

Claudia Erdheim

The Shtetl

Galician and Bukovina 1890-1918

Vienna: Album Verlag für Photographie

Euros 22.00

(Miriam Y. Arani)

Photographs offer brief glimpses of the past, glimpses all the more valuable when other possibilities of recollecting the past are either difficult or sheer impossible. Claudia Erdheim found that the photographic process invented in 1839 made it possible for her to collect visual testimonials of Yiddish shtetls in Eastern Europe wiped out by the Nazi regime. Motivated by friends at the Jewish Museum in Vienna, she attempted to supplement the photographic legacy she had inherited from her grandfather with other photographs and images. It was thus that she began doing research in archives, libraries and museums in what is today Western Ukraine and buying photographs or reproductions of photographs from local dealers and collectors.

The photographs in Claudia Erdheim's book "The Shtetl" depict Eastern Galicia at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century. The term "shtetl" does not refer to a geographic location, but rather to the numerous villages, towns and city districts in Eastern Europe once inhabited by Jews. The shtetls emerged in the late Middle Ages when Boleslaw III permitted the Jews who were fleeing persecution in Western Europe to settle in the Polish Piast Dynasty. In the course of the division of Poland, Galicia became part of the Austro Hungarian Empire at the end of the 18th century. The title of Claudia Erdheim's photo book indicates her focus on Galicia and Bukovina, two of the crown lands of the Austro Hungarian Empire and their capitals Lvov and Chernovits (today Chernivtsi, Ukraine).

Up until now only very few photographs have been published revealing Jewish life in Eastern Europe. In Eastern Galicia Polish owners of large estates often dominated Ukrainian farmers and at the time the photographs in Claudia Erdheim's book were taken, the Jewish "shtetl" was undergoing a radical transformation. About a quarter million Galician Jews were in the process of emigrating to the West. At the end of the 19th century crude oil had been discovered in Boryslav near Drohobych. Numerous oil companies emerged and the

population grew at a very fast rate. Moses Hersch Erdheim, Claudia Erdheim's great-grandfather, managed to climb the social ladder and become an oil magnate who could afford to finance the university education of his two sons in Vienna (see photos 22, 23).

Sishe (Siegmond) Erdheim – one of the two sons of the oil magnate – photographed the world he had known as a child whenever he was back on vacation as an adult (photos 12-22). Like his contemporaries who at that time also lived in big cities, he was probably rather sentimental when looking back on life in the “shtetl”. It was a world in which Yiddish was the language of everyday life and religious tradition still played a comparatively big role in the lives of the people. Yet Sishe's photographs of Jewish Boryslav in 1910 are by means nostalgic. They bear witness to the social differentiation of Galician Jews at the time of industrialization. The difference in hairstyles and clothing worn by Jewish managers and workers is unmistakable on the photographs. Moses Erdheim, portrayed in his social and cultural environment, does not appear a “capitalist” but rather a “patriarch”. Many of the photographs suggest the predominance in the Jewish population of modest craftsmen, workers and merchants.

As a whole, the photographs in this volume reveal little about the Jewish community in the “shtetl”. The editors point out that not all photographs portraying people concern Jewish history in a narrower sense. Unfortunately, they don't mention that most of the people portrayed cannot be assigned to any one nation or religion on grounds of their outer appearance. Only those boys with peyess (photos 45, 72) and those men with full beards and more or less middle-class or proletarian headgear (hat or cap) often captured in the photographs are clearly Jews. Most conspicuous of all were Chassidic Jews in festive clothes and prayer coats with fur lined hats (photos 30, 40, 58 and 78). This is probably why they were photographed so often.

The introduction by the publishers giving the historic context in which the photographs of this volume were taken is certainly useful. Yet the attempt of the publishers to trace the particular selection of photographic themes back to a Jewish culture and identity – even though the photographs depict scenes which were probably common in the Jewish life of that time – seems superfluous, if not misleading. Especially the publishers' many thoughts on the use of photography in Jewish areas of settlement in Eastern Europe seem artificial. It is, after all, well known that photography spread throughout the industrialized cities much quicker than to

the rural areas. It was mostly affluent city dwellers - of no one religion or nationality - who photographed the poor country folk. Those who are interested in the use of the medium of photography in Jewish society of Eastern Europe during the late 19th and early 20th century should consult the standard work by Lucjan Dobroszycki and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (*Image Before My Eyes. A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland Before the Holocaust*. New Yor. Schokken Books, 1977).

The photographs taken by Sische Erdheim are not the only invaluable source of historic material. Those photographs depicting synagogues and adjacent schuls are just as informative. In the easily accessible surveys of Eastern European synagogues there are usually only few photographs of Jewish sacral architecture in Galicia and Bukovina. The photographs of important synagogues in Eastern Galicia and Northern Bukovina published in “The Shtetl” are therefore a most valuable addition to those of existing publications. Moreover, the book contains photographs of Jewish “temples” in Northern Bukovina such as those in Wisnitz (photos 71-71) and in the capital of the crown land Chernovits (photos 73-75). Most of the photographs that are of value in regard to the history of architecture were taken in Eastern Galicia. These include photographs of both the exterior and interior of the synagogue of Przemsyl (photos 6-8) and of several synagogues in Lvov such as the Old Synagogues (photo 31), the Turei Zahav or Golden Rose Synagogue (photo 34) and the Hasidic synagogue built at the beginning of the 19th century (photos 28-29). Other photographs published in this volume which will be of particular interest to the reader are those portraying synagogues in the cities of Brody and Drohobycz, cities that later fell into oblivion (both cities are today in the Ukraine). The men of Boryslav dealing in crude oil lived in the city of Drohobycz. Half of that city’s residents were Jews. Their number doubled in size at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century. The affluence and large size of the Jewish communities is reflected in the local sacral architecture which includes an exterior view of the New Synagogue and interior and exterior views of the Old Synagogue – the largest Jewish religious building in the crown land of Galicia (photos 9-11). Historic photographs of synagogues in Brody – the “Old Schul” and the “New Schul” (photos 45-52) – remind one of the glamorous past of a city which since the end of the 18th century had been an economically flourishing free trade zone and then become a German speaking center for Jewish cultural education.

Although the publication certainly has many merits, its shortcomings need also be mentioned. “The Shtetl” uses the spelling of the names of towns as they are found in the *Wiener Allgemeines Ortslexikon* of 1906, making it very difficult to find them on modern maps. The change in names of these towns over the course of time is unfortunately hardly mentioned. Moreover, too many historic photographs on each page make it difficult to fully appreciate each single one. Yet Claudia Erdheim has presented to the public a carefully selected and informatively commented collection of photographs that are by no means easily accessible. They reflect an era of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in an area that is today the Western Ukraine and eastern Poland.

(First published in German language in: *MEDAON. Magazin für jüdisches Leben in Forschung und Bildung*, Heft 3, 2008 – URL <http://www.medaon.de> - shorter version in: *Rundbrief Fotografie. Analoge und digitale Bildmedien in Archiven und Sammlungen*. Vol. 16, 2009, No. 2, p. 34-35)