

## Life in 1940s Poland: The Setting of *The Devil's Arithmetic*

When Hannah Stern opens the door for the prophet Elijah at her family's Passover seder, she suddenly finds herself in another time and place—a small Jewish village in Eastern Europe during World War II. Although Jane Yolen never names the exact country in her book *The Devil's Arithmetic*, the details make it clear that the story takes place in Poland during the 1940s, a time of great danger and tragedy for Jewish people. Understanding what life was like for Jewish families in this place and time helps readers appreciate the world Hannah enters and the importance of remembering history.

### A Country at War

In 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland, beginning World War II. The German army quickly took control of the country, forcing millions of Polish people—especially Jews—under strict and cruel laws. Jewish families were ordered to leave their homes and move into crowded ghettos or were sent to labor and concentration camps. Families were separated and murdered, traditions were banned, and simple joys such as celebrating a holiday or going to school were taken away.

### Life in a Shtetl

Before the war, many Jewish families in Poland lived in small villages called shtetls. These communities were close-knit, with neighbors helping one another and sharing traditions passed down through generations. Shtetls were Jewish communities centered around their cultural and religious traditions. In her book *The Devil's Arithmetic*, Yolen imagines a town she calls Viosk, which is based on these historic Jewish towns. The sudden and tragic destruction of the town by the Nazis is a major plot point in the book, reflecting the fate of these communities during the Holocaust.

As shown in the book, shtetl communities centered around a vibrant economy and a deep religious faith. At the center of a shtetl, visitors would find the market and the synagogue. Bustling with people, the market was a place where businesses thrived including pharmacies, barbershops, taverns, and stores. Near the market was the synagogue, a house of prayer, a place of study, and a communal center for Jewish people to meet and socialize.

In shtetl communities, life was highly organized so that things ran in the best possible manner. The synagogue functioned as a town hall where important community matters were discussed and decided. Various charitable organizations were based in the synagogue, including providing aid for the poor, visiting the sick, handling burial services, and arranging marriages. Families lived in the same shtetl for generations, forming closely knit communities where everyone practiced the same faith.

Two modern-day movies are mentioned in the book that depict life in a shtetl—*Fiddler on the Roof* and *Yentl*. If you have seen these movies, then you have a good idea what these communities were like.

Shtetl life became a powerful symbol of a distinct and resilient Jewish identity in Eastern Europe—a world that was largely lost during the Holocaust. Today, some communities have rebuilt a shtetl existence elsewhere to simulate the quiet and wholesome pre-World War II Jewish life.

## Jewish Traditions and Customs

Jewish traditions and customs play an important part in the story *The Devil's Arithmetic*, reminding us how important it is to celebrate and be grateful for the present life while remembering the past. Some of the Jewish traditions and customs mentioned in the book include weekly observances of Shabbat, daily prayer, lighting candles, wedding ceremonies, and the Passover holiday. These are just some of the traditions and customs that the Jewish people celebrate.

**Shabbat (Sabbath):** A weekly day of rest from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, observed by refraining from work and commerce and focusing on family, prayer, and study. A special family meal on Friday night typically includes lighting candles, eating challah bread, and drinking wine.

**Daily Prayer:** Many observant Jews pray three times a day, often in a synagogue for communal prayer.

**Lighting Candles:** A common ritual on Shabbat and festivals is the lighting of candles, symbolizing God as light.

**Passover:** A holiday about remembering and celebrating the Jewish people's freedom and resilience. The story of the exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt is recounted on the first night of the Passover at the seder meal. Symbolic foods help families remember the story and retell it through readings, songs, and discussions, with a special focus on the four questions traditionally asked by the youngest child. The seder meal ends with the door being opened for Elijah, the harbinger of hope.

**Remembering:** Connecting all the Jewish traditions and customs is the act of remembering. The commandment to “remember” is repeated nearly two hundred times in the Hebrew Bible. It is not just about recalling the past but actively reenacting it through rituals like Passover and storytelling to honor ancestors and learn from history—the triumphs and tragedies.

It seems fitting that Jane Yolen wrote about the Holocaust through the time travel genre, giving the present-day character of Hannah the opportunity to live the past to understand its importance in the present.

- Read about the Four Questions, the Haggadah, and the Passover seder in the glossary provided at the back of the book.
- Take a virtual field trip to the shtetl of Anatevka in the movie the *Fiddler on the Roof* (optional). Visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDtabTufxao> (4:47).
- Take a virtual field trip to learn about the Passover and seder traditions (optional). Visit [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzsuL9U1a\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzsuL9U1a_k).