

## A Strict Teacher

In 1925, education in the town was a mix of the medieval and the modern. Only a few years earlier there had been three [traditional teachers]. Only one [..], who was also the synagogue caretaker, remained. Everyone knew that he was ineffectual. The five- and six-year-old children, who were put in his care until they reached the age of ten, barely succeeded in mastering a little Hebrew and a smattering of Bible knowledge. But people made excuses, saying that a child must be sent to *heder*. The [teacher] beat the children and gave each one a nickname: Yakum the Bomb, the Philosopher, and the like. The method of instruction consisted of learning to read letters, then syllables, then whole words, and so on. A group of five or six of the more intellectual families hired a private teacher who, as might be expected, was a Hebraist. He taught all subjects: Bible, Hebrew, natural science, even Lithuanian.

I had occasion to meet one of the *heder* teachers, a former scholar who spent all his time in a small house of study. His method was to strike terror in the hearts of the children. The six- or seven-year-old children spent from nine o'clock in the morning until sundown (in summer) in *heder*. The teacher let them go home for only a single hour during the day. They had to stay in the classroom even when another class was being taught. They were forbidden to speak to each other. This teacher often punished the children by ostracizing them, forbidding all of their classmates to utter a single word to those being punished; it was a sort of boycott. This punishment had a dreadful effect on the children. They cried a great deal, would not eat, and could not sleep. One seven-year-old girl became ill. One mother, whose child had been struck by the teacher, went to see him and created a scene; "If you are going to hit anything, hit your own head against the wall," she shouted. Still, even this teacher was kept on in the village for two entire terms. "But children really did accomplish something in Bible and Hebrew," several fathers told me. For this, the modern small-town Jew was ready to sacrifice even his own child.

The town had a Lithuanian progymnasium, where eight Jewish girls were among the students (12 percent of the enrollment). Boys were not sent there. ("What can one do with a girl?" the small-town Jew would say.) Six sons of prosperous families studied at Hebrew gymnasia in large cities. One boy was enrolled in a Russian gymnasium in Kovno. The town has one student studying at the yeshiva in Słobodka. There were five boys studying Gemara<sup>1</sup> in the town itself.

Excerpted from Hirsz Abramowicz, "A Lithuanian Shtetl," in *Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II*, ed. Dina Abramowicz and Jeffrey Shandler, trans. Eva Zeitlin Dobkin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press in cooperation with YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1999), 92.

---

<sup>1</sup> Talmud.