbs. Gerald Gamm describes this moment excellently in his book, *Urban Exodus*, where he notes how the economic devaluation of Jews' houses in Boston was explicitly motivated by racial changes in their neighbourhoods.<sup>53</sup> Jews responded to the social and economic pressures of neighbourhood change by reaffirming their position as white Americans, driving a cultural wedge between themselves and other non-white groups. Within and through instances of racially-motivated migration, Jews' identity as white Americans was reinforced from two sides: they simultaneously participated in patterns of white-defined behaviour by fleeing non-white neighbourhoods, and did so while taking advantage of FHA loans which deliberately aided this kind of suburban-bound flight for white-defined groups.<sup>54</sup> Thus, suburban mobility was one aspect of how most Jews concretized and participated in their post-war identity as white Americans. With the notable exception of Black, non-white Sephardic, and other minority Jewish groups, the majority of American Jews leveraged

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<sup>50</sup> Moore, *At Home in America*, 235.

<sup>51</sup> Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 47; Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 321; "Two-Thirds of America's Jews Now Live in Suburbs, Expert Estimates," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, October 16, 1959, <https://www.jta.org/1959/10/16/archive/two-thirds-of-americas-jews-now-live-in-suburbs-expert-estimates>.

<sup>52</sup> Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 47; Gamm, *Urban Exodus*, 225.

<sup>53</sup> See Gamm, 44.

<sup>54</sup> See Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 206, 214–215.

their footing in the American mainstream to access suburbia and its associated connotations for their own identities and lifestyles.

When looking geographically at American Jewish suburbanization, two distinct patterns characterize this period of American Jewish movement. On the one hand, suburbanization entailed dispersal within specific regions. The movement out of New York City and into surrounding areas in Westchester and Nassau counties, Long Island, and New Jersey is one example of this. This did not always involve the drastic depopulation of Jewish neighbourhoods as the aforementioned examples of Detroit and Boston, but sometimes featured a slowed increase in urban populations alongside a marked rise in the growth of surrounding areas.<sup>55</sup> For those Jews who did move to suburbia, some of them settled together, turning emergent suburbs into Jewish enclaves. Hasia Diner points to a handful of examples – Skokie, Illinois; Shaker Heights, Ohio; Newton, Massachusetts; and Silver Spring, Maryland – as indicative of this pattern.<sup>56</sup> What is notable here is the proximal nature of these suburban communities to the cities of former residence: Chicago, Cleveland, Boston, and Washington, D.C.

The second trend at play in post-war American Jewish migration was a broader movement out of these regions. Many Jews in the post-war period spread across the country, often settling alongside smaller, established Jewish communities. This considerably expanded Jewish sunbelt populations – those in southern states – and led to communities in Miami Beach and Los Angeles which rivalled traditional north-east centres of American Jewish life.<sup>57</sup> However, Jews often suburbanized within regions of their former residence, and so, despite this dispersal into the sunbelt, the vast majority of American Jewry lived in only five states after the 1950s brought increased mobility to their communities.<sup>58</sup>

Throughout all of these movements, Jews' ability to integrate within various environments represented American mainstream participation and privilege. However, that also meant that Jews moved into environments which perpetuated suburbia's

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<sup>55</sup> See Abraham A. Fleischman, "The Urban Jew Goes Suburban," *The Reconstructionist* 19, no. 2 (March 6, 1953): 21. The *American Jewish Year Book* also features data in a number of years throughout this period which show this variety of trends.

<sup>56</sup> Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 287.

<sup>57</sup> See Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 133–39; Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 283; Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and LA* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

<sup>58</sup> Moore, *To the Golden Cities*, 27.

foundational attitudes toward class and race. Because Jews' presence in these communities was grounded in an underlying exclusivity, they would have acutely experienced the pressures to conform to the white, middle-class image which befitted mainstream suburbanites. These pressures certainly did have tangible bearing on American Jews' post-war development. As will be seen in the following section, Jews' identities in the 1950s were being reoriented toward the American mainstream's preferred categories, such as in the way that their ethnic difference was recast as religious distinction. Looking further at these various dynamics and the way that they affected American Jews, most of whom were in suburban environments by the mid-century, will help identify what changes were happening in those communities' day-to-day experiences. Ultimately, these developments will show how the 1950s determined Jewish communities from without and how, as suburban dynamics changed in the mid-century, Jews responded to that determination. Old World nostalgia grew popular alongside the increasing destabilization of suburbia's homogeneous character. In that regard, the various dynamics that will be explored on national, suburban, and communal levels establish conditions to which this nostalgia responds and set the framework within which American Jews developed the Old World's image.

### *National Dynamics: Religion, Anti-Communism, Gender, and Ethnic Revival*

Among the central tensions of mid-century suburban life, there were certain dynamics which were felt by American suburbanites but whose presence was neither limited to suburban environments nor dependent on suburban conditions. To that extent, these dynamics were national in nature. Matters such as the American attitude toward communism, the construction of religious categories, changes in gender roles, and concerns with minority experiences were certainly phrased uniquely on the basis of suburbia's cultural conditions, but ultimately are broader conversations in which the entire country participated. These are also conversations in which Jews were directly engaged: Jews' adoption of a new socio-economic profile, as discussed earlier in this chapter, meant that that Jewish suburbanites were balancing their outward articulations and inward self-conceptions with the broader American mainstream's changing relationship to contemporaneous issues. This section will focus on some of the tensions involved in this

balance, and specifically the ways in which ideas surrounding religion, political anti-communism, and minority ethnic identities were affecting American Jewish suburbanites.

Although it is impossible to do full justice to these historical dynamics with the current limitations for space, one will be able to see how the tensions emerging from this historical context gave a crucial impetus and form to the nostalgic expression of Jewish identity and heritage in this period. As noted well in recent scholarship, many features of imagined Eastern European spaces connect with these contemporaneous concerns.<sup>59</sup> Whether it is the emphasis on piety as a central Jewish feature, the embrace of tradition and its associated gender roles, or the representation of Jews' ethnic particularity, the image of the Old World takes form with various American mid-century dynamics in mind. Even if one acknowledges that this may not be a conscious process on the part of nostalgic media – many photobooks, for instance, are presented as documentary representations of an earlier time and place<sup>60</sup> – it is important to recognize that the connection of features between Jewish nostalgia's context and contents does inform its audiences' experiences. It is thus a crucial point for thinking about American Jews' nostalgic gaze.

One significant tension behind this nostalgic gaze was the increased application of, and later dissatisfaction with, the category of religion for describing Jewish life and culture. Especially alongside suburbanization that took place in the 1950s, Jews in the mid-century were increasingly becoming labelled a “religious group.” This is because, at the same time as they were joining mainstream American society in the post-war period, what it meant to be an “American” was increasingly constructed in religious terms: that language gave form to American values within mainstream society.<sup>61</sup> While later nostalgic representations helped American Jews to reclaim their ethnic identities – the Old World was consistently imagined as a location of holistic Jewish experiences which extend beyond definitions of religious activity – in this earlier period those communities were actively rearticulating their tradition with religious emphases in order to fit with the expectations of the American mainstream.

Although that shift toward religious categories did eventually pose challenges for expressing wholistic Jewish identities, as will be seen later in this section, Jews did first find

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<sup>59</sup> See Steven Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 36–39; Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity*, 90; Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 16.

<sup>60</sup> See Abraham Shulman, *The Old Country* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 1.

<sup>61</sup> See Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 74.

success in integrating with mainstream culture on the basis of a religiously-defined “Judaism.” This is largely because of a religious moment in American history. The “religious revival” of the 1950s equated being active in one’s religious community with the embrace of American culture at large, and swept through the country with massive social implications: “In God We Trust” was added to currency, the words “under God” to the pledge of allegiance, and religious congregations enjoyed surging memberships.<sup>62</sup> In this regard, as Markus Krah writes, “Judaism became the most accepted form of expressing Jewishness”.<sup>63</sup> Jews were able to shed their ethnic particularity and step into the religious American mainstream.

In this way, the idea of Judaism went beyond simply according with an American emphasis on religion; it was also a way of asserting Jews’ place within the core of American society. Throughout the religious revival, Jews and non-Jews alike put forward the idea of America’s “tri-faith” foundations. This meant that Americans saw their civil culture as informed by three distinct, but mutually comprehensible, religious traditions: Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. While the idea of a “tri-faith” America has its roots as early as the 1910s, the religious revival amplified its currency as a way of describing how America rooted its democratic values in a well-defined religious disposition.<sup>64</sup> This religiosity was, in part, a means of contrasting communism on the world stage – as will be discussed shortly in this chapter – but also set out a vision of an ideal American society.

That ideal was firmly religious at the expense of other identities, and especially at the expense of ethnic designations. One can look to Will Herberg’s 1955 publication of *Protestant–Catholic–Jew* as indicative of this. In this bestseller, Herberg argues that previously-divided ethnic groups – such as Italians, Jews, Germans, and others – have progressed through acculturation toward religious recategorizations, becoming unified along the lines of American religions – the Protestants, Catholics, and Jews of his title – which have each contributed foundational content to their American social surroundings.<sup>65</sup> This recategorization along religious lines was particularly accented in

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<sup>62</sup> See Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 274–75.

<sup>63</sup> Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 21.

<sup>64</sup> See Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 18–35, 39–41, 68–89.

<sup>65</sup> See Will Herberg, *Protestant–Catholic–Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, Anchor Books Revised Edition (Garden City: Anchor Books and Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1960), 27–40, 87.

suburbia. As Herbert Gans observed in his 1967 book on Levittown, earlier suburbanites were “giving up ethnic and regional allegiances and are gradually moving toward the triple melting pot in religion. They are Protestants, Catholics, and Jews who believe in an increasingly similar God, share an increasingly similar Judeo-Christian ethic, and worship in an increasingly similar way”.<sup>66</sup> It is with regard to this reformulation of difference that Nathan Glazer wrote in the context of the 1950s themselves that “Jewishness”, as an ethnic idea, was “everywhere in retreat” while Judaism “showed a remarkable, if ambiguous, strength.”<sup>67</sup>

Judaism in this image was framed as an additional category to one’s American identity. It was content that filled the necessary field of “religion.” While Laura Levitt provides an important note regarding how Jews did remain marked by a distinct confluence of race, class, religion, and ethnicity, she also writes that, in the rhetoric of a tri-faith America, they were set alongside Christians as “a version of the same with a minor difference.”<sup>68</sup> William Attwood’s 1955 article in *Look* articulates this succinctly in its opening paragraphs, where he addresses the position of American Jews, writing that “You are a Jew in America. Correction: You are an American who happens to be Jewish.”<sup>69</sup> This reduction of difference, however, ultimately was limited for many by the social barriers noted previously. Much as Jews continued to face pressures on the basis of their Judaism, non-white groups remained unable to sublimate their ethnic differences into the American religious mainstream.

On the part of American Jewry, even as they used these categories to assert their belonging in mainstream society, not everyone was content with this religious reconceptualization. As early as the interwar period, there were those who saw these categories as doing a disservice to Jewish communities and their traditions. In addition to early inter-war perspectives of Jewish intellectuals such as Leibush Lehrer and Mordecai Kaplan, dissent from the idea of a “religious” Judaism continued throughout the late

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<sup>66</sup> Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), xix.

<sup>67</sup> Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism*, 105, cited in Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity*, 106.

<sup>68</sup> Laura Levitt, “Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism,” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 2007): 808, see also 809-810.

<sup>69</sup> Attwood, “The Position of Jews in America Today,” 27.

1940s and into the 1950s.<sup>70</sup> The sociologist Milton Gordon wrote frankly on this issue in 1947, stating that, in terms of the American mainstream, “being a middle-class Jew is not the same thing as being a middle-class Gentile except for the additional factor of being Jewish”.<sup>71</sup> And as late as 1959, the scholar of Yiddish secularism Saul L. Goodman continued the conversation around categorical religion through promoting a cultural formulation of Judaism that did not operate on the terms of America’s religious revival.<sup>72</sup>

Nonetheless, despite these pushes against recasting Judaism in religious terms, this way of thinking about Judaism was both persuasive and prominent. Judith Kramer and Seymour Leventman, in their 1961 survey of Jewish life in the pseudonymous “North City,” found that 62% of Jews believed there to be no difference between Jews and non-Jews except for that of religious affiliation.<sup>73</sup> Due to the conception of a tri-faith America which placed Judaism and Christian identities at the heart of civic society, Jews’ articulation of this affiliation, then, became a means of participating in the religious and social makeup of the country.

One of the most prominent results of this religious focus for Jews was a surge in synagogue membership. While rates of Jews’ religious institutional affiliation in America as a whole climbed from 20% in the 1930s to almost 60% in the 1950s and early 1960s, suburbia made up a notable part of this increase: in suburban communities, over half of Jews joined synagogues, and in some communities the rate of religious institutional affiliation was as high as 80%.<sup>74</sup> Of course, the reasons for this focus on synagogue membership was not entirely religious in nature. Hasia Diner points out how synagogues took on various institutional roles in suburban environments, and provided social grounding for many Jews, which must also be acknowledged as a force behind this moment in American Jewish religious life.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> For detail regarding earlier antecedents to these perspectives, see Levitt, “Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference,” 812; Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Jewish Thought* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 170–73.

<sup>71</sup> Milton M. Gordon, “The Concept of the Sub-Culture and Its Application,” *Social Forces* 26, no. 1 (October 1947): 41.

<sup>72</sup> See Levitt, “Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference,” 824–26.

<sup>73</sup> See Judith R. Kramer and Seymour Leventman, *Children of the Gilded Ghetto: Conflict Resolution of Three Generations of American Jews* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1961), 194.

<sup>74</sup> Hertzberg, *The Jews in America*, 323; Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 260; see also Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 71.

<sup>75</sup> See Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 291–92.

It is possible that the success of the synagogue as an American suburban institution was, in part, due to its congruity within a broader national image of tri-faith America where “Judeo-Christian” traditions provided variations on a religious core. Eli Lederhendler notes how, on the basis of this “reinstitutionalization” of religious Judaism in the image of a commonly accepted tradition, Jews were able to embrace full civic participation.<sup>76</sup> The similarity that synagogues bore to churches, or at least to the loose analogy that they resembled, was surely a supporting factor of their acceptance in this context. Will Herberg’s note in *Protestant–Catholic–Jew* that the synagogue’s structure was “virtually the same as in the major Protestant churches” and that its form adhered to an Americanized religious tradition is especially notable in this regard.<sup>77</sup> The contents of these religious institutions were surely different, but with these analogic similarities the synagogue could be construed as a “version of the same” with regard to a broader tri-faith American practise. The synagogue thus signalled social and cultural integration within a post-war American religious landscape.

At the same time, the synagogue echoed many of the challenges of suburbia as a normative space, particularly when it came to women’s experiences. While religious affiliation was booming in the post-war period, and many women were part of that religious activity, women’s activities were severely limited according to gendered expectations. As Hasia Diner notes, women prominently participated in adult education programs and fundraising but were blocked from liturgical roles.<sup>78</sup> One Jewish feminist, Susan Shevitz, reflected on this suburban religious environment that, “We [women] served as cantors and congregational leaders at camp and at teen services. But in the adult congregational world there was no room for the woman skilled in liturgy or sermonizing or Jewish studies.”<sup>79</sup> As Jews began to recognize and grapple with this inequality within their religious institutions, they participated in a moment of critical reflection on gender within American society at large.

Moving into the 1960s, as the sexual revolution rose to prominence in American society, there was an increased awareness of gender from both conservative and

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<sup>76</sup> See Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity*, 120–21.

<sup>77</sup> Herberg, *Protestant—Catholic—Jew*, 191.

<sup>78</sup> Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 301–303; for an overview of women’s ordination in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, see also Sarna, *American Judaism*, 340–344.

<sup>79</sup> Susan Shevitz, quoted in Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2018), 130.

progressive American perspectives. Alongside continuing restrictions – such as those in religious leadership – and changes in how Americans perceived of gender, both suburbia and the middle class stood out as locuses for these tensions. People saw it both as the site of change and the bastion of patriarchal traditionalism. On the one hand, popular writers such as Vance Packard and William H. Whyte argued that suburbia had fallen prey to “a mass form of emasculation” for its men, a view that was echoed in other popular media such as *Mad Magazine*.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, this widespread conception was countered by charges that middle-class suburbia embodied American society at its most normative and conservative. The suburban household so emblemized a staunchly patriarchal place that Betty Friedan related it *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as a place of female dehumanization akin to Nazi concentration camps.<sup>81</sup> While Friedan stands as one extreme articulation of this perspective, her work was crucially influential for other progressive approaches to gender in suburbia. Dolores Hayden notes well how similar feminist critiques of post-war domestic spaces, including her own, join Friedan in describing how subjugated women were within the expectations of suburban lifestyles.<sup>82</sup> In this manner, conversations about gender were intertwined with reflections on suburbia’s implications for American society.

These discussions of gender were also a significant part of how Jews were reflecting on their own communities beyond the aforementioned matter of religious leadership. Jewish feminists called increased awareness to women’s issues through the lens of their religious identities and cultural communities.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, however, gender provided a language for a different kind of Jewish perspective, and one which was wholly more misogynist. This period of second-wave feminism is also when the overbearing “Jewish mother” became a cultural staple – appearing everywhere from Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) to the best-selling *How to Be a Jewish Mother* (1964) – as well as when the stereotype of the JAP grew popular.<sup>84</sup> The expectations placed on women

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<sup>80</sup> Berman, “American Jews and the Ambivalence of Middle-Classness,” 425; Leah Garrett, ““Shazoom. Vas Ist Das Shazoom?” *Mad Magazine* and Postwar Jewish America,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 16, no. 1 (2017): 70–73.

<sup>81</sup> See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1974): 293–298.

<sup>82</sup> See Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 50–54.

<sup>83</sup> See Sarna, *American Judaism*, 338–339.

<sup>84</sup> Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans*, 143–51, 178.

within Jewish communities thus became the grounds on which these visions of gender were contested between patriarchal perspectives and progressive women's voices.

The imagination of a nostalgic Old World was in no way removed from these influences. Progressive and conservative perspectives both looked to this imagination of Eastern European Jewry as representative of their own approach to gender roles and gendered experiences. Those looking for a patriarchal traditionalism saw the Old World as a place where gender was fixed, and where men in particular had clear obligations and secure social positions. In this vein, the influential *Life is with People* (1952) describes gender roles at a Shabbat dinner in the following fashion: "The waits between courses give time for learned conversation between father and sons... As the men converse the girls and women listen eagerly, their eyes active and their tongues still."<sup>85</sup> These patriarchal ideas were carried into the mid-century by works such as *The Old Country* (1974) and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964/1971).<sup>86</sup> At the same time, however, some Jewish feminist turned to the Old World as indicative of a positive vision for Jewish women's experiences, particularly in relation to women's suburban gender roles. Charlotte Baum, for instance, argued that Eastern European Jewish social norms established women as an economic pillar of the household, rather than merely an organizer for the home, and saw this as a model to be emulated in American Jewish society.<sup>87</sup> In these ways, the nostalgic language of mid-century Jewish heritage remains relevant for how suburban Jewry was reflecting on its own gendered experiences and expectations.

Alongside the amplification of second-wave feminism in the 1960s, as Americans were increasingly turning a critical eye to gender, critical reflection on religion also grew in prominence as American society moved out of the 1950s' religious revival. Within Jewish communities, the image of a religiously-engaged suburban Jewry soon lost its enchantment after the thrust of the religious revival had passed. In particular, one question became amplified in the mid-century wake of the 1950s: If Judaism is an American religion, what does it actually mean that it is a "religion"? The surge in affiliation that was taken to be indicative of religious participation did not adequately

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<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski, *Life is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 47; for a broader description of women and men's roles in separate, stable spheres of life, see also 125–41.

<sup>86</sup> See Shulman, *The Old Country*, 14; Joseph Stein, Sheldon Harnick, and Jerry Bock, *Fiddler on the Roof: Libretto Vocal Book* (New York: The Times Square Music Publications Company, 1964), 1.

<sup>87</sup> Charlotte Baum, cited in Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 147.

respond to this question, since the supposed participation was itself not there. Religious observance did not intensify alongside synagogue membership, and increasingly Jews had realized that their coreligionists were joining institutions on the basis of social and cultural activity.<sup>88</sup> The conclusion was that, as Kramer and Leventman put it in 1961, “Sentiment exceeds commitment” for this population: affiliation could not be taken to indicate dedication to actual religious engagement, which made that affiliation seem particularly superficial.<sup>89</sup> Now, affiliation is a problematic metric for religious vitality in the first place, as will be discussed in more depth shortly, since it relies heavily on artificial definitions of religious activity. Kramer and Leventman’s statement should read more specifically that “institutional participation exceeds commitment” for American suburban Jewry, though it is also important that they place such a high value on affiliation in the way that they do. This perspective highlights the religious revival’s problematic reliance on institutions and well-defined religious membership. In the context of its time, Kramer and Leventman’s view echoes earlier criticism from the 1950s which argued in the face of increasing affiliation that what was being “revived” in that religious moment was not so much actual belief in Judaism as a lived religion as much as it was belief in the power or relevance of religious categories.<sup>90</sup>

The crux of the issue was that the category of “religion” itself, while encompassing a range of Jewish institutions, did not suffice in encompassing a suitable gamut for Jewish cultural needs. The practises associated with religious participation were not necessarily those practises identified as important for American Jewish vitality; membership began to decline as organized religion was no longer seen as a wholly sufficient source of group identity or belonging.<sup>91</sup> The crux of this issue extends beyond its American context. Both Laura Levitt and Leora Batnitzky note how the category of “religion” as it was conceived in earlier European models and applied within an American environment hinges on ideas of privatization and individualism which rely heavily on Christian – and particularly Protestant – conceptions of religious engagement.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, as Rachel Gross and Ken Koltun-Fromm respectively note in terms of Jewish food practises, the

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<sup>88</sup> See Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 292–93; Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity*, 93.

<sup>89</sup> Kramer and Leventman, *Children of the Gilded Ghetto*, 17.

<sup>90</sup> See Sarna, *American Judaism*, 277.

<sup>91</sup> See Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity*, 94.

<sup>92</sup> See Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion*; Levitt, “Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference,” 811–12.

idea of religious engagement is also bordered by gendered assumptions regarding how these activities are defined. In many ways, women who cook traditional foods, prepare for the holidays, and educate others in this heritage function as religious authorities when it comes to the contents of Jewishness, but a more common understanding of religion places Judaism firmly in institutional settings which, as was prevalent in the 1950s, defines this religion through male-dominated contexts and situations.<sup>93</sup> Those formal and institutional environments participate in but do not encompass the cultural contents of American Jewish heritage. What this means with regard to the place of Judaism in an American mid-century landscape is that, defined in tri-faith terms as a “religious” traditions, Judaism was an ill fit. Even as the religious revival established a framework for American Jewish identity, those terms were inadequate for approaching the far-reaching contents of that identity. Thus, with regard to the religious, cultural, and social life of Judaism in America, the matter of locating one’s Jewish identity remained an open-ended question. The Old World nostalgia that will be discussed in the following chapter is, in many ways, one response to this.

In addition to existing pressures on the basis of how Jews represented themselves religiously, the ways in which American identities were changing throughout the 1950s were also strongly affected by the dynamics of the Cold War. This political conflict brought with it a sense of urgency for defining oneself as congruous with American values, with stark rhetoric from the likes of Joseph McCarthy raising the stakes of one’s affiliations. In that regard, many of the changes in broader American society, such as the religious revival, were reinforced by this political moment. Standing with the American mainstream meant that one stood with America; for many, this meant taking on the expectations, attitudes, and categories of that mainstream.

American Jews were particularly aware of this need to align themselves with the surrounding mainstream. There were persistent fears within Jewish communities that anti-communism was a thin veil for anti-Semitism: decades-old tropes already linked Jewish populations with communist sympathies, and explicitly anti-Semitic agitators, such as the congressman John Rankin, did draw on those linkages to assert that communists

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<sup>93</sup> Rachel Gross, “Table talk: American Jewish foodways and the study of religion,” *Religion Compass* 13, no. 4 (2019): 2–3; see also Ken Koltun-Fromm, *Imagining Jewish Authenticity: Vision and Text in American Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 76–116.

were certainly Jews, if not the other way around.<sup>94</sup> Certain high-profile cases, such as that of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, exacerbated this tension.<sup>95</sup> To this extent, Jewish communities were highly attuned to how Americans saw them. Edward Shapiro notes that, while anti-communist sentiment was not the anti-Semitic threat it might have resembled, the palpable expectation remained among Jews that they would be targeted.<sup>96</sup> In this regard, anti-communism mounted political pressure on the social and political influences of the American mainstream, strengthening the necessity of conforming to its expectations.

This can be seen clearly in the manner that anti-communist rhetoric and the religious revival intersected. The “tri-faith” advocacy which prefigures the religious revival, occurring in the 1930s and early 1940s, had encouraged the unification of political and religious cultures in a way that made it a particularly prominent rhetoric in the 1950s. As Kevin Schultz writes, influential proponents of American religious pluralism argued that “democracy could not survive without a deeply felt religious faith, especially one premised on individual human dignity.”<sup>97</sup> Later on, in 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower drove this message home while speaking at an engagement as president-elect. He noted that the American political structure could not be explained to the Soviets since it was rooted in religion and went on to say, in an oft-cited maxim, that “In other words...our Government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith and I don’t care what it is. With us of course it is the Judo-Christian [*sic*] concept”.<sup>98</sup> The American religious mainstream – the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish elements of its culture – was brought into view as a vital and inextricable part of America’s political project.

Thus phrased, the conflict of the Cold War was also a confluence of these political and religious ideologies. American religiosity and Soviet secularism were mutually exclusive in backing sharply-contrasting visions of society: the conflict was, as Jonathan Herzog notes, framed by secular and religious political “covenants” in this regard.<sup>99</sup> Soviet

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<sup>94</sup> See Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 278; Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 34; Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 46–48, 60–62.

<sup>95</sup> See Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 61–62.

<sup>96</sup> Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 35.

<sup>97</sup> Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, 45.

<sup>98</sup> “President-Elect Says Soviet Demoted Zhukov Because of Their Friendship,” *The New York Times*, December 23, 1952, 16.

<sup>99</sup> Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–4.

and American societies alike were rhetorically constructed in religious terms, with communism becoming a “rival faith” to the “Judeo-Christian” conception of American social values.<sup>100</sup> This support for the religious characterization of America encompassed also the creed of individualism and personal freedoms; in the early post-war period, to be American was clearly and deliberately associated with the right to one’s own form of worship and the connection between one’s moral grounding and religious values.<sup>101</sup> Riv-Ellen Prell describes how, on this basis, the religious revival’s “logic of affiliation implied ‘American’ values, particularly egalitarianism and democracy.”<sup>102</sup> This clearly contrasted the Soviet Union, whose presence was underscored by the lack of personal freedom in subjugation to the state. American Jews in particular felt this distinction keenly, as the persecution of other Jews within the USSR was a prominent topic within their communities. Jonathan Sarna details how the perceived failings of American Jewish communities during the Holocaust led to a greater fervour and eagerness in addressing the state of Soviet Jewry and turned their struggle within the USSR into a “Jewish civil rights struggle, parallel to the black struggle for freedom in the United States.”<sup>103</sup>

However, the use of religious liberty as a means of representing differences in capitalist and communist systems further pressured Jews to conform to a specific religious identity. After all, as Shapiro writes, “There was no easier way for Jews to demonstrate that they were fully Americanized than to profess a faith in God, since nowhere else in the Western world was the status of religion as elevated as in America.”<sup>104</sup> What this meant in the context of American Jews’ changing identities is that Jewishness was further folded into Judaism as a primary means of expressing their particularity, practises, heritage, and communities. While this slim religious category was not entirely adequate to summarize these facets of Jewish experience – as will be seen shortly in terms of the mid-century “ethnic revival” – it became a primary mode for that identity insofar as it insinuated a strong alignment with American society at large.

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<sup>100</sup> Herzog, 45, see also 4.

<sup>101</sup> See Herzog, 81–82.

<sup>102</sup> Riv-Ellen Prell, “Community and the Discourse of Elegy: The Postwar Suburban Debate,” in *Imagining the American Jewish Community*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Waltham and Hanover: Brandeis University Press and University Press of New England in association with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2007), 75, see also 81.

<sup>103</sup> See Sarna, *American Judaism*, 317–18.

<sup>104</sup> Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 159.

Ultimately, this demonstrates a larger strategy of identity which became woven into the nostalgic narrative surrounding Eastern Europe. In the same manner that Jews were distancing themselves from the perception of communist sympathies by articulating their identities along the lines of distinctly American discourses, they were phrasing their attachment to the Old World through themes which clashed with communism outright. This was as necessary as religious identification for Jewish communities, since there was some complexity surrounding the valorization of a heritage which, for all intents and purposes, was located in a now-Soviet geography. As Steven Zipperstein notes, work had to be done to make it clear that nostalgia for the shtetl was not an affinity for the USSR.<sup>105</sup> It is in this regard, as will be seen in the next chapter, that many authors emphasized two key aspects of the nostalgic narrative. On the one hand, they asserted that the Old World was dissolved. Its periodization did not reach into the communist era, and, more so, the communists themselves were partly responsible for its destruction. On the other hand, they claimed that the shtetl was a place of extraordinary piety. It is this last point that is especially pertinent when one considers the historical context described in this chapter, since the matter of religion was, as noted, a key difference between American and Soviet contexts.

However, this application of religious categories only went so far — not just for Jews, but for a large number of minorities, mostly white, who had sublimated their ethnic identities to this framework in the 1950s. This reaction to restrictive religious identities emerged as the mid-century’s “ethnic revival.” Here, Jews and other minority groups — often white minorities, such as Greeks, Italians, and the Irish — began to reassert their ethnic difference throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The dissatisfactions of identity within the religious revival thus gave way to a re-embracing of ethnic difference at the very same time as nostalgic media concerning the Old World began to proliferate. As Matthew Frye Jacobson notes, this was no coincidence, and was not limited to Judaism. Rather, a number of ethnic groups were reclaiming their distinction in these decades, including notable numbers of white American communities.<sup>106</sup> The sublimation of ethnic difference to religious designation was breaking down. If the 1960s and 1970s marked, as Peter Schrag writes in *Harper’s Magazine*, “The Decline of the WASP”, it was also the decline

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<sup>105</sup> See Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry*, 31.

<sup>106</sup> See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2, 17, 20–22.

of those categories built on such homogenously-white and religiously-defined identities.<sup>107</sup> Will Herberg's predictions in the 1950s that ethnic differences would become subsumed within broader religious affiliations was increasingly proved false as those very distinctions gave way once more to ethnic and racial particularity.<sup>108</sup>

A large part of the ethnic revival was grounded in an increased racial awareness brought about by the civil rights movement. In particular, the kind of minority awareness which supported Black power movements in the 1960s set the stage for other groups to engage their identities in a politics of difference.<sup>109</sup> Latinx, LGBTQ+, and Native American movements all grew against a backdrop of Black empowerment.<sup>110</sup> However, as noted previously, this greater assertiveness regarding non-white or non-mainstream American identities established a language through which white, mainstream minorities became more assertive as well. Populations such as Jews or Italians, who had successfully blended into a white tri-faith America, took the rhetoric of non-white minority identities and championed their own forms of particularism, uniqueness, and ethnic pride.<sup>111</sup> Thus, as Matthew Frye Jacobson writes of the ethnic revival, "Ethnicity was born precisely when the American color line was sharpening in new ways".<sup>112</sup>

However, alongside this rise in ethnic and minority consciousness, the American mainstream retained its racial barriers. It is not the case that minorities such as Jews, Italians, or Greeks – who continued to live within the American mainstream – identified themselves primarily with Black, Latinx, or Asian Americans on the basis of their difference from other white identities. As Marc Dollinger notes well, the shift from the 1950s' integration-oriented religious revival to the 1960s' particularistic ethnic revival was part of these white minorities' engagement with and continuing participation within an exclusive mainstream.<sup>113</sup> As much as it was "American" to be religiously-defined in the post-war period, later mid-century decades' heightened awareness of ethnicity and race meant that it was equally "American" to possess a minority consciousness. Thus, Jewish communities' support for a unique ethnic identity in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century did not actually run against their previous efforts to integrate with America's religiously-defined

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<sup>107</sup> Peter Schrag, "The Decline of the WASP," *Harper's Magazine*, April 1970.

<sup>108</sup> See Herberg, *Protestant—Catholic—Jew*, 20, 27–40; Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 33–35.

<sup>109</sup> See Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics*, 15.

<sup>110</sup> See Dollinger, 5, 17.

<sup>111</sup> See Dollinger, 7–9, 17, 105–106.

<sup>112</sup> Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 35.

<sup>113</sup> See Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics*, 108–109.

mainstream. In a milieu where identity politics had become the status quo for American public discourse, white Americans were able to affirm their belonging in the mainstream through the same minority discourses which stood outside of it.<sup>114</sup>

This difference for where white and non-white Americans stood in relation to the mainstream underscores a problem central to the ethnic revival. The same rhetoric regarding ethnic particularity did not, in fact, speak to the same experiences for many minorities: white Americans' embrace of minority identities in particular turned a blind eye to how they lived within and benefitted from being part of the mainstream majority. Non-white communities felt this imbalance acutely. While America was touted as a pluralistic "nation of immigrants," acknowledging its minorities, this emphasized a problematic kind of "Ellis Island whiteness" which excluded those who already lived here, those who came involuntarily, or those against whom this pluralistic society continued to discriminate.<sup>115</sup> As James Baldwin writes in a 1967 article, speaking directly to Jewish-Black relations in connection with the ethnic revival: "what now appears to be the American identity is really a bewildering and sometimes demoralizing blend of nostalgia and opportunism.... [white American minorities] cling...to those credentials forged in the Old World, credentials which cannot be duplicated here, credentials which the American Negro does not have."<sup>116</sup> In this regard, white communities' participation in the ethnic revival emphasizes the different notions of belonging at play within Jewish and Black communities respectively. Working from inside the mainstream, the majority of American Jews were able to embrace their particularism precisely because they already enjoyed the privileges of whiteness, middle-classness, and integration. The ethnic revival at large must be understood in reference to this way in which Black and minority discourses were co-opted by the white majority.

A key way in which white minorities perceived of their connection to ethnic particularity, and particularly to the "nation of immigrants" narrative regarding American pluralism, is through the periodization of their minority identities. Matthew Frye Jacobson describes how it was often the grandchildren of immigrants who sought to reconnect with their particularism, thus extending Marcus Lee Hansen's 1930s "principle of third-

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<sup>114</sup> See Dollinger, 108–109.

<sup>115</sup> See Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 7–8.

<sup>116</sup> James Baldwin, "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," *The New York Times*, April 9, 1967, [nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-antisem.html](http://nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-antisem.html).

generation interest” to the mid-century.<sup>117</sup> Hanson’s idea is that, as was discussed earlier in this chapter, the first and second generations of American immigrant groups are primarily concerned with Americanization: they shed their differences in favour of mainstream integration and balance their identities with the demands of their broader society. However, the third generation – a terminology which, as noted before, stands in for an experiential cohort that is raised within the mainstream – seeks to recover the particularity that had been shed by their predecessors as the price of admission. Thus, “What the second generation wishes to forget the third wishes to remember”.<sup>118</sup> Of course, this third-generation scope conveniently places the framework of minority heritage in line with mostly-white immigration from Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this way, the manner by which white Americans responded to Black emphases on minority experiences continued to define the mainstream in terms which excluded those non-white groups — in this case, by placing undue stress on an immigration narrative. As Martin Luther King Jr. phrased it in a speech, if the Statue of Liberty is the core of American pluralistic identity, the “mother of exiles”, then “sometimes I feel like a motherless child.”<sup>119</sup>

However, this kind of problematic white particularism is nonetheless important for thinking about the relationship that American Jewish communities had with the nostalgic Old World. This phrasing of white minorities’ place in America is a prominent way in which Jews and other white minorities understood themselves in the 1960s and 1970s. In that regard, the identity-laden rhetoric at play in the ethnic revival defines an imagined audience for the Old World’s nostalgic image: the way that many mainstream American Jews described themselves – and other Jews – in reference to white Ashkenazi identities plays a role in marking their nostalgia as significant communal heritage. This is much as other white minority communities were “rediscovering” their heritage at the same time. It is crucial to recognize that the ethnic revival excludes non-white and non-mainstream minority voices, and to understand where that exclusion is represented in the imagination of a homogeneous Ashkenazi heritage, but one must also acknowledge that this moment in white American culture is integral to Old World nostalgia’s historical context. It is thus necessary to understand white Jews’ relationship to their imagined Eastern European

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<sup>117</sup> Marcus Lee Hansen, cited in Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 2–3.

<sup>118</sup> Jacobson, 2.

<sup>119</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., quoted in Jacobson, 8.

heritage with reference to the backdrops both of Black and non-white identity discourses, and of white minorities' respondent conceptions about their own identities.

Within its own frame of reference, the idea of a "third-generation interest" does describe a periodization for how most Ashkenazi Jews, Italian Americans, and other specific white groups related to their mid-century moment of ethnic revival. These populations did follow similar paths from a period of mass immigration to conforming integration to the reassertion of their particular identities. And so, alongside the resurgence of Jewish interest in Yiddish and in Ashkenazi heritage, Jacobson notes how many third generations of white American communities voiced their desires for distinct ethnic affiliation in the 1960s and 1970s. Among other things, there was a renewed excitement surrounding Polish and Gaelic languages, for heritage-focused media such the musicals *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) and *Zorba the Greek* (1968), and for revisiting family histories in Greece, Ireland, and Italy.<sup>120</sup> All of these cultural forms resisted the American melting pot while affirming these communities' pluralistic American belonging within the white mainstream. As one contemporaneous commentator wrote, Americans sought these antecedents to their lifestyles as means of explaining their individual and group persistence within that mainstream: "Everybody wants a ghetto to look back to."<sup>121</sup> The ethnic revival provided a moment in which to position this desire for one's own heritage, no matter how nostalgic.

### *Suburban Dynamics: Spatial Homogeneity, Neighbourhoods, and Communal Networks*

While the ethnic revival launched a response to the 1950s' restrictive socio-cultural categories, Jews were also wrestling with a tangibly suburban set of challenges in the mid-century decades. The legacy of the post-war period was not only experienced through mainstream ideas about minority American identities but manifested within the spatial and communal organization of suburban communities as well. The way in which the suburbs had developed throughout the 1950s resulted in environments with substantial differences to the urban neighbourhoods to which Jews had been accustomed. This forced

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<sup>120</sup> Jacobson, 3–5, 25.

<sup>121</sup> Marcus Klein, "Heritage of the Ghetto," *The Nation*, March 27, 1976.

Jewish suburbanites to rethink and re-implement different versions of the communal and organizational networks that had been vital to their lives in previous environments. The high rate of synagogue affiliation along the lines of the religious revival, mentioned in the previous section, is one example of this. In that regard, the external influence of the American mainstream tells a story, here, about the tangible configuration of suburban communities and how those spatial concerns reflected substantial shifts in the ways that Jews built their communities and interacted with their surroundings.

Within this context, the dynamics which encompass and permeate these suburban neighbourhoods are crucial for understanding the relationship between nostalgic imagery and its mid-century Jewish audience. As will be discussed more fully in chapters three and four, the contrast between suburban and Old World environments encourages Jewish audiences' reflection on their everyday suburban experiences and the imagined experiences of the nostalgic Old World. Suburban spaces in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century embodied dynamics which both provided the impetus for and informed the contents of this nostalgic gaze; when mid-century Jews talked about the gap between themselves and their ancestors, that gap extended from the shtetl to the suburb. Thus, when thinking about the role of external influences in shaping the conditions of mid-century Jewish suburban experiences, the distinction between these places reaches questions of heritage which will be unpacked later on. The matter of suburban environments – what suburbs actually looked like and what it meant to live there – forms the foundation of how that heritage could be realized in the day-to-day lives of these Jewish communities.

It is important to periodize this discussion. After all, suburbia was a dynamic and changing place throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with its social, cultural, and organizational composition changing over the decades. However, early suburban patterns are instrumental for determining the later context of suburban developments, even if those developments operate differently from such earlier trends. Thus, although Becky Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese discuss how post-1970 suburbia was racially and culturally diverse, one can recognize that such diversity had to wrestle with the earlier exclusion and discrimination of suburbia in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>122</sup> The legacy of that environment would still have been felt keenly. It is to this extent that the way in which post-war suburbia took shape is a crucial way to think about the concerns within Jewish communities in the

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<sup>122</sup> See Nicolaides and Wiese, "Suburbanization in the United States after 1945."

later mid-century decades. As will be seen here, the deliberate shape of suburbia continued to exert many of the American mainstream's socio-cultural pressures on its residents. Suburbia as a whole, as both a built and a social environment, represented a homogeneous conformity which produced significant and lasting changes in the social and institutional lives of its communities.

The basis for these pressures was located in suburbia's fundamental homogeneity. It is not only the case, as noted earlier in this chapter, that the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and suburban developers exclusively enabled suburban mobility among certain groups. It is also true that those key players' role in suburban construction extended their ideas about racial and economic uniformity to produce equally uniform environments. As Diane Harris summarily states, "The FHA frowned on difference of any kind, whether in house form and style or in the identities of houses' occupants."<sup>123</sup> To that extend, architectural conservatism and standardization went hand-in-hand with racist and classist barriers to suburbanization.<sup>124</sup> The world on the suburban side of those barriers was built blandly: as Kenneth T. Jackson puts, it the monotony of suburban environments was "especially stark...before the individual owners had transformed their homes and yards according to personal taste."<sup>125</sup> Suburbia was deliberately and relentlessly repetitive.

The importance of this homogeneity is the way in which such built environments produced similar social spaces. Diane Harris notes well how suburbia's uniform neighbourhoods were culturally coded by such keywords as "secure," "stable," and "integrity," standing in for ideas about the nature and constitution of those communities.<sup>126</sup> Similar keywords also patterned suburbanites' ideal lifestyles, extending like-minded developers' mentalities into Americans' homes. To live well in suburbia meant living cleanly, informally, and spaciouly, among other things.<sup>127</sup> Class and racial lines were drawn between various lifestyles through these concepts, with issues such as privacy forming wedges to define different types of families, behaviours, and cultures.<sup>128</sup> One can notably see this in the shelter magazine *House Beautiful*, which enjoyed a

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<sup>123</sup> Harris, *Little White Houses*, 35, see also 34.

<sup>124</sup> See Harris, 37, 60; Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 173; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 239.

<sup>125</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 239–40.

<sup>126</sup> See Harris, *Little White Houses*, 37, 60; Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 173.

<sup>127</sup> See Harris, *Little White Houses*, 42–43; for the racial connotations of these keywords, see Harris, 92.

<sup>128</sup> See Harris, 38–39, 97–98, 119–21.

substantial suburban readership and which vocally advocated for the implementation of a specific suburban culture. In terms of a valued suburban privacy, one 1950 article was bluntly titled “Good Living is NOT Public Living.”<sup>129</sup> Such media indicated to suburbanites that to be part of the mainstream in this environment meant according with a particular vision of what it meant to be a suburban household.

What this meant for the “look” and cultural character of suburbia is that its form – both architecturally and culturally – became emblematic of American conformity in the mid-century. It was the epitome of average for the mainstream. To live within these spaces, then, meant to live in relation to this average, and more so to live in conjunction with the intention of the suburbs. It meant embracing the values and identity that developers had planted in the surrounding geography; as Harris notes, these sites and their accordant lifestyles were a cohesive package.<sup>130</sup> This idea also circulated in the mid-century as well; Judith Kramer and Seymour Leventman, reflecting on the suburbs in 1961, notably write that “No one can be in it, and not of it.”<sup>131</sup> Although this is something of an exaggerated portrait of suburbia, it is still meaningful in determining the perceived and experienced character of these neighbourhoods. While suburbanites themselves provided large amounts of individuality and difference to their communities, the presence of an imagined status quo created a suburban culture that echoed its description.

This way in which suburbia was imagined and constructed was also highly racialized. The way in which ideas of suburban lifestyles’ privacy, stability, and luxury took shape in the 1950s was strongly contrasted with the way in which white Americans characterized Black urban communities in opposite ways. As Harris describes, “black spaces were typically imagined as cramped, crowded, dirty, unhygienic, and not private. In the white imagination, black residential life included multigenerational and mixed-gender sleeping arrangements and social activities carried out on the front stoop, in the street, and in the alley instead of inside the private home or in the private backyard.”<sup>132</sup> One can see how apartment and tenements within historically Jewish urban neighbourhoods could fit these descriptors as well. In this light, the movement to suburbia is even more so a racial movement for newly-white Jews. Their participation in suburban

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<sup>129</sup> Joseph Howland, quoted in Harris, 133.

<sup>130</sup> Harris, 18; see also Nicolaides and Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945.”

<sup>131</sup> Kramer and Leventman, *Children of the Gilded Ghetto*, 175.

<sup>132</sup> Harris, *Little White Houses*, 38, see also 97–98, 119–121.

culture is also a navigation of these racist and discriminatory perceptions as they moved from publicly urban, geographically compact living situations to dwell in the 1950s' white suburban mainstream.

This formation of a mainstream suburban identity is important, even if it occurs in an earlier context than the period of third-generation ethnic revival, because its perceived racial and cultural homogeneity had lasting effects for Jews' relationship with their suburban environments. It sets up suburbia as a space defined by the majority. Markus Krah notes this well in describing how Jews saw themselves as minorities within suburbia at large, even when they made up the majority of particular neighbourhoods.<sup>133</sup> The patterning of space did not happen here in the same fashion as earlier urban neighbourhoods, where the presence of large ethnic minorities had led to an enclave.<sup>134</sup> The cultural geography of suburbia was perceived as distinct in itself; Jews therein were in contact with the constructed suburban whole, regardless of who lived around them.

This affected Jews. Whereas Jews did not have to reflect on their culture or belonging in older, ethnically concentrated urban neighbourhoods, suburbia brought with it the necessity of conscious decisions regarding how, and to what extent, Jews would express their identities.<sup>135</sup> In the words of Abraham Fleischman, Jews went from being "conscious" of their identities to "self-conscious" of who they were.<sup>136</sup> In turn, this led to a greater sense of peril regarding the sustainability of Jewish identity: something that had to be deliberately enacted, or which was thought to be so, was all the more tenuous for that fact. Even in suburban communities with large Jewish populations, the spatial neighbourhood itself was the province of the mainstream; one could not take for granted that anything in the suburban environment at large would be designed with Jewish difference in mind. The geography of these communities played into this experience. As Jackson writes, apart from a few exceptional cases, the vast majority of suburbia was low-density housing, eschewing row houses for expansive homes with yards and broad streets.<sup>137</sup> This meant that one could not walk out of one's home and immediately be surrounded by shops, Jewish or otherwise. Even more so, one could not even leave one's

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<sup>133</sup> Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 35.

<sup>134</sup> See Deborah Dash Moore, *Urban Origins of American Judaism* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 102.

<sup>135</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 35.

<sup>136</sup> Fleischman, "The Urban Jew Goes Suburban," 23.

<sup>137</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 239.

house to be surrounded by Jewish neighbours, since privatized households in mass-produced suburbs existed at the expense of robust street life.<sup>138</sup>

This engagement with new environments produced significant changes in the organization and character of Jewish suburban communities. As Jews entered the suburbs, these spatial differences had direct effects on the form of their social networks. Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum note this in their influential 1967 survey of a late-1950s suburban community: as they write, “In traditional Jewish society, the extended kinship group, together with the socially insulated Jewish town or neighborhood, formed a kind of circumscribed Jewish community in which face-to-face interaction unconsciously confirmed Jewish identity and expressed the Jewish way of life.”<sup>139</sup> However, in suburbia “This kind of Jewish society no longer exists.” Instead, there has been “the marked attenuation of social interaction within the familial group.... hastened by such processes as social mobility and acculturation.”<sup>140</sup> This does not mean that families were falling apart, but notes the influence of broader American – and suburban – emphases on the nuclear family as the essential social unit.<sup>141</sup> This also outlines the gap in needs between earlier modes of Jewish social life and the expected lifestyles of suburban environments.

Outside of the nuclear family, suburban socialization was strongly focused on formal relationships and one’s association with organizations.<sup>142</sup> A local school’s PTA, societies such as the Rotary club, or, in a Jewish context, organizations such as Hadassah became primary means of socialization in these spaces. They also notably granted women the opportunity to take on leadership roles which, as noted previously in this chapter, were often absent within institutional religious participation. To that extent, Sklare and Greenblum note how these organizations supplemented friendship groups to build community within suburban neighbourhoods. As they write of the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT), women were usually recruited by their neighbours.<sup>143</sup> Even more so, these opportunities for socialization were crucial in enticing

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<sup>138</sup> See Marshall Sklare, “Jews, Ethnicity, and the American City,” *Commentary* 53, no. 4 (April 1972): 73, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/jews-ethnicity-and-the-american-city/>; Sarna, *American Judaism*, 283.

<sup>139</sup> Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier: A Study of Group Survival in the Open Society*, Second Edition (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 251.

<sup>140</sup> Sklare and Greenblum, 251.

<sup>141</sup> See Harris, *Little White Houses*, 122.

<sup>142</sup> See Sklare and Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier*, 252.

<sup>143</sup> Sklare and Greenblum, 266, see also 252.

suburban Jews to become involved in such organizations in the first place. Even one such as ORT, which has charitable educational work as its main aim, was actively involved in combining that work with the benefit of suburban socialization.<sup>144</sup> In that regard, such groups overlapped considerably with suburbanites' friendships, building networks and serving an important purpose in filling the social gap left by the shift from urban to suburban spaces. The recession of ties to one's extended family, as well as the absence of close urban neighbours and acquaintances, meant that social contact had to be deliberate and organized. Communal organizations were therefore indispensable for living in suburbia.

On this basis of organizations' centrality to suburban life, the synagogue became a definitive institution in Jewish circles. These synagogues facilitated the same kinds of social functions as voluntary organizations and friendship groups.<sup>145</sup> However, the synagogue's centrality was also bolstered by the 1950s' emphasis on religious identities. One can see from the religious revival's prominence how similarly religious institutions were a natural place to ground one's communal activities. In this regard, connecting with both religious and social needs, synagogues took on multiple functions in response to these contextual demands. This was largely enabled by the repackaging and promotion of the synagogue in a particular form: as a center which could engage holistically with what suburban Jews wanted from their communities, on religious or areligious terms.

Synagogues' expanded roles were based, in part, on the inability to disentangle religious and ethnic identities in the 1950s. As Deborah Dash Moore notes, the strong social components of third-generation Jews' turn to synagogues constituted an ethnic membership in many ways.<sup>146</sup> In that regard, it brought Jewishness into a coherent religious package for the suburban mainstream; it enabled participation in a close-knit group without accentuating the differences insinuated by other organizations, such as earlier immigrants' *landsmanshaftn* which were organized along ethnic and geographic lines. On the basis of this congruity with mainstream expectations, the synagogue was able to reach an ever-greater variety of functions in suburbia under the guise of a religious institution — functions which, in environments outside of the mainstream, would have belonged properly elsewhere. Particularly in comparison to the sort of urban identities

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<sup>144</sup> See Sklare and Greenblum, 267–68.

<sup>145</sup> See Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 288–89, 291–93.

<sup>146</sup> See Moore, *At Home in America*, 236–37.

which depended on dense, Jewish-identified neighbourhoods – with their accompanying spatial experiences and circumscribed communities – suburban synagogues moved to fill those environments’ absence by becoming schools, leisure centers, social halls, in addition to sanctuaries.<sup>147</sup> Arthur Goren notes how, in urban environments where various organizations were still able to fulfill those roles, synagogues simply did not move to take on these social and educational functions.<sup>148</sup>

In addressing suburban needs, however, these synagogues encountered two distinct challenges. One is the fact that, no matter how diverse their programming, it remained fragmented along the lines of the synagogue’s various roles. It is to this extent that Abraham Fleischman describes the synagogue center as “a combination of a number of component elements, each of which singles out as its focus, in one case, the religious aspect, in another, the Hebrew school, in another, the youth activities and, in another, even the physical education activities.”<sup>149</sup> He then quickly adds: “Attempts to weave the elements together have generally met with only limited success.”<sup>150</sup> Others also noted the inability of synagogue centers to effectively join their secular programs with religious activities, decrying them as simply disguised “country clubs.”<sup>151</sup> In this regard, similar to the previously-mentioned tensions regarding active practise and social membership during the religious revival, synagogue centers faced skepticism regarding the perceived authenticity and promise of their institutional model.

The other main challenge that synagogue centers faced was one that was felt throughout all suburban Jewish institutions as an artefact of these communities’ spatial organization: dispersion. Both the locations of organizations and their constituents had shifted considerably when compared to earlier urban neighbourhoods. Everything was farther apart. Due to the instrumental role of new highways in the expansion and development of suburbia, driving was not only the norm in these particular communities but was an infrastructure around which these neighbourhoods were organized.<sup>152</sup> As Deborah Dash Moore writes, it is the automobile which determined the structure of post-

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<sup>147</sup> See Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 74–75.

<sup>148</sup> Arthur A. Goren, “A ‘Golden Decade’ for American Jews: 1945–1955,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 8 (1992): 4; see also Moore, *At Home in America*, 237; Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 40.

<sup>149</sup> Fleischman, “The Urban Jew Goes Suburban,” 22.

<sup>150</sup> Fleischman, 22.

<sup>151</sup> See Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 75.

<sup>152</sup> See Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 247–53.

war suburbs and, by that token, “changed the basis of community.”<sup>153</sup> Travelling from one place to another implied a spatial reconstitution of organizational ties which necessitated effort and deliberation behind social interactions. In terms of synagogues, this meant that congregants were increasingly distant from their gathering places. Gerald Gamm notes in his study of Boston Jewry how suburbanization both emptied the vicinities of urban congregations and established suburban synagogues whose purview was spread over large areas.<sup>154</sup> A similar pattern was replicated in other parts of America, where some synagogues opted to maintain both suburban and urban buildings, if able.<sup>155</sup>

On this basis, communal organizations not only had to be present, but also had to be accessible for suburban environments. Walking was often not an option, and, besides, the car had cultural hegemony on transport. The blunt reality of this challenge meant that Jews had to seriously consider how they acted, especially around the Sabbath and holidays when they were traditionally not permitted to drive. The Conservative movement put out a notable edict in 1950 that permitted Jews to drive to synagogue on Shabbat, given that families were otherwise beyond reasonable walking distance from services, but the controversy in this decision’s reception is an important example of how these matters remained undecided.<sup>156</sup> Suburbia was not yet settled on Jewish terms.

In this regard, the spatial move from denser urban environments to suburban neighbourhoods connects, again, with American Jews’ sense of identity within these spaces. Much as those urban neighbourhoods were seen as “natural” Jewish environments, and the move to suburbia involved deliberately locating Jewishness within changing communal networks, the kinds of social and organizational reconfiguration which accompanied suburban migration meant that Jewish communal life encountered a similar necessity for conscious action. On a symbolic level, this ongoing engagement accented the feeling that the suburbs at large were a non-Jewish space, even when suburban neighbourhoods themselves had majority-Jewish populations. Intuitive Jewish identities were not part of suburbs’ built environments or their public perception. Because

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<sup>153</sup> Moore, *At Home in America*, 235.

<sup>154</sup> See Gamm, *Urban Exodus*, 199–237.

<sup>155</sup> See Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 55.

<sup>156</sup> See Morris Adler, Jacob Agus, and Theodore Friedman, “Responsum on the Sabbath,” *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly* 14 (1950): 112–88; Jenna Weissman Joselit, “In the Driver’s Seat: Rabbinic Authority in Postwar America,” in *Jewish Religious Leadership: Image and Reality*, ed. Jack Wertheimer, vol. 2 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2004), 659–70; Sarna, *American Judaism*, 284–85.

of these neighbourhoods' deliberate development as emblems of mainstream American lifestyles, to enter suburbia for any minority was to encounter substantial differences in one's ability to enact, communicate, and transmit one's particular identity. Jews were no exception to this, even as they laid claim to stand at the core of a "tri-faith" American culture. Suburban Jewish communities continued to be reshaped by the social dynamics embedded within suburban spaces.

This issue illustrates along these lines the way in which suburbia fundamentally exerted pressure on its Jewish and minority residents. The conditions of these communities meant that living therein was inextricably shaped by the expectations of comfortably mainstream suburbanites and the social vision of suburban developers. By both spatial and cultural means, such external pressures set out the range of suburbia's communal possibilities, regardless of whether those possibilities afforded minorities the full extent of their socio-cultural needs. Jews recognized this disjunction. This will be important to keep in mind later on, especially in chapters three and four, where American Jews' situation within these environments will connect directly with their nostalgia for the Old World and its accompanying spaces. For the present conversation, however, these challenges point to continuing suburban dynamics throughout the 1950s and into the mid-century. These changes form the backdrop to how Jews were thinking about their lived experiences and substantially inform their relationship to the nostalgic Old World.

### *Jewish Dynamics: The Question of Survival and the State of Israel*

Up to this point, one has seen how pressures from the American mainstream shaped suburban Judaism on spatial, social, and religious fronts. As a result of these post-war developments, American Jews began asking questions about their communal authenticity, viability, and values while navigating mainstream environments. The challenges of fitting Jewish communities into novel suburban spaces and externally-derived socio-cultural categories led to significant anxiety regarding the future of American Jewry at large. In the mid-century, then, two key conversations responded to the national and suburban dynamics which have been discussed in this chapter: on the one hand, there was a vigorous discourse around the "question of survival," and on the other, Israel's role as a pillar of American Jewish identity grew significantly. Occurring at the same time as the

aforementioned ethnic revival, these issues became animated reference points for the discussion around identity and provided further motivation to look into particularity and heritage as means of defining what it meant to be Jewish in America.

The anxieties around survival were very clearly felt by Jews in new suburban environments: either Jewish identity was supported, protected, and carried forward, or Jewish communities would disappear. Given the way in which these pressures emanated from Jews' integration with the American mainstream, the matter of maintaining Jews' difference from broader society became a key issue for gauging long-term sustainability. Lila Corwin Berman writes to this point in saying that "assimilation became the key word to communicate the tensions of Jewish middle-classness."<sup>157</sup> This is largely because American Jews' new socio-economic profile had remade their identities with attention to the mainstream. As the rabbi Harold Saperstein put it in a 1965 sermon, American Jews had lost their distinctiveness on the basis of their newfound class identity: "We're no longer a poor people. The great test of Jewish life in our time is whether it can survive in the affluent society."<sup>158</sup> The shifts which accompanied mainstream integration were equated, by Saperstein, with a disintegration of traditional communal ties. In such a light, the institutional, organizational, and cultural changes discussed previously in this chapter all had the effect of forcing American Jews to confront what actually grounded their identities. While this conversation began in the 1940s and 1950s, it became particularly accented alongside years of change, dispersal, and suburbanization in the mid-century.<sup>159</sup> The great fear was that, if the basis for Jewish communal and cultural cohesion was merely contingent, then Jewishness as a whole would lose its vigour. Fearful that Jewish practises and values were not were being transmitted within integrated suburban environments, American Jews worried that they would eventually disappear amidst the pressures of American assimilation.

William Haber states these anxieties well in his 1960 article in B'nai B'rith's *National Jewish Monthly*. There, he writes that, even when Jewish affiliation was at an all-time high on the back of the religious revival, a deeper question persists regarding whether this affinity for organizations translates to long-term Jewish viability within an affluent and

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<sup>157</sup> Berman, "American Jews and the Ambivalence of Middle-Classness," 427.

<sup>158</sup> Harold I. Saperstein, "Fiddler on the Roof" (Manuscript, January 15, 1965), 4, Harold I. Saperstein Papers, MS-718, Box 4, Folder 1, American Jewish Archives.

<sup>159</sup> See Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 92.

integrated America. As he writes, “It is true that Jewish identification has grown in numbers, but it has not come to include the sense of continuity, of being part of a faith and of a people, of that inexorable link to the great Jewish continuum that stretches back three and four thousand years, and ahead to form the basis of our relation to Israel and to the European community on the deeper level of identity.”<sup>160</sup> It is this lack that forms the anxiety surrounding group survival. Especially in Saperstein’s “affluent society,” where Jews are navigating novel dynamics within the mainstream, the pallid emotion behind Jewish identification is differentiated from identity itself. Haber argues that Jews cannot assume that such nominal connections will be a sustainable basis for Judaism within an integrated American society. He writes that, within the mainstream, “we can no longer rely on automatic kinship and organic identity. It must be nurtured and fostered consciously.”<sup>161</sup> This nervousness around the future of American Judaism was widely shared by writers such as Charles Liebman, Marshall Sklare, and Nathan Glazer, among others.<sup>162</sup>

Of course, this was not the only interpretation of the dynamics facing Judaism. Edward Shapiro notes how some others – dubbed “transformationists” – believed that American Jewry, while certainly changing, was not necessarily destined for a passive decline. These arguments pointed out that new criteria may be necessary for assessing the strength of American Jewish identities, as well as noting constructive possibility for new Jewish cultures in this mid-century milieu.<sup>163</sup> However, it does remain notable that most of these authors were writing toward the 1980s, whereas one can see the clear trepidation surrounding communal and cultural change throughout the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>164</sup> In those decades, a large portion of American Jewry saw changes in their surrounding practises and behaviours as a cipher for Jewish vitality at large.

Although anxieties surrounding group survival were not exclusive to suburbia, these tensions were particularly felt within suburban settings. This is largely due to two factors.

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<sup>160</sup> William Haber, “The Question Is: The Older Generation of U.S. Jews Had Organic Link with Jewish Past, but Will Today’s Youth Feel Same Commitment?,” *The National Jewish Monthly*, September 1960, 18.

<sup>161</sup> Haber, 22.

<sup>162</sup> See Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 250–51; see also, for example, Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew: Politics, Religion, and Family in American Jewish Life* (Skokie: Varda Books, 2001) (originally published 1973).

<sup>163</sup> See Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 250–52.

<sup>164</sup> Shapiro, 250.

First, the way that Jews had to adopt new models of community turned the future form of Jewish identity into an open question. Second, in addition to this, the suburban situation itself was seen as a threat to Jewish cultural security. Although, as was discussed earlier, Jews often remained socially segregated within suburban neighbourhoods, the spatial organization of these environments nonetheless interspersed Jewish households in close and constant contact with non-Jewish suburbanites.<sup>165</sup> This proscribed the possibility that suburbia could stand on the terms of minorities' expectations: much as the religious revival's definition of Judaism and the organizational emphasis on synagogues linked Jewish communities to non-Jewish cultural categories, the inability to delineate Jewish environments in suburban spaces brought with it the assumption that Jews would live chiefly in relation to the mainstream. For those concerned with continuity, this lack of socio-cultural autonomy was tantamount to disappearance in the melting pot.<sup>166</sup>

This matter can be seen clearly in the attention given to intermarriage as a key part of assimilation, and something that was particularly located in suburbia. The tension between change and continuity was embodied in this issue. As Hasia Diner points out, the strong role of Jewish families in imparting identity from generation to generation led many to believe that survival was incompatible with increasing rates of exogamy.<sup>167</sup> However, much to the chagrin of alarmists, intermarriage was indeed increasing throughout the mid-century decades, and over one third of American Jews had married non-Jewish spouses by the 1980s.<sup>168</sup> This figure had some regional deviations: in areas of Jewish concentration – such as New York – there were fewer intermarriages, while Jews living among smaller Jewish populations were more apt to intermarry.<sup>169</sup> The suburbs, then, as integrated environments, were seen as more biased toward these mixed relationships. Although attitudes toward exogamy did shift across the 1960s and 1970s, generally becoming more positive as the years went on, prominent voices at many points throughout the mid-century maintain a strong focus on intermarriage as a social issue which ate at Jewish cultural cohesion.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> See Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans*, 157.

<sup>166</sup> See Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew*, 26.

<sup>167</sup> See Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 206–8.

<sup>168</sup> Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 233.

<sup>169</sup> Shapiro, 233.

<sup>170</sup> See Shapiro, 233–34; David Singer, “Living with Intermarriage,” *Commentary* 68, no. 1 (July 1979), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/living-with-intermarriage/>; Haber, “The Question Is.”

The main reason that this anxiety centered on exogamy was due to the relationship between Jewish identity and the family. As noted earlier, in suburbia extended family networks were shrinking, with a stronger focus on the relationships among nuclear family members as single households. However, this broader family was often an impetus for the preservation of Judaism between generations: as Eli Lederhendler writes, strict endogamy persisted throughout the 1950s on the grounds of precisely such a “family-based collective culture”.<sup>171</sup> When these networks shrunk, then, their social networks shrunk as well, and a considerable difference emerged in the force of cultural identity. The preservation of the Jewish family within the context of mid-century suburban dynamics remained linked with the perceived health of “traditional” Jewish society at large.

In this way, children became the center of the anxieties surrounding Jewish survival. Their eventual marital choices stood in as emblematic of broader communal changes. In this regard, and with an eye to these children’s development, there was a strong expectation that organizations would pick up the slack left by diminished familial networks; more and more, synagogues and Jewish groups provided educational and communal programming that sought to enforce a strong Jewish identity among third-generation youth.<sup>172</sup> As Diner describes, “Children occupied a place at the top of the Jewish communal agenda. Communal leaders and parents defined Jewish education as more important than they had in any previous era.”<sup>173</sup> It is in this fashion that the specter of intermarriage had formed, as Abraham Fleischman observed, “one of the basic motivations for the heightened interest in [Jewish] teen-age and young adult activities.”<sup>174</sup> It was seen as absolutely imperative that young Jews would see themselves as Jews, and to act on the perceived communal obligations of that identity.

This linkage between the identity of one’s children and the survival of American Judaism at large was explicit on both social and cultural levels throughout the later mid-century. Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum note in their 1979 study of Lakeville that non-synagogue organizations provided means of socializing that provided a bulwark against assimilation, writing that “the importance of the organization derives not so much from its aims and accomplishments as from the contribution it makes to Jewish group

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<sup>171</sup> Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity*, 100–101.

<sup>172</sup> See Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 150–51.

<sup>173</sup> Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 290; see also Berman, “American Jews and the Ambivalence of Middle-Classness,” 429.

<sup>174</sup> Fleischman, “The Urban Jew Goes Suburban,” 24.

survival.”<sup>175</sup> At the same time, Jews sought out representations of their identity that would provide this same sense of togetherness outside of such explicit programming. Amidst the ethnic revival, they turned toward the idea of heritage – and specifically transnational heritage – as a marker of group difference from the surrounding American mainstream. This is precisely the type of engagement that was prominently displayed as Old World heritage, and it is telling that Jewish families went to productions of *Fiddler on the Roof* and exhibitions about the Lower East Side with their children and grandchildren in tow.<sup>176</sup> This will be discussed further, especially in chapter three, with regard to how the nostalgic past was itself viewed as heritage, but suffice it to note for now that connecting with the Old World was an act of survival for many American Jews.

However, the Old World was not the only referent in this movement toward a strong Jewish identity. Israel took on an important cultural position as well, and American Jews’ relationship to that country enabled them to envisage what a viable, vibrant Jewish society might be. Israelis were imagined as an answer to the challenges of mid-century America for Jewish communities, and specifically as a response to the deprivations of Jewish suburban life. Rachel Kranson notes how Israel was perceived as a counterbalance to the materialism and vacuity of American lifestyles: it was represented as a place of idealism and austere selflessness.<sup>177</sup> This messaging was furthered by other popular works, such as Leon Uris’ *Exodus* (1958), which drove home the message that Israelis were “authentic” Jews, unrestrained by the quandaries of class and prestige, or the demands of American integration.<sup>178</sup>

Israel’s appeal for American Jews reached unprecedented heights in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly after the Six-Day War of 1967. Although many authors have written extensively on the significance of that conflict, noting its resonance with the Holocaust and the resultant swell in American Jewish support for Israel, what is important when thinking about the cultural and identity-laden concerns of mid-century American environments is how Israel became a “way out” of the mainstream’s external pressures.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Sklare and Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier*, 252.

<sup>176</sup> See Moore, *Urban Origins of American Judaism*, 112.

<sup>177</sup> See Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 4, 39–42, 153.

<sup>178</sup> See Kranson, 110–11.

<sup>179</sup> For a summary of the links between the Six-Day War and the Holocaust, see Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, 215; for a contemporaneous look at this conflict’s resonance, see also Arthur Hertzberg, “Israel and American Jewry,” *Commentary* 44, no. 2 (August 1967), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/israel-and-american-jewry/>.

Israel became, in Hasia Diner's words, a "powerful symbol of Jewishness" that was identified with an autonomous Jewish culture standing on its own terms.<sup>180</sup> In that regard, its resilience represented not only Jews' ability to resist explicit destruction, but also the more subversive dissolution that was feared alongside American integration. Israel became a grounding point for American Jews to resist their own surrounding assimilatory forces; the marker of difference that came with one's identification among a global Jewry meant that American Jews could differentiate themselves and make a case for cultural preservation. As Arthur Hertzberg predicted a few months after the War, "Israel may...now be acting as a very strong focus of worldwide Jewish emotional loyalty and thereby as a preservative of a sense of Jewish identity."<sup>181</sup> One can see especially with regard to Jewish suburbanites, who were grappling with externally-imposed developments to their culture and lifestyles, how Israel's image in this period represented a significantly distinct identity from mainstream American influences.

In addition to its importance as a contemporaneous location of strong Jewish identities, Israel's place in American Jewish discourse also concerned the developmental paths of shared Ashkenazi heritages. Part of Israel's perceived vitality was in its construction as a site of authenticity for this type of Jewishness. This means that American communities, especially suburban ones, were thought to depart from their Old World heritage in joining the mainstream; Israel, on the other hand, became a contemporaneous center of Jewish authenticity through its perceived connections with that heritage. This means that the cultural focus of a "traditional" Judaism in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is not present in mainstream America – even though America, by the numbers, possessed the largest Jewish communities – but is located in Israel. The writer Herman Wouk summarizes this well in "The Ashes and the Gold," which focuses upon the significance of the Six-Day War in Jewish history. There, he directly equates Israel with the survival of Old World Jewry, writing that "Israel is the Warsaw Ghetto that rose in time, and survived."<sup>182</sup> Thus, Israel's success ensures the continuity of heritage at the same time as Israel takes on the mantle of Jewish authenticity derived from that history. This sentiment – that Israel was the inheritor of the Old World, and thus a lynchpin of contemporary

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<sup>180</sup> Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 330.

<sup>181</sup> Hertzberg, "Israel and American Jewry."

<sup>182</sup> Herman Wouk, "The Ashes and the Gold," in *This Is My God: The Jewish Way of Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1988), 267.

Jewishness – was carried forward elsewhere, such as in educational materials. One encyclopedia of Jewish history went so far as to state that “In the contemporary Jewish world, ...the model of the isolated *shtetl* applies above all to the State of Israel.”<sup>183</sup> This was not a comment on social or political organization, but was a statement about authenticity and tradition.

This search for authenticity in Israel’s image says something important about the way that mid-century American Jews were responding to their contemporaneous challenges. In response to strong external influences from the non-Jewish mainstream, which pushed these communities to adopt certain vocabularies, lifestyles, and social organizations, Jewish communities were looking abroad for a strong, internally-structured representation of their identity. In this regard, both the anxiety of survival and the value placed on Israel speak to the same set of issues facing American Jewry: each is a response to pressures on American Jewish culture and communities to look and live a certain way. The nostalgic image of the Old World is also one such response, as will be seen throughout the remainder of this dissertation. While the anxiety of survival is a particularly pessimistic reaction to the dynamics of mid-century America, Jewish communities’ focus on Israel and the nostalgic Old World extend meaningfully from a moment of ethnic revival to lay claims on a particular identity. This means of articulating Jewishness in the mid-century thus speaks in part to the search for a sustainable heritage which would secure Jewish communities among the radical shifts which had affected their socio-economic profile, their lifestyles, their relationship with American society, and their communal structures.

And so, one can see how these tensions surrounding mid-century American Jewry set the parameters for the nostalgic Old World. The types of nostalgic images that will be discussed in the following chapter are representations of Jews’ desire to locate their identity within a represented heritage, and to shore up Jewish communities by that token. Although the mid-century may have been a golden era in many ways for American Jews – as discussed, it was a time of unparalleled prosperity and integration – those same Jews’ unanswered cultural needs led them to create and support such visions. The following chapter will look more specifically at what those images looked like, what ideas they communicated, and how they responded to mid-century concerns.

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<sup>183</sup> *A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People from the Times of the Patriarchs to the Present*, quoted in Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*, 162.

While this chapter has covered the main ideas and dynamics of mid-century American Jewish life in suburbia, many facets of its discussion paint a regrettably incomplete picture of this period. It is always possible to flesh out this historical context further. Especially with regard to matters of race and gender, the dynamics and conversations surrounding these social dynamics in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as Jewish communities' participation in those issues, extends far beyond what this chapter has sketched out. The key concern here has been twofold: to note those issues, so as not to ignore them, and to contextualize these dynamics within an overarching narrative about how American Jews related to the American mainstream's character and expectations. This framework sets the stage for how Jews' Old World nostalgia takes place in the 1960s and 1970s; it defines some of the central tensions for nostalgic viewers who, as will be seen in later chapters, brought this context into their encounter with images of Eastern European Jewish life. In a similar fashion to these complex historical dynamics, the memory of the Holocaust is something that has been absent in this chapter but which will appear more prominently in the next chapter's discussion of the Old World. In the context of this dissertation's overarching focus on American Jew's relationship to the nostalgic image and the kinds of nostalgic rhetoric at play therein, this chapter does provide enough of a basis on which to understand the foundational context for that relationship. The focus on experience that was discussed in the introduction is crucially involved in the kinds of developmental influences and socio-cultural pressures that have been explored here. As much as this context establishes American Jews' lifestyles in the mid-century, it defines the positions of spectatorship within which they valued the Old World's nostalgic image.

Moving forward, the following chapter will fill out the picture for what exactly Jews meant when they talked about the Old World and its heritage. Those qualities, in conversation with the dynamics and difficulties described here, will form the foundation of analysis for chapters three and four in which the visual presence and spatial qualities of this image will be brought to the fore. Ultimately, this will involve returning to the very dynamics and situations from this chapter, as this nostalgia mediates the spatial environments of mid-century suburbia. Such a relationship between audiences' experiences and valued nostalgic contents speaks to how American Jews were thinking about and working through their surrounding historical conditions.

## **CHAPTER TWO: THE CONTENTS OF AMERICAN JEWS' MID-CENTURY NOSTALGIC OLD WORLD**

The previous chapter's attention to history has demonstrated how the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of upheaval for American Jewry. Shifts in every aspect of their lives had drastically changed the class associations of this group, their ethnic associations, and their lived locations as well. Throughout this development, Jews' self-understanding was also in flux, as new narratives emerged to make sense of how their contemporaneous present related to their communal past. It is within this context that there was a notable swell in the amount of attention the Old World received across various cultural media. Rachel Kranson phrases this especially well, as she writes that, "As fortunes and social status of American Jews grew, the symbolic power of the shtetl, the immigrant slum, and the struggling new state of Israel gained in importance."<sup>1</sup> While chapter one has given a good understanding of the factors underpinning that growth in status, what remains to be unpacked is how the Old World is represented within that changing context. The shtetl and the immigrant neighbourhood in particular were developed as sites of Old World culture, and so it is their depictions and qualities that must be explored here.

This chapter will turn from context to content and look at the image of the Old World as it was represented in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in America. This will involve two questions of "what" this image is: first, what it is in terms of American Jews' nostalgia, and second, what it is in terms of its own visual qualities. Looking at the nostalgic image through these two questions will help to define both what is being represented across various depictions and how those representations exist in relationship with their audiences. Overall, this is an exploratory discussion: it covers mostly observations made by current scholarship regarding the nostalgic Old World. As noted in the introduction, this involves a correlative approach which connects qualities of the nostalgic image to the context of its American Jewish audiences, noting shared themes and concerns. This kind of correlative thinking does produce valuable conclusions to that end in recognizing how

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 18.

the Old World's image reflects its mid-century moment. However, here those connections will also form the grounds to move beyond correlative analyses: those conclusions set the stage for thinking about viewers' experiences and images' resonance, which will be discussed fully in the following chapter.

This relationship between viewers and images relies on the Old World's features which will be discussed here, but, at the same time, is not about a connection between an audience and any particular representation. It is about the relation of an American Jewish audience to the whole of this image. In the introduction, one saw that the term "image" can indicate many things. This includes things like specific objects, imaginary representations, and overarching formal concepts.<sup>2</sup> What is of most concern for this chapter is the broader and general image which more closely relates to a visual idea, existing at the level of those overarching concepts. Individual depictions, which are narrower in their scope, point toward such broader images. This is especially important since, as will be discussed, multiple nostalgic authors deliberately built the concept of "the Old World" along such generalized lines: the idea of a "world" in itself resists particular location, and nostalgic Jews connected that extensive idea with their heritage. In that same manner, the qualities of the Old World's image which were reproduced across nostalgic media in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century are not the province of individual representations, and not even the sole property of those images which depict them. Rather, it is the general image which gives narrative form to these specific nostalgic points, and so it is that general image that will be laid out in this chapter.

This way of approaching the Old World's broad nostalgic image extends from this dissertation's attention to spectatorship and to the rhetoric which develops through that visual cultural relationship. As will be seen more clearly in the next chapter, the meaning that these images articulate is a dynamic product of how American Jewish audiences encounter, reflect, and engage with their nostalgic heritage. The language and contents of these images is closely connected with those means of visual cultural involvement. In this way, the Old World's overarching images, which are represented in individual representations throughout the mid-century, focus the present conversation on the factors from chapter one which inform that relationship: in looking at the themes which dominate

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<sup>2</sup> See W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.

Old World nostalgia in the 1960s and 1970s, one is able to see how this nostalgia develops to engage with prominent concerns within American Jews' historical context. Yet it is important to recognize that this analysis is not wholly historical, nor does its focus hinge on matters of audiences' reception. The Old World takes shape in relation to an *imagined* Jewish heritage, much as the concerns facing white suburbanizing Jewry were imagined in relation to an American Jewish identity at large. This means that the Old World's generalized image and generalized audience alike develop through shared perceptions of what it means to be Jewish, to live Jewishly, and to engage with Jewishness in certain times and places. It is this imaginative connection between nostalgia and identity that informs this chapter's examination of these images' content and context. In other words, this chapter sets the interpretive table, identifying starting points for understanding American Jews' hermeneutic relationship with images of the nostalgic Old World.

In order to do this, first the development of this image will be briefly charted over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the contents of mid-century nostalgic representations have their origins in complex Yiddish literature of the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries, those images of Eastern European Jewish life were increasingly honed toward a simpler nostalgic perspective in the inter-war period. The shtetl in particular became the principal location of the Old World and its contents were increasingly cast in positive terms. However, it is the post-war period that contributed the most to the specific form and contents of American Jewish nostalgia in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1940s and 1950s, while Jews were joining the middle class and entering suburbia, the image of the shtetl was becoming increasingly iconic. Accompanying this iconicity was a further flattening of these towns' particularities and, as will be seen, many post-war nostalgic texts deliberately emphasized how the Old World embodied a general, essentialized Jewish wholeness. The main issue here is that both time and space in the Old World were increasingly undifferentiated in the nostalgic imagination: "the shtetl" became an ageless, replicable idea across many nostalgic media.

This simplification of the nostalgic image sets the stage for mid-century representations to reinforce a common understanding of the Old World, and to represent that understanding through a common nostalgic rhetoric. Before specifically looking at what qualities that overarching image possesses, this chapter will discuss the periodization of mid-century nostalgic media by noting how the simplifications of post-war nostalgia

bear popular fruit in *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) and the nostalgic images which follow throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas many distinct narratives persisted alongside Old World nostalgia in the post-war period, one will see that *Fiddler* sets out a definitive and influential representation of the Old World which patterns other media thereafter. This is not to say that American Jewry in the mid-century was univocal – that is hardly the case – but thinking about *Fiddler* in this way will highlight how a plethora of nostalgic representations after 1964 coalesced to an even greater extent around a specific, single image of the Old World. This image was then propagated through the production of new nostalgic texts and collections of earlier resources, such as photobooks and documentary sources, while many prominent nostalgic works from the post-war period were also reproduced and enjoyed wide circulation at this time. This discussion will thus outline a cultural moment in American Jewish nostalgic history which will supplement the socio-economic picture of this population that was described in the previous chapter. Ultimately, this will set the groundwork here for looking at specific qualities of the mid-century's stable nostalgic image, and for better recognizing what audiences were looking at when they encountered representations of the Old World.

### *The Development of the Old World's Nostalgic Image*

To understand American Jews' mid-20<sup>th</sup> century nostalgic image of the Old World, one must recognize that it relies heavily on precedents leading up to the 1960s. The idealization of that World as one of uniquely authentic Jewishness, the focus on the shtetl as a site of cultural aspiration, and many rhetorical emphases are articulated and developed over the course of decades both before and after World War II. This part of the present chapter will briefly chart how those key facets of the Old World's nostalgic image are drawn into the mid-century from discussions and texts in the decades prior, ranging from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the 1950s. However, as Markus Krah notes well, it is hardly the case that there was a clear understanding of this image in earlier decades; he asserts that, especially between 1940 and 1965, the discourse surrounding this nostalgia was particularly open, with many voices offering different perspectives on

the Old World's content and significance.<sup>3</sup> Yet that discourse does become more homogeneous from the 1960s onward. What is important, given an attention to the Old World's later stable and replicable image, is not a comprehensive understanding of these earlier perspectives, but rather a focused examination of how parts of that prior discourse have a voice in mid-century American Jewish nostalgia.

In this regard, this chapter will show how prior decades establish the grounds for the Old World's image in the 1960s and 1970s. Within those earlier representations are the seeds of many specific qualities that will be discussed toward the end of this chapter: the way that they develop the nostalgic image in a specific direction highlights a number of important emphases which continue to dominate the Old World's mid-century image. This is, in part, because many of these post-war texts maintained their prominence in those later decades as well; they circulated alongside the images they helped to shape, reinforcing particular perspectives on those representations and their contents.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the focus on the shtetl as a privileged Old World site, its generalization as a type, and the role of spirituality within those locations have notable precedents that are carried forward into the mid-century and embellished upon in that period.

This developmental course begins with Yiddish literature. With particular attention to Eastern European sites of Jewishness, writers were beginning to establish some of the core features of later nostalgic narratives – namely, the sense of a distinct Jewish place – and were particularly busy formalizing the shtetl as a common setting for these ideas. Dan Miron notes that, beginning in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, writers were busy constructing “the ‘classical’ literary shtetl as a pure, unalloyed, and undiluted Jewish ‘world’ that had somehow been transplanted from an idealized Eretz-Yisrael, an exilic Jerusalem, to the forests and steppes [*sic*] of the Slavic lands.”<sup>5</sup> By this, Miron means that the shtetl was seen as a bounded and autonomous space – Jews’ “own tiny *yidische melukhe* (Jewish state, kingdom)”<sup>6</sup> – which possessed a sort of Jewish fullness. However, at the same time, this

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<sup>3</sup> Markus Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 15.

<sup>4</sup> In particular, *The Earth is the Lord's, Life is with People*, and the photographs of Roman Vishniac are of note here. See Krah, 105–6, 187–88, 238; Alisa Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof* (New York: Picador USA, 2014), 119; Seth L. Wolitz, “The Americanization of Tevye or Boarding the Jewish ‘Mayflower,’” *American Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 526.

<sup>5</sup> Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl: And Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), xi–xii.

<sup>6</sup> Miron, xii.

was a contemporaneously contested idea. Especially in light of later nostalgic renditions, Sheila E. Jelen points out that Yiddish literature rarely treated the shtetl as “idyllic or monochromatic.”<sup>7</sup> Miron does also acknowledge this ambivalence in Yiddish writers who felt warmer toward those towns, noting that, while they romanticized the shtetl as “the hub of true Jewish intimacy and spiritual self-sufficiency,” they also saw these places as “anachronistic, solipsistic, and provincial...an asphyxiating enclosure.”<sup>8</sup> For these writers, the presence of the shtetl as uniquely Jewish also opened it up to criticism, especially from their unique Jewish perspectives.<sup>9</sup>

The inter-war emphasis on the shtetl as emblematic of the Old World had lasting effects. The efforts of Yiddish writers to define and mythologize the shtetl prepared it for its later valorization and popularity; their texts remained present as a literary precedent for understanding the Old World as a cultural image while later nostalgic representations were taking form.<sup>10</sup> In close contact with these literary roots, the next generation of American Jews embraced the understanding that the shtetl was privileged as a site of Eastern European Jewishness.<sup>11</sup> However, contrary to the variety of perspectives among Yiddish writers, these later texts' idealized contents amplified as they were read, internalized, and re-circulated. David Roskies notes particularly well how these depictions began to stress to an even greater extent that the shtetl was an originary Jewish landscape, while simultaneously departing from many of the complex and ambivalent depictions of Eastern European locales from earlier treatments of these settings.<sup>12</sup>

By the post-war period, the shtetl's centrality and idealization were foundational facts of the nostalgic Old World. That image of the Old World accrued many of its specific and stable features as it developed throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. In other words, it is in this period that a consolidated and generalized image, applicable to many specific representations, began to be concretely represented across a variety of media. This image grounds the nostalgic representations of the mid-century and anticipates many of the

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<sup>7</sup> Sheila E. Jelen, “A Treasury of Yiddish Stories: Salvage Montage and the Anti-Shtetl,” in *Reconstructing the Old Country: American Jewry in the Post-Holocaust Decades*, ed. Eliyana R. Adler and Sheila E. Jelen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 138.

<sup>8</sup> Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl*, xii.

<sup>9</sup> See Miron, 4.

<sup>10</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 217, 229.

<sup>11</sup> See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Introduction,” in Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski, *Life is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), xii.

<sup>12</sup> David G. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 48–49.

qualities that will be discussed later in this chapter. At this point, the most pertinent ideas that were hashed out in the post-war period concerned the role of the shtetl as a site of Jewishness, as was represented by earlier literary precedents, but also the way in which that image was further flattened from those precedents. These post-war sources continued the trend toward simplifying the shtetl so that it could better connect with its American audience.

One of the substantial texts of this period – although appearing a little early – demonstrates well how themes pertinent to the mid-century nostalgic audience were established at this time. As Markus Krah notes, *The World of Sholom Aleichem* (1943) struck readily on relevant ideas for a later nostalgic audience: “continuity in change, generational differences, holistic and fragmented identities, ethnicity and spirituality, ruptures through immigration and the Holocaust.”<sup>13</sup> Certain prominent features of the later nostalgic image, such as a valorized poverty and spiritual wholeness, were also carried through from these earlier post-war sources.<sup>14</sup> The confluence of these ideas connected well with later suburban Jews. The juxtaposition of a strong image for Eastern European Jewish heritage and its ongoing relevance became important for an audience which, as discussed in the previous chapter, was going through substantial changes to their social, economic, and cultural profile in America. This is especially the case if one recalls how the ethnic revival of the 1960s and 1970s reignited the search for a sense of identity outside of the boundaries of religious Judaism; earlier nostalgic sources provided the qualitative template for this developing image while also portraying its persistent thematic importance.

And so, as was noted, the way in which this image of the Old World was able to garner appeal for later mid-century American Jews was coeval with a further simplification of its contents. The sharp focusing of the Old World on specific qualities and locations enabled that image to be rendered comprehensible in relation to the situation of its later mid-century audience. A large part of this was the way in which the shtetl became increasingly prized as a synecdoche of the Old World in general, standing in for the totality of its Jewish contents and character. As noted, this focus was evident in prior literary precedents, but it became especially prominent in the post-war period.

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<sup>13</sup> Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 214.

<sup>14</sup> See Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 24–25.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, detailing the development of anthropological work on Eastern European Jewry, notes how this development took shape in academic communities; researchers in this period quickly homed in on the shtetl as the “prototypical ‘enclave community’ that carried the ‘core culture’ of East European Jews.”<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that urban sites of the Old World were erased from this image, but rather that the contents of those other communities was thought to be derived from – and thus most purely represented within – shtetl environments.

This disposition notably came to fruition in *Life is with People* (1952), which painted the Old World in broad, influential, and shtetl-focused strokes. This popular book remained prominent throughout the 1960s and 1970s, establishing its nostalgic vision of the Old World as foundational for third-generation American Jews.<sup>16</sup> However, while their means were scholarly, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes how the authors of *Life is with People* directly advanced its idealizing Yiddish literary precedents with regard to the book’s tone, style, and emphases.<sup>17</sup> Even more to the point, as Sheila E. Jelen notes, the ethnographic sources of *Life is with People* were mostly people who arrived as young children in America and whose recollections of the Old World were highly informed by Yiddish literary classics.<sup>18</sup>

With this literary heritage in mind, what is important is not just that *Life is with People* identified the shtetl as the key location of Eastern European Jewish life, but also that the methods of this book furthered the essentialization of the Old World by committing to the homogenization of its image. Its authors, Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski, explicitly sought to portray the Old World as a totality that cannot be encapsulated, only expressed, in individual manifestations.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, just as the shtetl stood in for Eastern European Jewishness at large, its contents were assumed to apply across the board to a variety of Jewish communities throughout the Old World.

This essentialism also set the agenda for the relationship between this nostalgic image and its American Jewish audience. Looking back to an early source in this formative

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<sup>15</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Introduction,” xiv.

<sup>16</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 187–88.

<sup>17</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Introduction,” xii.

<sup>18</sup> Jelen, “A Treasury of Yiddish Stories,” 139.

<sup>19</sup> See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Imagining Europe: The Popular Arts of American Jewish Ethnography,” in *Divergent Jewish Cultures: Israel and America*, ed. Deborah Dash Moore and S. Ilan Troen (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 165; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Introduction,” xvii–xviii.

period of the mid-century nostalgic image, Maurice Samuel asserts in *The World of Sholom Aleichem* that this essentialized Judaism forms the kernel of all American Jewish life. He writes that, although American Jewish populations had “rabbis, synagogues, temples, Sunday schools, or even Yeshivas” as well as “B’nai B’riths, anti-defamation leagues, lodges, unions, [and] cultural clubs”, these various means of Jewish community were ancillary to, not replicating of, “the folk wholeness of the Jewish life in Kasrievky”, Aleichem’s own generalized, fictional shtetl.<sup>20</sup> This idea of Kasrievky is here the literary emblem of Old World Jewry writ large, much as how its later manifestation in *Fiddler on the Roof’s* Anatevka would concretize a particular visual manifestation of this same general nostalgia.

What this looks like in nostalgic media is that attention to the shtetl falls under the guise of a broader language. For instance, rather than discussing a “shtetl,” Abraham Joshua Heschel talks about an “inner world” of Eastern European Jewry in *The Earth is the Lord’s* (1949). Similarly, with regard to Samuel’s *The World of Sholom Aleichem*, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that there is no reference to “shtetl,” but instead to “an era or period, to a people, or to ‘little Jewish communities in Eastern Europe’”.<sup>21</sup> The aim of this euphemism is not to avoid addressing the shtetl head-on, but instead is to paint a broader picture about a way of life. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also points toward Roman Vishniac’s *Polish Jews* (1947) as an example of this unspecific style. *Polish Jews* is notable for being an earlier manifestation of Vishniac’s wildly popular *A Vanished World* (1983), but it features far less text alongside its images. While *A Vanished World* has narratives explaining its contents, *Polish Jews* features general captions with simple and imprecise place names: Carpathian Ruthenia, Poland, and Russo Poland, for instance. Thus, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that, within this context, these photos “trend toward the typical, rather than the particular.”<sup>22</sup> They do not seek to illustrate individual features of shtetls – even though they are direct depictions of individual things – but instead seek to illustrate the general, preconceived whole.

Significantly, this approach to the Old World opened the way for other sites to be rhetorically identified with Eastern European Jewishness. Because the Old World itself was

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<sup>20</sup> Maurice Samuel, *The World of Sholom Aleichem* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), 54.

<sup>21</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Imagining Europe,” 171; see also Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord’s: The Inner World of the Jew in Eastern Europe* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 7–10.

<sup>22</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Imagining Europe,” 175.

released from the specificity of place and more closely aligned with its “core culture,” other places where Jews were thought to practise the lifestyles of that culture became closely linked with this nostalgic image. With regard to specific Eastern European locations, each could be discussed on the same terms because they were primarily connected with an isolated and pure Jewishness rather than their surrounding context. Shtetls were increasingly construed as static, timeless places whose constitution was solely dependent on that connection with a decontextualized Jewishness.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, as one will see later in this chapter, the American immigrant neighbourhood was included within the nostalgic attention to the Old World on the basis of similar connections; they were joined with Eastern European culture and thus the authenticity gleaned from those associations.

It is no accident that this homogenization of American Jewish heritage was taking place at the same time as American Jewish identity at large was being whitened, suburbanized, and presented on equally homogeneous terms. As was seen in the previous chapter, many Jews' adaptations to the American mainstream's racial and religious expectations ignored actual diversity within and among American Jewish communities. Through the racial and identity politics at play, the Ashkenazic majority became the public face of an American Judaism writ large, and likewise the contents of that Ashkenazic identity were synthesized by the imagination of a common Eastern European heritage. The way that the shtetl becomes emblematic of an essentialized Jewish identity is necessarily connected to many American Jews' efforts to articulate a comprehensive, stable identity for the non-Jewish mainstream. This historical context informs the stability and consistency with which the shtetl stands in for a hegemonic Jewish experience. As will be seen later in this chapter, this is especially pertinent regarding how many common qualities of nostalgic Old World images reflect the contemporaneous concerns of American Jewish integration.

In relation to this imagination of Eastern Europe, there was also another particular and significant force behind the collapse of a complex image into this simplified, laudatory perspective on the shtetl. Part of such romanticization was couched in awareness of the Holocaust. While earlier Yiddish writers provided complex and somewhat ambivalent attitudes toward the shtetl as a site of Jewishness, later memorialization of those places

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<sup>23</sup> See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Introduction,” ix, xvi; Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord's*, 15, 25–26.

leaned more heavily toward celebrating them. As Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg note in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (1953), while shtetls had often been “ignorant, provincial, superstitious, and corrupt”, after the Holocaust they possessed “the romantic impulse” and “a new and almost holy authenticity.”<sup>24</sup> In this way, the Holocaust put force behind the shtetl as a site of heritage for later American Jewish suburbanites. Its gravity, in conjunction with the historical concerns from the last chapter, encouraged a wholehearted and simplified embrace of the Old World.

On the basis of this romantic impulse, the essentialized culture of the Old World was endowed with particular esteem on religious terms. As Markus Krah writes, “Religious thinkers reconstructed, essentialized, and aestheticized the East European past typically by isolating its spiritual dimension.”<sup>25</sup> The “core culture” of the Old World was tied to this religious emphasis. For instance, one can see this in Heschel’s *The Earth is the Lord’s*, where he asserts that Jewishness, embodied in the enactment of religious requirements, formed the total way of life for Eastern European Jewry.<sup>26</sup> This perspective was also brought directly to American Jews in the form of *The Eternal Light*, a radio broadcast about Judaism which boasted millions of listeners and widespread syndication.<sup>27</sup> Similarly to Heschel, *The Eternal Light* saw the Old World’s “folk identity” in religious and spiritual terms. Through its various programs focusing on the Eastern European Jewish past, the image of Eastern Europe was further concretized in relation to rabbis, religious traditions, and spirituality.<sup>28</sup>

Visual culture also played a central role in defining the shape of the Old World’s imagined religious core. Heschel’s work is embellished by Ilya Schor’s woodcut illustrations, which give form to religion’s centrality in the life of the shtetl.<sup>29</sup> In reinforcing this message, and doing so through visual means, these images interface between the message of Heschel’s text and the expectations of Jewish communities in the 1950s. Schor connects the shtetl’s essentialized folk Jewishness with a religiously-tinted nostalgia, echoing the dominant perceptions of Jewish identity within the American mainstream

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<sup>24</sup> Howe and Greenberg, quoted in Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 143.

<sup>26</sup> See Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord’s*, 20–21.

<sup>27</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 170; Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 24.

<sup>28</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 172, 177–78; Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 24.

<sup>29</sup> See Heschel, 39, 51, 61, 69, 75, 83.

— that is, of Jews as defined by Judaism, and by their religious commitments.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, other contemporaneous artists were also creating images of Eastern Europe which participated alongside *The Earth is the Lord's* and *The Eternal Light* in a nostalgic conversation about the Old World, and particularly the shtetl, as the font of a religiously-engaged Jewry. Marc Chagall, for instance, is notable for populating the Old World with bearded men – with echoes of piety, as will be seen later in this chapter – as well as linking such symbols with the dreaminess of a nostalgic folk culture. As these images grew increasingly popular and, for those like Chagall, iconic, they became central to how American Jews visualized and conceived of the Old World.

However, when recognizing how these images defined the form and face of Ashkenazi heritage, it is important to note that they do not always accord with the apparent needs of Jews who, in this period, were focused on integrating with their surrounding American mainstream. In addition to connecting post-war Jewish identities with the Old World's nostalgic image, and doing so in a way that certainly reinforces perceptions about Jewishness as a predominantly religious identity, works by artists like Schor and Chagall simultaneously provide a point of contrast to the limitations of mainstream American experiences: as opposed to suburbia, where Jews made cultural and social compromises in order to integrate, the shtetl in these depictions is a location where Judaism provided the logic for structuring their way of life. This imagination of a rich Jewish heritage and, even more so, the imagination of a setting for unadulterated Jewish experiences, will be especially important in this dissertation's later chapters. There, one will see how the essentialized shtetl becomes an aspirational symbol for what American Jews gave up in their move into mainstream suburban identities, and an image of a heritage with which mid-century audiences connect nostalgically.

Still, when looking at nostalgic perspectives in post-war America and the earlier mid-century, in many cases this construction of the Old World was not as stable as the later nostalgic image would be. While those like Heschel emphasized the uniformity and purity of the shtetl, others were resisting that homogenizing impulse. One can see in Howe and Greenberg's aforementioned quotation from *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, published in the 1950s, that people were reflective of how the Old World's image was changing. Howe and

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<sup>30</sup> See Ken Koltun-Fromm, *Imagining Jewish Authenticity: Vision and Text in American Jewish Thought* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015), 63–64.

Greenberg themselves give voice to dissenting representations of the shtetl in that anthology, just as others were continuing to propagate other, more complex images of these shtetls.<sup>31</sup>

Within the context of the mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century, not all Jewish Americans ascribed to this vision of the Eastern European past either. As Krah notes, especially with regard to writers such as Max Weinreich and Irving Kristol, many were not content with placing authority in the Old World as a privileged site of Jewish culture.<sup>32</sup> Many saw it as being the domain of feudal hardship or simply out of date, and a substantial group took issue with the location of authenticity in Eastern Europe at the expense of a strong American Jewish identity.<sup>33</sup> Although the nostalgic image was increasingly prominent throughout the 1960s, it is not as though these dissenting voices disappeared. To that extent, it is useful to keep in mind Jacob Sloan's review of *Life is with People* from 1952, where he writes that "obviously we cannot and would not accept or reject, revive or deny, that [shtetl] past *in toto*."<sup>34</sup> It is not that the popularity of nostalgic works represents that everyone accepted their ideas, but rather that such popularity points to the significance of this heritage for a large portion of its American Jewish audience and, on that basis, the relevance of its image in its contemporaneous discourse. Markus Krah does an excellent job throughout his book on post-war American Jewish nostalgia of noting how various groups engaged with this Old World image in line with their own distinct aims, and one must recognize that this discourse was ongoing throughout the American mid-century.

Nonetheless, the romanticized shtetl continued to dominate American Jewish culture at large. The cultural context for this prevalence is the manner by which, in the 1960s and continuing through the 1970s, multiple media produced and supported an increasingly-widespread and qualitatively stable image of the Old World. While the direction granted by post-war precedents establishes the tone and contours of these later developments, the contents of this mid-century image are even more homogenized in terms of their commonalities. The same talking points regarding a spiritualized, essentialized Jewishness persisted in thinking about Eastern Europe, but they were channeled into replicable representations which found particular resonance with their

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<sup>31</sup> See Jelen, "A Treasury of Yiddish Stories," 144–48.

<sup>32</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 65–66, 90–91.

<sup>33</sup> See Krah, 158–59.

<sup>34</sup> Jacob Sloan, quoted in Krah, 186.

mid-century audiences, and it is in this fashion that the essentializing groundwork of post-war Jewish nostalgia flourished among third-generation American Jews. These specific facets of the nostalgic image will be discussed shortly, so as to provide an understanding of its qualities which manifest across various media, but first the shift from post-war to mid-century nostalgia will be approached in greater detail.

### *Fiddler on the Roof and the Standardization of the Mid-Century Nostalgic Old World*

As was noted in the introduction to this dissertation, a definitive turning point of this movement toward a singular mid-century image of the Old World was *Fiddler on the Roof*, which premiered on Broadway in 1964. If the idea of the Old World was still developing in the 1940s and 1950s, as Krah discusses, then this presentation in the early 1960s was definitive.<sup>35</sup> The significance of *Fiddler* is that it brought together the previous tendencies of American Jewish nostalgic discourse into a single comprehensive package. It specifically took advantage of the generalized Old World image as a way of making a musical which was simultaneously untethered from Jewish specificity – the producers intended this generalization to appeal to broader American audiences<sup>36</sup> – and truthful to some overarching conception of what Eastern European Jewish life was like in spirit. Much as Herzog and Zborowski had captured a generalized shtetl in their anthropological overview of the Old World, *Fiddler* had constructed a shtetl of all shtetls which followed that model. As Krah writes, this manner in which individual characters stood in as definitive archetypes supported this: “Tevye embodied how *the* East European Jew looked, dressed, talked, sang, danced, thought, prayed, and felt.”<sup>37</sup> This also meant that the post-war development of an essentialized image was, in Tevye, firmly represented as a coherent figure, much in the way that Tevye’s imagined surroundings were nostalgically conceived as a culmination of earlier nostalgic depictions of the shtetl.

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<sup>35</sup> See Krah, 14–16, 240.

<sup>36</sup> See Richard Altman and Mervyn Kaufman, *The Making of a Musical: Fiddler on the Roof* (New York: Crown, 1972), 14; see also Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders*, 157.

<sup>37</sup> Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 238; see also Wolitz, “The Americanization of Tevye,” 526.

In terms of its connection with historical context, though, this particular image enters the scene at a time when American Jews were increasingly desiring coherence for the narrative of their past. As American Jews turned from reductive, religious group definitions toward the reclamation of a communal cultural heritage amidst the mid-century ethnic revival, *Fiddler* premiered and provided a strong image of what that heritage looks like. Its success in doing this made it a particularly emblematic focus of attention for Jews who were thinking about their minority identities in that American moment. Within this framework, many of the narrative qualities which are present in other visual sources are also manifested in *Fiddler*, turning it into a kind of guiding architecture for the shape of Old World nostalgia. As Steven Zipperstein argues, *Fiddler* “would define for American Jews, more so than any other cultural artifact of the 1960s and beyond, the content of their Jewish past.”<sup>38</sup>

After 1964, then, there was a stable narrative which evinced a clear and shared understanding of what the Old World looked like and who its inhabitants were. This particular image was supported by a plethora of representations across various media, from museum exhibitions to photobooks to films, which illustrated different qualities and reinforced each other’s commonalities. This came into play both contemporaneously, with images echoing their representations of the Old World, and through precedent, as certain images drew on earlier nostalgic representations for their form. For instance, *Fiddler on the Roof* looked to Marc Chagall’s paintings and the photographs of Roman Vishniac and Alter Kacyzne.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, those very photographs were reprinted, given new glosses, and circulated in various photobooks which would have been influenced by *Fiddler* as a popular precedent.<sup>40</sup> This network among various media is, itself, largely based on the earlier essentialization of the Old World as a non-specific and timeless idea, which enabled on a narrative level the integration of these various perspectives into their larger image. On this basis, the stability of certain qualities and the means through which those qualities were articulated became a hallmark of the mid-century nostalgic Old World.

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<sup>38</sup> Steven Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 34; see also Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 5, 238, 240.

<sup>39</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 238; Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders*, 119; Wolitz, “The Americanization of Tevye,” 526.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Abraham Shulman, *The Old Country* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974); Lucjan Dobroszycki and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Image Before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland, 1864-1939* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).

Importantly, this consolidation of the nostalgic image also unifies multiple media which were produced across a broad swath of time, joining them in a consistent whole. Particularly with regard to photography, but also in terms of literary republications, these primary source materials range anywhere between the later 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1930s. Although some media would have been produced in the mid-century itself, such as the play and film versions of *Fiddler on the Roof*, these representations are nonetheless also joined with those other nostalgic sources in their audience's perception: as will be discussed in the following chapter, they all constitute points of heritage which connect that audience to the constructed past. However, for the time being, it is important to note that this breadth is supported without issue within the nostalgic image. These various distinct images come to represent the greater, static "Old World."

This is the case within individual collections of images as well. Abraham Shulman's 1974 photobook *The Old Country*, for instance, piles pictures ranging from 1860 to 1920 into its depiction of the Old World; later publications also followed suit.<sup>41</sup> This was possible on the very grounds that Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski established in *Life is with People*: the generalized image of the shtetl enables a wide range of particulars to support its overarching whole, regardless of whether those particulars are differentiated by time or space.<sup>42</sup> Shulman also draws on the essentialism of writers like Heschel in writing, contrary to history, that the Old World's character remained unchanged for hundreds of years and only began to shift at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>43</sup> In this regard, because the shtetl was seen as a static whole with stable qualities, those differences in decades were not thought to matter much in terms of the greater nostalgic image. And furthermore, in cases where differences do begin to visibly emerge, the nostalgic narrative that flourished in the mid-century was able to readily apply ideas of destruction through change to explain the significance of these developments. As will be seen later through discussing that specific aspect of the nostalgic image, the Old World remains either a static essence or a dissolved past.

In line with this broadened scope for the nostalgic gaze, it is important to also acknowledge that American Jews drew early 20<sup>th</sup>-century immigrant communities into a

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<sup>41</sup> See Shulman, *The Old Country*, 1; Anke Hilbrenner, "Invention of a Vanished World: Photographs of Traditional Jewish Life in the Russian Pale of Settlement," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 57, no. 2 (2009): 184.

<sup>42</sup> See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Introduction," xvi.

<sup>43</sup> Shulman, *The Old Country*, 171.

close relationship with Eastern European sites of the Old World. This was particularly accented in relation to New York as an American location of Eastern European immigrants, and especially so with regard to the Lower East Side. This focus was a novel development for the mid-century, though not unprecedented. As Hasia Diner notes, post-war perspectives certainly valorized these immigrant neighbourhoods, though the mid-century saw those perspectives more strongly aligned with a single narrative about American Jewish immigration from Europe and its concentration in the Lower East Side.<sup>44</sup> In brief, that neighbourhood came to stand as an emblem of Jewish identity in the same fashion that the Old World constituted a glimpse of an essentialized Jewishness; as will be seen shortly in this chapter, this had much to do with the perceived connection between that neighbourhood and the “timeless” qualities of the Eastern European shtetl.

What this looked like alongside the increase in mid-century representations of the shtetl is that, in addition to a similar increase in depictions of immigrant neighbourhoods, there was also a keen interest in immigrant histories among much of the American Jewish population. Moses Rischin's *The Promised City* (1962), Ronald Sander's *The Downtown Jews* (1969), and Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* (1976) are emblematic of this moment. Simultaneously, works such as Will Eisner's *A Contract With God* (1978) and Linda Heller's *The Castle on Hester Street* (1982) were articulating these connections between immigrant enclave and Old World Jewishness on visual cultural terms.<sup>45</sup> These various books were produced at the same time as a number of earlier literary works about American Jewish immigrants were also being republished and successfully finding audiences.<sup>46</sup> This is not surprising if one considers chapter one's discussion of identity politics at this point in American history. As noted there, as well as earlier in this chapter with regard to the conjunction of the 1964 production of *Fiddler on the Roof* and the beginnings of the 1960s' ethnic revival, within the mid-century various white American groups were reclaiming their minority statuses; the language of immigration was the main way of doing this.<sup>47</sup> However, American Jews were also making these connections within the context of a strong nostalgic focus on the Old World as a location of pure Jewish

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<sup>44</sup> See Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 175–77.

<sup>45</sup> See Will Eisner, *A Contract With God: And other tenement stories* (New York: DC Comics, 2000), 19–23; Linda Heller, *The Castle on Hester Street* (New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> See Diner, 65–66, 70.

<sup>47</sup> See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2, 7–8.

culture. In that regard, the framework in which stories were told about earlier Jewish communities consistently relied on Old World nostalgia for its substance. As will shortly be discussed further in terms of the nostalgia for immigrant neighbourhoods, these locations were privileged as sites of authentic Judaism precisely because they were thought to have a closer connection with the character of Eastern European Jewishness. This relied heavily on the essentializing nostalgic discourse of the post-war period but applied that approach to Jewishness within a specifically American purview.

Visual culture was a key part in how these American histories were incorporated with the image of Eastern Europe and aligned with a distinctly Old World presence. For example, one can look to the 1966 exhibition *The Lower East Side: Portal to American Life* – also referred to by its alternate title, *Portal to America* – which was installed at the Jewish Museum in New York. This wildly popular exhibition featured enormously enlarged images of the Lower East Side, with street and tenement scenes covering entire walls.<sup>48</sup> More importantly, it put that setting into conversation with earlier nostalgic assumptions about Eastern Europe, tracing the image of early American Jewish immigrants in light of the shtetl and its qualities; this will be discussed in greater detail soon. *Portal to America* is also typical of how a variety of earlier visual sources from photographers such as Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Jessie Tarbox Beals, and Joseph Byron were rediscovered, reprinted, and recirculated across a variety of nostalgic sources.<sup>49</sup> These photographic sources – once again ranging from between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1920s<sup>50</sup> – were also replicated in contemporaneous cultural productions, such as in films like *Hester Street* (1975). This body of representation enriched the existent nostalgic image of the Old World, broadening its scope while replicating the same perceived qualities of shtetl Jewry within this American setting.

The exact ways in which these qualities and connections figure in the nostalgic image will become clearer in the following section. To better illustrate exactly what the nostalgic image of the Old World depicts, its main features will be noted and unpacked in relation to how each nostalgic perception supported a particular construction of the Old

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<sup>48</sup> See Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 81.

<sup>49</sup> See Diner, 159–60; see also Deborah Dash Moore and David Lobenstein, “Photographing the Lower East Side: A Century’s Work,” in *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections*, ed. Hasia Diner, Jeffrey Shandler, and Beth S. Wenger (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 30.

<sup>50</sup> See Moore and Lobenstein, “Photographing the Lower East Side,” 29–30.

World. The total sum of these various qualities is what one thinks about when discussing “the image of the Old World.” There are also some other facets of this image which involve perceptions and qualities that will not be discussed here — for instance, specific assumptions about the way in which shtetls formed communal networks. It is not that those qualities are unimportant, but, given the aims of the current conversation, it is necessary to prioritize those qualities which are most constitutive of the nostalgic image’s main, popular points. Through examining them further, and particularly through looking at their representation in various images, one will better recognize the contents of that overarching Old World image.

### *The Qualities of the Mid-Century Nostalgic Image*

The remainder of this chapter will cover some of the main, striking qualities of the mid-century nostalgic image of the Old World inasmuch as it proliferated throughout the 1960s and 1970s. These qualities are firmly represented across a variety of media, supporting the continuity of their overarching imaginary whole. Particularly due to the centrality of many of these features, there is little variation in their respective representations across those decades: the shtetl is consistently pious, the Lower East Side is consistently authentic, and those Old World sites are consistently located in the past. The same stability holds true for the other qualities of this image as well. These are well-grounded in the disposition of post-war nostalgic imagery, but develop through their individual depictions to elaborate on, for their audiences, what it means for American Jews to see and relate to their communal past.

The main aim of examining these qualities is simple, since it will establish familiarity for the present conversation, but the methodology in doing so here requires some explanation. While it is necessary to gain a clear idea of what the image is and to see what the Old World looks like, especially since this is an image represented in visual culture, it is also important to approach this image in a way that makes sense for the analytical program which was noted in the introduction and which will be discussed further in the next chapter. This diverges significantly from many literary approaches to this topic, which seek to textually examine nostalgic representations in context in order

to recognize the references, themes, and intentions that inform their contents.<sup>51</sup> Instead, visual cultural discourse looks more to questions of spectatorship than authorship: what is important here is how nostalgic images hold particularly poignant meaning for their viewing audiences, not what meaning is intended within a work. This methodology relies on the individual, their perceived image, and the range of contextual preconceptions to inform the manner in which that person will intuit and interpret the image before them. Of course, that image's resonance often overlaps between these approaches, but, as will be seen in the next chapter, the ways in which visual culture identifies unique considerations will be crucial for understanding this nostalgia affects its audience. Thinking about the act of seeing as a hermeneutically-rich encounter, rather than an exegetical reading, helps to frame this present conversation in terms of the relationship between images and their audiences.

Insofar as the idea of an encounter will be central to the next chapter's analysis of Old World nostalgia, here it is important also to recognize the primacy of immediate visual experience in approaching and assessing the specific qualities of this nostalgic image. This is because nostalgic audiences themselves would have been first seeing and then reflecting upon these representations. Such an approach comes out particularly well in Avina Weintraub's discussion of Bill Aron's photography, where she notes how "images rather than the written text dominate" and provide the visual language and central material on which their associated text can elaborate.<sup>52</sup> Of course, these two processes of seeing and reflection are interrelated – reflection provides the network of ideas through which other visual media are experienced – but it is nonetheless important to recognize that each image is, itself, encountered first.

In this regard, in anticipation of the methodological considerations of the next chapter, these qualities will be discussed through first encountering their representations in specific images, and then working from that particularity toward the broader replication and resonance of such qualities in the nostalgic image at large. This will both convey the means through which American Jews would have read aspects of these images and note where those qualities connect with other nostalgic images which, together as a broad and

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<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Alissa Solomon's study of *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Wonder of Wonders*; see also the literary studies in Eliyana R. Adler and Sheila E. Jelen, eds., *Reconstructing the Old Country: American Jewry in the Post-Holocaust Decades* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017).

<sup>52</sup> See Aviva Weintraub, "Visiting a 'Vanished World': Photography and the Jewish Lower East Side," *YIVO Annual* 21 (1993): 193.

generalized Old World, form the basis for nostalgic reflection. In a practical sense, this means that the discussion of each quality will begin with an image and will discuss the message of that representation before moving on to its broader context, resonances, and analysis.

*This image redacted due to copyright.*

From *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971).<sup>53</sup>

Here is Tevye, as depicted by Chaim Topol in Norman Jewison's 1971 film adaptation of *Fiddler on the Roof*. He is at the end of his well-known song "If I Were a Rich Man." Here, flanked by his two farmyard animals, he dreams of material wealth and the benefits that it grants: a massive house, servants, and status. He relishes the thought of being able to spend his time studying instead of working, and to have others in the shtetl approach him for advice. However, his surroundings are anything but that vision of wealth. His barn is cramped. A rickety ladder leans against a platform, composed of a few thin planks and, above that, a ceiling filled with holes. Here, within this space, Tevye begins and ends his song addressing God, humbly asking if it would be so difficult to have granted him a small fortune rather than installing him in the life of a pauper.<sup>54</sup> However, reality sets in as soon as his reverie is finished. His cow loudly moos and, facing God – though, given the angle of this shot, looking directly to the audience – Tevye shrugs feebly in resignation to his circumstances. In this film, the song is followed by a sharp change of scene, but in the

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<sup>53</sup> Norman Jewison, *Fiddler on the Roof*, DVD (MGM Home Entertainment, 2002).

<sup>54</sup> Joseph Stein, Sheldon Harnick, and Jerry Bock, *Fiddler on the Roof: Libretto Vocal Book* (New York: The Times Square Music Publications Company, 1964), 13–14.

original stage production this grounding in reality is pronounced further: a crowd comes on stage, with multiple villagers hounding Tevye for not delivering an order of milk.<sup>55</sup>

This song and the way that Tevye behaves in it creates a strong and clear image of poverty in the Old World. It is clear enough that Tevye is poor, of course, but this representation also sets the tone for how wealth is viewed in terms of the shtetl's culture; Tevye, after all, is an archetypal character whose reception was closely aligned with attitudes toward the Old World as a whole.<sup>56</sup> With this in mind, one sees clearly in "If I Were a Rich Man" an interpretation of poverty which rings throughout other nostalgic representations. This is first and foremost a perception of poverty as endemic to the shtetl. If Tevye were on the Lower East Side, perhaps he could seriously entertain America's rags-to-riches narrative, but in the shtetl he can only shrug.<sup>57</sup> As he says, it is up to God to determine wealth.<sup>58</sup> This is not defeatism, but rather is a candid acknowledgement that the shtetl exists under conditions where it cannot possibly be wealthy, particularly in the economic terms of its mid-century audience. Even the wealthy people whom Tevye idealizes would be impoverished by those standards.

This idea forms one of the most substantial pillars of the Old World's image, especially insofar as this poverty is directly represented by many primary sources which were reproduced and represented as nostalgic media. In photographs and recollections, a mid-century audience could see that houses' roofs buckled, people wore tattered clothes, and food was scarce in the shtetl.<sup>59</sup> However, what is truly important within this depiction of shtetl poverty is not so much the fact that the Old World was mostly poor, but more so what that poverty was thought to indicate. There was a clear sense that the impoverishment of these locations, while truly stark and difficult, released Old World Jews from the trappings of materialism and led to a heightened spiritual richness. More so than simply correlative, poverty and piety were seen as necessary companions. In fact, as Sheila E. Jelen points out, the strength of piety was most often linked to the absence of

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<sup>55</sup> Stein, Harnick, and Bock, 15.

<sup>56</sup> See Krahn, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 238; Wolitz, "The Americanization of Tevye," 515–16.

<sup>57</sup> For the way in which the narrative of the American Dream is applied to Jewish immigrants from the Old World, see Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 28–29.

<sup>58</sup> See Stein, Harnick, and Bock, *Fiddler on the Roof*, 13–14.

<sup>59</sup> See Shulman, *The Old Country*, 38; Roman Vishniac, *A Vanished World* (London: Allen Lane, 1983), plates 37, 67; Diane K. Roskies and David G. Roskies, *The Shtetl Book* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1975), 105, 107.

other material opportunities: Jews could do little but pray in the shtetl.<sup>60</sup> It is to this extent, as Rachel Kranson writes, that poverty was depicted “as the handmaiden of deep spirituality, intellectualism, and generosity.”<sup>61</sup> The origins of this conception, as with much of the mid-century nostalgic image, are rooted in earlier nostalgic precedents, and notably those from the post-war period. Programs such as *The Eternal Light* and texts like *Life is with People* strongly emphasize that the Old World was poor in material wealth but rich in spiritual vitality.<sup>62</sup>

This idea is well-represented throughout *Fiddler on the Roof*, but is especially placed front-and-center in “If I Were a Rich Man.” Tevye embodies the counterbalance between material poverty and spiritual riches, giving voice to that in the way by which he imagines wealth. Rather than purely fixating on material benefits – though those are certainly part of his desires – Tevye also focuses his imagination through religious goals. Thus, if he were able to live a life of ease, he would use that time to pray in synagogue.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, he describes discussing holy texts with educated men “the sweetest things of all.”<sup>64</sup> Tevye certainly is chasing some level of prestige here, but it is precisely the way that prestige was realized in the imagined shtetl that nostalgic audiences tied to a spiritual wealth: the absence of material possibilities, given the endemic nature of shtetl poverty, meant that learning, wisdom, and spiritual gain were most highly prized. Tevye reflects this idea readily.

This perspective on poverty, whether in the form of Tevye or within other nostalgic representations of the Old World, resonated well with the economic changes that were happening to American Jews in the mid-century. Particularly for those moving into suburban environments, the question of how class affected cultural values was closely linked with the anxieties surrounding Jewish cohesion, vibrancy, and survival which were noted in the previous chapter. Thinking through these issues through the nostalgic image meant that, by envisaging poverty in the shtetl, American Jews were able to clarify the relationship between their affluence and their Jewish values. Lila Corwin Berman notes how this resulted in a widespread conception that the concessions of suburban life acted

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<sup>60</sup> Jelen, “A Treasury of Yiddish Stories,” 148.

<sup>61</sup> Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 174; see also Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders*, 55.

<sup>63</sup> Stein, Harnick, and Bock, *Fiddler on the Roof*, 14.

<sup>64</sup> Stein, Harnick, and Bock, 14.

against the best interests of Jewish cultural vitality — and, vice-versa, that Jewish vibrancy was most purely found in situations of poverty.<sup>65</sup> It is not that American Jews wished to give up their social and economic gains, but rather that they were in a process of locating their values within the sense that those gains had come at the expense of some level of communal and cultural coherence.<sup>66</sup> After all, the very wealth that had given them their suburban homes and yards had also demanded the reconfiguration of their social and organizational networks on terms that were not their own. This feeling of discomfort with the process of social change created an underlying attitude toward past poverty which was readily applied within the image of the Old World, as one can see here, and helped to depict for American Jews values that they did not believe could originate within the affluent American mainstream.<sup>67</sup>

However, as much as the image of Old World poverty resonated well within its mid-century context, it also operates as a critique of those same American Jewish communities. After all, mid-century suburban Jews were, in many ways, the well-off individuals that Tevye wishes to be.<sup>68</sup> Although Seth Wolitz argues that the resonance between the idealized “rich man” and the suburban Jew aids in the reception of this musical as a point of continuity with its later audience, one can nonetheless see how the contrast between Tevye’s aspirations and middle-class reality operates as a form of criticism.<sup>69</sup> American Jews did have the disposable income to pursue much of what Tevye dreams, but, especially in suburban environments, the general perception was that social and material aspirations were more often prioritized than the spiritual.<sup>70</sup>

Nonetheless, as Rachel Kranson explains, this critique itself does more than simply point out the deficiencies of middle-class suburban culture. By setting up Tevye and the shtetl in opposition to those social values, the relationship between poverty and the Old World provides a way for American Jews to align themselves with those values — it is suburban space, and not Jewish suburban communities, that is identified as the point of concern. As Kranson writes:

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<sup>65</sup> See Lila Corwin Berman, “American Jews and the Ambivalence of Middle-Classness,” *American Jewish History* 94, no. 4 (December 2007): 428–29; see also Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 16.

<sup>66</sup> See Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 163.

<sup>67</sup> See Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 140.

<sup>68</sup> See Eli Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950-1970* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 67.

<sup>69</sup> See Wolitz, “The Americanization of Tevye,” 528.

<sup>70</sup> See Berman, “American Jews and the Ambivalence of Middle-Classness,” 428–30.

The history, collective memory, and shared mythology of the Jewish people provided them with a rich array of symbols through which to express deeply felt concerns about becoming part of an affluent middle-class majority. The tendency to turn to their Jewish heritage for a language of critique [of middle-class Jewish culture] emerged as one important way that postwar American Jews remained culturally distinct as they embraced the American middle class.<sup>71</sup>

In other words, because Tevye is the prototypical “shtetl Jew” and the Old World is seen as the font of authenticity for later American communities, his attitude toward wealth – and American Jews’ identification with that attitude – signifies a deeper cultural perspective that sets apart American Jews from the American mainstream, even as they enjoyed its wealth and privilege. The nostalgic role played by poverty is at the root of this perceived cultural value of the Old World’s relationship with class and status.

*This image redacted due to copyright.*

From *A Vanished World* (1983).<sup>72</sup>

In this image, a row of boys pore over Hebrew texts. The room is dark and the boys are huddled, two to a book in the foreground and four to a book on their right. The main

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<sup>71</sup> Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 113.

<sup>72</sup> Vishniac, *A Vanished World*, plate 8.

source of light seems to be from a window, which comes sharply down onto the table and reflects back onto these boys' faces, making it almost seem as though the texts before them are illuminating the scene. This photo's emphasis is on the relationship between these children and the text: the whole scene is immediately framed by a single line of description – "Talmud students. Trnava, Czechoslovakia, 1937"<sup>73</sup> – and, visually, it is their study that fills this space. Everything else, even objects such as the stick and inkwell which are situated in the foreground, melt into the shadows. The main aesthetic here is one of contemplative piety.

This image is taken from *A Vanished World*, Roman Vishniac's best-known book of photographs from Eastern Europe. Although *A Vanished World* was published in 1983, its contents were circulating well before then: first, in a 1947 collection entitled *Polish Jews: A Pictorial Record*, and later in exhibitions throughout the 1970s.<sup>74</sup> Many of Vishniac's individual photographs have been reused in various contexts, and early mid-century images – notably including *Fiddler on the Roof* – drew on his representation of Eastern Europe.<sup>75</sup> The way in which this photograph communicates piety, then, is influential in relation to other images like it. As Anke Hilbrenner notes, the image of boys in study was established as a trope of the Old World in which Vishniac takes part, alongside other photographers who had previously articulated the same message.<sup>76</sup> This message was clear: Jews in the shtetl were highly involved in prayer and religious worship as part of their day-to-day lives. This is especially so with regard to the presentation of institutional and male-dominated religious activities. Vishniac's work influentially took this idea to the nostalgic American Jewish public.

What this meant for the perception of the Old World extended beyond the contents of these photographs. The Eastern European cheder – a boys' religious school whose closest suburban equivalent would be Hebrew classes at the synagogue – would certainly be familiar to American audiences who witnessed its repetition throughout various nostalgic media, but the ideas that this environment represents are not limited to the contents of this image: neither to boys nor to isolated educational environments. Rather,

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<sup>73</sup> Vishniac, plate 8.

<sup>74</sup> See "Exhibitions | Roman Vishniac Archive," accessed April 3, 2020, <https://vishniac.icp.org/exhibitions>.

<sup>75</sup> See Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders*, 119; Wolitz, "The Americanization of Tevye," 526.

<sup>76</sup> See Hilbrenner, "Invention of a Vanished World," 174–75, 184; see also Dobroszycki and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Image Before My Eyes*, 77.

this represented piety was seen as an example of how the shtetl itself was religiously involved. From post-war nostalgic sources onward, the shtetl was phrased as a holy town: of its multiple institutions, places of study and worship loomed large in the nostalgic imagination.<sup>77</sup> This set the groundwork for later nostalgic sources, which drew on earlier representations to describe the shtetl as “a place of sacredness.”<sup>78</sup>

While this perspective was certainly bolstered by the common appearance of both cheders and active prayer across various representations of the shtetl, what was really being communicated is the manner by which Jews in these environments were thought to weave this activity into their everyday lives. Where formalized or institutionalized religion was not placed front-and-center, a unique relationship with God persisted nonetheless. Tevye's character in *Fiddler on the Roof* is a prime example of this. As was noted in relation to “If I Were a Rich Man,” Tevye is constantly addressing God; he does so at the beginning and the end of that song, and numerous times throughout *Fiddler* as a whole. David Roskies suggests that this personal relationship diffuses the location of religious activity: Tevye “doesn't need a quorum of ten men to pray with because he talks directly to God.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, outside of the synagogue and the cheder, outside of set times for holidays and rest, Jews in the shtetl are imagined as constantly engaged with religious activities. Learning, as represented by Vishniac, is one consistent example of this persistent involvement that is echoed across other nostalgic sources.<sup>80</sup> This directly contrasts the kind of religious activity in mid-century suburbia, as seen in the previous chapter, where synagogue affiliation strongly aligned Jewishness with institutional religion and, beyond that, where declining rates of observance spoke to a more secular general environment.<sup>81</sup>

Similarly, as was noted in the previous chapter and briefly mentioned above, this representation of piety also has gendered aspects which contrast the dynamics surrounding gender within suburban environments. Specifically, while gender roles and women's experiences were being critically discussed in mid-century America, nostalgia

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<sup>77</sup> See Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski, *Life is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 71; Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord's*, 20–21, 45–47.

<sup>78</sup> See Shulman, *The Old Country*, 18, see also 3–4.

<sup>79</sup> Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*, 173.

<sup>80</sup> See Herzog and Zborowski, *Life is with People*, 88; Dobroszycki and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Image Before My Eyes*, 74.

<sup>81</sup> See Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 291–93.

for the Old World's religious character often emphasizes an image of that heritage on stable patriarchal terms. It is telling that images of Jews in prayer are most often men and boys, and that the cheder as a male institution is a dominant image of religious education.<sup>82</sup> Equally significant is men's general omnipresence. As Mark Lubell, the director of the International Center of Photography, writes when in discussing Vishniac's work, the Old World in these images is populated primarily by "Bearded scholars and young schoolboys...[and] black-cloaked religious men".<sup>83</sup> These depictions center Jewish life in the image of masculinity, especially insofar as their piety is intertwined with the beard as a marker of learning and religious dedication. Other imaginations of the Old World join Vishniac in these gendered presentations. Both *A Contract with God* (1978) and *Hester Street* (1975), for instance, contrast the bearded and pious immigrant with the secular, integrated, clean-shaven American Jew; in doing so, they further locate the Old World's religious lifestyles with male-identified symbols.<sup>84</sup>

The gendered presentation of the Old World's piety also speaks to a broader view on the traditionalism of shtetl culture. As noted in the previous chapter, Jews in the Old World were imagined as adhering to rigid gender roles, with men in positions of authority and women in charge of the household.<sup>85</sup> This is put forward from the first moment in *Fiddler on the Roof's* influential depiction of shtetl life, as the musical declares with absolute certainty that learning is the domain of fathers and sons, while women and their daughters clean, mend clothes, and get married.<sup>86</sup> In this way, the idea of piety goes hand-in-hand with the idea of a traditionally-gendered society.

Additionally, this pious environment was also linked with its conditions of poverty. The shtetl's orientation toward spirituality meant that learning and religion, rather than wealth, constituted one's status. Tevye's desire to further religious ends through material means speaks to this. Rachel Kranson also notes well across a variety of sources how the nostalgic literature of the post-war period concretized this idea by consistently portraying how shtetl Jews, given such means, would immediately further religious and scholarly

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<sup>82</sup> See Vishniac, *A Vanished World*, plates 7–8; Hilbrenner, "Invention of a Vanished World," 175, 182–84. The depiction of girls' cheders is also part of the nostalgic Old World, but it is far less common. For an example, see Dobroszycki and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Image Before My Eyes*, 77.

<sup>83</sup> Mark Lubell, "Director's Foreword," in *Roman Vishniac Rediscovered*, ed. Maya Benton (New York and Munich: International Center of Photography and DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2015), 7.

<sup>84</sup> See Eisner, *A Contract with God*, 34–35, 49; Joan Micklin Silver, *Hester Street*, DVD (Kino Lorber, 1975).

<sup>85</sup> See Herzog and Zborowski, *Life is with People*, 47, 125–41; Shulman *The Old Country*, 14.

<sup>86</sup> Stein, Harnick, and Bock, *Fiddler on the Roof*, 1–2.

aims. For instance, in *The Jewish People Book III* (1953), Deborah Pessin writes that wealthy parents would “go straight to the *Yeshivah* and seek out the most brilliant students” to marry their daughters.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Lee J. Levinger, Elma Ehrlich Levinger, and Harry Gersh write in *The Story of the Jews* (1964) that “The rich man, seeking a good match for his daughter, did not look first for the son of another rich man. He looked for a promising student”.<sup>88</sup> This view that learning was placed above material gain was echoed in influential sources like *Life is with People* and perpetuated in nostalgic texts throughout the mid-century.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, in terms of the concrete use of one’s wealth, Kranson points out that these texts prioritized philanthropic giving above financial growth.<sup>90</sup> This stance toward money is precisely that which is articulated in “If I Were a Rich Man”: the sentiment that wealth is a means to charity and learning in the world, rather than an end in itself or its lifestyle.

Piety, then, comes first. This is the idea that was carried forward into the mid-century nostalgic image. The shtetl as a location was thought to be imbued with religious values, much as its many traditions – which were not only *Fiddler’s* opening focus, but emblematic of the shtetl’s overarching nostalgic character – were linked to religious observance.<sup>91</sup> Yet this does not eclipse the presence of other non-religious practises and groups. Revolutionaries and secular Zionists alike were certainly present in the shtetl and are represented in nostalgic images.<sup>92</sup> However, those groups were imagined as acting on top of the more fundamental piety of these towns. Zionism and socialism in particular are phrased in such a way so as to leave room for the shtetl itself to remain a site of sacredness. For instance, in *Life is with People*, Zionism is directly identified with “a different set of values” than that of the Old World, maintaining “a nationalistic and material goal that was at odds with the concepts of the shtetl.”<sup>93</sup> Similarly, Shaina Hammerman notes how *Fiddler’s* secular and socialist Perchik is distinctly not “of the shtetl,” but arrives from

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<sup>87</sup> Deborah Pessin, *The Jewish People Book III*, 69, quoted in Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 27.

<sup>88</sup> Lee J. Levinger, Elma Ehrlich Levinger, and Herry Gersh, *The Story of the Jews*, 186, quoted in Kranson, 27.

<sup>89</sup> See Herzog and Zborowski, *Life is with People*, 81–83; Shulman, *The Old Country*, 14, 18.

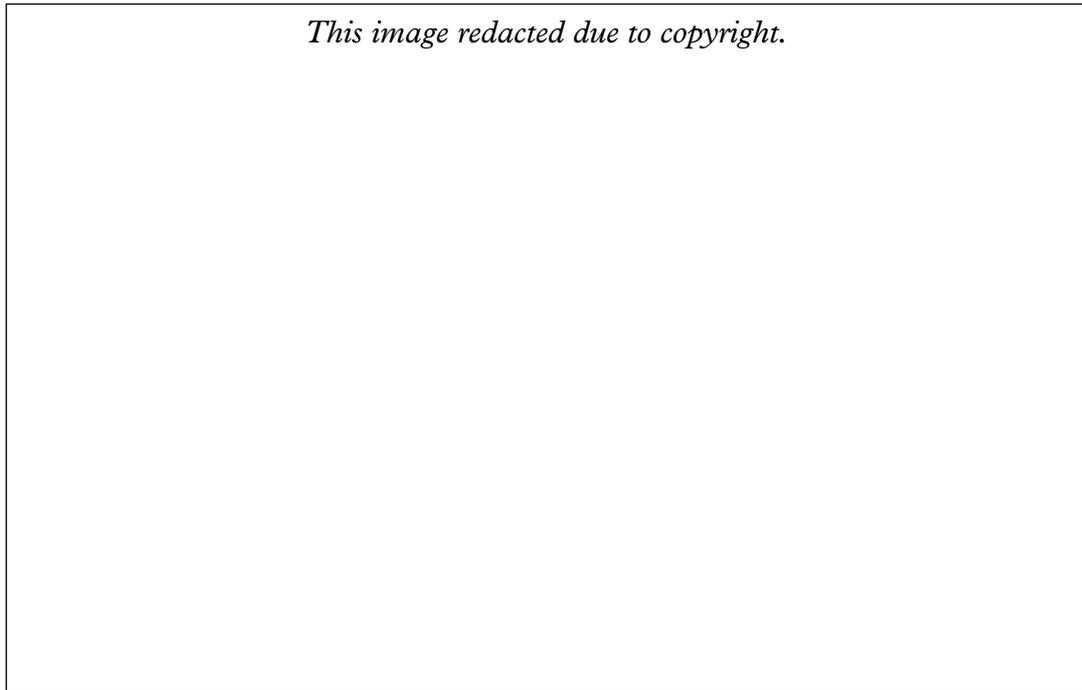
<sup>90</sup> See Levinger, Levinger, and Gersh, *The Story of the Jews*, 185, quoted in Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 28.

<sup>91</sup> See Stein, Harnick, and Bock, *Fiddler on the Roof*, 1–2; Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord’s*, 19; Raphael Patai, *The Vanished Worlds of Jewry* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1980), 44; Shulman, *The Old Country*, 11–12.

<sup>92</sup> See Shulman, *The Old Country*, 24–26.

<sup>93</sup> Herzog and Zborowski, *Life is with People*, 164.

Kiev, an urban center.<sup>94</sup> This is emphasized within the play as well, as Jews in the shtetl dismiss Perchik as being preoccupied with the outside world.<sup>95</sup> Insofar as these representations were influential in patterning the nostalgic image at large, one can see in these examples how the shtetl, as a site of Eastern European Jewishness, is continually couched in piety as constitutive of its character and its perceived “core.”



From *Image before My Eyes* (1977).<sup>96</sup>

In this photograph, taken from the 1977 exhibition and subsequent photobook *Image before My Eyes*, five people stand in various states of injury. The accompanying text informs us that this image depicts a “Family injured during the pogrom in Mińsk Mazowiecki in June, 1936.”<sup>97</sup> However, despite their victimization, these people do not appear particularly distressed in this moment. Besides their run-down clothes and environment, emblematic of the poverty that was previously discussed, they are not abandoned or helpless; their wounds are bound. Although one may see this as representative of their temporary security and their recovery after this pogrom, the way

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<sup>94</sup> Shaina Hammerman, “Another ‘Tradition Omission’: Reconsidering Fiddler on the Roof in Yiddish,” *In Geveb Blog* (blog), accessed November 19, 2019, <https://ingeveb.org/blog/another-tradition-omission-reconsidering-fiddler-on-the-roof-in-yiddish>.

<sup>95</sup> Stein, Harnick, and Bock, *Fiddler on the Roof*, 16.

<sup>96</sup> Dobroszycki and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Image Before My Eyes*, 145.

<sup>97</sup> Dobroszycki and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 145.

in which such violence features in the nostalgic image of the Old World would suggest that another narrative is at play here. The appearance and demeanour of this family is more likely read as a representation of perpetual insecurity that is perceived as part of the shtetl's existential situation. Pogroms are to be expected.

The time of this photograph is also important for thinking about how the shtetl was imagined. It was, of course, a moment in Eastern European Jewish history when these attacks were becoming all the more common, three years after Hitler's rise to power in Germany and, in historical perspective, only three years before the Nazis' invasion of Poland. In this regard, this image certainly would have read to a mid-century audience with reference to the Holocaust, whose significance and central role in the nostalgic image will be discussed later in this chapter. However, with respect to the nostalgic perception of persecution in general, it is important to recognize that the Holocaust was only a capstone to the endemic violence, spanning previous decades and centuries, that was seen as characterizing the shtetl.

The idea of the pogrom that is depicted here in its aftermath – albeit a clean, white-banded aftermath – is more central to understanding the relationship between the shtetl and its perceived quality of constant hardship. While explicit images like this, focusing on persecution, are actually rarer in photographic sources, and, like this photograph, are more common in terms of the visual documentation of later violence in the 1930s, the narrative of endemic violence itself remains prominent in the mid-century. Jews in the 1960s and 1970s would certainly have been familiar with this representation of the shtetl: reproductions of primary sources and prior texts from the post-war period drew on chronicles of pogroms, oppressive economic conditions, and anti-Semitic legislation, making these an expected part of the shtetl's image for their nostalgic American audience.<sup>98</sup>

In terms of visual culture, then, this idea became well-represented within the American mid-century by two means: first, by its inclusion within prominent nostalgic images, and second, by its incorporation within the framing of other representations of the Old World. With regard to prominent images, *Fiddler on the Roof* places persecution

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<sup>98</sup> See, for examples, Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry*, Second Expanded Edition (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 34–35, 83–84; Roskies and Roskies, *The Shtetl Book*, 68–70, 85–96, 99–103; Herzog and Zborowski, *Life is with People*, 223–24.

front-and-center in both its stage and film productions: shtetls, after all, are politically disenfranchised within the Russian Empire and are thus placed at the whims of actors outside their boundaries.<sup>99</sup> Seth Wolitz notes how the inclusion of a pogrom scene was something uniquely present in the 1964 production of *Fiddler*, which was produced at a time when “pogroms and especially the Holocaust for American Jews...were becoming fused in folk memories intimately associated with the ‘Old Country.’”<sup>100</sup> Thus, within the mid-century, the sort of persecution visibly presented in *Fiddler* was used as a framing device for other, more documentary materials. Photobooks’ introductions, for instance, highlight both the Holocaust and the manner in which persecution characterized a reality of the shtetl’s life. For example, in *The Old Country*, Abraham Shulman writes that shtetl synagogues were sometimes built in the form of fortresses “which served in cases of hostile attacks and pogroms.”<sup>101</sup> The fact that the synagogue stands emblematically as the shtetl’s pious core enforces the sense that sudden and violent intrusions were a regular part of these entire environments. This perspective was so deeply rooted in American expectations through the shtetl’s popular image that, when Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin published an anthology of Eastern European memorial books in 1983, they noted that the representation of mutual trust between Jews and non-Jewish peasants would most likely surprise their readers.<sup>102</sup>

This idea of persecution as a part of the shtetl’s constitution also forms a strong point of contrast between the imagination of European Jewish life and the experience of American Jews; America’s political security sharply contrasts the insecurity of the shtetl. In thinking about the relevance of persecution in this connection, Hasia Diner notes well how pogroms form the single key motivation for Jewish emigration in nostalgic narratives of the Old World.<sup>103</sup> This means that, on the basis of persecution, America is accented within Old World nostalgia as a “way out” of Eastern European hardship. As Diner writes directly: “The relationship between eastern Europe and America could not have been more obvious.... America loomed in their [Jews’] consciousness as the beacon of hope and salvation; eastern Europe signified murder, rape, violence.”<sup>104</sup> This “formulaic

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<sup>99</sup> See Stein, Harnick, and Bock, *Fiddler on the Roof*, 33, 75, 90–92; Jewison, *Fiddler on the Roof*.

<sup>100</sup> Wolitz, “The Americanization of Teyve,” 526; for how this perspective is incorporated in the 1971 film, see Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders*, 302–3.

<sup>101</sup> Shulman, *The Old Country*, 6.

<sup>102</sup> Kugelmass and Boyarin, *From a Ruined Garden*, 3.

<sup>103</sup> See Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 76–77.

<sup>104</sup> Diner, 77.

understanding” of immigration and, in its broader implications, of European danger, was perpetuated across the breadth of post-war American Jewish culture at large.<sup>105</sup> In terms of visual culture, one can see this perspective not only in *Fiddler's* representation of emigration from the Old World, but also in the permeation of other cultural sources outside of the nostalgic gaze. Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978) and Ralph Bakshi's *American Pop* (1981), for instance, use pogroms as the principal motivation for their respective characters' American immigration.<sup>106</sup> While these works may not remain focused on their initial presentation of the shtetl, their framing of the American immigrant narrative does demonstrate how the idea of Old World persecution remains highly relevant in light of the mid-century ethnic revival: the juxtaposition of European hardship and American opportunity fits well with the ways in which many white minorities were explaining their socio-economic successes as they travelled a path into the acculturated American mainstream.<sup>107</sup>

*This image redacted due to copyright.*

Street scene, New York City, c. 1910, by Lewis W. Hine.<sup>108</sup>

This is a well-known street scene by Lewis W. Hine. It is an image of New York, and was evidently shot in a distinctly Jewish neighbourhood: its Yiddish signs, on the left and

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<sup>105</sup> Diner, 77.

<sup>106</sup> Eisner, *A Contract with God*, 20; Ralph Bakshi, *American Pop*, Streaming online video (Amazon) (Columbia Pictures, 1981).

<sup>107</sup> See Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 12–14, 18, 65–66.

<sup>108</sup> “Lewis Hine | International Center of Photography,” accessed July 5, 2020, <https://www.icp.org/exhibitions/lewis-hine>.

right, point to the foreign character of this space. This setting is distinctly one of immigration, much in the same way that a mid-century audience or a contemporary audience would expect certain ethnic immigrant groups, such as the Chinese, to form similar neighbourhoods with a visible minority presence. Non-English signage is one indication of such communities. However, here, it is not only legible indicators which mark this neighbourhood as different from mid-century American expectations; the way in which people engage with space is also notable. There is little distinction between sidewalk and street — one man, near the center of the photograph, is strolling leisurely while pushcarts take up large chunks of the road. Commerce here is something that likewise happens alongside noise and dirt. In this way, while certain elements of this city scene would be familiar to nostalgic audiences — the buildings would have at least remained the same in appearance — the crowds which swarm among them are not. Middle-class American life, and especially suburban life, was, of course, a life of privacy and the automobile; this scene, on the other hand, is an image of dense, pedestrian, and public living.

A large part of understanding this photograph through the mid-century nostalgic gaze does not lie in reading its significance in relation to its historical context, but in its connections with other nostalgic media which would have informed its interpretation. As will be discussed in the following chapter, multiple encounters with images build patterns of recognition; this is important for recognizing the relationship between individual representations and the broader nostalgic image — such as with the generalization from the shtetl to the Old World that was discussed through post-war nostalgic sources — but also informs how those individual representations would have been understood within those hermeneutic encounters themselves. What this means is that, when looking at this image in isolation, it is clear enough that a gap exists between the perceived experience of this neighbourhood and the lived experiences of its mid-century audience. However, looking at it in line with other nostalgic images, and given that an audience would have also been seeing many of those images in reference to one another, a different narrative emerges that highlights not only its displacement from the present but its continuity with a further past.

Hine's photograph does not stand alone in the mid-century. Allon Schoener's *Portal to America* (1966) includes numerous such photographs, all of which boast the same

crowds, use of the streets, Yiddish signs, and so forth, while prominent books such as Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* (1976) also feature similar images as emblematic examples of these immigrant neighbourhoods.<sup>109</sup> Ronald Sander's *The Lower East Side* (1979) further concretizes these crowded streets as natural for and constitutive of the Lower East Side's character by repeating a number of dense urban scenes from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>110</sup> Considering the widespread popularity of Schoener's exhibition and the substantial audience for these books, one can see how the repetition of these streetscapes turns Hine's photograph into a stereotypical representation of a Jewish urban neighbourhood, and particularly one from the Lower East Side of New York. Much in the way that the shtetl was honed as the typical setting for the Old World at large, this scene is established through multiple representations as the standard setting of American Jewish immigrant life.

However, importantly, these types of connections also place this setting in conversation with the perceived culture of the Old World and its shtetl. The whole idea of public commerce as central to communal life, as represented by Hine and others, readily connects with the way in which the market was defined as a centerpiece of the shtetl's activity. Their descriptions also echo one another's bartering and busyness.<sup>111</sup> This is one means by which the immigrant neighbourhood is visually depicted in ways that would resonate with a nostalgic perspective on Eastern Europe. Of course, there was also the fact that these Jews *were* European in origin, but nostalgic authors went above and beyond in emphasizing that their Old World culture was brought with them to America. For instance, Schoener stressed this connection by selecting multiple 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century articles for his exhibition which referred to immigrant Jewish neighbourhoods on European terms: one 1897 article from *The New York Times* states that New York's Lower East Side is a "genuine Jewish ghetto" on par with any in Europe.<sup>112</sup> Irving Howe, in an article which would later accompany Schoener's exhibition, went even further in arguing

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<sup>109</sup> See Allon Schoener, ed., *Portal to America: The Lower East Side, 1870-1925* (New York, Chicago, and San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 69–73; Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1976), plates 9, 16, 18.

<sup>110</sup> See Ronald Sanders and Edmund V. Gillon, Jr., *The Lower East Side: A Guide to Its Past in 99 New Photographs* (New York: Dover Publications, 1979).

<sup>111</sup> See Kugelmass and Boyarin, *From a Ruined Garden*, 30–35; Schoener, *Portal to America*, 55–61; for examples of this in visual representation, see Dobroszycki and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Image Before My Eyes*, 49, 56; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, plate 2.

<sup>112</sup> Schoener, *Portal to America*, 55.

that the shtetl and immigrant neighbourhood were co-identifiable: he writes that “the Lower East Side was a fulfillment of energies from the immediate Jewish past: it was Kamenetz Podolsk revived, Berdichev released, just as the *landsmanschaft* [Jewish immigrant association] was the *shtetl* transported.”<sup>113</sup> The image of this neighbourhood, then, would have been recognized on European terms within the context of a nostalgic audience.

And so the essence of this matter is that photographs like Hine’s depict American settings but European Jews. Rachel Kranson puts this well as she writes:

At the same time they [mid-century American Jews] portrayed the Eastern European shtetl as the source of authentic Jewish values and culture, postwar American Jews also imagined the historical, immigrant slums of the Lower East Side as another mythic, vibrant, and thoroughly Jewish space. Indeed, the sacralization of the shtetl and the Lower East Side were deeply connected, as postwar American Jews often portrayed the immigrant world of the Lower East Side as a continuation of shtetl life on more hospitable American soil.<sup>114</sup>

There was a concrete sense, as one can see with Howe and Schoener, that the Old World had survived in America. In the foreword to Abraham Shulman’s *The Old Country* (1974), Isaac Bashevis Singer reinforced this idea, writing that Jewish immigrants were not only connected to European culture, but that this generation’s “poor shtetl Jews did not come to this country to forget their history, to lose their identity, but to continue to be the People of the Book. . . . Those people suffered, perhaps, from many sicknesses, but amnesia wasn’t one of them.”<sup>115</sup>

This was communicated visually as well. Hasia Diner notes that in *Portal to America* photographs were constantly aimed at framing American Jewish immigrants as somewhat disconnected from their immediate context. While many of the images depicted market and labour scenes on the Lower East Side, many others were focused on Jews in various

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<sup>113</sup> Irving Howe, “The Lower East Side: Symbol and Fact,” in Allon Schoener, *The Lower East Side: Portal to American Life, 1870-1924* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1966), 13.

<sup>114</sup> Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 29; for more on this identification of the immigrant neighbourhood with Eastern European authenticity, see also Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 8, 27, 58, 83–84.

<sup>115</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Foreword,” in Abraham Shulman, *The Old Country* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), ix.

relationships with religion. As Diner writes: “Jews in the *Portal to America* exhibit were shown in prayer and in sacred study. They sat at their Sabbath tables, and the meanness of their physical surroundings contrasted with the sanctity of the ritual moment.”<sup>116</sup> In other words, their Jewish practises took them out of their immediate Americanizing surroundings and connected them, instead, to their rich, distinct, and timeless heritage. As will be seen further in the fourth chapter, the Lower East Side itself was nostalgically viewed as a Jewish neighbourhood because it enabled these sorts of identity-laden connections for its residents.

Much as the piety and poverty of the shtetl formed a contrast with the later affluence of mid-century suburban Jewry, this image of the Lower East Side also draws a line between that extension of the Old World and later American Jewish environments. The way in which this immigrant neighbourhood is visibly imagined emphasizes the complete lack of middle-class luxuries, namely privacy and decorum. Instead, as Diner writes, looking at Sydney Taylor’s 1950s portrait of the Lower East Side, this image impresses the noise of peddlers, the cramped busyness of the urban marketplace, and the obtrusiveness of hucksters on its audience; Diner places this directly in contrast to the calmness and class of suburbia, which was “touted by developers for the quietness of private space and the green stretches of lawn.”<sup>117</sup> In the same vein of thought, Deborah Dash Moore notes how this contrast would be particularly appealing for American Jewish suburbanites in search of an “authentic” urban image.<sup>118</sup> These various representations of the Lower East Side coalesce to impress upon the nostalgic viewer how few distinctions there were between public and private spaces in immigrant neighbourhoods, and how far that world would have stood from their own suburban home.

In contrasting suburban American communities, immigrant neighbourhoods also highlight the social challenges faced by American Jewish suburbanites. They do this by establishing desirable elements within immigrant Jews’ cramped and impoverished conditions. On the one hand, Diane Harris notes how such multigenerational and mixed sleeping arrangements, as well as the type of social activities in public places, rather than in the private home or backyard – exactly what is depicted by Hine and others – were

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<sup>116</sup> Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 81.

<sup>117</sup> Diner, 62, see also 134, 160; for a discussion of private and public spaces on the Lower East Side, see also Deborah Dash Moore, *Urban Origins of American Judaism* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 135–36.

<sup>118</sup> Moore, *Urban Origins of American Judaism*, 146.

demonstrative of undesirable living arrangements for white, middle-class suburbanites.<sup>119</sup> However, on the other hand, this density also impresses upon its viewer that these are Jews living *together*, encouraging the kind of intuitive communities that most sharply contrasted the need for deliberate Jewish activity within spacious and private suburban environments.

As a final note in discussing this image and its place in the nostalgic Old World, it is important to recognize a tacit focus in the present discussion: that, while the perceived connections between Jewish immigrants and shtetls' culture was an idea which spanned multiple American neighbourhoods, it was often located particularly in the Lower East Side of New York. That area was a primary site of Eastern European authenticity. As Hasia Diner writes, "Those in later generations who were in need of memory had fewer words and pictures to draw upon to describe the immigrant moment in Chicago, Boston, or Pittsburgh" — rather, because of the plethora of cultural material focusing on the Lower East Side, "New York and its immigrant enclave provided the texts from which they [American Jews] fashioned their texts of memory."<sup>120</sup> The Lower East Side became a nostalgically mythic space. At the same time, similarly to this focus on the Lower East Side as a neighbourhood, the inhabitants of the Lower East Side were equally iconic and homogeneous in the American Jewish nostalgic imagination. Diner notes how, despite historians demonstrating that Jewish immigrants were a diverse group who often came to America for economic reasons, rather than political or persecution-based factors, American audiences of the Old World's nostalgic image "continue to insist on the memory of the tradition-bounded shtetl Jews who chose America as they fled pogroms."<sup>121</sup> This emphasis joins with the aforementioned endowment of immigrant culture as an authentic recreation of Eastern European Jewishness, turning the Lower East Side into an extension of the Old World.

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<sup>119</sup> Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 38.

<sup>120</sup> Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 158, see also 161.

<sup>121</sup> Diner, 23.

*This image redacted due to copyright.*

From *Hester Street* (1975).<sup>122</sup>

Here, in the film *Hester Street*, Shloime Neversky has just arrived on the Lower East Side at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Dressed in an overcoat and having entered with a European woolen cap, he naïvely looks around the room as he is settled in a bar amidst four other Jews. However, unlike him, they are devoid of Old World trappings. The men do not have his sidelocks and the women joke about his appearance, albeit in distinct Eastern European accents. The film's protagonist, Jake, plucks off Shloime's hat, claps him on the shoulder, and asks in Yiddish: "So, how do you like America?" Shloime grows earnest. He is trying to find his cousin, Pincus Levinsky. The other four laugh before Jake whispers snidely, "He will soon learn in America there're no such thing as relatives."

Jake's maxim is neatly undermined as the film goes on. While he has fully embroiled himself in secular American life, his wife and child from the Old Country – still pious and tradition-bound – appear suddenly in New York. Nonetheless, far from their arrival unilaterally demonstrating the strength of Old World values, it establishes the film's central tension between Jake's penchant for Americanization and his wife Gitl's desire for continuity. Just as Jake has thrown off his previous name, Yankle, their son is called Yossele and Joey by turns. In their home, Jake insists on English over Yiddish, and here, in one of the opening scenes, the audience sees that this widespread Americanization was an

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<sup>122</sup> Joan Micklin Silver, *Hester Street*.

attitude shared by many other Jews. So too is this idea reinforced from the very first representation of the Lower East Side in *Hester Street*, which takes place in a dancing academy, where men and women freely mix and a sign on the wall proclaims, in Latin and Hebrew characters, “No Yiddish Spoken Here.” Although some characters, such as Jake and his friends, are certainly more ready to embrace this repression of Eastern Europe in favour of their American setting, *Hester Street* also shows how other, more conservative characters develop. Gitl, while retaining her Yiddish name and nostalgically-imbued piety, does adjust many of her behaviours; most visibly, she sets aside her hair coverings and, even without Jake’s urging, speaks primarily English.<sup>123</sup>

It is important to recognize that this image of the immigrant neighbourhood does participate in the nostalgic imagination, accompanying the authenticity-laden and more homogeneous idea of the immigrant ghetto that was discussed with regard to Lewis W. Hine and Allon Schoener. While the Lower East Side was certainly presented in the image of Gitl, it is also presented in the image of Jake: as Americanizing, shifting, and breaking with tradition. Other nostalgic works, such as both of the aforementioned *World of Our Fathers* and *Portal to America*, note this transition alongside their emphases on the immigrant enclave as a site of “authentic” Jewish values, while other films, such as 1980’s remake of *The Jazz Singer*, continued *Hester Street*’s emphasis on ethnic minorities’ participating in Americanization.<sup>124</sup> The importance of this representation in the narrative of Old World nostalgia is that it forms a clear demarcation between past and present, allowing both for connections among Old World locations – both Eastern European and American sites – and bridges between the mid-century American Jewish mainstream and their earlier immigrant history. These neighbourhoods constitute a staging ground for Americanization and, as such, are both the point of connection for later audiences and the last vestige of Eastern European culture.

With regard to Lewis W. Hine’s photograph and the conversation around *Portal to America*, it was evident that these immigrant neighbourhoods were connected to previous European Jewish communities. That sense of cultural authenticity is the same touchstone which grounds the perspective on these neighbourhoods as part of later American Jewish communities as well. The fact that Eastern European immigrants were authentic bearers

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<sup>123</sup> For more on Gitl’s Americanization, see Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 87–88.

<sup>124</sup> See Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, esp. 229–235; Schoener, *Portal to America*, 103–44; Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 91–92.

of a shtetl culture in the nostalgic imagination meant that they could serve as a point of reference for a direct relation between later acculturated American Jews and their earlier Americanizing predecessors — their grandparents and great-grandparents, in familial terms. The genealogical nature of these connections demonstrates how this mid-century nostalgia for the Old World is bound up in concerns with identity and heritage, as will be discussed further in the next chapter. The fact that these earlier communities were acculturating to American norms, like *Hester Street's* Jake and Gitl, tells an important story for later mid-century Jews regarding the development of Old World values within their American context.

Hasia Diner, in her book *Lower East Side Memories*, explores this connection in depth. She argues that the role of Americanization within a nostalgic context is highly dependent on the status of immigrant neighbourhoods as authentic linkages with the Old World. Particularly for later suburban Jews, Diner notes that “the Lower East Side became their ‘old world,’ their *alte heym*.”<sup>125</sup> It was the specific location of their heritage and a point of connection with Eastern Europe as they mapped their generational changes from the “poverty and piety” image of the shtetl to the affluence of the American mainstream. The nostalgic representation of the Lower East Side supports this cultural reflection through its gesture toward an American narrative of immigration, adaptation, and development. As Diner writes, the image of this neighbourhood conforms both to an American “pilgrim” concept and to the narrative of American success on the back of hard work.<sup>126</sup> Once again, as with thinking about pogroms in light of immigration narratives, this connection with the Lower East Side is particularly relevant in concert with the ethnic revival of the 1960s and 1970s. One can recall from the previous chapter that, in this period, various white ethnic groups were distinguishing themselves from a homogenized American mainstream, often drawing on their own immigration histories – from places like Ireland, Italy, and Greece – to emphasize the uniqueness of their identities.<sup>127</sup> The way in which the immigrant neighbourhood is not only celebrated, as with Lewis W. Hine’s photograph, but is placed in a lineage with later communities through images such as *Hester Street* is a means by which Jews were doing the same thing.<sup>128</sup> The imagination of

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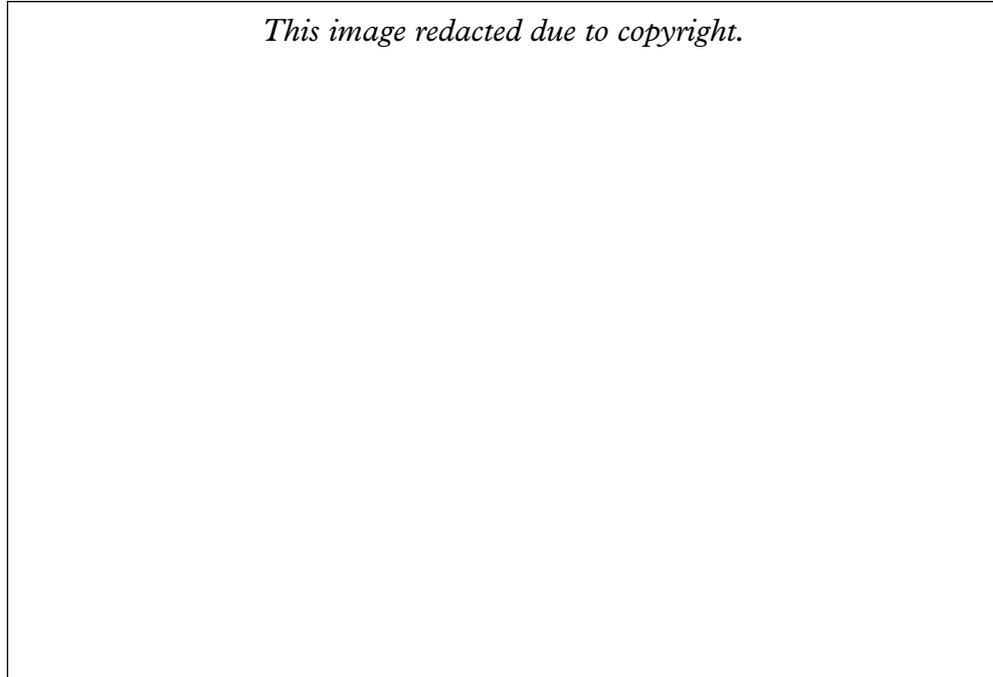
<sup>125</sup> Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 170.

<sup>126</sup> See Diner, 28–29.

<sup>127</sup> Jacobson, *Roots Too*, 2, 8.

<sup>128</sup> See Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 170.

the Lower East Side in particular and the immigrant neighbourhood at large as sites of communal connection enabled mid-century American Jewry to articulate themselves as part of an ethnic authenticity which, otherwise, was relegated to the past.



From *The Vanished Worlds of Jewry* (1980).<sup>129</sup>

In this photograph a black-clad man walks along the street with five children. In many ways, he seems out-of-step with his surroundings. His dark clothes and long coat contrast the jacket and tie of one man in the background as well as the shorter coat and light slacks of the man beside him. Others in this street scene seem to notice the incongruity as well: the right-hand man's head turns slightly, while the woman in the background has stopped walking completely in order to turn around and look. Of course, there are other possible interpretations of these motions, but other features of the image emphasize this perception. In terms of visual construction, the man and the children – presumably his family – are set apart from the others. His appearance echoes a specific Eastern European garb, representing the timeless Jewishness put forward in other nostalgic images, and here that appearance puts him out of step with his more modern surroundings. After all, this setting is not in Eastern Europe — the words “Eggs Butter Cheese” are clearly written in

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<sup>129</sup> Patai, *The Vanished Worlds of Jewry*, 52.

German. The accompanying caption confirms this, simply stating: “In the streets of Berlin, 1928.”<sup>130</sup>

The importance of this incongruity is that it points to a narrative of displacement and dissolution for the Eastern European Old World. Here, in concert with the encompassing image of that nostalgic World, one sees a decontextualized Jew: a person who is still visibly identifiable with someone from the shtetl but whose surroundings do not participate in the expectations of the nostalgic gaze. This photograph appears in Raphael Patai's book *The Vanished Worlds of Jewry* (1980) and, in a longer discussion running alongside this image, Patai provides some context for this conjunction of person and place. He traces a narrative of persecution from the 17<sup>th</sup> century – after the Chmielnicki massacres in 1648 – which ultimately effected a “reversal in the direction of Jewish migration” from Germany to Eastern Europe.<sup>131</sup> Within the 1920s, when this image was taken, Patai notes that there remained sizable emigration from the East toward Germany.<sup>132</sup> However, unlike the way in which America features in the nostalgic imagination – as a safe haven for immigrants – this German location points directly to a darker narrative: the ultimate destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust. Due to the gravity and intensity of Holocaust memory in the mid-century, this certainly would have been at the forefront of a nostalgic audience's mind. In this way, the displacement of this Eastern European figure points to the greater displacement of European Jewry, while the year of this photograph points to imminent destruction. In Patai's words, in relation to Jews in Germany, it depicts a moment when “the shadow of death was falling upon them.”<sup>133</sup> This narrative, extending from Germany across Eastern Europe, is a strong part of the nostalgic image, and especially so in its representations of the 1920s and 1930s.

The narrative at play behind these connections intertwines with many of the other qualities of the mid-century nostalgic image, drawing readily both on ideas of long-standing persecution and a unique shtetl authenticity to describe the Holocaust as the endpoint of Old World Jewry. On the one hand, the Holocaust is the capstone of the violence and oppression that intrudes upon the nostalgic Old World, as was seen previously with regard to pogroms, but, on the other hand, it is also an exceptionally

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<sup>130</sup> Patai, 52.

<sup>131</sup> See Patai, 52–57.

<sup>132</sup> See Patai, 57.

<sup>133</sup> Patai, 57.

extreme and wholly unique event. If the pogrom was part of the shtetl's life, with fluctuations of violence and peace, then the Holocaust is the final persecution which prevents the reassertion of that life or its traditions. As Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski write in *Life is with People*, "Only the wars and revolutions of the twentieth century, with the final destruction of six million lives, put an end to its role as the current home of the tradition."<sup>134</sup> The sense of authenticity which permeates nostalgic descriptions of the shtetl's culture, and which was seen to have continued unadulterated for hundreds of years, is forced into oblivion within this period. It is on those untimely terms that, continuing into the mid-century, nostalgic perspectives propagated this idea that the Old World "is not merely dead, but was killed."<sup>135</sup>

Of course, in this narrative of destruction, there are also other factors apart from the Holocaust which demonstrate that the Old World was beginning to vanish. The creators of *Fiddler on the Roof*, for instance, saw their musical as principally depicting a "dissolution of a way of life" both on the terms of explicit persecution and on the basis of fundamental change.<sup>136</sup> While Tevye's home is ultimately destroyed, it is also the changes in family structure and the appearance of ideologies from beyond the shtetl which eat away at his Old World traditions. Seth Wolitz notes well how this deviation from tradition points Tevye and others out of the shtetl and toward later American Jewish audiences, insinuating their cultural departure from the Old World.<sup>137</sup> This idea – that the culture of the shtetl fluctuated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and thus grew challenged in its connection with an authentic Jewishness – is a core part of how the Old World's dissolution fits into a longer narrative about tradition and identity. And yet, even when thinking of those developmental processes, it is impossible to avoid a clear emphasis on the Holocaust as a decisive event. As Markus Krah notes, the Holocaust was increasingly emphasized in public and political Jewish activities in the 1960s, and one can see how that sets the tone for the mid-century nostalgic image.<sup>138</sup> Throughout a multitude of visual sources, the Old World is framed in relation to that event over and above other processes of change.

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<sup>134</sup> Herzog and Zborowski, *Life is with People*, 34.

<sup>135</sup> Dan Jacobson, "The Problem of Isaac Bashevis Singer," *Commentary* 39, no. 2 (February 1965), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/dan-jacobson/the-problem-of-isaac-bashevis-singer/>.

<sup>136</sup> Altman and Kaufman, *The Making of a Musical*, 31.

<sup>137</sup> See Wolitz, "The Americanization of Tevye," 527–28.

<sup>138</sup> Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 234.

For some examples of this representation, one can clearly see an attention to the Holocaust in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century repackaging of photography from the 1920s and 1930s. While photographers such as Alter Kacyzne, Roman Vishniac, and Moshe Raviv could not have predicted the course of history, in light of the Holocaust their work became recast as prescient “salvage” from the last days of the Old World.<sup>139</sup> Vishniac is the most prominent photographer in this regard insofar as, in his wildly popular *A Vanished World* (1983), he rewrites the narrative around his photographs and claims that he had foreseen the coming “shadow of Nazism” and had taken it as his task “to make certain that this vanished world did not totally disappear.”<sup>140</sup> This is supported by the foreword accompanying his work by Elie Wiesel.<sup>141</sup> However, while Vishniac certainly stands out due to the popularity of his book, earlier works also emphasized this same narrative, and many bore the idea of the Old World’s disappearance front-and-center: alongside the clear message in the titles of Raphael Patai’s *The Vanished Worlds of Jewry* (1980) and Roman Vishniac’s aforementioned *A Vanished World*, many others make explicit reference to this destruction or conclude with photos of emigration.<sup>142</sup> One 1977 photobook even goes so far as to fatalistically call post-war Polish Jewish life “the final chapter.”<sup>143</sup> These cases are by no means the only ones wherein the Holocaust plays a critically important structuring role in the mid-century nostalgic understanding of the East European Jewish past – non-photographic sources, such as *Fiddler*, also make key contributions<sup>144</sup> – but these photobooks are a good example in their narrative consistency around this emphasis.

However, at the same time as the Holocaust occupies a central place in this narrative of destruction, there is also a clear role played by the Soviet Union in cementing the Old World in the past: the Nazis and the Soviets form bookends to a long process of dissolution.<sup>145</sup> Lila Corwin Berman notes well how the American imagination linked together Soviets and Nazis in a larger narrative about fascism, and, in that

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<sup>139</sup> See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Introduction,” xi; Weintraub, “Visiting a ‘Vanished World,’” 190; Singer, “Foreword,” x.

<sup>140</sup> Vishniac, *A Vanished World*, vii.

<sup>141</sup> See Elie Wiesel, “Foreword,” in *A Vanished World* (London: Allen Lane, 1983), v.

<sup>142</sup> See Dobroszycki and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Image Before My Eyes*, xviii; Shulman, *The Old Country*, 2, 210; Vishniac, *A Vanished World*, vii–viii.

<sup>143</sup> See Earl Vinecour and Chuck Fishman, *Polish Jews: The Final Chapter* (New York: New York University Press, 1977).

<sup>144</sup> See Wolitz, “The Americanization of Tevye,” 532.

<sup>145</sup> See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Introduction,” xi, xvi.

perspective, they also take on the same imagined relationship to Eastern European Jewish communities.<sup>146</sup> The very real suppression of contemporaneous Jewish communities within the Soviet Union also confirmed this narrative for many American Jews.<sup>147</sup> This would have resonated well in an historical context whereby, as was noted in the previous chapter, the legacy of McCarthyism encouraged distance between the admiration of Eastern European communities and the Soviet environment of those contemporaneous locations; Americans could freely valorize Jews of the shtetl, but there would be repercussions if that rosy nostalgia reached toward a communist state.<sup>148</sup> Emphasizing the manner in which the Soviet Union was acting against the interests of Eastern European Jews and participating in the continued destruction of the Old World was certainly one way of establishing this necessary distance. In sum, the role of the Soviet Union as an endpoint of the Old World's narrative forms a strong connection between the American political imagination at large and the specific perception of the American Jewish nostalgic imagination.

Lastly, thinking about this narrative of dissolution, it is important to recognize that it applies to American sites of Eastern European immigration as well as the Old World. Immigrant neighbourhoods such as the Lower East Side are also thought to have lost their authentic Old World inhabitants within this mindset. Of course, this change did not occur through the Holocaust or a Soviet presence, but rather it was the advent of post-war upward mobility and socio-cultural developments which moved American Jews out of touch with the heritage-laden Jewishness of those environments.<sup>149</sup> Simply put, many Jews left these neighbourhoods in favour of other urban or suburban environments. Bill Aron, a photographer, notes this well in his 1976 photo-essay "A Disappearing Community in the Lower East Side", where he writes: "The Forward Building has been sold and is now an Oriental church; the newspaper has moved uptown.... The Jewish grocer, butcher, baker, and tailor have all but disappeared. The tenements are being razed by urban renewal."<sup>150</sup> Aron goes on to note that, while this neighbourhood was "once a facsimile of the European shtetl" it is "now a foreign country."<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> See Berman, "American Jews and the Ambivalence of Middle-Classness," 411, 421–22, 425.

<sup>147</sup> See Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 143–45; Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 27, 121–22, 235.

<sup>148</sup> See Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry*, 31.

<sup>149</sup> See Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 32–33; see also Weintraub, "Visiting a 'Vanished World,'" 194.

<sup>150</sup> Bill Aron, quoted in Weintraub, "Visiting a 'Vanished World,'" 195.

<sup>151</sup> Aron, quoted in Weintraub, 195.

Despite this sense of American dissolution, Hasia Diner introduces an important caveat that the Lower East Side as a neighbourhood did persist as a site of present authenticity for many mid-century Jews. For instance, *The Jewish Catalog* (1973), a text for “do-it-yourself Judaism” emerging from countercultural movements in the 1960s, emphasized that the Lower East Side was an accessible location to experience authentic Jewishness and purchase unique religious or cultural items, such as ritual objects or Yiddish books.<sup>152</sup> However, as Avina Weintraub writes, while the neighbourhood certainly retained this importance in terms of symbolic identity, it performed that identity on the basis of its past life: by the mid-century it had become a “‘semi-restored village’ to purchase and ingest a Jewish feeling.”<sup>153</sup> Its actual Old World connections were relegated to history. This underscores a broader understanding of the Old World’s dissolution that Weintraub phrases well, writing that “the physical discontinuities of the ‘Old’ World and ‘New’ World are joined through the temporal logic of *past* and *present*” more so than an actual geographic distance.<sup>154</sup> It is not only that the immigrant neighbourhood or the shtetl has changed, but that it has vanished through various means and is irretrievably confined to that past.

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<sup>152</sup> See Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 97–98.

<sup>153</sup> Weintraub, “Visiting a ‘Vanished World,’” 205, see also 203.

<sup>154</sup> Weintraub, 191, italics in original.

*This image redacted due to copyright.*

From *The Face of Faith* (1972)<sup>155</sup>

This image is from a collection of photographs of the Hasidic community in Brooklyn's Williamsburg. Here, the viewer is presented with figures unlike those in other parts of America, or even in most other Jewish communities. As with the previous photo in Germany, this man's dark overcoat, long beard, and distinctive hat separate him from his surroundings. Whereas in suburbia, as was seen in the previous chapter, many ethnically-coded differences were collapsed into the category of religion so that Jews could join the American mainstream, here there is a clear resistance to that integration: through representation and identification, a religious Judaism is being made ethnic and distinct. If, as Arthur Hertzberg writes, the Hasid stands as a nostalgic emblem of the Old World, here this man is an emblem of its persistence in spite of an acculturative environment.<sup>156</sup> Thus, the main visual idea here is one of preservation and continuity with past traditions. This photograph's title of "Patriarch" – or "Patriach" [*sic*] – emphasizes

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<sup>155</sup> George Kranzler and Irving I. Herzberg, *The Face of Faith: An American Hassidic Community* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Hebrew College Press, 1972), 25.

<sup>156</sup> See Arthur Hertzberg, "The Worldly Jew," *Commentary* 10 (July 1950), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/einems-yidishe-machshovos-by-melech-ravitch-yidish-un-yidishkeit-by-yosef-opatoshu-and-kedushah-un-gevurah-bei-yidn-by-y-efroyki/>.

such connection with history. Save for the polish on his shoes and the good repair of his clothes, this man would be at home in the imagined Old World. While muddy shtetl roads have been traded in for wide American sidewalks, the content of this figure remains the same. The book's author, George Kranzler encourages this interpretation by providing a short caption alongside the photograph which stresses this man's age, placing him in continuity with the past and its heritage. He is bent by "experiences of both the good and the terrible years" with "eyes that see beyond the immediate.... A typical Galuth figure, he moves easily amidst the trappings of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century traffic."<sup>157</sup> This text affirms the visual iconicity of the Hasidic figure as part of the mid-century imagination of the Old World and its relationship to American settings.

However, while one saw how Old World connections were also valorized in immigrant neighbourhoods, here the congruity of Hasid and shtetl is less straightforward. The identification of the Hasid with a timeless character – the "Galuth figure" in visible tradition and dress – invokes a sense of displacement. It is not like the immigrant neighbourhood's reconstruction of Eastern European life. The strangeness of this juxtaposition between the Old World and contemporaneous America is also furthered through the aforementioned narrative of dissolution; the Old World, after all, was supposed to be destroyed or acculturated out of existence. In this regard, Hasids' presence in mid-century America as authentic participants in Old World culture is cast as an anachronism. As Avina Weintraub describes, the nostalgic gaze places them in line with "the Forward Building, the pushcart, and the Yiddish signs" of the Lower East Side: "'survivals' of the past living in the present."<sup>158</sup> Similarly, Kranzler, placing American Hasids in direct continuity with the Old World, emphasizes that they have sustained their centuries-old ways of life into the contemporaneous present, though in a different sense of "survival": he notes how Hasids have maintained their communities in the face of drastic historical persecutions.<sup>159</sup> Yet it is important to recognize that Kranzler's narrative is not only about the resistance to persecution but also the resistance to change. In all settings, at all times, he asserts that it is the same spirit and values which define "the face, the features" of Hasidic life.<sup>160</sup> In that regard, the man in this image remains

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<sup>157</sup> Kranzler and Herzberg, *The Face of Faith*, 25.

<sup>158</sup> Weintraub, "Visiting a 'Vanished World,'" 201; see also Bill Aron, quoted on Weintraub, 196.

<sup>159</sup> Kranzler and Herzberg, *The Face of Faith*, 111.

<sup>160</sup> Kranzler and Herzberg, 23.

at a distance from his own present, and, as Jack Kugelmass notes, viewing Hasids in general is often nostalgically represented as a “journey into the past.”<sup>161</sup>

This strong linkage between contemporaneous Hasidic communities and the contents of the Eastern European Jewish past is well-represented by Kranzler and Hertzberg in the 1970s, but stems initially from the post-war development of American Jews' nostalgic gaze. Earlier writers, such as Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel, strongly emphasized this conjunction by articulating Hasidic life for a general American Jewish audience.<sup>162</sup> As representations of the Old World developed further, Hasids were increasingly identified with core facets of that overarching nostalgic image. For instance, in Kranzler and Herzberg's book, Hasids are closely aligned with the shtetl's trifecta of poverty, piety, and persecution which has been previously discussed in this chapter. Kranzler writes that *The Face of Faith* captures Hasids in “a low-income community” but represents their “boundless faith and inspiration.... courage, strength of conviction, wholeheartedness, and resilience.”<sup>163</sup> Supporting this emphasis through earlier sources, Krah also notes how Heschel and Buber were particularly interested in the piety of these Hasidic communities, emphasizing to their audiences the importance of Hasids' religiosity.<sup>164</sup> It is because of this detailed intermeshing of Hasidic and Old World qualities that later, contemporaneous mid-century Hasidic communities looked closer to the distant past than the American present for many nostalgic Jews.

For nostalgic mid-century American Jews, this series of associations establishes a complicated imagined relationship between themselves and contemporaneous Hasids. On the one hand, Hasids are nostalgically valorized, but, on the other hand, they stand against the changes and compromises which had brought many Jews to the comfort and privilege of suburbia.<sup>165</sup> In Jack Kugelmass's words, Hasids are represented as “authentic representatives of a time past, an Eden from which we are fallen.”<sup>166</sup> They are untouched by the American mainstream and the historical developments that were discussed in the previous chapter. However, the complexity of the picture becomes clear when one

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<sup>161</sup> Jack Kugelmass, “Jewish Icons: Envisioning the Self in Images of the Other,” in *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 42.

<sup>162</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 200–201, 203–4.

<sup>163</sup> Kranzler and Herzberg, *The Face of Faith*, 5.

<sup>164</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 203.

<sup>165</sup> See Kugelmass, “Jewish Icons,” 41, 46–47.

<sup>166</sup> Kugelmass, 41.

recognizes that this perceived authenticity hinges on the distance between these Hasidic communities and other, more acculturated American Jews. While, as Nora Rubel writes, for many American Jews “‘real’ or *authentic* Judaism is associated with the world of the ultra-Orthodox”, that affirmation of Hasidism is nostalgically imagined and, as such, it does not encompass an actual desire for communal relations.<sup>167</sup> Kranzler readily acknowledges the “intentional otherness” of Hasidic difference but does not explicitly note the wedge that it drives between the lived communities of suburban and Hasidic Jews.<sup>168</sup> Yet, although this ambivalence is not part of the nostalgic image, it is important to acknowledge alongside it.

Thinking analytically about this distance in relation to the nostalgic construction of the broader Old World, one can see an interesting interdependency of this valorization and distance. While Hasids’ lack of acculturation with American society frames them as “other” to the integration and Americanization of most mid-century Jewish identities, it also aligns them with the mythologized shtetl. Although there is a gap between the values of many American Jewish communities – especially suburban ones – and those Hasids’ perceived values, the idea of an authentic, uncompromising Jewish culture nonetheless articulates something meaningful for this audience. This is especially pertinent when thinking about how the environments of those “traditional” Hasidic communities and an acculturated suburban Jewry are brought into conversation with one another through nostalgic reflection, as will be seen more clearly in chapters three and four. Yet, even within that meaning, one can see the foundation here for a perception of anachronism: the idea, as Bill Aron put it in 1976, that Hasids seem “to have just stepped out of another century.”<sup>169</sup>

### *In Summary*

And so, through these various representations, one can see the pillars upon which the nostalgic Old World is founded. These exploratory sketches have highlighted how the mid-century image of Eastern European Jewry was consistently identified as being

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<sup>167</sup> Nora L. Rubel, *Doubting the Devout: The Ultra-Orthodox in the Jewish American Imagination*, Religion and American Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 24, italics in original, see also 28-29.

<sup>168</sup> Kranzler and Herzberg, *The Face of Faith*, 5.

<sup>169</sup> Aron, quoted in Weintraub, “Visiting a ‘Vanished World,’” 196.

impoverished, pious, and persecuted. This was located particularly in the shtetl, building on the legacy of American Jewry's post-war nostalgic construction of the Old World which had set up those towns as the quintessential locations for Jewish authenticity. However, based on the cultural nature of the nostalgic Old World, it was also able to be recreated outside of its originary locations, and American Jewish immigrant neighbourhoods were thus cast as secondary sites of the Old World. There, and especially on the Lower East Side of New York, Eastern European Jews were imagined as recreating their society, replicating in the immigrant slums many of the poor and pious contents of the shtetl. However, America was also cast as the land of opportunity — after all, it is where those same immigrants had experienced success, and whose descendants had embraced socio-economic ascendance to become the middle-class and suburban audience of this very nostalgic image. In that regard, those immigrants were depicted as undergoing processes of Americanization at the same time as they continued to represent an authentic Eastern European Jewishness. This sense of change underscores the periodization of the Old World at large. It points to how neither Eastern European sites nor American locations of the shtetl, its values, or its inhabitants were thought to persist past the late 1930s: in the 1940s, Europe was swept underneath the Holocaust, and, in the post-war period, Old World society was lost to either Soviet oppression or American integrative compromise. To that extent, the continued presence of Hasids who resembled the Old World communities of the past was seen as both important – they are, after all, bearing the image of a nostalgically-valued heritage – and incongruous with the present values of many American Jews.

All of these qualities are communicated visually through individual representations – whether photographs, museum exhibitions, stage productions, or film – and are reinforced through one another, either by repetition of their contents or mutual resonance. For instance, one sees how George Kranzler and Irving I. Herzberg's treatment of Hasids relies on the interpretation of Jewish religiosity put forward by people like Roman Vishniac. Similarly, Allon Schoener and Irving Howe's connection of the Lower East Side to the shtetl is successful largely due to how a nostalgic audience could readily perceive such parallels through the qualities of those nostalgic locations, such as their shared poverty. As has also been seen, much of this resonance also makes sense within the historical context from the previous chapter: issues such as the maintenance of tradition

or the role of wealth in Jewish culture connected well with the contemporaneous situation and challenges of American Jewish communities, and particularly those who were undergoing significant social and cultural changes via processes of American mainstream integration and suburbanization.

While many of these connections are also made in literary sources, looking primarily at these images outlines an important set of further considerations. This methodology lays the groundwork for thinking about how nostalgic qualities resonated with their audiences through uniquely visual means: by way of broad generalizations and impressions – such as the idea of the overarching Old World itself – which implicate novel questions about American Jews' ongoing relationship with those images. As will be discussed in the next chapter, this crucially connects academic thinking about this mid-century nostalgia with matters of communal heritage. Present textual and historical analyses overlook such connections, and this is why images and visual culture are so important; they approach the ways in which certain ideas have consistent meaning for their audiences, and thus how ways of seeing structure ongoing ways of living in relation to that value.

To that extent, the next chapter will explore further this connection between historical context and nostalgic contents through visual culture, thinking primarily about “how” mid-century American Jews encountered the Old World and what that experience means. This will contrast existing scholarship, since most research has remained focused on historical context or literary precedents to explain the meaning of images, treating them as stable texts. In order to reconsider this conversation, visual cultural theorists' approach to hermeneutics will be applied to the Old World's nostalgic image. This will emphasize the manner in which this image is not only perceived, but felt, and will help recognize the way in which the nostalgic Old World forms a point of meaningful, experienced heritage for mid-century suburban Jewish communities. In this way, much as this chapter and the one before it have mapped the context and content of mid-century American Jewish nostalgia for Eastern Europe – outlining what this image *is* – the following chapters will use the approaches of visual cultural theory to explore these hermeneutic considerations and their implications – what this image *means* for its audience.

## **CHAPTER THREE: HERMENEUTICS AND HERITAGE IN AMERICAN JEWISH NOSTALGIA**

Up to this point, two things have been mapped out: the historical context of mid-century suburban American Jewry and the elements of a nostalgic narrative that they supported and claimed as heritage. These two foundational topics are the basis for understanding Jews' nostalgia for the Old World in this period. Particularly in chapter two, one saw the beginnings of an analytical approach to these facets of mid-century American Jewish nostalgia: historical and cultural context provides the basis for understanding the resonance of this Old World nostalgic image. However, as was noted in the introduction, attending solely to this sort of comparative analysis does not account for important aspects of nostalgia's visuality, materiality, and engagement with its audience. Here, those features will take center stage. It is necessary to return to the question, as noted at the beginning of this dissertation, of what these images actually do for and in relation to the communities that view them.

This will not come at the expense of the first two chapters' contents, of course. The point of this analytical work is to enrich the current conversation by bringing to bear the introduction's interpretive considerations, as noted with regard to the methodological approach of visual cultural studies, onto the historical dynamics and narrative features mentioned in chapters one and two. In doing so, this chapter will perform two tasks: it will consider the general approach of contemporary scholarship to these nostalgic images and their context, and will interrogate what novel considerations visual culture brings to the interpretive table. The crux of this contribution is a specific hermeneutic idea. While common comparative approaches rely on seeing nostalgic images as stable texts through which interpretation is performed, the contributions of visual cultural studies show that this is often otherwise; there is a complex interpretive interplay to the nostalgic gaze which necessitates reflection on the experience of seeing itself. Thinking of nostalgic images as passive objects in the process of developing their meaning overlooks the way in which this hermeneutic relationship took place for mid-century American suburban Jewry and their valorized Old World. Crucially, this chapter will look at how such visual cultural relationships locate the Old World's nostalgic image within ongoing thinking about

American Jews' culture, identity, and heritage. The way in which Jews engaged with images of the Old World speaks to that nostalgia's dynamic involvement with a way of encountering and expressing communal values from within the mid-century American mainstream.

This matter is ultimately one regarding rhetoric. Mid-century nostalgia for the Old World puts forward consistent representations of that World's contents and meaning, as was seen in the previous chapter, and rhetorically connects those representations with the context and concerns of mainstream nostalgic American Jewish audiences. Here, the dissertation will further examine these compelling images in light of visual cultural considerations. It is because images of the Old World are connected with their audiences, and their contents are articulated as representations of authentic Jewish heritage, that the rhetoric presentation of these images evidences a dynamic visual cultural relationship and necessitates an attention to hermeneutic experiences. However, as was noted in the introduction, it is important to recognize that this matter of rhetoric is neither a question of authorship nor one of historical reception: the way that this rhetorical meaning develops is the product of a contemporaneous spectatorship, and the way in which that spectatorship is interpreted with reference to images and their viewers alike. Mid-century American Jews were enmeshed in constant processes of encountering, reflecting on, and engaging with these images of the Old World and its heritage; these processes are the key focus in examining how visual cultural experiences result in a significant rhetorical force behind the Old World's nostalgic presentation.

The crux of this matter is a responsive, ongoing, and meaningful relationship between images and their viewers. By turning to questions of visual culture, one will be able to see how the nostalgic gaze can be complicated by foregrounding this relational spectatorship. The issue is that the image of the Old World is not just something that is presented to an audience and is stably interpreted by them, but, as an image, it engages Jews in comparison with idealized representations of their culture. After all, as Steven Zipperstein writes, the Old World forms a "yardstick" against which mid-century Jews judged their own communities.<sup>1</sup> As will be seen in the course of this chapter, this emphasis on a relationship between American Jewry and its nostalgic imagination will move the Old

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 5; see also Rachel Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 43.

World from being a direct result of certain contents within a certain context, outlining instead how it exists as a resonant vision of heritage across many moments of audiences' engagement. This definition is important since heritage, as discussed by contemporary scholarship, points clearly to personal and experiential considerations which are central to enriching the conversation around why these nostalgic images were important to their American Jewish audiences. Rather than this image being unpacked solely in relation to its historical or literary contexts, this incorporation of visual cultural theory and its connection with heritage will demonstrate how the act of seeing the Old World is, itself, an important object of study. Especially as this gaze is further examined in the following chapter, one will be able to see how an attention to the experience of images brings into this conversation certain ideas – there, questions of how one lives in certain social and cultural environments – which would otherwise be left out of historical or literary scopes.

In this chapter, however, the present academic conversation around American Jewish nostalgia for the Old World will be discussed primarily with relation to visual cultural studies' emphasis on experience. This will focus mainly on the hermeneutic elements of that experience as a way of understanding visual nostalgia outside of current scholarship's reliance on well-worn methodologies. This nostalgia is, after all, a phenomenon which is deeply indebted to its literary precedents and historical context, and likewise is usually analyzed through those disciplines. One sees this clearly in scholarship across the past twenty years or so which appraises nostalgic representations in terms of their texts and contexts. Yet this same scholarship does not also look at what it means to experientially encounter these images, and thus does not think about this moment in American Jewish nostalgia through those images themselves: instead, it favours using points of analysis which surround visual cultural experience to explain the contents of nostalgic spectatorship and its accompanying identity discourse. The aforementioned historical and literary methodologies are two such ways of discussing nostalgic images through frameworks which do not attend to visual cultural experiences.

In order to address this gap in scholarship, this chapter will focus on ways in which attention to experiences can prompt reconsiderations of what the nostalgic Old World is, as well as how American Jewish audiences engaged with it. While this conversation will not touch on matters of historical or social reception, it will nonetheless highlight significant visual cultural dynamics which are relevant for thinking about American Jews

as audiences for the Old World. Even on more abstract terms, visual culture has bearing for how one approaches and reflects on concrete moments of spectatorship and community-driven interpretation. Experiential and hermeneutic dynamics are part of both the widespread popularity of this nostalgia that was discussed in chapter two, and the tensions which typified many mid-century American Jewish communities in chapter one's discussion of the American mainstream. Thus, by taking visual culture into account, these experiential and hermeneutic considerations will revisit the connection between these contents and contexts and will recognize how cultural relationships are already a significant, yet undervalued part of American Jews' connection to the nostalgic Old World.

This investigation will first map out the current scholarly conversation and the ways in which it conceptualizes the nostalgic Old World. Through this overview, one will see that literary and historical approaches cast images as static points of reference for other conversations: they are seen as representations of underlying discourses regarding their contexts, rather than being shaped by their immediate visual considerations. This is to say that images become functional tools through which American Jews are thought to respond to the sorts of surrounding dynamics discussed in chapter one. The issue with this reliance on talking around images' experiences is that such approaches neglect important considerations which arise from thinking about images directly. In contrast, a hermeneutic approach seeks to describe how American Jews were dynamically encountering and interpreting nostalgic representations. Thinking carefully about what is involved in these experiences prompts reflection on the understanding of images in current academic approaches to the nostalgic Old World. Rather than treating these depictions as rhetorical or conceptual responses to underlying, ulterior concerns, the experience of spectatorship demonstrates that those images are themselves engaged in a dynamic relationship with their viewers and, by extension, exist in relation rather than in response to their context and audience. This approach to visual representations also affects how the Old World's mid-century image is seen within that relationship with its audiences: as a point of ongoing engagement, this image participates readily in matters of heritage rather than being simply representative of its contemporaneous mid-century context.

This attention to images as dynamic and engaged participants in American Jews' engagement with nostalgic depictions of their Old World heritage signifies that this nostalgia must be taken seriously on its own terms. It is not the case that Ashkenazi

heritage is simply rose-tinted and sentimentalized through this nostalgic lens, but rather that this mode of characterizing the past speaks to important values and desires of many American Jewish communities in the mid-century. Nostalgia's connection with heritage later in this chapter is particularly illuminating in this regard. Understanding nostalgia's role as heritage illuminates where this dissertation's attention to visual culture connects with broader anthropological and art historical conversations. As will be discussed in the conclusion, recognizing nostalgic spectatorship as a way of communally mediating, developing, and relating to the past has an unrealized role to play in scholarly approaches to communities and their concerns; the crux of the dynamics present within visual cultural relationships is a way in which many audiences coalesce around contemporaneous symbols and images.

However, before viewership, its relationships, and its interpretive elements can be explored further, this overarching conversation must be grounded in the current scholarship regarding mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American Jewish nostalgia.

### *Correlation, Function, and the Use of Nostalgic Images*

How does recent scholarship approach the confluence of historical circumstances and Old World nostalgia? It was noted in the introduction how major approaches to this topic generally follow historical or literary paths of analysis; what is the product of those discussions? Although various authors have their own emphases with regard to how post-war Jewish nostalgia fits into different aspects of American society or Jewish culture, the most substantial studies of this topic nonetheless seem to settle on similar conclusions. To these scholars, nostalgic discourse, literature, and representation provides functional means through which American Jews responded to the contemporaneous tensions of their environments which were explored in chapter one. As will be seen in the course of this section, this approach to nostalgia for the Old World is grounded in correlative readings between the contents of nostalgic representations and their American Jewish contexts, positing that those images therefore constitute a means of response to the challenges of their surrounding world. Ultimately, as writers such as Rachel Kranson assert, the nostalgic Old World operates as a sort of ameliorative tool which aids Jewish communities in thinking through and adapting to changes in their lives and identities.

By looking at this trend in thinking about mid-century American Jewish culture, it will become apparent how visual cultural experience is lacking in the current academic conversation: not only does contemporary discourse avoid experiential considerations but it also implies that images and audiences relate in straightforward ways. Of course, these sorts of analyses are important for recognizing when the nostalgic Old World emerges, how it develops, and the ideas that it might represent, but their approach to images problematically simplifies the complex reality of how audiences see. This means that, in concrete terms, one is often more concerned with how visual media echo the concerns and aims of their audiences than thinking about how such representations participate in those concerns. One looks at a photograph as bearing meaning because it resonates with a contemporaneous context, but in doing so one overlooks how that context is actively shaped by the concerns and values that are already represented within such a photograph.

As will be seen later on in this chapter, the close relationship between nostalgic representations and forms of communal heritage mean that images themselves do have bearing on their environments and audiences. One can recall from the introductory chapter that contemporary discussions of visual cultural theory – such as with David Morgan’s exhortation to view images as partners in the development of meaning, as opposed to static objects of interpretation – point toward ways of recognizing this relationship. However, when thinking about American Jewish nostalgia, the present academic discussion trends much more strongly toward thinking of images as principally determined by their context rather than developed within such means of spectatorship: historical and literary methodologies analyze images through their circumstances or their textual connections. This demands, in contrast to Morgan, that the image is something stable, formed in response to its surrounding concerns and existent cultural precedents. This is evident enough in the very title of David G. Roskies’ *The Jewish Search for a Useable Past*, which lays bare a function-focused approach to representations of Jewish history. Similar emphases are also at play in the approaches of other major analyses by Rachel Kranson, Markus Krah, Steven Zipperstein, and Eli Lederhendler.

In appraising the similarities among these analyses, some distinct trends in the language and reasoning employed demonstrate well how these scholars approach mid-century American Jews’ historical context and its relation with nostalgic representations. Nostalgic imagery in form and content is thought to reply directly to

the dynamics that were discussed in chapter one's overview of Jewish cultural anxieties. These links are in some cases correlative and in some cases made explicit through primary sources, though even in those explicit cases the link is only made possible by relating nostalgic imagery with primary reference to its contextual backdrop, and not to interactions with viewers themselves. Of course, such historical contextualization is crucial for analysis, but one will also see in the present chapter how viewing images as more than rhetorical or discursive means with which to approach historical or cultural situations points toward hermeneutic considerations which are no less central to how American Jewish audiences would have been experiencing the nostalgic Old World. In order to first recognize why the current academic conversation does not move in this direction, however, one must see how prominent approaches to American Jewish nostalgia prioritize correlation-driven and function-oriented interpretations of images' relationships with their audiences.

The foundation of these approaches lies in recognizing points of connection between the features of an image and the world around that image, analyzing the points at which the content and context of the nostalgic Old World meet. Some cursory examples of this analysis were part of chapter two. This methodology is well-suited to contextualizing certain nostalgic qualities, but does also imply that the image takes second-seat to those connections: in this framework, American Jewish nostalgia is often "really about" something else, and that something else is usually Jewish suburbanites' cultural and social contexts. For instance, one can look to Steven Zipperstein's brief but typical observation that "Tevye's foremost concerns...also figure among the chief concerns of postwar, suburban Jewry."<sup>2</sup> In the space of a few pages, Zipperstein lays out how *Fiddler on the Roof*, with its emphasis on shifting gender roles, intergenerational conflicts, and "the wages of prestige", echoes the central tensions in contemporaneous approaches to suburbia proper.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, he draws correlations between the imaginary content of Tevye's nostalgic world and the socio-cultural context of an audience's lived experiences, with the themes and concerns of that contextual world forming the driving force for this musical's nostalgic representation.

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<sup>2</sup> Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry*, 36.

<sup>3</sup> Zipperstein, 36–39.

Zipperstein's approach, and those related to it, prioritize the concerns of the audience as particularly informative for the meaning of their nostalgic image. There is a clear order of operations to this analysis. In terms of mid-century American Jews in suburbia, the articulation of a particular heritage is a secondary response to the primary discomfort of suburban environments; suburbia latently determines the shape and direction of Old World nostalgia in this way. This is clearly articulated by Eli Lederhendler, who contends that the post-war turn to Jewish nostalgia was "an overt response to disappointment in the present" and that the past becomes refashioned as a usable heritage in response to contemporaneous social and cultural anxieties.<sup>4</sup> Markus Krah articulates a similar perception in defining his study, writing that in the immediate post-war period Jewish Americans used nostalgia as a means to imagine what authenticity looked like in their communities. The various discourses occurring within this period were, in Krah's view, "a fragmentary way by which mid-century American Jewry refashioned its cultural memory" with regard to its changing social and cultural context.<sup>5</sup> He thus reads Jewish engagement with an imagined Eastern European past as a way of responding to contemporaneous tensions and reads the individual expressions of that nostalgia in relation to different perspectives that emerged in response to those tensions. To put this otherwise, different Jewish groups "looked through the lens of their American present...and allowed the present to shape the [Eastern European Jewish] past."<sup>6</sup> This was carried through different discourses – religious, intellectual, and political – whose discussions shaped the developing understanding of Judaism in its mid-century American context. Within this period the place of the Old World and its accompanying gaze is, for Krah, a point of negotiation and contest for questions of Jewish authenticity, legitimacy, and ideals.

These approaches qualify nostalgia and its narrative as distinctly functional means of engaging with the American present. Nostalgic imagery is not the final product of imagining Eastern Europe but a way of bringing the Old World to bear on American perspectives; it becomes a tool for reinforcing various arguments with the perceptible authority of communal traditions and values. As Krah concludes at the end of his book,

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<sup>4</sup> Eli Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950-1970* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 90.

<sup>5</sup> Markus Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 253.

<sup>6</sup> Krah, 74.

the Eastern European past is a “cultural resource that can be engaged for the sake of their [American Jews’] ever-changing present.”<sup>7</sup> Hence, nostalgia is a means of discourse: it is the way in which mid-century American Jewry “refashioned its cultural memory to reconstitute itself under radically transformed circumstances.”<sup>8</sup> This fleshes out the sentiment expressed by Zipperstein that the shtetl and the suburb are linked: the Old World represents the situation of American suburbia, as was claimed, but Krah develops this to reveal how the nostalgic staging of American Jewish concerns acts as a toolkit for responding to the anxieties which accompany post-war and mid-century periods of socio-cultural change.

So, if nostalgia possess both a direct relation to its contextual circumstances and a function in responding to those circumstances, what is the end result? Where does this means of response lead in terms of concrete action? Rachel Kranson, in her work on the class affiliations of American Jewish suburbanites, makes this matter clear: the function of nostalgia is ameliorative in nature. The turn to Eastern European heritage provides cultural lubricant with which to ease into unfamiliar and uncomfortable American environments, such as suburbia. In this regard, drawing on the work of Lila Corwin Berman, Kranson notes how American Jews were able to navigate a complicated relationship with middle-classness by leaning on their connections to Jewish nostalgic history.<sup>9</sup> One can also see a similar position in Hasia Diner’s discussion of Irving Howe’s *The World of Our Fathers*, where she acknowledges how attention to the Lower East Side in Jewish nostalgic literature “gave American Jews a chance to image themselves not as upper-middle-class, white suburbanites but as legatees to a radical tradition”.<sup>10</sup> Thus, being initiated relatively recently into the American mainstream, suburban Jewry looked to nostalgic narratives as the basis for an identity-laden history of minority experiences. Kranson asserts that this rhetoric did not come at the expense of participating in upward mobility. She argues instead that grounding identity in nostalgic difference constituted a means by which Jews could successfully integrate with post-war American realities on their own terms.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Krah, 260.

<sup>8</sup> Krah, 253.

<sup>9</sup> Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 16; see also Lila Corwin Berman, “American Jews and the Ambivalence of Middle-Classness,” *American Jewish History* 94, no. 4 (December 2007): 409–34.

<sup>10</sup> Hasia Diner, “Embracing *World of Our Fathers*: The Context of Reception,” *American Jewish History* 88, no. 4 (December 2000): 458.

<sup>11</sup> See Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 16.

Other writers accord with Kranson's appraisal of an ameliorative nostalgia, though they do not all participate in her focus on economic conditions as a primary lens through which to view suburban Jewry. It is the overarching idea that is persuasive: that nostalgia addresses the tensions surrounding American Jewry. In this regard, one can see how different scholarly emphases nonetheless land on the same point. For instance, Zipperstein comes to this conclusion in his culturally-focused examination of American Jewish nostalgia. Thinking about the shtetl as a site of imagined Jewish authenticity, he interprets Sol Gittleman's 1978 claim that "you could not take the shtetl out of the Jew" as something significantly expressed by *Fiddler on the Roof* and the nostalgic narrative at large; this musical embodies the idea of an eternal Jewishness predicated upon the experience of an archetypal Eastern European spirituality, much as was discussed in chapter two. However, far from abrasively setting this representation against the unsettled situation of suburban, acculturated, and increasingly-secular American Jewry, Zipperstein argues that *Fiddler* seeks to bring out this image as a reassurance that Judaism could survive the shift into novel, non-Jewish social environments: it is a soothing notion for suburbanites, a "message of comfort".<sup>12</sup>

Krah, too, follows a line of argument that ends with nostalgia servicing an amelioration of contemporaneous American anxieties. Particularly in his discussion of *Fiddler on the Roof*, he identifies the main aim of nostalgic representation as mollifying in nature: this musical establishes a lineage from the imaged shtetl to its Jewish audience in order to ground them amidst an environment of uncertainty by creating stable and resourceful markers of identity.<sup>13</sup> Within the space of this musical, the cultural activity of ethnic particularity is thus turned into a referent. Alisa Solomon notes aptly that, in *Fiddler*, "the theme of 'tradition' solved everything". It took the idea of "toyre" and made it into a more ambiguous heritage: "something one has" rather than "something one does", and something that American Jews could use rather than something that would make demands on them.<sup>14</sup> Krah builds explicitly on Solomon, but phrases this a little more forcefully, noting that "tradition" was not just an emptying of more intensive obligations, a movement from "more" to "less," but was also the endowment of regular

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<sup>12</sup> Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry*, 38; Sol Gittleman, *From Shtetl to Suburbia: The Family in Jewish Literary Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 148.

<sup>13</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 237, 243, 254.

<sup>14</sup> Alisa Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof* (New York: Picador USA, 2014), 155.

cultural and religious traits with “the shining patina” of linkages to authentic origins, a movement from “less” to “more.”<sup>15</sup> In this regard, Krah’s approach to *Fiddler* – which, as noted in chapter two, is a definitive instance of the later nostalgic narrative<sup>16</sup> – supports Zipperstein’s “message of comfort”: by using the image of the shtetl, the regular facets of American Jewish culture could be placed in line with authentic traditions, regardless of the anxious context within which such a culture existed.

In these cases – looking at Krah, Kranson, and Zipperstein – one can see clearly the way in which nostalgic representation is read as functionally supporting claims to identity in relation to mid-century American Jewry’s historical situation. It is in this regard that current analyses read correlatively between the narrative and historical circumstances of nostalgic representations in order to map where such nostalgia has useful and beneficial functions. This ameliorative bent echoes larger trends in the theory around nostalgia as well.<sup>17</sup> The phrase “coping mechanism,” in many ways, succinctly summarizes both the reparative and functional aspects of these perspectives. Nostalgia for the Old World is, in this light, a counterbalance to the acculturative and assimilative pressures of suburbanization that were discussed in chapter one. Its correlation with the broader moment of ethnic revival in the United States certainly supports this reading.

Of course, this line of analysis is important, and its attention to historical context does much to shed light on the drive behind a mid-century concretization and valourization of the Old World’s nostalgic image. In this way, it makes sense to think about the nostalgic articulation of religious tradition, such as with the piety discussed in chapter two, in relation to the political and historical dynamics emphasizing certain ways of understanding those traditions, such as with the Cold War and religious revival discussed in chapter one. There is also good grounding on which it is useful to approach these images through literary discourse, as was briefly noted through the previous chapter’s discussion of Dan Miron and David Roskies’ attention to Yiddish literary precedents of the nostalgic shtetl. This sort of textual analysis also helps to recognize the way in which the nostalgic Old World responds to the contextual needs of its audience, as it highlights the question of curation in the presentation of this image. For

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<sup>15</sup> Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 237.

<sup>16</sup> See Krah, 240.

<sup>17</sup> See Suzanne Vromen, “The Ambiguity of Nostalgia,” *YIVO Annual* 21 (1993): 72, 78–79, 81; Stefanie Armbruster, *Watching Nostalgia: An Analysis of Nostalgic Television Fiction and Its Reception* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016), 40.

instance, as Seth L. Wolitz and Alisa Solomon respectively note, *Fiddler on the Roof* was altered across different productions in order to respond to the needs and expectations of its varied audiences.<sup>18</sup> Specific primary texts also do advance clear aims. *The Face of Faith*, as an example, argues in favour of presenting Hasids as understandable and non-threatening for other Jewish audiences in direct response to the acculturated circumstances of American Jewry at large.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, from historical and literary angles alike, approaching nostalgic representations as informed by contextual issues does fit well with understanding the Old World's image as something functionally employed by mid-century American Jewish populations.

However, while this interpretation does make sense, further questions remain regarding spectatorship. As was mapped out in the introduction, this thesis seeks to expand the conversation from this context-oriented approach to the nostalgic image as an historical or literary construct toward an experientially-focused examination of the relationship between images and their audiences. So, what can be achieved by approaching this nostalgic image through other means than those employed by Kranson, Krah, Zipperstein, and others? The crux of the matter, drawn from hermeneutic-focused approaches to art history and visual culture, is that representations imply the ongoing performance of their contents and, similarly, a continual cycle of reception and interpretation that is developed between the audience and such images. Authors such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jeffrey C. Alexander emphasize this hermeneutic relationship within philosophy and anthropology respectively, while the same connection between viewers and images is further developed through David Morgan, Julia Sonnevend, and Margaret Olin's approaches to spectatorship, among others.<sup>20</sup> Historical and literary

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<sup>18</sup> Seth L. Wolitz, "The Americanization of Tevye or Boarding the Jewish 'Mayflower,'" *American Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 515–16, 528–29; see also Alisa Solomon's discussion of how *Fiddler on the Roof* was adapted for its Israeli production, in Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders*, 245–48.

<sup>19</sup> See Jack Kugelmass, "Jewish Icons: Envisioning the Self in Images of the Other," in *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 34.

<sup>20</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Second Revised Edition (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), esp. 278–306; Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Performance and Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), esp. 57–58; David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Julia Sonnevend, "Iconic Rituals: Towards a Social Theory of Encountering Images," in *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Dominik Bartmański, and Bernhard Giesen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), esp. 24–40. This preliminary list is not exhaustive for informing this dissertation's approach to hermeneutics, but other relevant scholars will be discussed shortly in due course.

contexts remain strongly significant throughout these authors' shared attention to hermeneutics, but with relation to how those factors inform the "gaze" that was discussed in the introduction — a socially- and contextually-informed act of looking.<sup>21</sup> This emphasis opens the scholarly conversation surrounding American Jewish nostalgia to a different understanding of its mid-century nostalgic audience, recognizing that they were developing alongside their engagement with the imagined Old World and placing their status as experientially-engaged viewers front-and-center.

What this visual cultural methodology means for the current conversation about this nostalgic image is that images must themselves be recognized as participants in mid-century American Jewish discourse. Rather than explaining their contents and significance as a representation of how American Jewish communities were responding to their context, visual cultural studies places images inextricably within that context to which these communities responded. To make this distinction clearer, one can look to the contrast between Rachel Kranson's treatment of a functional Old World image and Irit Rogoff's discussion of spectatorship. In addition to Kranson's identification of the nostalgic image with a functional means of responding to class anxieties, as has been noted, she writes explicitly that, on these terms, the image is a "foil" for reflecting on the situation of American Jews.<sup>22</sup> This means that its context comes first: the image is the culminative representation of its literary precedents and historical connections. It is in this way that Kranson connects the contents of shtetl poverty to the context of American Jews' upward mobility. In her argument, that historical picture determines the Old World's significance. However, Rogoff challenges this way of identifying meaning in images. In particular, she notes how such context-focused approaches problematically assume that media are faithful representations of these contextual concerns. Reflecting on her own academic training, she writes that, "we were instructed in staring at pictures. The assumption was that the harder we looked, the more would be revealed to us; that a rigorous, precise and historically informed looking would reveal a wealth of hidden meanings."<sup>23</sup> However, as she goes on to note, images do much more than reflect their

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<sup>21</sup> See Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 3–6; regarding the connection between the gaze and relational aspects of spectatorship, see also Olin, *Touching Photographs*, 24–40; Margaret Olin, "Gaze," in *Critical Terms in Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff, Second Edition (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 318–29.

<sup>22</sup> Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 43.

<sup>23</sup> Irit Rogoff, "Studying Visual Culture," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, Second Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 27.

contexts. They also engage their audiences in interpretive processes which continually generate new meaning.

In other words, Rogoff highlights how context-oriented approaches do not acknowledge the ways in which these images' meaning develops flexibly and inconclusively in conjunction with their audiences. While Kranson's connection of nostalgic shtetl poverty to American socio-economic change is important, it ties these images' contents to their context in a way that neglects the actual interaction between the nostalgic Old World and mid-century American Jews. Thus, Rogoff's reflection stresses the need to look at questions of what determines significance within experiences of viewership, much as other visual cultural scholars – such as David Morgan – push the conversation around images from one about “visual evidence” to one about a socially-engaged practise of seeing.<sup>24</sup> Rather than the context coming first, the emphasis here is on the direct interaction and relationship between the image and its audience. It is an experientially-focused approach to the matter of Old World nostalgia.

Moving forward, this chapter will expand upon what it means to look at images with attention to how their meaning is mediated by the experiences of their audiences. This discussion is not a matter of active analysis, such as how chapter two “read” the qualities of nostalgic images, but focuses instead on how viewership involves an instinctive, hermeneutic relationship that is important for considering how the Old World's image resonates with mid-century American Jews. When thinking about a cheder, for instance, it is necessary to ask not only how its depiction of apparent piety contrasts sporadic suburban religious engagement, but also how that contrast speaks to the everyday experiences of this American Jewish audience. These experiences are less a matter of contextual specifics and more strongly related to questions of worldview, interpretation, and values. In that regard, looking at hermeneutic experiences points to the presence of a dynamic relationship between American Jews and their perception of the Old World — a relationship which, at the end of this chapter, will be better understood as one of personal and communal heritage.

This discussion will return to the methodological considerations of the introduction, looking to the conversation around visual culture as a way of refocusing American Jewish nostalgia on this interaction between images and audiences. The work of David Morgan

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<sup>24</sup> Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 32.

and W.J.T. Mitchell will be especially relevant in defining this relationship, as well as the way that Morgan and Julia Sonnevend discuss the experiences which participate in these image-viewer interactions. Through looking at these visual cultural theorists, the conversation will shift from being about the “world behind the text” to the “world in front of the text”: it will step into the question of spectatorship and focus the discussion on encountering images.

Crucially, such images’ experience is built on ongoing processes which demonstrate how the Old World is a continually-mediated image and not, as with current scholarship, a static interpretive resource. Exploring the hermeneutics of spectatorship will help identify this relationship in detail. To that extent, this remainder of chapter will focus on core elements of visual cultural experience: first, it will look at how nostalgic viewers encounter images as immediate visual media and how that encounter engenders impressions of these images. One will see how the viewer is directly implicated in a relationship with broader images through these impressions: the way in which they recognize similarities in other images speaks to a meaningful familiarity and, since this nostalgia is about Jewish heritage, a way of engaging with one’s identity.

The following section will explore this act of recognition further by looking at typologies in nostalgic media. Similar representations create broader, recognizable images which appear typical to their audience. Figures such as peddlers or institutions like cheders become readily transposable across multiple Old World settings, in Eastern Europe and America alike, on the basis of these typologies. However, the importance of such repetition goes beyond specific figures, qualities, or settings. The ability to perceive multiple representations as illustrative of an underlying type shows how those representations point toward broader images and how it is *those* images with which American Jews form particularly significant relationships. On a large scale, this mediation between particulars and generalizations is reflected in the way that the Old World’s image exists as a gestalt: it is the sum of many representations and nostalgic patterns.

This idea of a gestalt will prove important, since its position in the experience of images points once again to the way that American Jews are thinking about and developing their identities nostalgically. The next section will lay out how American Jews’ hermeneutic engagement with the Old World strongly connects with communal heritage, both in its mode and its articulation. The nostalgic Old World has these identity concerns at its fore

because it is a gestalt image that is not focused on historical specificity; it is constructed through and oriented toward its interpretive relationships. Importantly, because this nostalgia takes this position of communal heritage, American Jews readily approached it in familial terms: even though the image of “the Old World” did not exist in the actual past, American Jews still saw in it their specific histories.

Lastly, this chapter will come full circle in noting how the relationship between an American Jewish audience and a heritage-imbued nostalgic Old World is significantly dynamic and indeterminate. The concluding section will note that, despite the Old World being a core part of mid-century American Jewish identity, it is neither as functional nor as ameliorative as current scholarship may think. While American Jews certainly admired the Old World as a strong emblem of Jewish vitality and authenticity, this image also highlights the compromises, changes, and tensions which accompanied Jewish movement into the American mainstream. After all, in recognizing Old World figures, one is also recognizing how different their imagined experiences are from one’s own. This will be especially relevant in the following chapter, where one will see how this contrast between the imagined reality of the Old World and the immediate reality of mid-century Jewish suburbanites speaks to questions about socio-cultural spaces: the Old World, on those terms, demonstrates to its audience distinctly different possibilities for living Jewish lives than those available in the American mainstream. In that case, as well as here, this nostalgia is not simply about responding to contextual concerns, but develops its resonance and urgency through the relational development of its meaning. That nostalgia is, at its heart, an experiential engagement with visual culture.

### *Encountering Images Hermeneutically*

In thinking about the place of experience in appraising Old World nostalgia and its mid-century audience, it is important to ground the conversation in what happens when one sees an image. This meeting point between a representation and its audience is the basis of the present visual cultural conversation, since it constitutes visual experience itself. Whether one is going to see a stage play, coming across a photograph in a book, or visiting a museum exhibition, the moment where one sees visual media is the moment where the dynamics of the gaze come into play — in its pre-conceptions, its recognition,

and by other means that will be discussed in this section. This process is rapid: many scholars of visual culture, such as David Morgan, point to the immediacy of images as being an important element of how people see them. Images are capable of forming quick connections with their viewers and, within the short span of that time, to articulate recognizable ideas.<sup>25</sup> Later on, in the next section, one will see how this idea is important for understanding the role of typological connections among different individual representations and how those relationships develop the image of the Old World at large. When related to the material engagement with images, this thinking also highlights the mediatory nature of nostalgic images: how they act as meeting points between their viewers and the continually-developing construction of “the Old World.”<sup>26</sup>

It is useful, then, to think of interactions within the viewer-image relationship as “encounters” with images, particularly since the language of encounter highlights both a concrete experience that takes place in the world and the context of its setting.<sup>27</sup> As Elizabeth Edwards points out, images’ existence on such material and imminent terms is “central to its [the image’s] function as a socially salient object.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, images’ materiality forms the foundation of spectatorship’s contextually-informed gaze. At the same time, this idea of an “encounter” also goes beyond viewers’ own perceptions: it implies a certain level of surprise for an audience, hinting at images’ participation in the development of their meaning: rather than their contents being read onto them, as one might expect if visual media are being used toward specific ends, images participate in hermeneutic processes which also contribute meaning for their viewers.

This does not happen on a blank slate. Rather, as has been noted, images act as catalysts for realizing the pre-conceptions of their audiences; they bring them onto the interpretive table, so to speak. As David Morgan and Julia Sonnevend respectively note, from the first moment of its encounter an image will already have formed such a relationship with its viewer, and that certain possibilities, codes of interpretation, and resultant meanings will be established and in play.<sup>29</sup> This is because, as was noted in the

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<sup>25</sup> See David Morgan, “Image,” in *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 97; see also Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 258.

<sup>26</sup> See Morgan, “Image,” 97.

<sup>27</sup> See Julia Sonnevend, “Iconic Rituals: Towards a Social Theory of Encountering Images,” 219, 223.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, “Photographs as Objects of Memory” in *The Object Reader*, ed. Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 332; for further notes regarding images’ materiality, see also Edwards, 333, 335.

<sup>29</sup> See Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 76–77; Sonnevend, “Iconic Rituals,” 223.

introduction, the viewer's gaze is highly mediated: it is informed by multiple layers of preconceived interpretation on the part of one's self, one's peers, and one's society, as well as material considerations regarding how one is experientially encountering images.<sup>30</sup> This means that one's impression of nostalgic representations is grounded both in the encounter with that image and also in the disposition of the individual toward certain understandings of those features. The depiction of poverty in *Fiddler on the Roof* readily connects with ideas of piety not only because of what Tevye articulates in "If I Were a Rich Man" but also due to the framing of these concepts in American Jewish communities throughout the post-war period. These circulating ideas aid in the immediacy of visual interpretation, since certain things – Tevye's resignation to his circumstances, for instance – are already made comprehensible to these audiences prior to these particular representations. After all, when the idea of poverty has been cemented as a core feature of the shtetl at large, Tevye's response to it makes sense for nostalgic viewers' expectations.

It is important to recognize, however, that this immediate and guided interpretation is not a conscious or logical process. Morgan notes well how interpretive pre-conceptions are tacitly put into play and, most importantly, surface more through feeling than through cognitive or reflective processes.<sup>31</sup> In other words, one's interpretive dispositions are not only operating on the basis of a coherent framework – that is, one in which a viewer could say comprehensively that the Old World has specific qualities – but are also significantly grounded in intuitive and affective responses – the more general nostalgic feeling that the Old World possesses an "authentic" Jewishness. The specificity of these pre-conceptions is realized at points where a viewer is able to put their finger on the impressions they have received from other media: where they can say that the Old World looks like Tevye, or a Williamsburg Hasid, or a cheder. In that regard, when focused on a repeating pattern of images or a repeated archetypal subject, such as the Old World, one may be less involved in an act of seeing – that is, in an interpretive approach to the image at hand – than in an act of recognition – an instinctive connection of the image to a familiar set of interpretations.

This "recognition" is a crucial idea, since it says something important about the nostalgic audience's engagement with Old World images. As American Jews are seeing the

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<sup>30</sup> See Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 3–4; Rogoff, "Studying Visual Culture," 32; Sonnevend, "Iconic Rituals," 220, 225.

<sup>31</sup> Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 54, 258; see also Morgan, "Image," 97.

Old World through the recurring hermeneutic cycle of pre-conceptions, encounters, and impressions, the act of recognition constitutes a meaningful connection between themselves and the images before them. As Julia Sonnevend puts it, this is part of “getting to know [images], and ultimately feeling them.”<sup>32</sup> Carolyn Feibel and Ken Koltun-Fromm also note respectively in terms of seeing museum objects – another type of visual experience – how the individual’s role in the process of recognition provides a potent connection between oneself and the contents one is seeing.<sup>33</sup> In that regard, recognizing images demonstrates the internalization of their features, saying something important about those audiences which can make these connections. After all, productions such as *Fiddler on the Roof* or *Hester Street* were not shown to only Jewish audiences, but there is a specificity to Jews’ engagement with those media that differentiates them as consumers from other Americans. The familiarity of recognition speaks to a familiarity garnered by consistent exposure – to *Fiddler*, to *Portal to America*, to photographs, and so on – but also says something about the kind of audience that seeks that exposure. An Irish American could certainly enjoy *Fiddler*, but would not recognize its contents to the same degree as a Jewish American, much as a Jewish American could watch *Roots* (1977) but not recognize its contents in the same way that Black audiences perceive its resonance. In this way, recognition helps to qualify an impactful relationship between images and audiences.

In approaching other hermeneutic elements which arise from the encounter, the act of recognition also grounds the manner in which audiences see connections among different kinds of images. As noted in this dissertation’s introduction, visual culture encompasses both concrete representations and other, more conceptual or emotional images. When one walks away from a photograph, what they think is in that picture is as much an image as its actual representational contents. Similarly, the way that an audience builds familiarity with specific representations points to their internalization of other images based on those encounters. In the following section, these kinds of images will be explored further, and particularly the idea of “gestalt” images which are recognized through typological connections among various representations. Understanding the role that these broader images play in visual cultural relationships will clarify how specific nostalgic representations participate in the Old World as an overarching whole, as well as

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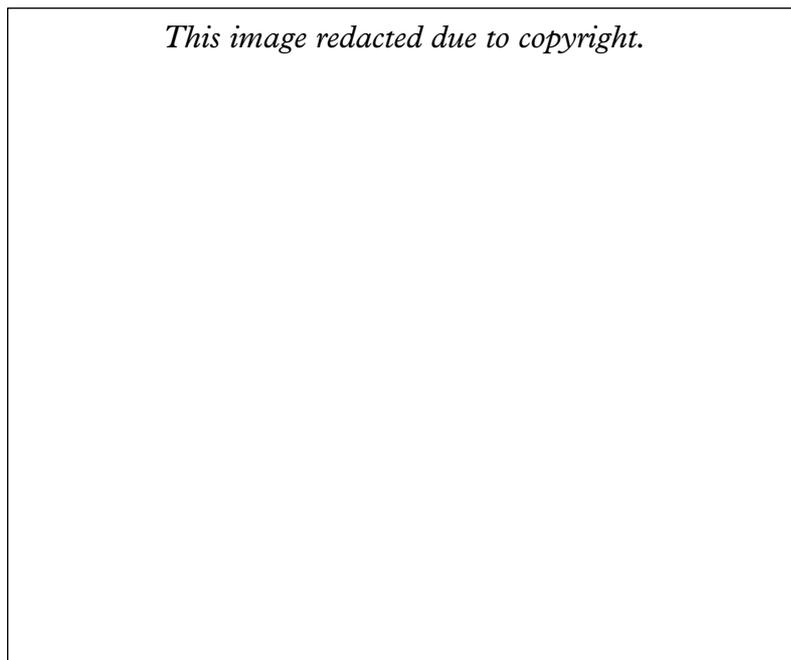
<sup>32</sup> Sonnevend, “Iconic Rituals,” 223.

<sup>33</sup> See Ken Koltun-Fromm, *Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 240–41.

how American Jews see those recognizable generalizations and form meaningful connections with them.

### *Typologies and Gestalt Images*

In order to think about what is involved in perceiving and relating to gestalt images, it is good to have a grounding example. Here, a fairly unassuming photograph will illustrate how visual cultural theorists talk about images' repetition and what an audience's resultant recognition means for considering American Jewish nostalgic experiences. The photograph itself is a street scene, taken from the 1966 exhibition *Portal to America: The Lower East Side*. In it, a small child buys a pretzel from a street peddler while her mother, holding the purse, facilitates the transaction.



From *Portal to America: The Lower East Side, 1879-1925* (1967).<sup>34</sup>

This image appears quite straightforward in its contents and is easily “readable” with regard to what it portrays: that is, the sale of a pretzel in an earlier time. Distinct visual cues, such as the quality of the photograph, the older fashion, and the multitude of

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<sup>34</sup> Allon Schoener, ed., *Portal to America: The Lower East Side, 1870-1925* (New York, Chicago, and San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 92.

pretzels structure this interpretation. This ability to quickly identify the image is precisely the kind of encounter that David Morgan defines in his discussions of images, and which Julia Sonnevend builds on through hermeneutic and performative considerations.<sup>35</sup> It is because of pre-conceived interpretive codes and conceptions that the image appears in this way. One relies on assumptions regarding gestures and body language to draw the child into a relationship with the woman on the left; that is the figure who appears similarly clothed, who provides the means of purchase, and who is thus identified with the child in appearance and in action. Similarly, speaking of clothing, one relies on class-related assumptions to identify which woman sells the pretzels and which is associated with the child. The woman on the left has clothes which appear more modern and less coarse than the woman on the right, bringing her into visual connection with the child's bright dress and modish hat. Similarly, the woman on the right bears a head covering which more strongly associates her with immigrant populations – it is a less Americanized fashion – and thus with the poverty and other implications which were discussed of immigrant neighbourhoods in the previous chapter. All of these notes are products of recognition: they rely on internalized pre-conceptions to associate certain features with accompanying connotations, and they do so in a way that speaks to how the viewer sees.

As noted in the previous section, these associations are grounded in repeated encounters with similar images. Through these experiences, a viewer becomes familiar with both the form of an image – in this case, the figure of a peddler – but also recognizes the ways in which similar images resonate for them – a peddler may evoke certain ideas, such as class associations, and a viewer settles into those connections. In both cases, this connectivity builds links among images. Because a viewer may feel the same way when seeing similar depictions of peddlers, those representations become typologically connected with each other and with that impression: “the peddler” becomes an image in itself, albeit a typological one that can only be recognized in concert with other representations. It becomes, as noted by W.J.T. Mitchell in this dissertation's introduction, a “formal overall gestalt” which represents its instances while having no ultimate manifestation.<sup>36</sup> Viewers' recognition of typological connections among images results in these overarching gestalts.

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<sup>35</sup> See Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 75–79; see also Sonnevend, “Iconic Rituals,” 223–28.

<sup>36</sup> See W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.

This production of gestalt images does not only apply to explicit features of Old World images, but also is part of how viewers see consistent nostalgic themes. For instance, one can look to Roman Vishniac's depiction of a cheder, from chapter two, and the way in which its articulated piety forms a strong impression for nostalgic audiences.<sup>37</sup> Thinking about this image hermeneutically, and in reference to similar images circulating in the mid-century, one can see how Old World piety is consistently visualized alongside the cheder. This means that the idea of "piety" itself becomes recognizable inasmuch as "the cheder" is constructed as a familiar image through these visual encounters. This example demonstrates that the recognition that emerges from encountering images provides viewers with the ability to make linkages to and within the broader nostalgic qualities of the Old World, and not only in the context of what is directly in front of them.

Typological recognition points to an important part of visual experience which shapes how mid-century American Jews were engaging with nostalgic images. Typological images show that spectatorship is not only about what is made explicit in the encounter with certain representations, but is dependent on an ongoing development of more general images as well. This is an especially important consideration for thinking about Old World nostalgia. As will be seen shortly, it introduces to the contemporary conversation new points of reference for thinking about what and how American Jews were seeing nostalgically: they were not only nostalgic for explicit images, such as Tevye's folk simplicity, but also for the themes and impressions articulated in those images' types. They built relationships with those gestalt images as much as they did with specific, concrete representations. Thinking about repetition and recognition in this way helps to clarify how the kind of visual hermeneutic relationship discussed here applies to the Old World at large, since that World itself is one such image: it is composed of smaller representations – either individual or conglomerated in other gestalts – which give the viewer feelings of familiarity and recognition for its contents. In that regard, as American Jews engaged with the contents of their nostalgia, they were also revisiting and developing the Old World's image. Within the context of visual culture, this produces a continuous and dynamic relationship that meaningfully involves both viewers and images in the hermeneutic experiences which have been discussed in this chapter.

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<sup>37</sup> See Roman Vishniac, *A Vanished World* (London: Allen Lane, 1983), plates 7-8.

*This image redacted due to copyright.*

*This image redacted due to copyright.*

Top left: From *A Vanished World* (1983).<sup>38</sup> Top right: From *The Old Country* (1974).<sup>39</sup>

*This image redacted due to copyright.*

Center: From *A Vanished World* (1983).<sup>40</sup>

*This image redacted due to copyright.*

*This image redacted due to copyright.*

Bottom left: Solomon Yudovin, “V khedere” (“In the cheder”).<sup>41</sup>

Bottom right: Alter Kacyzne, “Boys’ *kheyder*.

Lublin, 1924.” From *Image Before My Eyes* (1977).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Vishniac, plate 66.

<sup>39</sup> Abraham Shulman, *The Old Country* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), 129.

<sup>40</sup> Vishniac, *A Vanished World*, plate 8.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Anke Hilbrenner, “Invention of a Vanished World: Photographs of Traditional Jewish Life in the Russian Pale of Settlement,” *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 57, no. 2 (2009): 183.

<sup>42</sup> Lucjan Dobroszycki and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Image Before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland, 1864-1939* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 76.

This kind of repetition and its resultant gestalt images are important for a couple of reasons. As noted previously, these typological images participate in processes of recognition which connect nostalgic images meaningfully to personal and communal identities. At the same time, looking at how certain figures and themes are depicted consistently within nostalgic images helps orient the academic discussion of visual culture toward thinking about spectatorship as an active and developing process. The remainder of this section will explore that second point further. Because the gestalt image is the product of multiple, continuous encounters, impressions, and changing pre-conceptions, it is typified not by its signification but by the relationships entailed by these hermeneutic factors — as an image, it remains dependent on connections among representations and experiences of spectatorship that are evolving as more images and new interpretations enter the nostalgic picture. For example, one can see in these processes how a gestalt image such as “the Old World” is necessarily changing alongside its audience’s increasing exposure to its many individual representations.

Of course, this visual interpretive relationship between viewers and images is helped along by more explicit connections made within nostalgic media. It is not only that images of the Lower East Side visually reflect the contents of the Old World, but that, as was seen in the previous chapter, people like Allon Schoener and Irving Howe deliberately placed these images alongside one another. Similarly, photobooks’ texts and facets of other media – such as the narrative framing of films and stage productions – encourage certain ways of understanding visual details by setting out frames of reference for their audience’s interpretation. Ken Koltun-Fromm notes well how text and narrative supplement the imminent encounter with visual media, writing that the received framing of these images is a crucial factor in shaping their significance.<sup>43</sup>

However, it is one thing to have such textual framing present and another thing to have it incorporated as part of visual experience itself. This is to say that there is a distinction between the way in which an image may be articulated – with a caption, or with an explicit narrative – and the manner by which certain textually-communicated ideas become part of the pre-conceptions and hermeneutic experience of the encounter itself – such as with the introduction to *Portal to America*, for instance. In this case, it is important to keep in mind the way that Avina Weintraub approaches her own work on

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<sup>43</sup> Koltun-Fromm, *Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America*, 246–48.

Lower East Side photography: that, while text does contribute to a viewer's understanding of images, this meaning is itself drawn out through being able to place it within the visual encounter.<sup>44</sup> So, in Weintraub's case, a photobook's captions only make sense by how their descriptions are actually represented. With longer textual passages, such as in Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers*, images' presence turns that text into the kind of immediate, involved encounter that has been discussed here. This visuality is especially important for thinking about American Jews' engagement with their nostalgia because, as David Morgan and Julia Sonnevend note well, it connects the contents of these images with impactful feelings.<sup>45</sup> Much as how the act of recognition comes from within a viewer, these feelings implicate viewers in a close relationship with the images before them. This way of thinking about texts' role in representation highlights once again that the audience is potently involved with nostalgic imagery through their own experiences of spectatorship.

In this way, the presence of gestalt images points to the manner in which the nostalgic Old World is both a rhetorical response to American Jews' mid-century context and a developing idea to which American Jews related within that historical period. As suburban Jewry visualized their nostalgia, they entered an interplay of representation and interpretation which contrasts current scholarship's approach to these media as examples of ulterior contextual or literary contents. As discussed here, rather than photographs simply supplementing Howe's historical discussion in *World of Our Fathers*, those images introduce unique connections and experiences for a nostalgic audience by way of visual culture. Their location amidst ongoing hermeneutic processes and within typological networks underscores that their meaning in relation to Howe's history is not simply illustrative: rather, looking at a photograph evokes its own connections. An image of Orchard Street on the Lower East Side, for instance, is not just about Howe's discussion of immigrant experiences, but also connects with the viewer's expectations for this image. The state of the street may recall Old World poverty, or the signs with Hebrew characters may point to a perceptibly intact minority culture in ways that depart from Howe's explicit discussion of American immigration, yet which accord with other ways of seeing the Lower East Side nostalgically. One must thus consider seriously the way in which multiple scholars of visual culture stress that the development of images' meaning occurs between

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<sup>44</sup> See Aviva Weintraub, "Visiting a 'Vanished World': Photography and the Jewish Lower East Side," *YIVO Annual* 21 (1993): 193–96.

<sup>45</sup> See Sonnevend, "Iconic Rituals," 220, 227–28; Morgan, "Image," 97.

audiences and images – through the kinds of hermeneutic connections discussed here – rather than being solely applied to those images by their authors or viewers.<sup>46</sup>

*This image redacted due to copyright.*

“Orchard Street, 1910”. From *World of Our Fathers* (1976).<sup>47</sup>

The point here is that images’ meaning is mediated by their ever-developing relationship to their viewers and to other images. It is not fixed in a manner where the nostalgic Old World could serve a particular purpose, since these depictions resonate in many ways and with many different ideas. Of course, images can certainly be put to those purposes, as Markus Krah and Rachel Kranson detail, but it would be a mistake to think that Old World nostalgia as a whole is about that kind of discourse. Rather, as has been seen so far in this chapter, the hermeneutic engagement between images and their audiences demonstrates the presence of a complex relationship that involves viewers’ feelings and identities. These relationships dynamically mediate and generate the impactful meaning of American Jews’ nostalgic Old World vision.

However, it is important to recognize that viewers are not only forming relationships and identifying with the images in front of them. Precisely because the experience of

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<sup>46</sup> See Mitchell, *What to Pictures Want?*, 49–50; Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 5; Koltun-Fromm, *Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America*, 247–48.

<sup>47</sup> Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1976), plate 25.

images relates to a broadening of individual representations – working from particular encounters to general impressions about those images’ contents – one must acknowledge that there is a relationship at play between the viewer and that typologically-derived gestalt, not just between the generalization and its individual manifestations. When a nostalgic viewer sees a cheder in the photographs of Roman Vishniac, Solomon Yudovin, or Alter Kacyzne, having seen others like it, they recognize first the gestalt which joins with their pre-conceptions and emotive impressions: they intuitively make the connection between this representation and that larger image, since such specific representations join with typological gestalts through their viewer’s impressions and recognitions. In this way, such representations depict less “a cheder” and more “*the* cheder” as a recognizable and decontextualized image.

This relationship between gestalt images and their viewers is important in a number of ways for thinking about American Jews’ nostalgia for the Old World. On a basic level, it identifies a way in which overarching nostalgic ideas – such as “the Old World” itself – become a part of visual experience. However, this relationship is also relevant for thinking about how that experience becomes communally meaningful for American Jews, since ideas of a shared heritage and familial histories often connect with these general images: as will be discussed shortly, this gestalt enables someone with roots in Poland to see their ancestors in “the shtetl” even when looking at a depiction of Lithuania, since one’s heritage is situated within the Old World at large. These sorts of connections are seen well enough in the way that the Old World is described in nostalgic media. The previous chapter showed how post-war Old World nostalgia clearly enabled and encouraged its generalization, and American Jews placed their heritage within the gestalt images emerging from that development.

There are many examples of these generalized images throughout post-war and mid-century Old World nostalgia. For instance, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, *Life is with People* (1952) opts to forego describing any one place, instead seeking to build a “composite portrait” of a shtetl, and to “evoke a total world.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Markus Krah points out how *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) embraced this geographic ambiguity,

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<sup>48</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Imagining Europe: The Popular Arts of American Jewish Ethnography,” in *Divergent Jewish Cultures: Israel and America*, ed. Deborah Dash Moore and S. Ilan Troen (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 165, 164; see also Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski, *Life is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 21.

with its proper historical object being this generalized “world” to which it could be mapped as a pseudo-ethnographic heritage.<sup>49</sup> In the realm of the explicitly visual, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also points to Roman Vishniac’s *Polish Jews* (1947) as an example of a nostalgic vision which deliberately undercuts its regional and cultural specificity.<sup>50</sup> Abraham Shulman’s *The Old Country* (1974) continues this trend by deliberately placing photos of Warsaw and Lutsk beside depictions of rural towns, and all within a section titled “The Shtetl.”<sup>51</sup>

Thinking about hermeneutics helps to make sense of what is going on here. These images are able to play fast and loose with specificity because, as Irit Rogoff writes, images as a whole “do not stay within discrete discretionary fields” — specific designations give way to the experience of spectatorship itself and the manner in which, through that spectatorship, images’ mutual connections form a generalized whole.<sup>52</sup> In that regard, these nostalgic images represent the world “in front” of the image more so than the world “behind” it: they emphasize their relationship with contemporaneous Jewish audiences at the expense of their relationship with the past. They embrace the gestalt images that American Jews were recognizing and use that kind of visual engagement to build compelling depictions of a broad, nostalgic world. Considering visual cultural processes shows how this generalization is both a rhetorical development in the nostalgic image and, simultaneously, is part of how American Jews were experiencing and relating to the Old World’s image. So, when one looks at nostalgic representations in the mid-century, it is important to recognize not only how this developmental course took place in relation to literary precedents and in response to historical context, but also how the experience of encountering these images promoted their resonance with a nostalgic American Jewish audience.

This resonance can be seen particularly in how American Jews laid claim to the Old World through familial and generational connections. While relating to broad depictions of Jewish life – such as images of “the shtetl” and “the Lower East Side” – mid-century Jews invested those images with the weight of personal histories and communal heritage.

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<sup>49</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 238. Of course, there were multiple and notable outcries in response to this musical which highlighted its historical falsity, such as by Irving Howe and Cynthia Ozick.

<sup>50</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Imagining Europe,” 175.

<sup>51</sup> Shulman, *The Old Country*, 38–39, 60–61; this mixing of images from a variety of places and times was common in other photobooks as well: see Hilbrenner, “Invention of a Vanished World,” 184.

<sup>52</sup> See Rogoff, “Studying Visual Culture,” 26.

The following section will explore how this communal significance is grounded in the kind of ongoing visual cultural relationship that has been discussed in this chapter, as well as how gestalt images play a crucial role in connecting nostalgic experiences with this heritage.

### *Nostalgic Heritage and American Jewish Identity*

In this thesis's following and final chapter, it will become clear how encountering nostalgic images produces a direct contrast between an American Jewish viewer's lived experiences and the imagined day-to-day reality of the Old World. However, beyond noting where mid-century American Jews place value in their nostalgia, it is also important to ask why this nostalgia is particularly valuable in the first place. The answer to that question has much to do with the relationship with images that has been discussed here. The hermeneutic processes that have been discussed in this chapter point toward how American Jews invested the Old World with authenticity and communal relevance. As will be seen in this section, the way in which American Jews have a familiarity with the Old World's gestalt – the "world" itself that is constructed out of multiple encounters among distinct representations – provides a mode for thinking about that past as a form of heritage. Even though nostalgia is largely constructed, as was seen in chapter two's discussion of its development, and even though gestalt images are loosely related to factual representation, American Jews saw the Old World as a meaningful place in which to situate their familial histories and cultural identities.

This section will look at the idea of a nostalgic heritage in two ways. First, one will see how the hermeneutic processes from this chapter – and in particular the presence of a gestalt image – bring nostalgia in line with heritage as a concept. The issue of faithful representation, whether to historical fact or individual images, will demonstrate how nostalgic images reflect identity concerns for American Jews. The fact that Jewish audiences are forming relationships with these thematic or generalized images speaks to how they chiefly look to the nostalgic Old World for its contemporaneous relevance, rather than seeking historical fidelity in its representations. This is much the same as the concept of heritage as it is discussed in current scholarship. Second, having outlined this relationship between hermeneutic engagement and heritage concerns, the conversation

will turn to American Jews' generational claims to the Old World: by making their nostalgia directly relevant to personal and familial histories, American Jews clearly define why these images are meaningful for them. As much as the act of recognition signifies something about a viewer's familiarity with an image, this act of familial connection establishes a language for why it is especially meaningful for someone to participate in that visual relationship.

However, despite these familial connections, there are few nostalgic representations that actually depict the contents of one's personal history. Because the nostalgic Old World was deliberately homogenized and idealized throughout the post-war period, its popular images are generalized in a way which makes identifying with its explicit contents often difficult. After all, Tevye may be received as a compelling ancestral figure by mid-century American audiences, but whose great-grandfather would have actually been like Tevye?<sup>53</sup> That character is a conglomeration of nostalgically-developed themes, behaviours, and images. Similarly, even with the Old World's direct representation in photographs, American Jews are recognizing and forming relationships with typologically-derived gestalts and, on that basis, experiencing general images that have no firm correlation with the historical Old World — the hermeneutic spectatorship that has been discussed in this chapter allows for a loose connection between images and the facts behind their representations. This sort of relationship once again focuses this conversation on matters of contemporaneous experiences. While gestalt images' general nature does not mean that Old World nostalgia has nothing to do with history – it remains grounded in the actual Old World in its representations, either depicting it directly or referencing it – it nonetheless highlights how the resonance of nostalgic images is much more dependent on its audience's perception than on those historical contents.

Recent scholarship around Roman Vishniac puts this point in perspective. His photographs are greatly important to the mid-century nostalgic Old World and, as was seen at various points in the last chapter, they are valued as honest portrayals of that world insofar as they are phrased as “salvage” media which preserves the character of Eastern European Jewry.<sup>54</sup> Yet, as Maya Benton has shown thoroughly, Vishniac was motivated to

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<sup>53</sup> See Wolitz, “The Americanization of Tevye,” 527–28.

<sup>54</sup> See Vishniac, *A Vanished World*, vii; Elie Wiesel, “Foreword,” in *A Vanished World* (London: Allen Lane, 1983), v; Jeffrey Shandler, “Behold a Vanished World,” in *Roman Vishniac Rediscovered*, ed. Maya Benton (New York and Munich: International Center of Photography and DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2015), 135–38.

stage many of his photographs in order to portray Eastern European Jewry according to certain narratives for the benefit of American Jewish audiences.<sup>55</sup> In light of this research, the categorization of these photographs as “documentary” has become problematic, although, as Laura Wexler notes, this is not a wholly settled issue.<sup>56</sup> The importance of this ambiguity is that it outlines how the belief in Vishniac’s work as a testament to its depicted historical communities is, itself, a nostalgic perspective. Ultimately, what is most important in this framework is the presentation of the image in relation to its audience. Little changes depending on whether Vishniac’s photographs are or are not staged, because their nostalgic power has already been drawn from the narrative around them and the experience of encountering them: as Jeffrey Shandler points out, Vishniac’s “documentary” photographs connected readily with the nostalgic perspectives of people like Abraham Joshua Heschel who, as was seen in the last chapter, were instrumental in developing the generalized and homogenized Old World’s image.<sup>57</sup> In short, they participated in a meaningful, if not factual, viewership. Considering Vishniac’s relationship with historical fact reveals that the meaningful relationship to nostalgic media is more concerned with a compelling gestalt image and its nostalgic rhetoric, whether in its typological connections or accompanying narratives, than with the particulars of these individual portrayals.

And so, because nostalgic images are grounded in matters of a rhetorically-charged presentation, rather than historical representation, the main concern of American Jews’ nostalgic gaze has more to do with where an audience finds meaning and resonance than with where such images are faithful to their contents. As will be seen shortly in this section, this dependence on audiences’ participation indicates how identity and heritage are part of American Jews’ nostalgic relationship with the Old World. However, these terms for a nostalgic relationship are not without reservations; some are troubled by this image’s ambivalent relation to historical fact. Speaking to nostalgia at large, the historian Christopher Lasch argues that this attention purely to the relationship between viewers and images – as opposed to a relationship among viewers, images, and images’ subjects

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<sup>55</sup> Maya Benton, “Vishniac on Assignment,” in *Roman Vishniac Rediscovered*, ed. Maya Benton (New York and Munich: International Center of Photography and DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2015), 108–20.

<sup>56</sup> See Laura Wexler, “What Vishniac Saw: Another Look,” in *Roman Vishniac Rediscovered*, ed. Maya Benton (New York and Munich: International Center of Photography and DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2015), 36–39.

<sup>57</sup> See Shandler, “Behold a Vanished World,” 136.

– constitutes a betrayal of history.<sup>58</sup> Certain contemporaneous commentators of mid-century American Jewish nostalgia would certainly agree. Hillel Halkin and Irving Howe publicly decried *Fiddler on the Roof* for both its kitschy simplification of the historical shtetl and its resultant historical inaccuracies.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, others criticized Vishniac for unreliably representing an Eastern European Jewish history.<sup>60</sup> While not all nostalgic media from this period treated their historical depictions so loosely, this kind of consistent criticism on historical terms does indicate how a difference exists between the perceived contents of the nostalgic Old World – that is, its supposed historical representations – and what audiences were finding meaningful within those contents.

In many ways, given the hermeneutic considerations discussed in this chapter, and particularly how viewers often build relationships with general or thematic gestalt images, one can see that these kinds of historically-oriented critiques miss the point of what this nostalgia is about. People like Howe or Halkin focus on the Old World's particulars at the expense of understanding why those representations are important for their audiences. One can look to reviews of *Fiddler on the Roof* as a prime example of this. While Howe decried the musical for its lack of historical fidelity, another reviewer, Howard Taubman, wrote that the musical “touches honestly on the customs of the Jewish community in such a Russian village.”<sup>61</sup> “Touching honestly” here does not mean that *Fiddler* is historically true, but rather that it connects meaningfully with the gestalt image of these customs or, in the musical's opening cry, of American Jews' experience of “Tradition!” The musical puts forward these kinds of meaningful images – of traditions, of “the” shtetl, of Old World piety, and so on – and it is these images which impress upon the audience that *Fiddler* contains an honest Jewish heritage. Put simply, the musical has the same feeling for that heritage as its audience. Although, of course, there will always be some like Howe who are invested in specific details, the popularity of works such as *Fiddler* says something important about what else the majority of their audiences were valuing. In this same

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<sup>58</sup> See Vromen, “The Ambiguity of Nostalgia,” 73.

<sup>59</sup> See Stephen J. Whitfield, “Fiddling with Sholem Aleichem: A History of *Fiddler on the Roof*,” in *Key Texts in American Jewish Culture*, ed. Jack Kugelmass (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 105; Irving Howe, “Tevye on Broadway,” *Commentary* 38, no. 5 (November 1964), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/teveye-on-broadway/>.

<sup>60</sup> See Evelyn Friedlander, “London Report: The Enigmatic Variations of Roman Vishniac,” *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 17, no. 2 (1983): 20–22.

<sup>61</sup> Howard Taubman, “Theater: Mostel as Tevye in ‘*Fiddler on the Roof*,’” *The New York Times*, September 23, 1964, 56; see also Howe, “Tevye on Broadway.”

manner, American Jews' enthusiastic reception of Roman Vishniac's photographs, despite Vishniac's own documentary unreliability, demonstrates that they resonated with their audiences through similar meaningful relationships: even if a certain pious figure was deliberately posed to create an effect, seeing their visualized piety was an important experience for American Jews.

Thinking about nostalgia in connection with heritage helps to clarify why these kinds of de-historicized gestalts are valuable for American Jewish audiences. David Lowenthal describes particularly well how, in heritage studies, the bond of trust between audiences and their heritage is more a matter of perceived significance than historical validation.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, as with how American Jews gravitated toward increasingly general and thematic representations of the Old World throughout the post-war and mid-century periods, an image's resonance with its viewers determines its nostalgic value. Thinking once more about Roman Vishniac, Maya Benton acknowledges that, despite the falsehood of these images and their accompanying narratives, they powerfully represent the Old World by enlivening their audience's emotive connections to this heritage.<sup>63</sup> Even after these images' ambivalent relation to historical fact is revealed, they maintain relevance for their audiences because they serve a different set of concerns.

These concerns are primarily concerns of identity. The point at which a nostalgic audience can identify with an image in front of them is also the point at which that representation most successfully resonates with its viewers. When someone intuitively recognizes a facet of the nostalgic shtetl, they reinforce its significance regardless of whether their perception is factually true — whether *Fiddler's* contents represent the values, emotions, and distinctiveness of suburban American Ashkenazim is more important than if it is enacted according to Irving Howe's historical criticism. Unlike history, heritage and nostalgia are able to embrace this dependency on its interpretive communities. As Lowenthal puts it, "Charges that heritage perverts the past, even if true, are pointless."<sup>64</sup> And, as he goes on to argue: "bias is the main point of heritage.... *Heritage diverges from history not in being biased but in its attitude toward bias.*"<sup>65</sup> So too is the case with nostalgia, since the present academic conversation around this concept is grounded

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<sup>62</sup> See David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 121, 146–47.

<sup>63</sup> See Maya Benton, "Holding It Still," *Loose Associations* 4, no. 3 (Autumn 2018): 9–10.

<sup>64</sup> Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*, 104.

<sup>65</sup> Lowenthal, 122, italics in original.

in the expectation that present concerns will shape the nostalgic image, with the process of referencing history weighing more than the past's reality.<sup>66</sup> In terms of the Old World's mid-century American Jewish audience, the question is thus what value was being placed on the experience of spectatorship that has been discussed here. What was the importance of being connected with a prior Eastern European Jewry, gaining a sense of them, and becoming familiar with their general image?

As was noted at the beginning of this section, this importance is that many American Jews saw the Old World in direct, personal, and familial terms. Its image is not just a source of heritage in visualizing vibrant Jewish traditions in general, but also in speaking directly to who Jewish viewers were and where they came from. After all, people want to feel that their heritage is part of their own lives; their familial histories give them a way to think about those connections. This strong link between American Jews' nostalgic heritage and one's own familial history grants the Old World a particularly important role in defining the contents of American Ashkenazi culture. In other words, heritage concretizes how certain images motivate specific audiences to engage further and substantially in the relationships between themselves and particular gestalt images. This is especially important to consider when thinking about the mid-century ethnic revival, when many distinct American minority heritages were being enlivened through representation. As discussed in chapter one, groups such as Irish, Jewish, and Greek Americans reclaimed cultural distinctions by highlighting their heritages and building close relationships with them; identifying the Jewish Old World as a site of one's own familial history stakes out a minority American identity while also making that nostalgic heritage uniquely relevant for one's Jewish community, as opposed to an Italian American who goes to watch *Hester Street* or visits the Lower East Side. The relationship that Jews build with these nostalgic images is significantly different on the basis of these generational connections to the Old World's Jewish contents.

There are two particular ways in which American Ashkenazim articulate their familial connections to Old World nostalgia in the mid-century. On the one hand, insofar as nostalgic heritage itself relies on a relationship with gestalt images, these familial connections to the Old World most often note similarities rather than directly identifying with specific figures or depictions. It is unlikely, after all, that a photograph in *Portal to*

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<sup>66</sup> See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 8, 13, 50; Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 23, 145.

*America* will be of one's grandparent, but that exhibition's depiction of Eastern European immigration is certainly something which applies to that grandparent nonetheless. It is to this extent that Nora Rubel notes how "The appeal of an 'authentic' Old World brand of Judaism" is the appeal of "the kind one's great-grandparents may have practiced [in Eastern Europe]".<sup>67</sup> At the same time, the extension of these comparisons into the Eastern European Old World helps identify one's own mainstream American community with the Old World's "authentic" Jewish inhabitants. Looking at one's ancestors tells a meaningful story about who one is in the present; in this way, Eli Lederhendler points to how familial connections provided the crucial means for American Jews to identify themselves with the nostalgic past.<sup>68</sup> American Ashkenazim enter a relationship of continuity with the nostalgic image through these identities.

*Fiddler on the Roof* is an excellent example of how these generational claims imbue the nostalgic image with contemporaneous resonance through this continuity. Seth L. Wolitz notes well how the figure of Tevye was refashioned to better represent American values, and particularly an adaptability in line with mid-century, acculturated Jewish audiences. As he writes, with these emphases within the musical "Tevye becomes an almost progressive grandfather figure, a legitimizer of change" who is brought in line with later American Jewish communities through anachronistic modernization.<sup>69</sup> The events in *Fiddler* become personal, familial events, which echo in type the personal histories of nostalgic Jews. Rubel helpfully contextualizes this phrasing with regard to the image of Eastern European Jewry at large. Balancing the isolation of the Old World and its piety with the acculturation of America and its value-oriented religious Judaism, she notes that, "These are Old World characters who hold fast to their ideology, but we are led to believe that, given the right sort of exposure to modernity, they would adapt to changing ways."<sup>70</sup> It is the familial and generational imagination that gives shape to this connection, by identifying contemporaneous dynamics – the same as those discussed in chapter one – with the "sort of exposure" that develops Eastern European Jewry into white American Jewish suburbanites. In this regard, Tevye represents one image that American Jewish audiences looked to as a simulacrum of their own ancestors,

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<sup>67</sup> Nora L. Rubel, *Doubting the Devout: The Ultra-Orthodox in the Jewish American Imagination, Religion and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 24.

<sup>68</sup> See Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity*, 90.

<sup>69</sup> Wolitz, "The Americanization of Tevye," 516, see also 530-531.

<sup>70</sup> Rubel, *Doubting the Devout*, 34.

and simultaneously laid claim to as a connective figure between their own communities and the Old World's perceived authenticity.

It is important to mention that these familial connections were not only happening in visual culture. Other Jewish nostalgic texts in the American mid-century emphasized such generational links to the Old World as well. For instance, Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* made such links, even in its own title and scope: the "world" of his description is the American immigrant neighbourhood, but the book itself begins by describing the Old World shtetl.<sup>71</sup> Such spatial connections meant that American Jews could read *World of Our Fathers* and place their own familial histories in a lineage from the essentialized Old World — despite the fact that most Jews were not from shtetls, but came from European urban centres, the nostalgic gaze merges the personal with this nostalgic narrative.<sup>72</sup> Hasia Diner notes precisely these connections with regard to the reception of Howe's book. "American Jews read it as their group story", she writes. "Reviewers in Jewish publications often began with personal tales about their grandparents, and they touted their authentic connections to that immigrant world."<sup>73</sup> Given the considerations in chapter two regarding perceived parallels between Eastern European and immigrant American communities, such a connection stands in for a link to Old World heritage itself. The impact of familial history is realized within such historical continuity.

And so, with an eye to the experience of seeing images, one must acknowledge that these generational connections become part of how nostalgic American Jewish audiences recognize the Old World and, most importantly, recognize themselves within it. This is where heritage is also well-represented in nostalgia. The ability to perceive oneself in the nostalgic image — both in specific representations and generalizations — concretizes how that image stands as a point of cultural and identity-laden reference. For instance, responding to *World of Our Fathers*, one avid reviewer wrote of the book that "Our family albums seem to have sprung into life" so that "familiar scenes and faces stare back at us."<sup>74</sup> The modality of sight here, the dynamics of relating to a nostalgically-constructed world, draw the reader into a viewership which emphasizes their meaningful connection

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<sup>71</sup> See Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 7–25.

<sup>72</sup> See David G. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 52.

<sup>73</sup> Diner, "Embracing *World of Our Fathers*," 454.

<sup>74</sup> Lily Edelman, "Jewish Immigrants and Their American Dream," *National Jewish Monthly* (April 1976): 40, quoted in Diner, 456.

to this past. This is precisely what heritage does as well, and, in both cases, the experience of visual cultural recognition is significant. After all, as the author Verlyn Klinkenborg puts it in a *New Yorker* article, “After three or four generations, the faces of ancestors staring out from photograph albums look no different from the faces you see in history books”.<sup>75</sup> On these terms, Jewish audiences’ response to *World of Our Fathers* on familial terms indicates something important: that visual cultural heritage reverses this transition, endowing people in the Old World with presence, character, and connection to their viewers. Heritage, existing on both personal and collective terms, seizes on the generational connotations of American Jews’ nostalgia and uses those relationships to establish anonymous figures in the shtetl, or even fictional characters such as Tevye, as part of one’s own individual and communal identities.<sup>76</sup> As Margaret Olin writes, this is made possible by the relational aspects of spectatorship: “An illustration of a place few people have visited can, if seen often by enough people, make that place feel comfortably familiar.”<sup>77</sup> The Old World is no different, having been made “comfortably familiar” through the repetition of its images and the development of its idealized, standardized, and essentialized shtetl; this familiarity opens up the Old World to its Jewish audiences’ own attachments.

In this way, how American Jews encounter and form visual relationships with the Old World is particularly meaningful. While those relationships occur through the same hermeneutic means as spectatorship at large, the presence of heritage in this visual nostalgia sets it apart for its Jewish audiences. This is not to say that heritage and nostalgia are identical – there are many points in contemporary scholarship where these concepts diverge<sup>78</sup> – but rather notes how the program of heritage shares many approaches with the experience of nostalgia. Both of these ideas strongly situate the past in relation to the concerns, aims, and emotions of the present.<sup>79</sup> This helps to identify why the nostalgic Old World is particularly resonant with its mid-century American Jewish audiences, and

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<sup>75</sup> Verlyn Klinkenborg, quoted in Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*, 58.

<sup>76</sup> See Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*, 57.

<sup>77</sup> Olin, *Touching Photographs*, 101.

<sup>78</sup> This is especially with regard to differences between tangible heritage sites and conceptualizations of nostalgia as immaterial and affective. See Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 29, 53; Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*, 21; Armbruster, *Watching Nostalgia*, 39, 59–60; Stewart, *On Longing*, xii, 135.

<sup>79</sup> For this idea in heritage studies, see Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*, xv, 126; Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 58–59; in terms of nostalgia, see Vromen, “The Ambiguity of Nostalgia,” 72, 78–79, 81, 83; Armbruster, *Watching Nostalgia*, 40.

to make sense out of the way that those Jewish audiences identified with that nostalgic image. On a conceptual level, heritage in this context furthers visual culture's thinking around image-viewer relationships by directly extending that relationship from one's experience to one's identity: it recognizes a way in which these visual cultural relationships are particularly impactful for certain viewers and certain audiences.

This relationship remains grounded in this chapter's discussion of hermeneutic processes. The visualization of heritage in nostalgic imagery is a key way in which American Jews are coming face-to-face with the Old World and forming a relationship with it. To that extent, one's recurring encounters with images, the impressions that result from those experiences, and one's recognition of certain typological gestalts are part of how American Jews are perceiving the contents of their contemporaneous identities. Heritage and familial connections provide a language for locating these identities in viewers' hermeneutic experiences. Thus, when an American Jew goes to see *Fiddler on a Roof* in theaters or buys a copy of *A Vanished World*, they are able to think about, reflect on, and develop their heritage through those experiences.

However, this does not mean that heritage or identity are instrumentally tied to nostalgic visual experiences. It is not as though *Fiddler* or *A Vanished World* are simply means to the end of enriching mid-century American Jewish identities. As mentioned throughout this chapter, what is most important here is how these instances of spectatorship point to ongoing and dynamic relationships between images and their audiences. Some, such as Rachel Kranson, may note how building a specific Jewish identity is a product of American Jews' turn to the nostalgic Old World, but visual culture's emphasis on relationality would suggest that it is not so: that identity itself will continue to be mediated as American Jews develop their self-understanding through ongoing hermeneutic engagements.<sup>80</sup> Heritage is also drawn into these processes as it is identified, visualized, encountered, and reflected upon in relation both to the contents of the Old World's nostalgic image and its audience's own familial histories.

In this regard, it is important to revisit the kinds of function- and correlation-oriented analyses that were discussed previously in order to see how a relational perspective on heritage produces a different picture of what is happening here for mid-century American Jews. This chapter's final section will look at the significance of

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<sup>80</sup> See Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 16, 18.

these visual cultural relationships in this way: by thinking about how hermeneutic processes draw individuals into close relationships with recognized and heritage-laden images, one will see that such a relationship does not imply that images and their viewers actually accord with one another. This is to say that, as much as the nostalgic Old World may hold the contents of a mid-century American Jewish nostalgic identity, that image and its audience remain situated in two different worlds. One must consider seriously the possibility that, rather than being encouraged by the strong presentation of their identity, this nostalgic audience could acutely perceive the gap between them and their heritage.

### *Reconsidering the Old World's Nostalgic Role*

One can recall from earlier in this chapter that contemporary scholarship thinks about Old World nostalgia as particularly static. Many authors see it as a juncture of literary sources and historical context, noting how it draws from those precedents to respond specifically to certain issues within American Jews' post-war and mid-century experiences. In this regard, writers such as Markus Krah argue that this nostalgia helps to do certain things in response to that context: it becomes a functional means for American Jews to articulate their identities and communal concerns. Notably, current scholarship also often extends this functionality to a particular ameliorative end. Rachel Kranson represents this trend especially well, as she argues that representing American Jewish identities through Old World nostalgia helped ease tensions surrounding those American communities' recent integration into the socio-economic mainstream. Through these various perspectives, nostalgia for the Old World is consistently depicted as something that American Jews employ to achieve certain ends.

The hermeneutic and heritage-oriented considerations from this chapter challenge this conception by complicating its two main components: that this nostalgia is functionally utilized by American Jewish communities, and that this nostalgia works to ameliorate the tensions facing American Jews in the post-war and mid-century periods. The first idea here has already been discussed throughout the chapter. Insofar as the nostalgic image is something with which American Jews have an ongoing and dynamic hermeneutic relationship, its meaning is constantly developing. Its significance for American Jewish audiences is not fixed in a way where it can have stable, comprehensive

connotations. To a certain extent, it can be put toward particular ends – Markus Krah writes extensively of specific perspectives which use the nostalgic Old World as part of their argument – but that kind of function does not represent the relationship that American Jewish audiences were building with the nostalgic image as a whole. At the same time, the presence of heritage concerns in American Jews’ relationship with the nostalgic Old World demonstrates how that nostalgia cannot be simply ameliorative. Similar to its supposed functionality, nostalgia can certainly be put toward those ends, but looking further at the way that heritage presents a vision of Jewish vibrancy will demonstrate that this is not always the case.

The crux of the matter is that, while the nostalgic Old World may present a strong image of Jewish values and traditions, that image is distinctly different from its audience. As has been discussed throughout the first and second chapters, the socio-cultural position from which most American Jews encountered nostalgic representations of the Old World comes after decades of substantial deviation from their initial communal and cultural character. Nonetheless, the Old World continues to be a grounding reference for heritage in this context; one can recall Steven Zipperstein’s idea from the beginning of this chapter that the Old World is like a “yardstick” for measuring the development of Jewish communities.<sup>81</sup> In that way, not only is the nostalgic Old World continually developing in relation to its American Jewish audiences, but it is also exemplifying for them what an aspirational Jewish society could look like. The next chapter will expand on this relationship in noting where and how American Jews found the Old World aspirationally desirable, but suffice to say at this point that these visions of an idealized Ashkenazi heritage often demonstrated where suburban Jewry were unable to enact the same traditions, or where communal values were changing alongside the American mid-century’s developments. Contents such as the Lower East Side’s street life or Jewish children’s involvement in religious education are prominently displayed throughout the Old World’s nostalgic image, but are located in suburban Jewish lives quite differently — or not at all.

On these terms, seeing the nostalgic Old World as heritage draws out the gap between one’s own suburban situation and one’s communal ideas in a way that is not necessarily encouraging. Especially as mid-century Jews were rethinking the socio-cultural

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<sup>81</sup> See Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry*, 5.

compromises that they had made in joining the American mainstream, the image of a strong Jewish culture that looks quite unlike American Jewry is reason for pause. Rachel Kranson asserts that this dissonance helped American Jews ease themselves into the American mainstream, since identifying with this vision of Jewish difference “preserved their sense of a Jewish identity...without compromising their recent social and economic gains.”<sup>82</sup> This may be true on some level, but it overlooks how that Jewish identity also highlights meaningful experiences which are lacking in suburban Jewish life. That difference is a “yardstick” which consistently measured a considerable distance between its idealized reference and the reality of American Jewish experiences. The nostalgic Old World’s otherness to the American mainstream could easily look the same as an otherness to mainstream American Jews.

And so, thinking about Old World nostalgia as a site of communal heritage brings these sorts of comparisons into play and prevents that nostalgia from being simply positive. While various elements of hermeneutic relationships may emphasize congruity between nostalgic images and their viewers – one can recall how viewers’ familiarity with and recognition of certain images are markers of such congruity – the fact remains that such identification also makes the differences between American socio-cultural compromise and Old World Jewish wholeness all the more palpable. This indicates that contemporary scholarship, while noting valuable ways in which American Jewry did engage with the nostalgic Old World, overlooks some important parts of these nostalgic experiences. Notably, the way in which nostalgic spectatorship is a *relationship*, rather than a rhetorical use of cultural materials, is important to highlight. Seeing Old World heritage visually engages Jewish audiences in a range of hermeneutic processes which are inconclusive and ongoing, affecting how these audiences feel about, connect with, and identify with the contents of that nostalgic heritage. Similarly, the fact that this relationship is fluid and ongoing points out that American Jews were engaging with the Old World in a variety of ways, not only in manners that were encouraging for their own cultural identities. These considerations will be carried forward into the next chapter, where they will be central for thinking about where suburban spaces are drawn into contrast with idealized nostalgic environments. Looking to the Old World as a point of reference for

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<sup>82</sup> Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 18.

mid-century American Jewish communities will help recognize how different experiences represent a respective presence or absence of heritage, tradition, and values.

In summary, then, the hermeneutic underpinnings of visual experience offer a fuller picture of how American Jews saw nostalgic images and the manner in which those images resonated with their audiences. The place of heritage in this conversation highlights the manner in which nostalgia for the Old World is not only a hermeneutic experience with which American Jews became acquainted, revisiting and developing its meaning through interpretive processes, but is significantly an experience which engages this audience in their own values, aspirations, and ideals. Jewish audiences' nostalgic relationship to the Old World resembles this heritage both in how it follows a similar program, representing contemporaneous concerns and possessing a similar relationship to historical fact, as well as in how both of these concepts experientially connect individuals to their communities. In doing so, it also connects those individuals with ideas outside of their own immediate or reflective experiences. This visual cultural nostalgia is simultaneously about how individuals' encounters with images play into the thinking around American Jewish identity and how those images resonate as points of shared heritage within a broader American Jewish discourse.

As noted, these considerations shape the present conversation around nostalgia for the Old World on drastically different terms from those in the current academic discourse. Whereas most writers take historical or literary approaches to these images, explaining their contents and significance through correlative and functional connections with their context, that thinking occludes how these images develop alongside their viewers in complex and discursive ways; visual cultural theory brings this complexity back into view.<sup>83</sup> In order to think thoroughly about how these nostalgic images resonate with and continually engage their audiences, it is important to consider those dynamics of visual experience: the material encounter with images, the feeling that arises from spectatorship, and one's relationship with generalized images are all crucial parts of how American Jews were constructing and developing the nostalgic Old World. The ability of that world to stand as a site of heritage for later acculturated and suburbanized American

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<sup>83</sup> See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16; Sonnevend, "Iconic Rituals," 227–28.

Jewish communities is dependent on these compelling points at which individuals and communities see it, recognize it, and experience their connection to it.

In the following chapter, the conversation will turn from how American Jews saw the Old World to what they saw in it. This exploration will remain grounded in the processes discussed here, but will angle toward better understanding *what* within the Old World's nostalgic image resonated with its American Jewish audience. Specifically, by looking at the way in which images mediate between individuals and nostalgic ideas, and thinking about the spatial connotations of relating to an imagined "world" as a site of communal heritage, one will be able to see how Eastern Europe as a place is nostalgically connected with ideas of Jewish vitality. Much in the manner that has been discussed here, this vision of heritage points to a gap between American suburban and Eastern European nostalgic experiences. By establishing the Old World as a point of socio-cultural reference, the rhetoric of the Old World's authentic heritage draws a line between the types of lifestyles which are possible in that place and mid-century American Jews' own environments: on these terms the shtetl, viewed as a site of rich Jewishness, becomes host to the proper conditions for Jewishness to flourish, while suburbia and its associated mainstream compromises are cast as hostile environments for Jewish vibrancy, no matter how beneficially integrated with its surrounding society it may be. As will be discussed, this has much to do with the types of autonomies – political, social, or cultural – which are afforded to different Jewish groups at different times; while political autonomy may provide safe ground for Jews to thrive in America, its accompanying acculturation threatens the socio-cultural autonomy at the root of their identity. In this way, seeing nostalgic images in light of communal heritage and being drawn into conversation with their system of values is one way in which American Jews engage with a meaningful vision of Jewish wholeness, critique their surroundings, and affirm their own identities within the broader landscape of the American mainstream.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE NOSTALGIC IMAGE AND SPATIAL EXPERIENCE

In the previous chapter, one saw how a conversation about images on their own terms brings the issue of visual experience to the fore. The encounter between mid-century American Jewish suburbanites and the nostalgic representation of the Old World demonstrates the ways in which such images develop meaning through a relation with their viewership, ultimately producing a form of communal heritage for this audience. This is important to consider, since, without thinking about visual culture, it is easy to overlook the ways that nostalgic audiences experience and develop these relationships. If one thinks of nostalgic images as purely functional or simply the result of their contextual concerns, then one ignores the heritage-laden manner by which American Jewish audiences recognize, identify with, and are challenged by their nostalgic experiences. This chapter will argue that these encounters with nostalgic heritage form a strong image of an idealized Jewishness which holds their viewers to certain socio-cultural aspirations. In pushing its viewers to engage in reflection on the presence or absence of those aspirations, the Old World's mid-century nostalgic image highlights where its hermeneutic experiences have a hand in defining what American Jews are finding particularly valuable in their nostalgia.

This chapter will thus turn toward questions about these images' contents, asking where this presentation of nostalgic heritage connects with the concerns and desires of its audiences. It is crucial to think about these points of connection since, at first glance, there is something strange going on in thinking about these images as simply aspirational: the Old World is certainly valorized and established as a representation of Jewish wholeness, but its own imagined reality seems to belie the unequivocal embrace of its contents. American Jews may have loved *Fiddler on the Roof*, but who would actually want to live in Anatevka? Who would trade in their genteel suburban lawn for Tevye's run-down barn? And, more to the point, who would trade their hard-won social integration for the politically-precarious vision of Eastern European Jewish life that American Jews continually lauded throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century? Of course, as Rachel Kranson points out in various ways, there was a definite appeal to defining oneself as an outsider

in these decades.<sup>1</sup> Old World nostalgia does connect Jews with that status – being in the mainstream but “not of it”<sup>2</sup> – but the connections between nostalgia and heritage suggest that there is something within this vision that American Jews *do* want to enact beyond an identity. As seen in chapter two, the nostalgic Old World’s specific qualities resonate with its American Jewish audience: it is not only the idea of Jewish authenticity, but certain tangible, represented experiences that these viewers value. It is important on that basis to look further at American Jews’ relationship with those nostalgic images and how, despite the apparent gap between those images’ contents and audiences, Jewish audiences were finding a contemporaneous relevance in these representations of their heritage. This connection between what American Jews valued in their lived experiences and the values present within the Old World’s nostalgic image is a meaningful intersection which speaks to the communally-charged rhetoric which surrounded both American Jewish suburbanites and the imagination of their heritage.

This rhetoric is not only about the values, habits, and culture of nostalgic Old World Jewry, but also about the setting which encompasses those imagined communities. As will be seen throughout this chapter, the way in which American Jews form relationships with their envisaged heritage connects with broader spatial concerns which inform their nostalgic gaze: the Old World’s image represents certain experiences and, by extension, the possibility for certain experiences within certain settings. This recognition of the Old World on spatial terms is much the same as the recognition that American suburbia possesses a certain character which indicates the kinds of lifestyles and experiences that its residents have, as was seen in chapter one. In that regard, the relationship between suburban Jewish audiences and the contents of their nostalgic heritage does not only imply a contrast between those places’ qualities – such as their institutions, social networks, or demographics – but also entails a reflection on what it must be like to live within these different environments.

This spatial thinking is a natural extension of American Jews’ hermeneutic and experience-oriented encounter with images of the Old World. After all, gestalt images represent consistent and recognizable contents — the way in which seeing a photograph of a cheder, for instance, stands in for seeing an expression of “the cheder” as a

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<sup>1</sup> See Rachel Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 16, 113, 140.

<sup>2</sup> Kranson, 16, italics in original.

generalized type. In other words, Jews are imagining a certain ideal space on the basis of these individual encounters, working from the particular (seen) to the general (imagined and recognized) nostalgic image. This means that there is an imagined world which stands behind those individual representations and to which this audience relates. This was very much a part of the conversation in chapter two, where one could see how specific qualities of the Old World were stably represented across various nostalgic depictions, helping to construct this broader image. However, when thinking about audiences' reflections on these depicted experiences, one must recognize that those specific qualities are less important than the conditions which permit them. To put this another way, it is crucial to the imagination of Old World Jewry that they were poor and pious, but in terms of what value those qualities have for a mid-century American Jewish audience it is more important to think about what in these environments enables or results in that poverty and piety, since therein lies the points of contrast between the experiences of nostalgic Old World and suburban American Jewry. In this regard, the experiential considerations of the previous chapter will remain significant here, but the main focus will be on how these experiences take place within specific settings, real or imagined.

With an eye to spectatorship, these spatial connotations are helpful for identifying how the contents of an imagined Old World is connected to American Jews' more immediate experiences. Ultimately, the apparent contradiction of American Jews' desire for Old World Jews' distress is better understood as a nostalgic perspective on the supposed richness of day-to-day life: rather than focusing on ideas such as poverty or persecution as foundationally constitutive of the Old World's character, the mid-century nostalgic gaze articulates those qualities as the products of certain encapsulating conditions for that earlier Jewry. Although certain elements of these conditions may not have been favourable, such as with Jews' political disenfranchisement in Eastern Europe, others were crucial for these Jews' connection to an idealized wholeness. The presence of substantial cultural autonomy, for instance, based on the perceived insularity of the shtetl, enables the construction of a holistically Jewish society in the nostalgic vision. It is these sorts of circumstances which form the desired contents of mid-century American Jews' relationship to the Old World. As will be seen, this is even more the case when one considers the types of suburban compromises that were discussed in chapter one, with

many avenues for such social and cultural autonomies becoming closed in favour of integration with the American mainstream.

This idea of settings' role in nostalgic relationships will be fleshed out throughout this chapter, both with attention to the lived spaces of American Jewry and the imagined spaces of the Old World. On both sides of this relationship, environments' relevance is principally a matter of how they determine what experiences are possible for their constituents. This is guided by the kinds of opportunities, limitations, and expectations that are present in such spaces. For instance, the shtetl's piety is strengthened by its institutional self-governance – in religious and cultural terms – while first-generation American Jewish immigrants' connectivity with the Old World is made possible by the persistence of social and transnational networks with Eastern Europe. Conversely, suburban Jewish experiences are shaped by a lack of socio-cultural autonomy: they are determined by the specific sort of institutions and social networks that the American mainstream expects – and which developers built into the suburban landscape – as one can see in chapter one's discussion of suburban synagogues' prominence. Across these cases, an environment sets the boundaries within which Jewish communities live. To invest these conditions with significance, then, means that American Jewish communities are thinking about the range of experiences that are possible within various environments and expressing their desire for communities in which their Jewishness can readily be a part of those spaces.

In this regard, as will be seen, the question of social and cultural autonomy as environmental conditions – that is, whether communities are able to regulate their immediate spaces according to their group identities – is a key point of difference and desire between American Jewish suburbanites and their imagined Old World heritage. This recognition fleshes out the experiences that were discussed in the previous chapter. It notes that, when Jews were seeing nostalgically, they were also engaging in a process of reflection about the significance of their setting. Spatial concerns' involvement in the nostalgic gaze draw attention to the cultural context of mid-century American Jews in relation to the perceived context of their nostalgic object: the Old World is constructed first and foremost as a place of Jewish wholeness in contrast to the perceived compromise that accompanied Jews' place within suburbia.

It is important to recall, however, that this conversation is limited by its assumptions of a cohesive and accessible American Jewish audience for the Old World. Even as substantial numbers of Jews engaged with suburbanization in the mid-century, many communities were neither suburban nor engaging with the same pressures and dynamics of mainstream suburbia. At the same time, as noted previously in this dissertation, significant groups of American Jews were excluded from the Old World's white Ashkenazi heritage. Even as this dissertation continues to focus on the white American mainstream, this is important to recognize. At the same time as this recognition acknowledges problems inherent to discussing this moment of popular nostalgia for the majority of American Jews – namely, that this conversation focuses on a homogenized American Jewish audience – recognizing the limits of this conversation also demonstrates that the Old World and its audience exist on equally imaginative terms. “American Jewry,” as a cohesive category in the mid-century, is an idea that is developing in relation to its surroundings and articulated heritage. In this way, it is crucial to acknowledge that the hegemony of white Ashkenazic nostalgia indicates both the problematic suppression of American Jewish diversity and the continuing development of an outward-facing white Jewish identity whose rhetoric and concerns are shared by the nostalgic Old World's image. Suburbia looms large as a setting for the imagination and location of this homogenized, mainstream American Jewry.

And so, no matter how constructed this group actually is, the rhetoric surrounding suburban Jews' experiences is valuable for understanding how nostalgic perspectives engage with questions of environment. Thinking about where nostalgic meaning connects with suburban Jews' contemporaneous concerns, one will see how the kinds of hermeneutic and heritage-oriented relationships from chapter three engage readily with perceptions of how certain spaces affect the everyday lives of Jews therein. Given the kinds of challenges facing suburban Jewish communities that were discussed in chapter one – that is, the substantial reorganization of their socio-cultural lives – and the role that this nostalgia plays as a form of Jewish heritage, one can see how this representation of space resonates strongly with the experiences of suburban mid-century nostalgic audiences.

This discussion will also help to illuminate the apparent contradiction that was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: how one can idealize the nostalgic Old World as a timeless whole without identifying with all the qualities of that vision. In the case of the Lower East Side, it is safe to say that no American suburban Jew would actually want

the dire poverty or socio-economic exclusion of that time, but it is a crucial idea that they would, in fact, want the cultural freedom of robust Jewish communities which was afforded by such nostalgic immigrant neighbourhoods. By locating desire in the kinds of experiences that these nostalgic spaces enable, one can better recognize how these images of American Jewish heritage form points of contrast, reflection, and meaning for their nostalgic audiences. At the same time, this recognition of American Jews' relationship with the Old World – and particularly the Old World as a space that is constructed as other to American suburban experiences – once again affirms the previous chapter's argument that these images cannot simply be ameliorative for their viewers. Thinking about how environments determine communities' experiences highlights suburbia's own challenges for building and enacting minority American identities; this was recognized by many, not only Jews, through the 1970s' ethnic revival. For Jews, then, the nostalgic Old World plays into a more complex discourse about their communal vitality, and not necessarily in an encouraging role. If, as will be seen at the end of this chapter, the Old World is imagined as a kind of socio-cultural power fantasy – a uniquely robust, holistic, and timeless Jewish society – then this fantastic vision reflects a lack of socio-cultural power within American suburbia.

In order to think about these issues, this chapter will first return to the hermeneutics of the visual encounter to reflect on how spatial experiences are involved in nostalgic spectatorship. The idea of a gestalt image – one with which the nostalgic audience has a recurring and consistent relationship – will ground the conversation here. After all, as noted in the previous chapter, processes of generalization and recognition turn individual nostalgic representations into images of a world: one looks through them and into a greater whole. This implies that, on the basis of their general nature, these images encourage their viewers to look past specific qualitative details and toward the kinds of circumstances which make those details possible. This is key for recognizing how certain conditions enable or preclude their occupants' experiences. In that regard, this first section will focus on how this kind of environmental awareness is reflected in hermeneutic processes, and how it is represented in American Jews' engagement with Old World nostalgia. Particularly in comparison to the kinds of external pressures that were discussed in chapter one's examination of American suburbia, one will see how nostalgic spaces are imagined as

having a significantly different relation between their socio-cultural attitudes and Jewish communities than American Jews' own mid-century surroundings.

In the following section, the conversation will turn to how these nostalgic environments are explicitly valued within American Jewish discourse. Although a large part of this section will look at second-generation urban neighbourhoods in the inter-war period, which is decidedly outside of Old World nostalgia's scope, the thorough discussion which surrounds those neighbourhoods will help to define why and how certain environments were thought to be especially beneficial for Jews. These "Jewish spaces" – of which the Old World is one – are seen to possess the right qualities to naturally inculcate a feeling of Jewishness and a strong communal identity. Ultimately, this way of thinking about spaces in American Jewish life returns to the tensions in chapter one, noting where and how American Jews were facing newfound dynamics as they adapted their culture and communities to the non-Jewish mainstream. It is thus because nostalgic spaces contrast the pressures of this mid-century mainstream, and especially suburban environments, that the Old World becomes a vision of unfettered Jewish wholeness. In order to further explore how spaces produce and sustain different experiences in this way, this chapter's fourth section will look more closely at how idealized Jewish spaces feature in Old World sources themselves. Conversations about nostalgic heritage and lived experience meaningfully connect through this reflection.

Lastly, a final section will return to the question at the beginning of this chapter. It will look, through questions of space, to how the visual cultural relationship between the Old World's nostalgic image and its American Jewish audience is not only about what those images explicitly represent, but is also about the possibilities for Jewish experiences that they envisage. In short, they picture a meaningfully Jewish environment. Looking more closely at Jewish spaces' idea of socio-cultural autonomy will help to locate this meaning within Old World nostalgia: the question of how Old World spaces reflect the expectations of their Jewish inhabitants, despite also representing substantial persecution and political barriers for them, will demonstrate the importance of communities' ability to define and identify with their environments. Old World Jewry's position within spaces which readily reflect their communal identities – such as the nostalgically-imagined shtetl or the Lower East Side – represents to an American Jewish audience a considerable vision of Jewish vibrancy and, in the ways discussed through

heritage, an aspirational ideal which informs the ongoing relationship between their own suburban communities and the nostalgic Old World.

Although this relationship between nostalgic and suburban environments may at first seem to rely on historical details as the grounds on which to analyze images' significance, an attention to environments points to broader considerations involving audiences' experiences of visual culture. Rather than identifying where the contents of nostalgic images meet with their historical context – such as with the way that Rachel Kranson ties shtetls' poverty to socio-economic changes in American Jewish communities – thinking about “Jewish spaces” and socio-cultural autonomies focuses the conversation on how certain environments themselves, as staging grounds for communities' experiences, are crucial for understanding how nostalgic American Jews saw the Old World. American Jews' nostalgic gaze is not only a matter of envisaging specific qualities for Old World Jewry, but also perceives unique spaces in that world which support and represent an uncompromising Jewishness.

### *Seeing Spaces' Role in the Nostalgic Gaze*

The starting point for thinking about where spatial concerns enter the nostalgic picture is, as with the previous chapter, American Jews' hermeneutic experiences in encountering nostalgic images. The same processes which result in this audience's ability to recognize and generalize specific qualities in representations of the Old World also implicate questions of what makes those qualities possible. Chapter three's discussion of gestalt images is particularly important for guiding the conversation around nostalgic spaces in this regard. Insofar as these images paint a broader picture of the nostalgic Old World at large, they direct viewers toward thinking about these images in terms of their environments: since specific representations and themes repeat typologically throughout nostalgic images of the Old World, there must be something in the gestalt whole which is conducive to enabling those things. As much as any specific nostalgic representation, this gestalt's imagined context connects meaningfully with the values and desires of its audiences.

While this spatial thinking will appear throughout the chapter in terms of how American Jews perceived the Old World as particularly privileged in its ability to create

and sustain vibrant Jewish communities, this section will establish the grounds for thinking about that ability. This will begin by first looking at how an attention to environments and spaces is implicated in American Jews' nostalgic gaze. As mentioned briefly, the nostalgic Old World consistently orients its viewers toward seeing itself on spatial terms through various avenues of generalization; given the processes of repetition and recognition which were discussed in the previous chapter, even specific representations are related to the backdrop of a gestalt world. With this conceptual grounding, one will see how these settings establish the parameters for certain experiences: their various interconnecting qualities form points of reference for thinking about how people lived and formed identities within these different spaces. This relationship between environments and their inhabitants' experiences will then be explored further by looking closely at American Jews' suburbanization in the post-war period. By thinking through how American Jewish culture was changing as it entered suburban environments, one will be able to see in a concrete way how such spaces set out expectations for those within them. Similarly, this section will then briefly look at how the same relationality between environments and inhabitants is part of American Jews' imagination of Old World settings. The differences in spaces here – between the nostalgic Old World and American suburbia – are crucially important, since they begin to identify the idea that will be expanded throughout the remainder of this chapter: that mid-century American Jews place value in a world that is other to their own environment and its associated socio-cultural compromises. In this nostalgic gaze, the Old World is not only an image of vibrant heritage on the basis of its explicit Jewish qualities, but also on the kinds of experiences that it, as a world, supports and sustains.

One can see this attention to environmental concerns within the way that American Jews formed a hermeneutic relationship with the Old World's nostalgic image. As one can recall from the previous chapter, the role of recognition in spectatorship consistently generalizes images' contents by constructing broader thematic or typological images; nostalgic audiences perceive and form relationships with these gestalts as much as they do with their individual manifestations in discrete representations. The importance of thinking about such generalization here is the manner in which this movement from individual representation to general gestalt focuses the nostalgic gaze similarly from a specific quality toward its surrounding environment. In other words, since American Jews were relating nostalgically to generalized images, its specific representations continually

reflect the gestalt whole in a way that highlights how that setting – “the shtetl” or “the Old World” at large – produces these particulars. This kind of hermeneutic relationship between nostalgic viewers and the spaces of their nostalgic heritage connects readily with the way that the Old World was steadily generalized throughout the 1940s and 1950s, as was seen in chapter two: the kind of image that mid-century Jews engaged with from the 1960s onward was already homogenized in a way where they were able to recognize in its specifics the situation of an entire world.

In this regard, American Jews are not only recognizing in individual representations certain gestalt images on the basis of consistent themes, figures, and impressions, but are also looking at how those features are consistently connected with nostalgic settings. The gestalt is part of a larger picture about what enables and supports its consistent appearances. To put this another way, when someone sees Tevye’s poverty in *Fiddler on the Roof*, and then goes on to see this poverty represented in nostalgic photographs and other media, the image of “shtetl poverty” that emerges has as much to do with the conditions which produce this poverty as it does with the experience of impoverishment. Poverty’s thematic image becomes tied to a setting of persecution and economic exclusion which says something about shtetls’ environments. Similarly, as each nostalgic image becomes connected through recognizing these interrelations among various qualities – here, between poverty and persecution – American Jews’ nostalgic encounters turn into world-building experiences. A viewer does not only see the individual representation or the typological image, but also the interwoven relations of those things within the overarching gestalt of “the Old World.”

In this way, the repeated visual cultural encounters which were discussed in the previous chapter underpin not only the hermeneutic processes of typological recognition and generalization, but also show viewers how certain environments determine the kinds of experiences within them. Individual features become products of their settings. Especially as the Old World is increasingly defined both as a hermeneutic gestalt and as a deliberately homogenized space – as was happening throughout the post-war period and alongside American Jews’ increasing exposure to nostalgic images – its audiences are able to see this larger picture. For instance, while the Lower East Side is valorized as a site of Jewish authenticity, that cultural character is enabled by qualities of the space: its dense Jewish population, its robust street life, its connections to Eastern European Jewishness,

and so on. These individual features set out nostalgic audiences' expectations for how one experiences the Lower East Side as an extension of Eastern Europe and, in that way, how this environment enables an "authentic" connection to other Old World sites. As much as Tevye's poverty is a product of his environment, Jewish immigrants' sustained cultural richness is similarly derived from the character of their surroundings.

This relationship between environments and their inhabitants is also a key part of how American Jews were experiencing suburbia in the post-war and mid-century periods. In terms of their lived experiences, suburban Jewry were constantly encountering socio-cultural expectations as part of their surrounding neighbourhoods. One can recall from chapter one that suburbia itself communicated specific values as a result of its deliberate development, placing emphasis on social homogeneity, domestic order, privacy, and communal security, among other things.<sup>3</sup> This lattice of values was strongly present in how Americans thought about the suburbs and what it meant to live there. This is why moving to suburbia was seen to substantially change American Jewish communities, forcing them to reshape and rearticulate their identities: suburbia came with its own means of socialization, communal organization, and culture.<sup>4</sup> Those living in suburban environments, and especially minorities facing socio-cultural pressures from the American mainstream, were constantly encountering these interconnected ideas as part and parcel with suburbia as a whole.

Recalling chapter one, the way in which environments' pressures play into their inhabitants' socio-cultural experiences is particularly evident in the religious revival of the 1940s and 1950s. In this period, Jews and other suburbanizing minorities had to reshape their identities in order to fit with the established mainstream's conceptions of who they were.<sup>5</sup> Particularly, the post-war idea of a "tri-faith America" pushed these minorities to identify in prescribed religious terms: while this revival enabled a certain degree of ethnic pluralism by including white groups such as Jews and Italian Americans in the American

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 38–39, 97–98, 119–21.

<sup>4</sup> See Harry Gersh, "The New Suburbanites of the 50's: Jewish Division," *Commentary* 17 (March 1954), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-new-suburbanites-of-the-50sjewish-division/>; Markus Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 35.

<sup>5</sup> See Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 21; Eli Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950-1970* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 120–21; Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 259–61.

mainstream, it also placed constraints on what Jewish or Italian identities could be put forward within that context. As one can remember, ethnic tolerance on the basis of religious identities allowed for Jews to identify most strongly with Judaism, just as Italians were cast as Catholics; alongside other white minorities, these groups came together under the umbrella of a “Judeo-Christian” American heritage.<sup>6</sup> This pressure was not only felt by groups who sought admittance to the American mainstream, but within certain spaces as well: suburbia was an exceptionally focused setting for this vision of religious American identities insofar suburban cultural expectations closely echoed those of the American mainstream at large.<sup>7</sup> In this way, living within a certain space – here, the suburbs – places individuals in close contact with attitudes and expectations which shape their communities and identities.

In this way, Jews’ experiences within the suburban mainstream are substantially determined by that environment. In the example at hand, the 1950s’ religious revival constitutes a dominant socio-cultural framework for minority identities. This framework establishes the concrete means by which Jews and other ethnic minorities built communities in suburbia; for instance, as was seen in chapter one, Jewish communities were increasingly structured around the synagogue.<sup>8</sup> This way of structuring suburban spaces, wherein synagogues dominate Jews’ social landscape, perpetuates the organization of Jewish communal activities in relation to those institutions and, on that basis, furthers the framing of Jewish communal identities through synagogues’ religious connotations. In other words, synagogues were a means by which Jews could fit into an American vision of a “tri-faith” society, and similarly encouraged a corresponding religious identity. This identity was a necessary extension of suburban Jews’ turn to synagogues for communal cohesion. In that way, the kinds of expectations which run throughout these environments establish the boundaries in relation to which suburban communities develop.

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<sup>6</sup> See Laura Levitt, “Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism,” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 2007): 808–10; Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity*, 120–21; Krahn, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Becky Nicolaidis and Andrew Wiese, “Suburbanization in the United States after 1945,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, April 2017, <http://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-64>; see also Harris, *Little White Houses*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> See Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 291–92.

However, this is not to say that those communities always take the expectations of the mainstream on board. As with the ethnic revival, when minorities were reclaiming their non-religious particularity, one can see that there are moments where groups are defining themselves against their encompassing and dominant frameworks. However, it is important to recognize that the environment remains present throughout these moments. The ethnic revival takes place in contrast to its previous religious revival and in conversation with the manner by which those religious ideas had been woven into suburban spaces. In a substantial way, the push for Jewish heritage in the 1970s acknowledges that those pressures remain a part of suburbia's cultural environment: publications such as *The Jewish Catalog* (1973) located Jews' cultural authenticity elsewhere, emphasizing urban Jewish history and particularly the nostalgic Lower East Side as antidotes to suburban constraints on minority identities.<sup>9</sup> This kind of thinking, which is echoed in suburban Jewry's turn to Old World nostalgia, reflects on environments' role in determining the kinds of experiences and identities which take place therein.

In this manner, questions of socio-cultural autonomy are especially important for understanding how these environments relate to their constituents. Whether or not a given group is able to control the character of their surrounding environments is a key consideration here. For instance, while Jews or Irish Catholics could join suburbia by emphasizing their participation in a "tri-faith" American mainstream, that environment itself remained determined by the expectations of a non-Jewish and non-Irish majority culture that continued to place pressures on these minority populations. These groups were included in suburban neighbourhoods – which came with substantial socio-economic privileges, as seen in chapter one – but those neighbourhoods as culturally-charged spaces did not change to accommodate such groups. This mismatch between suburban environments' expectations and inhabitants meant that, much as with *The Jewish Catalog*, those suburban spaces were seen as unable to support authentic or vibrant minority experiences. That vibrancy was reserved for where people could identify readily with their surroundings — such as the Old World or in other minorities' homelands, be it Italy, Greece, or Ireland. In all of these places, there was a perceived congruity between specific

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<sup>9</sup> Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 97–98; see also Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 156–57.

populations and their environments' socio-cultural expectations. This congruity is a cornerstone of the Old World's nostalgic image that will be unpacked further throughout this chapter.

On these terms, the experience of what it means to live in suburbia was perceived quite differently to how Jews' day-to-day experiences were represented in the Old World's nostalgic image. The crux of the matter is congruity: as American Jews encountered images of the shtetl or the immigrant neighbourhood, these spaces were imagined to support particularly Jewish experiences for their inhabitants because their socio-cultural expectations existed on the basis of that Jewishness. One can see this in how the shtetl is represented throughout nostalgic media. While suburbs were spaces where an American majority determined the norms, even in cases where Jews made up a majority in certain neighbourhoods, the shtetl as a nostalgic idea was grounded in its Jewish populations. This is represented in the way that those towns are imagined as consisting mostly of Jews.<sup>10</sup> However, more so, the shtetl's space is organized on the basis of this demography: inasmuch as non-Jewish peasants are nostalgically seen to enter the shtetl only on market days, rare occasions, and pogroms, the shtetl itself is firmly identified with Jewishness.<sup>11</sup> If the dominance of the synagogue as a sole Jewish institution is a marker of Jews' acquiescence to suburban norms, then the variety of Jewish institutions in nostalgic depictions of the shtetl point to how Jews were imagined as being able to engage with their communities on their own terms.<sup>12</sup> In this way, the nostalgic shtetl's constitution and day-to-day experiences are imagined to follow from its Jewish inhabitants.

This difference between the shtetl and suburb typifies a larger pattern of environmental awareness within Old World nostalgia as a whole. In many cases, the way in which nostalgic environments are depicted directly contrasts the daily interactions between mid-century suburban Jewry and their non-Jewish environments. The crux of the difference between these spaces is one of social and cultural autonomy: whether communities in these environments are set up in a way that works through Jewish

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<sup>10</sup> See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Introduction," in Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski, *Life is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), xx–xxi, see also xiv–xvi; Shulman, *The Old Country*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> See Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*, 45, 61; see also Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry*, Second Expanded Edition (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 30–31, 35; Shulman, *The Old Country*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> See David G. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 44–45; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 13; Shulman, *The Old Country*, 3–4.

expectations or demands compromise from their Jewish constituents. In suburbia, Jews do not have a hand in defining their surrounding spaces, and are expected to behave like white American Protestants – fitting in while becoming a “version of the same with a minor difference”, as Laura Levitt puts it<sup>13</sup> – while in the shtetl’s image, despite a substantial amount of political powerlessness, the strong presence of multiple Jewish institutions meant that this social environment was imagined according to an unfettered Jewishness. American Jewish audiences were consistently seeing this contrast through nostalgic images: the ability to define one’s cultural and social surroundings is a key part of Jews’ relationship with the perception of the Old World and its spaces.

This manner of reflection also points toward these images’ significance as a visualization of heritage as noted in chapter three, but here on environmental terms. As was briefly noted in the previous chapter, intangible heritage most often focuses on ways of life and everyday experiences as possessing value for communities and their identities.<sup>14</sup> It is this same emphasis that is meaningful here insofar as the Old World, as a visualization of American Jewish heritage, prompts reflection on these experiences and on the conditions which enable or preclude such experiences. In this regard, the presentation of idealized spaces in nostalgic imagery helps American Jews think about their own connections, personal and familial, to these kinds of imagined contexts; such environments tell a story about where American Jews came from and what kinds of experiences are part of that identity. Thus, when American Jews are seeing what identities are supported or challenged by certain spaces, they are also recognizing to what extent “authentic” Jewish experiences could take place within those spaces’ socio-cultural frameworks. Seeing representations of the Old World which illustrate Jews’ congruity with their lived environments demonstrates those experiences to an audience who, in the context of the mid-century ethnic revival, were deeply concerned with how to engage with this perceived authenticity and its associated identities.

What does this connection between heritage and space look like within American Jews’ mid-century nostalgia? Many sources – visual and textual alike – emphasize congruity, noting how Old World environments were principally oriented toward the experiences and expectations of their Jewish constituents. On the pulpit, Harold

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<sup>13</sup> Levitt, “Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference,” 808.

<sup>14</sup> See Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 2, 44; Suzanne Vromen, “The Ambiguity of Nostalgia,” *YIVO Annual* 21 (1993): 72, 78–79, 81.

Saperstein preaches about the importance of “a pattern” of life that organized Eastern European Jewish communities; through popular anthropology, Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog write of shtetls’ communal isolation as forming a haven for Jewish culture; in his photobook, Abraham Shulman notes how the Jewish structure of the shtetl served as “a fortress against the influences of the outside [secular and non-Jewish] world” for hundreds of years.<sup>15</sup> None of these ideas are about the actual qualities of these spaces, but look toward the encapsulating conditions which make those qualities possible. Similarly, with regard to immigrant ethnic neighbourhoods, their situation is directly involved in Jews’ balance between Old World and Americanizing tensions. That context guides the referents of immigrant enclaves’ image both with regard presence and role of Jewish institutions within urban spaces and the dialogues among Jewish communities and other American groups; this can be seen through descriptions of such neighbourhoods by Harry Gersh or Irving Howe.<sup>16</sup>

All of these descriptions inform the way in which American Jews were thinking about the contents of their nostalgic heritage. This is not only a matter of such direct statements, or even of certain environments’ depiction in nostalgic representations, but is part of the gestalt whole which American Jews were developing through their repeated and ongoing encounters with various nostalgic images. As mentioned earlier in this section, these gestalts’ importance as focuses for the nostalgic gaze demonstrates how American Jews were looking through the Old World’s explicit features and perceiving lifestyles, habits, experiences, and other intangible elements of its imagined contexts. After all, these gestalts often *are* the nostalgic environments which involve these considerations, much as how individual images of peddlers, cheders, and street scenes build into broader images of “the shtetl,” “the Lower East Side,” or “the Old World” itself.

Returning to the main question from the beginning of this chapter, looking at images in this way helps to better understand where the imagined Old World resonates with American Jewish values and concerns. Environments’ representation of their underlying

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<sup>15</sup> Harold I. Saperstein, “Fiddler on the Roof” (Manuscript, January 15, 1965), 4, Harold I. Saperstein Papers, MS-718, Box 4, Folder 1, American Jewish Archives; Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski, *Life is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 34; Abraham Shulman, *The Old Country* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), 171.

<sup>16</sup> See Gersh, “The New Suburbanites of the 50’s”; Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1976), 127–29, 169–224.

socio-cultural attitudes, and the way in which those attitudes are enacted within different environments, provides a language for American Jews' meaningful identification with their nostalgic heritage. This is especially pertinent for when the explicit contents of that heritage – such as a valorized poverty – seem at odds with this audience's mainstream context and socio-economic priorities. By thinking about how American Jews were perceiving Old World nostalgia through holistic gestalt images, one can see that these communities were not only interested in identifying specific desirable qualities within their Eastern European heritage. They were also thinking about the factors which enabled those qualities and the ways in which such settings had resonance and relevance for their own lived environments. This is because, as noted throughout this section, such spaces have a role to play in defining the kinds of experiences that are possible therein and the socio-cultural expectations faced by their inhabitants.

The Old World thus represents for American Jews a place of possibility. It is valorized as supporting a wholeness of Jewish experience because its spaces are organized and culturally patterned in relation to its own Jewish constituents, rather than being derived from its non-Jewish surroundings. The next section will look further at this distinction. Whereas suburban neighbourhoods exert non-Jewish socio-cultural pressures on their Jewish residents, Old World environments are imagined as completely congruous with the Jews therein: that is, those spaces' own socio-cultural attitudes are derived from those Jews' expectations and norms. In that regard, as will be seen, these environments become recognized as distinct "Jewish spaces." As opposed to the sorts of "American spaces" or, more specifically for this audience, "non-Jewish spaces" which characterized later suburban environments, nostalgic environments are distinctly structured on the basis of Jewish interests. This, in turn, enables robust identities and vibrant communities in ways that were desirable to mid-century nostalgic Jews. After all, these nostalgic audiences were constantly negotiating such socio-cultural dynamics within the suburban mainstream.

### *Jewish Spaces and Their Identities*

Up to this point, one has seen the way in which different spaces determine their constituents' socio-cultural experiences and how this comes to bear on American

minorities' engagement with mid 20<sup>th</sup>-century suburbia. A key idea from this discussion is the issue of congruity: whether a given cultural environment possesses the same attitudes as certain communities therein. While American Jews had to adapt their communal identities and networks to fit with suburban constraints – such as with a narrowed focus on synagogues as principal Jewish institutions – their nostalgic Old World heritage put forward a vision of what Jewish experiences could look like within other environments. In those places, whether the shtetl or the Lower East Side, Jewish lifestyles were congruous with their surroundings and, on that basis, were able to develop robust Jewish identities in ways that contrast mid-century suburban anxieties. In terms of thinking about Old World nostalgia, it is notable that these environments themselves are explicitly identified as Jewish. Their congruity with Jewish communities translates to them being seen as part of those communities' structures.

This section will explore the identification of “Jewish space” further, setting out the framework for recognizing how the Old World's imagined environments resonated with the experiences, expectations, and aspirations of its suburban Jewish audiences. In other words, they were congruous with mid-century Jews' perspectives, in addition to those of their imagined constituents, in a way that represented to suburban Jewry environments of possibility for strong identities and valuable experiences. In this regard, thinking about Jewish space expands on the hermeneutic relationship between Jewish audiences and Old World images: it explores where meaning is being developed out of the interpretive interactions discussed previously, in chapter three, and puts a name to the nostalgic appeal of certain gestalt images.

However, in order to recognize how suburban Jewry was perceiving the Old World as “Jewish space,” it is necessary to first flesh out that concept. This will involve setting aside the Old World for a moment and looking more closely at how American Jews were thinking about second-generation urban neighbourhoods. There is a much more explicit conversation around those environments which identifies them as Jewish spaces, and out of that conversation one will be able to recognize similar connections within American Jews' relationship with the nostalgic Old World. At the heart of this matter is not only the way in which certain environments were imagined as congruous with their Jewish inhabitants, but also the way in which that congruity was perceived as representing Jewish communities' ability to define and structure their surroundings. In this way, an attention

to second-generation Jews' reflection on environments' norms will help to provide the language for talking about third-generation Jews' attention to nostalgic spaces wherein those norms extend from Jewish concerns. Of course, this section will also approach some cursory Old World examples of Jewish space, but the main focus will be on defining this idea so that it can be applied more thoroughly to thinking about what Jews are valuing when perceiving their own environments and those of their nostalgic heritage.

This conversation will begin with understanding how "Jewish spaces" are recognized: on what terms do American Jews think about the kind of congruity that has been discussed in this chapter? This is largely a matter of to what extent certain environments conform consistently to Jews' expectations and norms. In that regard, there are three key components for thinking about these spaces' relationship to their Jewish constituents: naturalness, density, and autonomy. This section will explore each of these ideas in turn. First, looking at the description of second-generation urban environments as explicitly Jewish spaces, one will see how the ability to identify with one's setting is thought to encourage a natural, intuitive Jewish identity. This is not only a core feature of Jewish spaces, but is also a substantial part of why these environments resonated with suburban Jewish communities who, as discussed in chapter one, were thinking about the survival of their traditions and identities in suburbia. Expanding on this congruity between Jewish identities and Jewish environments, second, one will see how density is an important part of how individuals experience such natural Jewish identities. These spaces are constantly representing Jewish culture and community in two ways: on the one hand, by having a large number of Jewish inhabitants in close proximity, and on the other, by facilitating their interactions through shops, restaurants, institutions, and street life which reflects those Jewish inhabitants. Lastly, third, one will see how this density and its accompanying variety of Jewish experiences within a given space provides its Jewish inhabitants with an important degree of socio-cultural autonomy. They are able to set their own norms and expectations because their environments are part of their Jewish communities.

This discussion informs the Old World's nostalgic image by identifying how mid-century American Jews were thinking about these environmental concerns in relation to their own suburban context. By looking at urban neighbourhoods' desirable qualities, one sees more clearly the absence of those qualities within suburban spaces, and this

absence highlights the tensions which underpin mid-century Jews' relationship with the Old World's nostalgic environments. In other words, this approach to Jewish spaces among second-generation Jews establishes the grounds for later thinking of the shtetl and the American immigrant neighbourhood alike as similarly possessing naturalness, density, and autonomy. At its core, suburban Jews' inability to engage with the lifestyles which are presented in these nostalgic environments – whether in urban neighbourhoods or in Old World nostalgia – signals their inability to enact meaningful experiences within the socio-cultural constraints of the American mainstream. After all, the perception of prior urban neighbourhoods and Old World locations is that they all are spaces which enable Jews to live Jewishly, emphasizing the authenticity of their everyday experiences, as opposed to how Jews encountered suburbia's imposition of non-Jewish socio-cultural norms.

In this fashion, the perceived autonomies of the Old World, however limited by poverty and strife, represented something important for American Jews. Within novel suburban environments, as American Jews were questioning the form and vitality of their communities, they were also looking to these nostalgic representations of Jewish spaces as examples of authentic Jewish experiences. These images define for their Jewish audiences an aspirational heritage: these are the environments which, if Jews lived in them, would mollify the tensions surrounding American Jewish developments in the mid-century. Being able to encounter, perceive, and form relationships with nostalgic spaces connects with contemporaneous discourses around Jewish authenticity and, most pointedly, Jewish survival in this way. However, as with the current scholarship surrounding Old World nostalgia, it is important to note here that these representations of Jewish spaces do not simply assure their audiences that socio-cultural strength is achievable. Second-generation perspectives on urban environments define them as robust Jewish spaces while pointing also to the fact that suburban Jewry has given up those desirable environments alongside their integration within the American mainstream. The way in which these Jewish spaces are thought of as natural, dense, and autonomous grounds for Jews' socio-cultural experiences is thus part of an ongoing introspection as mid-century American Jews engaged their heritage in relation to the substantial changes in their everyday lives. One can see this when examining the valorization of Jewish space in more detail.

When looking at the idea of Jewish space, one sees immediately that these environments are imagined as seamlessly congruous with their inhabitants' Jewish

identities. After all, they are *Jewish* spaces. This means that they are thought to naturally inculcate Jewishness in their inhabitants and that those inhabitants are able to participate in Jewish identities by simply being there; the conditions of Jewish space support the continuation and development of such identities without much effort.<sup>17</sup> If one considers Abraham Fleischman's perspective that suburban Jews were becoming increasingly "self-conscious" on the basis of being "in most cases, a visible minority in a non-Jewish majority", one can think of Jewish space as inculcating an "unconscious" way of being: when everyone around oneself is supposed to be Jewish, one's own Jewishness becomes congruous and invisible.<sup>18</sup> The way in which second-generation Jews thought of New York City as a whole is a perfect example of this. That imagined urban environment stands out as an inverse of non-Jewish suburbia. While suburban Jews had to deliberately organize their communities and teach their heritage to their children, in New York it was thought that one had to do nothing to be Jewish; Jewishness permeated the space itself.<sup>19</sup> It is on this basis that Midge Decter, reflecting on her children, wrote that she surely would have sent them to a religious school if they were living somewhere like St. Paul, Minnesota. However, by living in New York, they were "living in a Jewish culture anyway."<sup>20</sup> Not only did her children grow up thinking that "everyone was Jewish", but "that they were members of the majority culture."<sup>21</sup> Decter was originally from St. Paul and felt this distinction acutely; there, in the minority, one either passed for non-Jewish or was "totally conscious of being a Jew all the time".<sup>22</sup>

This perception of certain spaces as natural Jewish environments was likewise noted well by others in the mid-century. Decter's perspective was echoed by Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum in their 1967 study of suburban Lake City Jewry. One can recall

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<sup>17</sup> See Riv-Ellen Prell, "Community and the Discourse of Elegy: The Postwar Suburban Debate," in *Imagining the American Jewish Community*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Waltham and Hanover: Brandeis University Press and University Press of New England in association with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2007), 71.

<sup>18</sup> Abraham A. Fleischman, "The Urban Jew Goes Suburban," *The Reconstructionist* 19, no. 2 (March 6, 1953): 23.

<sup>19</sup> See Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity*, 90; Marshall Sklare, "Jews, Ethnicity, and the American City," *Commentary* 53, no. 4 (April 1972), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/jews-ethnicity-and-the-american-city/>; Deborah Dash Moore, *Urban Origins of American Judaism* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 102.

<sup>20</sup> Midge Decter, "An Activist Critic on the Upper West Side," in *Creators and Disturbers: Reminiscences of Jewish Intellectuals of New York*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Goldstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 359.

<sup>21</sup> Decter, 351, 359.

<sup>22</sup> Decter, 351.

from chapter one that they noted how kinship groups and socially-insulated communities in urban contexts formed “a kind of circumscribed Jewish community” where direct social interactions both “unconsciously confirmed” and affirmed Jewish identity for spaces and individuals alike.<sup>23</sup> Eli Lederhendler notes a number of writers who agree with Sklare and Greenblum, and who argue that urban spaces such as New York City formed self-contained Jewish environments and conditions conducive to the easy articulation of Jewish identities.<sup>24</sup> Through the 1980s, in fact, these perspectives remained prominent in the discourse around how such Jewish identities related to their surrounding contexts. The sociologist Neil Sandberg, for instance, directly reinforces the persistent ideas around suitable Jewish spaces underpinning robust personal and communal identities, writing that “In the past, Jewishness was absorbed by young people as they grew up in Jewish community and family environments” because “They were immersed in a culture where Jewish language, behavior, and symbolism developed as automatic responses.”<sup>25</sup>

To draw out this idea further with an example, the naturalness of Jewish spaces is best represented by the way in which American Jews described and imagined their obligations to their identities and heritage. The basic premise was that, in non-Jewish spaces such as suburbia, they were expected to be Jewish on someone else’s terms. However, the interesting contrast is that, in the imagination of Jewish spaces, there existed the radical freedom to be not-Jewish on one’s own terms. This is to say that the natural character of the Jewish spaces also meant that they were imagined as places free from Jewish performance or obligation. For instance, Nathan Glazer, writing in 1957, notes that urban neighbourhoods that were most inflected with Jewish culture were also those in which Jews’ behaviours were the most flexible and irreligious. In other words: in which Jews did not have to do anything to be Jewish or to possess a robust Jewish identity. As Glazer states, while synagogue membership in these areas was low and practise was not guaranteed, “one could live a completely Jewish life from a sociological point of view”.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier: A Study of Group Survival in the Open Society*, Second Edition (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 251.

<sup>24</sup> See Eli Lederhendler, “New York City, the Jews, and ‘The Urban Experience,’” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 15 (1999): 52–53.

<sup>25</sup> Neil C. Sandberg, *Jewish Life in Los Angeles: A Window to Tomorrow* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986), 131.

<sup>26</sup> Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism*, Second, Revised Edition (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 117–18.

Instead, what made these places so definitively Jewish was how, despite the lack of a Jewish “consciousness”, “one could have only Jewish friends, eat Jewish foods, [and] follow Jewish mores and culture patterns”.<sup>27</sup> The passive enforcement of certain cultural expectations, rather than the deliberate performance of identity, supports Jewishness within these environments.

Some were even able to take this flexibility to an extreme, acting *against* Judaism within the framework of Jewish space while retaining a strong sense of their Jewish identity. Similarly to the possibilities for areligious Jewish behaviours, some living in Jewish spaces engaged with actively irreligious identities that were, nonetheless, enacted with a firm Jewish consciousness. For instance, the historian Nat Hentoff described his upbringing in Boston’s Roxbury and Dorchester neighbourhoods. As Moore notes of his autobiography, Hentoff talks about “sitting on the porch of his house in the heart of the neighborhood, scoffing at his more observant neighbors by eating a salami sandwich as they walked to synagogues services on the fast day of Yom Kippur.”<sup>28</sup> Hentoff had his own phrase for this relationship to his surroundings: he was enacting a “life as a heretic” tradition.<sup>29</sup> Flouting expectations of Jewishness in this way was entirely made possible by the fact that Hentoff lived within a Jewish environment wherein his identity remained secure, regardless of his own actions. While eating his sandwich, he remained in relation to those Jews he saw, and participated in a cultural community with them through his own means. His entire conception of a “life as a heretic” in the first place would have no meaning in suburbia; there, his actions would have no environmental expectations to contrast.

As one can see from these perspectives, unconscious Jewishness was itself the product of social as well as geographic spaces, which implies the second point for defining Jewish space as a concept: a certain density drives the “natural” identities of these spaces’ constituents. This means that various institutions, organizations, shops, and networks form the points of contact for the types of face-to-face interactions described by Sklare and Greenblum, among others, and that they do so with sufficient frequency to be seen as part of the environment itself. In more recent discussions around the idea of Jewish space, this same perspective is carried forward by writers such as Deborah Dash Moore, Riv-Ellen Prell, and Hasia Diner. Moore, for instance, notes how a rich public life

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<sup>27</sup> Glazer, 117–18.

<sup>28</sup> Moore, *Urban Origins of American Judaism*, 104–5.

<sup>29</sup> Nat Hentoff, quoted in Moore, 105.

extended from the density of Jewish settlement within ethnic neighbourhoods, which prepared the conditions for significant performative possibilities on behalf of these spaces' identification with Jewishness.<sup>30</sup> Prell accords with that perspective, writing that it is on the basis of such public life that Jewish patterns and practises could become part of the environment itself: "Jews lived their lives in urban streets, air, and public spaces. Even stores that catered to Jewish needs became a version of a Jewish civic square."<sup>31</sup> The most important thing for qualifying these neighbourhoods, she continues, is the sense of a shared and Jewishly-identified space.<sup>32</sup>

The crux of the difference, however, between an assemblage of Jewish-identified organizations and the presence of such organizations within a Jewish-identified space is density. Especially with regard to Jews' experience of urban American environments, the presence of Jewish shops, synagogues, and other gathering spaces within walking distance all meant that one could readily identify one's own Jewishness with the cultural character of the neighbourhood around them. It is to this extent that Hasia Diner writes of American Jewish areas that, in addition to immediate communities providing the basis for Jewish social life, "Delicatessens selling corned beef, salami, and pastrami; appetizing shops offering herring, smoked fish, and pickles; and bakeries that turned out aromatic loaves of rye bread marked Jewish space. Newsstands sold Jewish publications, and the basic tempo of life followed the cycle of the Jewish calendar"<sup>33</sup> The density of these experiences drives their identification with the environment itself insofar as they provide unique means for the representation of Jewishness, especially compared to other non-Jewish environments. Prell crucially links the prominence of urban Jewish neighbourhoods' diners, kosher butchers, Jewish bookstores, and other visible institutions with their role as conduits of Jewish cultural practises to this very extent.<sup>34</sup> The means of being Jewish in these spaces, she asserts, "depended less on formal membership than on the presence of kin and the overlapping relationship of work, family, and a variety of communal organizations... Fundamentally, Jewish life rested on the fact that Jews were in the majority of those paradigmatic urban neighborhoods, and Jews defined the norms."<sup>35</sup> In

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<sup>30</sup> See Moore, 103–4.

<sup>31</sup> Prell, "Community and the Discourse of Elegy," 70.

<sup>32</sup> Prell, 70.

<sup>33</sup> Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 226.

<sup>34</sup> Prell, "Community and the Discourse of Elegy," 70–71.

<sup>35</sup> Prell, 71.

thinking about the Old World's nostalgic images, one can recognize similar features in photographs of the Lower East Side, which boast a visibly Jewish street life through their depiction of dense environments, filled with Yiddish, peddlers, and crowded Jews.<sup>36</sup> Such images extend the aforementioned identification of the space's "natural" Jewishness to the imagination of how individuals would have been experiencing it, underscoring that urban Jewish spaces were constantly encountered by their inhabitants in ways which reinforced that identity.

The third key facet of Jewish spaces concerns whether or not the experiences of Jewish particularity inform the conditions within a given environment. In the case of Jewish spaces, this connection is made successfully. As one saw with Prell, for instance, the matter of experiencing a densely Jewish environment and perceiving that environment in Jewish terms is joined through a present Jewish majority and the ability of that majority to define its surrounding norms. This is also similar to what Diner has written when she states that the "tempo of life" followed the Jewish calendar in American Jewish neighbourhoods. In both of these cases, the conditions of the space are able to be determined by its Jewish constituents, rather than being imposed from without. This is especially important when thinking about the image of the Old World as well, since its imagination as a place of Jewish wholeness often involves the fact that its social functioning and cultural expectations are grounded in a localized Jewish milieu. In these various locations, the autonomy to socially and culturally regulate one's own community is key.

The importance of autonomy in defining Jewish spaces is crucial, since such control was not necessarily the case for all places where Jews lived, even when those places had a Jewish majority. Suburbia is the key example of this. As Prell writes, the mere presence of Jewish social organization in these non-Jewish environments was not enough to make them into these sorts of Jewish spaces: assembling together, acting in relation to one another, and spending time together did not change the experience of Jews' overarching environments, which, as noted in chapter one, remained grounded in pressures from the American mainstream.<sup>37</sup> One can also see this in primary sources. The way that Abraham Fleischman discusses suburbia's effect on Judaism, for instance, or how Harry Gersh describes the difference between urban and suburban Jewish lives are both

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<sup>36</sup> See Allon Schoener, ed., *Portal to America: The Lower East Side, 1870-1925* (New York, Chicago, and San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 69–100.

<sup>37</sup> Prell, "Community and the Discourse of Elegy," 70, 73.

indicative of these external conditions at play in a determining fashion.<sup>38</sup> This was also the case for other ethnic minorities in such environments. The photographer Bill Owens' seminal work on suburbia, *Suburbia* (1972), captures especially well how the particularity of American minorities is swept underneath the homogeneity of suburban American traditions such as eating hot dogs and celebrating the Fourth of July.<sup>39</sup> The white mainstream itself encourages its participants to adopt its expectations as their own.

This thinking around Jewish spaces runs throughout third-generation American Jews' perspectives on the Old World. While such perspectives are not as explicit as in the conversation around second-generation American urban environments, the perception of nostalgic environments within gestalt images – such as the shtetl and the Lower East Side – hinges its appeal on these same issues of natural, constant, and autonomous Jewish experiences. After all, both second-generation and third-generation Jews were facing socio-cultural challenges in suburbia. In that regard, mid-century American Jews' relationship with Old World nostalgic images draws from this discussion around Jewish space: it represents to its audience environments of socio-cultural possibilities within the framework that has been outlined here. The same feeling of belonging which fits with urban American environment's Jewish identities helps to make sense of nostalgic Jews' impression of the Old World as part of their own heritage. In the following section, this connection will be taken further, and the idea of Jewish space will be located more specifically in Old World images. There, one will see how the environmental features identified by second-generation American Jews help to recognize where suburban Jewry placed similar value within the Old World's perceived experiences and spaces.

### *Jewish Spaces in the Nostalgic Old World*

As American Jews were developing and engaging with their relationship to images of the Old World, both as depictions of Jewish spaces and as representations of their intangible heritage, those audiences' conversations reflected their own contemporaneous environments. Much in the way that second-generation Jews were thinking about the differences between urban and suburban communities, third-generation Jews in mid-

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<sup>38</sup> See Fleischman, "The Urban Jew Goes Suburban," 23; Gersh, "The New Suburbanites of the 50's."

<sup>39</sup> See Bill Owens, *Suburbia* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972), plates 44, 46, 50.

century suburbs were visually encountering images whose contents highlighted the distance between their own shifting context and seemingly-stable nostalgic environments. As noted in chapter two, the Old World is represented through these images as a timeless whole and, in terms of its relationship with the Jewish spaces discussed here, this timelessness lends itself to a fixed point of reference for Jewish identities. In contrast, the kinds of sustained compromises, adaptations, and pressures which typify American Jews' place in mainstream suburbs highlight the urgency behind American Jews' relationship with those nostalgic images. Within this relationship with Old World images, it is thus important that suburban Jewish identities are situated, through heritage and familial connections, in nostalgic spaces: the representation of an autonomous, robust Jewish society within overarching images of Old World communities and environments is meaningful for Jewish audiences within their mid-century moment of substantial socio-cultural change. The idea of Jewish space provides a useful language for locating on what terms this relationship provides such a resonant contrast.

This section and the next will look more closely at how the ideas of Jewish space are part of the Old World's nostalgic representation. These specific qualities of Jewish space that were discussed in terms of second-generation American Jews' urban neighbourhoods will be located in images of the Old World, though with particular attention to matters of naturalness and autonomy. Density is surely important as well – and tells an important story about the challenges that American Jews were facing in suburbia – but these other components of Jewish space touch more directly on the question of congruity that was discussed previously. That is to say that natural and autonomous Jewish spaces do not only concern the organizational structure of neighbourhoods and communities, as the matter of density does, but also highlight how Old World environments' norms and expectations are grounded in Jewish lifestyles. This line of thinking recognizes the presence of intangible heritage that was discussed in the previous chapter, and is important later on in this conversation for analyzing how spaces – in the Old World and the suburbs – affect the experience of that heritage.

The way that Old World nostalgia represents these spatial ideas is not as direct as in the previous conversation of second-generation urban environments, but it is nonetheless expressed consistently. This is especially relevant in terms of the gestalt images which form out of American Jews' ongoing relationship with the Old World. As noted previously

in this chapter and the last, the impressions, typologies, and recognitions which occur within mid-century American Jews' consistent engagement with nostalgic images has the effect of broadening what American Jews were seeing from specific qualities to the environments which enable them: visual commonalities, details drawn from captions, and communal discourses all help to define Jewish spaces by painting a picture of the world behind individual representations. It is in that broader image that Jewish space is a vital part of American Jews' engagement with the Old World. In this regard, this section will look primarily at the discourse around Old World nostalgia as a helpfully explicit representation of these gestalt images. Some specific images will certainly be relevant in seeing what Jewish space looks like for the Old World, but what is most important for understanding American Jews' nostalgia is how these individual representations build broader images and impressions which show to that audience the contents of their lived heritage: in imagining what the Old World looks like as a Jewish space, American Jews were thinking about what kinds of experiences those spaces involve. This will ultimately help set the stage for the next and final section, where attention will turn once more toward how these Jewish spaces are especially valuable in relation to their viewers' mid-century suburban context.

First, however, it is useful to locate how Jewish space participates in the imagination of Old World environments. From the outset, one can see how Old World Jewry is pictured as firmly entrenched in their Jewishness. As opposed to later suburban environments where Jewish communities were adjusting in response to the surrounding non-Jewish mainstream, Old World environments were imagined to make Jewish identities intuitive. After all, if you were Jewish in the shtetl, you would not identify as a peasant. Part of this rests on those environments' exclusion – Jews in the shtetl simply were not part of peasants' communities – but also represents a meaningful connection between nostalgic spaces and the way that Jews therein would have engaged with their own insular experiences of values, language, and behaviours which defined their identities. This is directly comparable to the way that naturalness was previously discussed as part of second-generation American Jews' urban environments, familial networks, and formational experiences. The result of this natural affiliation with Jewishness is well-represented in the way that Jews, as figures, are distinct in nostalgic images. A particularly strong example of this is featured in Raphael Patai's *The Vanished Worlds of Jewry*:

*This image redacted due to  
copyright.*

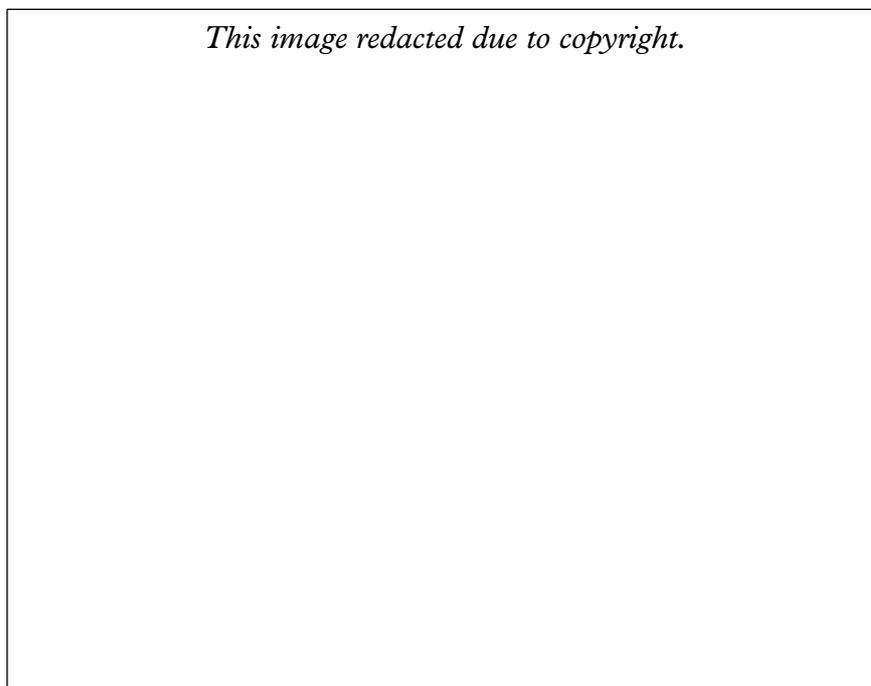
From *The Vanished Worlds of Jewry* (1980).<sup>40</sup>

This image is supplemented by a brief caption, “A deal between a Jew and a Huzul in Carpatho-Russia”. There is no question who is who. This photograph marks an especially strong difference by its visual language – the Jew’s black coat contrasting the Huzul’s white tunic – but it also reinforces certain Jewish features which would be familiar to a mid-century nostalgic audience. This Jew’s beard and black clothes mark him as part of the Jewish Old World by typological association with other photographs of “shtetl Jews”; this was seen in chapter two not only in the way that such bearded, Jewish figures populate the nostalgic imagination, but also with regard to the contemporaneous image of Hasids with which nostalgic suburban Jews would be familiar. The important point here, in thinking about the Old World as a kind of Jewish space, is that its environments produce these figures. The socio-cultural norms which structure everyday life in the Old World encourage this visible identification in Jewishness. In turn, this solidifies a Jewish identity to the extent where it is instantly recognizable not only through kippot or peot, but by way of beards, headscarves, and clothes in general, as well as imagined activities and behaviours. These consistent markers within Old World environments solidify Jewish identities’ distinction and make them intuitive for nostalgic viewers. In that way, looking

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<sup>40</sup> Raphael Patai, *The Vanished Worlds of Jewry* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1980), 58.

at another photograph of Polish peasants and Jews from *Image Before My Eyes* (1977), one has familiarity with who may belong to which group.



From *Image Before My Eyes* (1977).<sup>41</sup>

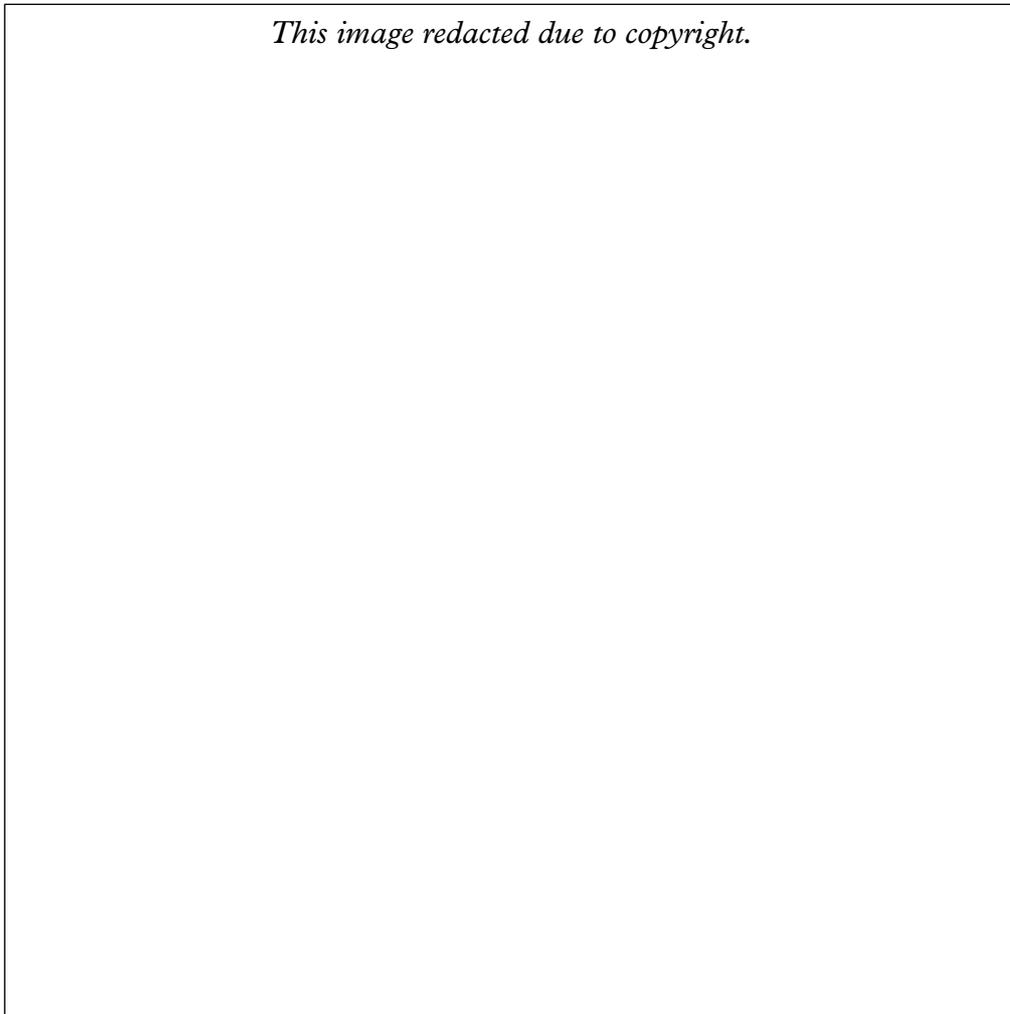
In contrast, one sees an absence of these distinctions clearly in suburbia. As discussed previously, rows of identical houses and suburban norms' firm pressure toward conformity shaped mid-century suburbanites in the image of the American mainstream. So, regardless of whether they were Italian or Jewish, Catholic or Protestant, people living in the suburbs lived in relation to the ideals of that mainstream. The middle-class nuclear family, as well as its associated possessions and lifestyles, was the definitive point of these environments' cultural reference; this common conformity came at the expense of visible differences among suburban groups.<sup>42</sup> Bill Owens depicts this well in *Suburbia*, where, at the end of his photobook, he includes portraits of the various people whose lives he has documented. Everyone appears part of one unified American culture, expressing the middle-class suburban household and its familial core, while ethnic

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<sup>41</sup> Lucjan Dobroszycki and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Image Before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland, 1864-1939* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 44.

<sup>42</sup> See Harris, *Little White Houses*, 86-87, 92, 109.

distinction is pushed out of sight. Only peoples' last names hint at their identities apart from the suburban mainstream — Volponi, McPherson, Goldberg, Schwartz.<sup>43</sup>



From *Suburbia* (1972).<sup>44</sup>

While suburbia represents an environment wherein everyone is like everyone else, Old World images depict a space where Jews are seen as Jews. This kind of intuition comes back to the idea that everyday experiences within those environments were also highly associated with Jewish distinction. This makes Old World Jewishness “natural” in the nostalgic imagination by showing how Old World Jews would have readily identified with Jewishness as their primary identity. However, the way of contextualizing Jewish figures in relation to their nostalgic surroundings also highlights another important aspect of

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<sup>43</sup> See Owens, *Suburbia*, plates 80-83.

<sup>44</sup> Owens, plate 82.

Jewish space: how Jews have an active hand in defining their everyday experiences through these environments. As mentioned previously in this chapter when introducing the idea of socio-cultural autonomy, the shtetl and other Old World environments were imagined as principally Jewish in both demographics and character. These factors connect their inhabitants with Jewish identities in the sense of Jewish spaces' naturalness, since the shtetl is imagined as intuitively Jewish, but they also point to the involvement of a similar socio-cultural autonomy at play. Since Jews make up shtetls and well-defined immigrant neighbourhoods, and since those spaces themselves are recognized as "Jewish," such Jewish populations are able to define their own environments' norms.

One can see this autonomy represented by daily experiences within Old World environments. These imagined lifestyles do not follow their surrounding non-Jewish majorities, but relate instead to Jewish communities, institutions, and socio-cultural expectations; Jews in both the shtetl and the American immigrant neighbourhood are represented as engaging with their surroundings on their own terms. For instance, Abraham Shulman's *The Old Country* (1974) celebrates how Old World life involves a variety of religious and ritual roles which extend from Jewish communities' own needs.<sup>45</sup> For Shulman, this is one facet of how the shtetl possesses its own professional world which serves the interests of its Jewish population. This kind of insularity is important for recognizing autonomy in nostalgic images, since seeing specialized roles within Jewish settings identifies ways in which Jews are able to act freely in responding to their needs. This contrasts other spaces, such as American suburbia, where those needs themselves had to adapt to their environments' demands: rather than fulfilling roles which continued communal traditions, the way in which Jews practised and engaged with those traditions substantially changed within the American mainstream. In this regard, when mid-century nostalgic audiences encounter representations of Jewish distinction that are interwoven with the regular operation of Old World communities, they are seeing ways in which those communities were able to practise their identities with a substantial degree of socio-cultural autonomy.

It is important to emphasize that this autonomy is specifically socio-cultural. While the kind of communal possibility that is represented in nostalgic images demonstrates Jews' ability to construct an environment that is congruous with their heritage, identities,

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<sup>45</sup> See Shulman, *The Old Country*, 12–13.

and norms, nostalgic images also continually represent these communities' lack of autonomy in other ways. As discussed in chapter two, Eastern Europe in particular represents a nostalgic environment wherein Jews' communities are ultimately at the mercy of their non-Jewish surroundings. The presence of political disenfranchisement and pogroms indicates a hard limit on Jews' control over their spaces. Nonetheless, these nostalgic images' relationship with their American Jewish audiences helps to make sense of why this socio-cultural autonomy is significant, despite its accompanying lack of political self-determination. Old World Jews' ability to structure their communities and cultural identities is what most informs the vision of heritage to which this nostalgic audience relates. As has been mentioned briefly, both in the previous chapter and this one, this emphasis has much to do with the way in which American Jews reflected on their own suburban situation by engaging visually with their nostalgic heritage. In this regard, what the shtetl lacked in political autonomy, it made up for in social and cultural autonomies which more directly structured its character. By contrast one can see that, although suburban Jews possessed an unprecedented level of political security within the American mainstream, suburbia lacked the robust social organization and cultural character for its Jewish populations to feel at home.

This balance of autonomies is also seen in nostalgically-imagined ethnic immigrant neighbourhoods. Although such neighbourhoods were certainly less insular than the shtetl, Jonathan Sarna and Deborah Dash Moore respectively note well how urban density creates the sense of a bounded Jewish space and an accompanying level of control, even among second-generation Jewish communities.<sup>46</sup> In this case, just as in the earlier immigrant neighbourhoods, Jewish environments persisted as a "largely self-contained subculture" of broader American society: locations which, while experiencing the forces of acculturation, nonetheless maintained control over their socio-cultural experiences on the basis of their "ethnicity, propinquity, and culture."<sup>47</sup> This is emphasized to such an extent in nostalgic media that, in Sydney Taylor's influential *All-of-a-Kind Family* (1951), the Lower East Side is even represented as "a foreign land right in the midst of America" — a perspective which carried through to nostalgic representations in the 1960s

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<sup>46</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 222; Deborah Dash Moore, "At Home in America?: Revisiting the Second Generation," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25, no. 2/3 (Winter-Spring 2006): 162–63.

<sup>47</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 222.

and 1970s.<sup>48</sup> As was discussed in chapter two, these locations took on similar conditions to shtetls in the Jewish nostalgic imagination, and in this case one can see how their perceived socio-cultural control enforced yet another point of similarity on the basis of representing Jewish spaces.

Within both Eastern European and American Old World settings, one can see how Jewish communities are nostalgically imagined as robust sites of heritage and tradition. Socio-cultural autonomy is particularly important for thinking about this image of communities and their environments, since it simultaneously highlights how Old World Jewry are placed in congruity with their surroundings – by having a hand in defining and sustaining them – and emphasizes how mid-century suburban Jewry are having to adapt to neighbourhoods and environments which conform to non-Jewish conceptions of their own heritage. One can see that suburban negotiation clearly in the post-war religious revival, as has been discussed throughout this dissertation: in highlighting religious institutions as central to their identities, American Jews acquiesced to others' conceptions of who they are, how they communicate their values, and how their communities are organized in the suburbs. In turn, it is thus others' expectations which set the parameters for suburban Jews' means of engaging with their communities, since the synagogue takes over from identity-laden neighbourhoods as the site of Jewish experiences. In this light, while Old World Jews are in control of the relationship among their communities, their identities, and their environments, it is clear how suburban Jews lack this socio-cultural autonomy within the broader American mainstream.

As noted at the end of the previous chapter, seeing nostalgic images of the Old World from this standpoint is both constructive and challenging for American Jews. On the one hand, visual encounters provide them with strong images of their heritage, reinforcing their identities. However, on the other hand, seeing the vitality of the Old World and its Jewish spaces highlights the distance between those circumstances and the constant socio-cultural pressures within American Jews' own situation. In that regard, one must think of these environments' possibilities within the context of the relationship between nostalgic Jews and their heritage. The meaning and resonance of Old World experiences, as enabled by and represented in their Jewish spaces, lies in how mid-century Jews look to the Old World as a marker of who they are within a very different set of constraints.

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<sup>48</sup> Taylor, quoted in Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 62, see also 72.

Within this framework, Jewish space represents to its nostalgic audiences the possibility for a full engagement with the contents of the Old World's heritage. So, when a viewer sees a specific depiction like the divorce scene from *Hester Street* (1975), where Gitl and Jake go before a religious court, they are not only seeing the representation of traditional practises but also perceiving the way in which those practises are naturally connected with the immigrant neighbourhood's Jewishness. Likewise, that broad image of a Jewish-identified space is imagined to inculcate and reinforce its own inhabitants' Jewish identities through constant engagement with their communal and cultural surroundings. Thus, nostalgic American Jews recognize in such images as *Hester Street* not only Yiddish signs – speaking to the density of Jewish populations – or the intuitive identification with Judaism – speaking to the unconscious naturalness of a Jewish environment – but the ability to apply that culture and identity to everyday lives.

This chapter's central question regarding what nostalgic Jews desire becomes clearer through this connection between Jewish spaces and Old World experiences. Whereas the Old World's crushing poverty or looming persecution mark the world that American Jews had left behind by the mid-century, the strong identification of identity-laden experiences with Old World spaces highlights, in conjunction with the historical context, what suburban Jews sought to connect with. As is evident within the ethnic revival, American Jewish communities embraced their nostalgic heritage as a way of reclaiming particularity after decades of socio-cultural development toward the mainstream. Those Jews' nostalgic gaze and their relationship with Old World images is a key part of how they were engaging with this moment: seeing this world and developing the meaning of their heritage in relation and response to its representations is itself an important experience for nostalgic audiences.

In the next and final section, this connection with nostalgic images will be unpacked further. By revisiting visual cultural ideas of viewers' impressions and recognition, one will see how nostalgic experiences play into a significant engagement with those viewers' heritage. This line of thinking once again highlights how mid-century American Jewish audiences participate in an ongoing relationship with the nostalgic Old World. However, what is different given this chapter's considerations is how this relationship is not only between Jewish audiences and explicit qualities within Old World images – such as was examined in chapter two, and discussed in chapter three's overview of current scholarship

– but is also a connection between mid-century Jews’ context and those images’ perceived environments. For example, the Old World’s poverty does not only reflect mid-century Jews’ relationship to affluence, but also the conditions of that affluence, the demands that affluence placed on Jews, and how non-affluent Old World environments were imagined to enable a different set of socio-cultural priorities. Thinking about mid-century American Jewish nostalgia in this way makes the matter of Jewish spaces particularly relevant for thinking about how suburban Jewish communities saw the Old World and what that experience meant to them.

### *Encountering Resonance and Meaning in Images of Jewish Spaces*

This final section will re-examine American Jews’ nostalgia for the Old World in two ways. First, it will revisit the overarching argument which has run throughout this chapter and the last: that American Jews’ engagement with images of the Old World is grounded in hermeneutics and visual culture. By summarizing the relevance of this visibility in building the relationship between nostalgic audiences and Old World images, the meaning of American Jews’ nostalgic heritage can be better situated within concerns about how that heritage can or cannot be realized within different spaces. Then, second, this section will look specifically at where those concerns are located in spatial experiences; the question of heritage and identity, after all, is intertwined with suburban Jews’ entry into mainstream American environments and the Old World’s depiction of different socio-cultural environments. Each of these spaces holds different implications for how their inhabitants assert, identify with, and experience their Jewishness. In that way, nostalgic images connect American Jews with an “authentic” Jewishness through the Old World’s environmental contrast with suburban spaces and their compromises with the American mainstream. Ultimately, the way in which these socio-cultural environments connect with American Jewish heritage contributes to a nostalgic narrative about who mid-century American Jews were and where their particular identities were rooted. This is a cornerstone of nostalgic images which is overlooked when looking solely at images’ qualities or purely at American Jews’ suburban context: it is necessary to think about the spaces represented through images to recognize on what terms the Old World, as a

world, represents socio-cultural authenticity, vibrancy, and sustainability for its nostalgic Jewish audiences.

This significance is experienced within the hermeneutic relationship that has been discussed in chapter three. While the Old World's image is something that was developed intentionally over the course of the post-war decades, as was seen in chapter two, it also gains significance as a representation of Jewish heritage through its visual cultural interactions with its Jewish audiences. Individual encounters with specific representations build, through impressions and consistent features, into gestalt images which indicate meaningful facets of the Old World as a whole. Because this engagement is discursive, occurring through ongoing engagement between images and audiences, the kinds of gestalts which feature in mid-century American Jews' nostalgic gaze speak both to the contents of their perceived images and the experiences of their viewers. After all, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the act of recognition says something important about the viewer themselves: the ability to perceive these gestalt figures and themes indicates that viewers are familiar with nostalgic representations and actively engaging with them. In terms of American Jews' nostalgia for the Old World, this active participation becomes active identification through heritage; as was seen toward the end of chapter three, the way that familial and communal connections play into Old World nostalgia shape it as such heritage for its American Jewish audiences.

The present chapter has focused on this idea of heritage, but through questions of environments rather than contents. Instead of American Jews looking at nostalgic images and thinking, "My grandparents looked like this," thinking about spaces' role in shaping lifeways and other points of intangible heritage shows that these images also communicate, "My grandparents had these sorts of experiences." As with gestalt images, the whole is as important as its parts. Here, the role of the environment as one such gestalt image supplements its individual representations to present and contextualize the grounds on which American Jews imagined their ancestors as having particularly valuable Jewish experiences. As has been seen through the discussion of "Jewish space" in its American and Old World contexts, there are specific conditions which are necessary to produce these experiences, and those conditions are notably lacking in American suburban environments. This forms a meaningful contrast. Thus, as American Jews

were encountering and engaging with their nostalgic heritage, they were also reflecting on these differences in lifestyles and noting the implications of those differences.

Many of these mid-century communities' contextual tensions and concerns from chapter one relate to this reflection on American Jews' contrast with nostalgic environments. As much as suburban Jews were looking at spaces where Jewishness was an intuitive and visible identity, they lived in spaces where their own Jewish experiences had to be deliberately organized. While children in the Old World were seen as steeped in Jewish culture and learning, children in suburbia were the focus of their communities' anxieties for Jewish survival. Whereas the Old World represented an uncompromising and bold Jewish culture – alongside the state of Israel – suburbia demanded compromise and dictated the framework Jews' identities therein. All of these concerns which typify the challenges facing suburban Jewry are absent in their imagination of the Old World. This is not just a question of qualities – how Old World Jews are different from suburban Jews – but one of environments: it is about how each Jewish community respectively relates to their surroundings, and what experiences those environments produce. In suburbia, Jews' experiences were constantly in the context of a non-Jewish majority which defined the expectations for those environments, while on the other hand, in the imagined Old World, Jews carved out spaces wherein they could define their own expectations and realize the contents of their heritage within everyday experiences which were inaccessible to those images' suburban audiences.

And so, in seeing gestalt images – be it the shtetl, the Lower East Side, or the Old World at large – American Jews were looking nostalgically at environments which visualize that kind of socio-cultural possibility. In thinking about the value placed on visions of the Old World, the fact that a space could stand on terms other than that of a surrounding majority is important. In the nostalgic image of the shtetl and the immigrant neighbourhood, Jews participate in a world whose norms extend from their own particularity, and this forms the basis for their strong identities and meaningfully Jewish lifestyles. In this way, one can see more clearly how Jews were not only valorizing specific qualities as representative their Old World heritage, but were also seeing environments as part of who they were and how they related with their American surroundings. For instance, *Fiddler on the Roof's* opening proclamation of “Tradition!” rests not only on the values of the shtetl's populace but also on their ability to enact those values within the

right sorts of spaces. Anatevka's dissolution at the end of the musical is thus representative not only of the loss of place, as its inhabitants move out from the shtetl, but a loss of space whereby former Anatevkans can no longer maintain their authentic Old World lifestyles. As Jerome Robbins, *Fiddler's* director, puts it: "Shtetl means my community, more than my location".<sup>49</sup> Fundamental changes in communities' environments entail similar changes within those communities themselves, whether in the Old World's dissolution or the move into the suburban mainstream, and thus Robbins' emphasis highlights the importance of spatial concerns as the grounds on which American Jews imagine the contents of their nostalgic heritage.

In this regard, one can see how the experience of heritage is the crux of American Jews' nostalgic concerns. The way in which spaces figure in Old World images highlights that communities' core activities within these environments – the engagement with Jewish heritage and the continuation of tradition – is dependent on those environments themselves. This connection between heritage and spaces' socio-cultural possibilities locates where American Jews were perceiving these experiences within Old World environments. An attention to the environments depicted in gestalt images also helps to make sense of how American Jews valorized the Old World while maintaining their distance from some of its key features. American Jewish suburbanites may not have wanted to run their lives through a religious court or regularly send their children to cheders, but they *did* find meaning in images of institutions which imbued the Old World's lived environments with Jewish identities. While suburbia and its associated pressures on Jewish life prevented the permeation of space in this way, funneling Jewishness into synagogues and specific social networks, the Old World's nostalgic image provides for its audience a strong vision of what an unfettered Jewishness could look like on cultural and social levels.

However, there is a continuing and significant tension at play in suburban Jews' focus on these images as representative of their identities. Insofar as the Old World, as Jewish space, is fundamentally structured other to suburbia's socio-cultural compromises, placing value in its spatial possibilities works against their participation in the American mainstream. It reclaims Jewish particularity and emphasizes Jews' status as cultural

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<sup>49</sup> Jerome Robbins, quoted in Alisa Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof* (New York: Picador USA, 2014), 140.

outsiders.<sup>50</sup> Yet, at the same time, Jews had a different angle on this heritage: they sought to contextualize these particular identities within their status as insiders. Matthew Frye Jacobson and Marc Dollinger both note well how, even within the celebration of particular identities, the narratives surrounding heritage in the mid-century reinforced white minorities' inter-generational paths into the mainstream.<sup>51</sup> This accords with the historical sources from chapter one which demonstrated how American Jews valued their integration within the mainstream, working hard to join the middle class alongside other Americans and taking on the associated changes in their institutional, cultural, and social lives.

This tension between particularity and inclusion is exacerbated by the necessary involvement of spatial experiences in defining the possibility for authentic Jewish lifestyles. This is often overlooked by current function- and amelioration-focused perspectives on American Jews' nostalgia. For instance, although Rachel Kranson argues that the nostalgic narrative and its resultant identity are compatible with Jews' newfound suburban environments, her perspective does not acknowledge that those identities are closely connected with their own nostalgic environments.<sup>52</sup> This is to say that Jews' nostalgia is not only a matter of claiming a certain identity out of perceiving the Old World's qualities, such as how ideas surrounding poverty contribute to the nostalgic image, but is also a matter of how those identities depend on their context in the way that has been discussed here. To this extent, Kranson is correct in writing that "The relative acceptance and abundance of the postwar years...seemed to threaten the very essence of their [American Jews'] Jewish difference [from other groups]", but oversteps in thinking that nostalgia can be used to simply reclaim this difference.<sup>53</sup> The specific features by which the Old World nostalgically represents Jewish heritage cannot be so easily separated from the environments which enable them, and that means that Jewish audiences will necessarily have to contend with the substantial divide between those values and their own socio-economic aspirations. Thus, at the same time as Jews were casting their nostalgic heritage in terms of American integration, as Jacobson and Kranson point out, they were

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<sup>50</sup> See Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 16.

<sup>51</sup> See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 89–90; Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2018), 108.

<sup>52</sup> See Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Kranson, 18.

also valuing particularity on terms which worked against their place within those suburban environments.

This difference points to American Jews' ongoing negotiation of their relationship with images of the Old World. As noted in the previous chapter, American Jews' nostalgic experiences connect them with a communal heritage, but the meaning of that heritage is being continuously developed through hermeneutic experiences. This means that the significance of seeing Old World nostalgia cannot be so functional nor so ameliorative as contemporary scholarship contends. Rather, as Kranson herself highlights, these nostalgic images challenge their American Jewish audiences by locating their cultural values outside of their own material environments. Much as with chapter two's discussion of "If I Were a Rich Man," where the image of authentic Jewish aspirations is used as a critique of affluent suburban Jewry – since they have the means, but not the will, to fulfill the desires of the nostalgic Jews they valorize – nostalgic images participate in complicated and often fraught means of locating mainstream Jews' communal and personal values within their contemporaneous suburban experiences. In this regard, nostalgic images represent a potentially unnerving conversation about the costs and benefits of entering the American mainstream. The way in which American Jews hermeneutically encountered images of their heritage and entered relationships with them reflects broader thinking within the mid-century ethnic revival where other white minorities were similarly questioning how their communal identities complicated their place in mainstream society. Visual culture helps to recognize these ongoing discourses through its emphasis on continuous hermeneutic engagement.

Looking back at the role of nostalgic images in these discourses, one can see that hermeneutics are an important part of American Jews' self-reflection. The immediacy, impressions, and resonance of nostalgic images makes them integral to American Jews' relationship with their heritage. As American Jews were thinking about the idealized experiences of Old World communities, they were seeing those lifestyles acted out on the stage, presented on the screen, and drawn into photobooks' narratives. However, these images are a complete package, so to speak. As seen throughout this discussion, the kinds of qualities which were highlighted in chapter two are wholly dependent on the world that stands behind them; matters such as authenticity or piety are the result of Jewish spaces and Jewish experiences therein.

To return to the question at the beginning of this chapter, this attention to space responds to the apparent contradiction between American Jews' affinity for the Old World and their strong attachment to middle-class lifestyles which contrast those of Eastern European Jewry. Thinking about how certain spaces inform their constituents' experiences highlights the role of the Old World's lived environments in defining the intangible heritage that resonated with mid-century conversations about what American Jews value — everyday experiences, natural Jewish identities, and continued traditions become hallmarks of nostalgic significance. Whether a space is hospitable to the social organization and cultural security that supports these environments thus plays a large role in determining that space as identified with or othered from Jewish identities within nostalgic images themselves. Alongside the explicit contents of those images, these spaces hold particular appeal for American Jewish audiences; their vibrant identities brightly contrast the challenges Jews were facing in the suburban mainstream, offering a vision of socio-cultural autonomy that supports instinctive and strong Jewish identities. This helps to explain why the Old World as a nostalgic whole remains impactful as an image of heritage while some of its explicit qualities – poverty and persecution in particular – run directly against the successes and desires of its integrated, affluent Jewish audiences. It is thus in the conditions surrounding those qualities that the nostalgic image demonstrates possibilities for its audience and, likewise, demands reflection from them.

And so, to restate this chapter's argument, these perceived qualities establish the Old World's environments as representative of significant Jewish experiences. Inasmuch as these nostalgic images depict the possibility for rich and authentic Jewish lifestyles, that World bears significance as a counterbalance to the compromise and uncertainty which typified mid-century American Jewish identities. In other words, the Old World escapes the compromises, the anxiety, and the developmental demands which were defining features accompanying American Jews' move into the cultural and social spaces of the suburbanized middle class. In this regard, the nostalgic vision of the Old World is actually a sort of power fantasy, as strange as that sounds. Within the context of political powerlessness – of pogroms, isolation, and anti-Semitism – the shtetl and immigrant neighbourhood exist as imagined bubbles of Jewish control. In terms of this dissertation's overarching discussion of the nostalgic image, and the way in which that image was encountered and experienced by mid-century American Jewry, one can see how the

imagination and perception of other spaces has meaning for Jews who were themselves encountering the confluence of multiple, intense, spatialized dynamics of their own. It is particularly relevant, given the issues of survival and the anxieties surrounding American mainstream integration, to take seriously this imagination of a space that is not beholden to those same pressures. For those seeing these nostalgic images, the viewer is confronted with a space of possibility – a “space of identity” in both the Eastern European shtetl and the immigrant enclave – which is equated with the realization of robust Jewish heritage, authentic Jewish particularity, and the guarantee of Jewish continuity.

## IN CONCLUSION

Throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, American Jews were looking to the Old World as a vision of strong Jewish communities and robust Jewish identities. The nostalgic images which depicted this world, snapshot by snapshot, enabled these Jewish audiences to encounter and connect with an idealized form of their heritage. However, while these images did provide representations of what vibrant Jewish communities could look like, they also emphasized the gap between the Old World's nostalgic contents and American Jews' experiences of their middle-class, mainstream lifestyles. In that way, these nostalgic images draw out the tension between minority particularity and mainstream privilege by showing to their American Jewish audiences the imagination of a heritage-rich world which is quite unlike their own suburban surroundings. The kinds of day-to-day experiences which American Jews identified with their tradition-steeped ancestors became part of the discourse around how Jews lived in mid-century suburbs, and how their own experiences supported or compromised their own Jewish lifestyles.

This attention to nostalgia as a mode of conversation about Jewish audiences' contemporaneous challenges is important, especially insofar as it demands this nostalgia is taken seriously. This is not how nostalgia is often handled at present. In popular discourse, nostalgia is often more closely associated with kitsch than heritage, and prominent voices in discussions of nostalgia – such as Svetlana Boym and Arjun Appadurai – focus singularly on individuals' own past experiences rather than acknowledging present-tense and communally-mediated forms of nostalgic desire. Old World nostalgia, being less about Eastern Europe and more about American suburbia, is thus cast as “ersatz” or “armchair” nostalgia — terms which fail to recognize the Old World's relationship with its Jewish audiences and its function as a form of heritage.<sup>1</sup> However, this dissertation participates in the growing recognition that nostalgia is a deeply resonant and present-tense phenomenon, independent of historical experiences. Rachel Gross, in her newly-published book on Jewish nostalgia as religious participation, phrases this recognition well when she writes that, “Even as critics disdain it as an inauthentic emotion, nostalgia fulfills individuals' search for an authentic past, creating communal

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<sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 76–78, 82; Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 38.

cohesion” through its rhetoric and connection with nostalgic groups.<sup>2</sup> Gross also points to material culture and concrete activities as an important part of this nostalgic engagement: eating at a Jewish deli or visiting the Lower East Side draws Jewish audiences into a close relationship with their nostalgic heritage.<sup>3</sup> As has been seen throughout this dissertation, the role of Old World images and the relationships inherent within spectatorship also participate in these dynamics. Through encountering and envisaging the Old World, mainstream American Jews were both developing a vision for their contemporaneous identities and reflecting on immediate socio-cultural challenges which surrounded their communities.

Hermeneutics shows that this discourse of heritage and reflection is implicit within American Jews’ engagement with the nostalgic Old World. Whether in *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Hester Street*, or through various photographs which circulated across different exhibitions and publications, these audiences were constantly encountering and developing the contents of their nostalgia. In the context of this dissertation, this was particularly relevant in chapter three, where one saw how hermeneutic processes underpin the way in which these audiences engaged with the representations of their heritage. Ultimately, it is these questions of experience and interpretation which are most relevant for thinking about the resonance and impact of American Jews’ nostalgic gaze. As this Jewish audience was developing the idea of a gestalt world, they were also reflecting on their own lives within the suburban world to which they belonged. This kind of experience-oriented reflection, which was prominent in chapter four’s discussion of distinctions between Old World and suburban environments, evidences an active relationship with this nostalgia. The important piece of this relationship is not that these images necessarily respond to their mid-century Jewish viewers with encouragement in the face of socio-cultural compromise with the American mainstream, but that they enrich that audience’s understanding of their identities, their heritage, and their everyday experiences as American Jews.

This shift toward recognizing nostalgic images’ position as a form of visual cultural heritage, and orientation toward the relational considerations involved in assessing such heritage, holds promise beyond this dissertation’s immediate scope. The way in which the Old World’s nostalgic images demonstrate a significant relationship with their audiences

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 29, see also 28.

<sup>3</sup> See Gross, 33–38.

reflects a broader way in which nostalgia is increasingly recognized as a contemporaneous and serious mode of discourse. Rather than a simply sentimental attachment, this way of characterizing nostalgia stresses that its reflection of communal heritage and development alongside identities typify a serious mode of engaging with contemporaneous concerns. As Gross writes, how communities participate in nostalgia serves to “construct a sensibility that profoundly shapes people’s lives.”<sup>4</sup> On these terms, the Old World is not an escapist image; mid-century American Jews were not stepping out of suburbia into its imagined richness. Rather, how that Old World was represented, discussed, and valued is a way by which American Jews were framing their position within the suburban mainstream, within mid-century America, and within their own continually-developing communities.

This use of nostalgic rhetoric remains relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, not least of all in media which continues to draw upon the same themes and identities that are present in mid-century nostalgia for the Old World. Questions of Jewish character and cohesion run throughout representations which, aptly for this dissertation, now turn to the 1950s and 1960s as moments of nostalgic heritage. The Coen brothers’ *A Serious Man* (2009) makes the connection between the shtetl and suburb explicit, drawing parallels in the experiences of those two locations.<sup>5</sup> Other works approach mid-century Jewish communities in a more straightforward manner: they place Jewish identity firmly in post-war urban environments, and especially within the kinds of neighbourhoods that were discussed in the previous chapter. The very first episode of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017–) embodies this nostalgia as, from its opening scenes, the show exemplifies a view of 1950s’ New York City as a space of dense, natural, and vibrant Jewish identities.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, *Transparent* (2014–2019) connects its contemporary characters’ Jewishness to earlier Los Angeles neighbourhoods reminiscent of Boyle Heights; these same Jewish spaces result in unshakeable – though critically-received – Jewish identities.<sup>7</sup>

This way of seeing the past and drawing connections into the present is the same kind of relationship that many mid-century American Jewish communities had with their

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<sup>4</sup> Gross, 193.

<sup>5</sup> See Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, *A Serious Man*, Prime Video (Focus Features, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, season 1, episode 1, “Pilot,” created by Amy Sherman-Palladino, aired March 16, 2017, on Prime Video, <https://www.amazon.com/Pilot/dp/B0875K26X2/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Transparent*, season 3, episode 8, “If I Were a Bell,” directed by Andrea Arnold, aired September 22, 2016, on Prime Video, <https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B01J4SSR58/>.

nostalgic images of the Old World. The visual cultural relationship at play across these various representations serves to reinforce, develop, and reflect upon contemporary identities for audiences of *Anatevka* and the Upper West Side alike. In considering the implications for understanding mid-century American Jewish nostalgia as a form of heritage in relation to the Old World's developing image, it is equally important to extend this thinking to the present: to acknowledge where depictions of American Jewish history come to form points of reference for contemporary identities — the ways that these media depict Jews as insiders or outsiders, or how they examine relationships with other minorities, demonstrate important aspects of how Jewish audiences develop alongside both an identity-laden heritage and their non-Jewish surroundings. This is especially important today, in complex and divided countries like America, as many Jewish communities are reflecting on their relationship with prominent conversations regarding LGBTQ+, Black, and other minority experiences.

In this way, highlighting experiential concerns in assessing mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American Jews' nostalgia for the Old World advances a broader conversation about the role of visual culture in producing and performing heritage. The way in which nostalgic images participate in a relationship with their Jewish audiences reflects an ongoing and dynamic engagement with those audiences' lived experiences, communal aspirations, and values. This must be taken seriously as a communally-driven and socially-relevant concept. Nostalgia is a key part of how Jewish communities developed in the mid-century, and it likewise speaks to how Jewish communities develop now. Communities' ability to form relationships with nostalgic images – from immediate representations to broad gestalts, whether encouraging or critical of their viewers – is a prominent reflection of such relationships with heritage throughout periods of far-reaching social, cultural, and economic change.

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