

ANATEVKA: THE FICTIONAL CITY I WOULD MOST LIKE TO INHABIT

by Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe



Syosset, New York

The Atlantic magazine (Sept. 2015) asked The Big Question: What Fictional City (Or Other Locale) Would You Most Like To Inhabit?

The possibilities included:

Rivendell, a Tolkien creation

The London of J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan

Dr. Seuss's Who-ville, where everyone is smiley, happy and friendly 24/7. Who can forget Mayor, Ned McDodd, the oddball politician who can barely control his 97 children. BTW, Who-ville turns out to be a tad more expensive than you probably thought. A resident economist estimated that a home in Who-ville will cost you about \$1,365 [in 2012].

Source: Movoto.com.

Innisfree, the scenic Irish village where John Wayne retires in "The Quiet Man." According to Wikipedia, Atlantis, a fictional island, has become a byword for any and all supposed advanced prehistoric lost civilizations. It continues to inspire contemporary fiction, from comic books to films.

Bedrock, the fictional prehistoric city which is home to the animated TV series, "The Flintstones." Who can forget their drive-in restaurant serving

Brontosaurus ribs, Roc Donald's, Maison-La Rock, and Le Chateau Rockinbleau!

The Island from Lost

Lewis Carroll's Wonderland

Not mentioned was Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average. "The Onion" [newspaper] reported in 2009, "Two Dozen More Bodies Found In Lake Wobegon." "What's the use in complaining?" Irene Bunsen, Clarence's sister-in-law, told reporters. "It's like the cold weather. Everyone has to deal with it, so it's better to just keep quiet. And besides, maybe Pastor Inquist and his wife deserved to die after they went to Florida for that one week in January while the rest of us sat here and froze."

Also not mentioned is Chelm, the mythical town in Poland, where all the residents are usually happy, gentle, folk who also share another virtue-they are considered fools by everyone living outside of Chelm.

According to Seymour Rossel, "In Chelm, the wisest thing you ever heard was spoken by the LAST person who spoke, In Chelm, the most foolish thing you ever heard was spoken by the LAST person who spoke, Therefore, the next Chelmer to speak will always have something WISER AND MORE FOOLISH to say."

And, finally, there's the fictional (1905) Russian village/"shtetl" in Fiddler on the Roof: ANATEVKA.

Maurice Samuel ("In Praise of Yiddish") described a "shtetl" as follows:

The shtetl is remembered by the older generation with affection and tenderness because it represents a marvelous and vanished time of secure personality, a time when there was no sickly problem of identity. But we must not romanticize the shtetl; we must not conjure up populations of scholarly and saintly tailors, shoemakers, peddlers, butchers, coopers, tinsmiths, shopkeepers, living an otherworldly life. There was poverty, snobbery, exploitation, and sharp social division; there was squalor and injustice; and for the majority the cultivation of spiritual enjoyment was limited and intermittent. But the wonder of it is that such enjoyment did exist,

and in a degree unknown to the surrounding world; and with it existed an awareness seldom encountered elsewhere that there was a higher life to which even ordinary folk could aspire.

The richness of shtetl life helps to explain why so large a proportion of gifted writers and thinkers came from places hard to find on the maps and now remembered only for their famous sons...it is hardly to be doubted that the shtetl showed a much larger per capita yield of creative figures than the Jewish urban population.

Why would I like to inhabit Anatevka?

To experience firsthand what the play "Fiddler on the Roof" was all about. It was not just a man and his unmarried daughters. It was about the struggle to preserve tradition in a changing world.

Life in Anatevka is very much governed by "traditsye" (tradition). The residents include Tevye, the Dairyman. He's a likable, hard-working person who sees the positive side of life. He has raised his daughters according to the Scripture, many of which he invents himself. He is humorous ("humoristish") and relaxed, but when pushed, Tevye can be stubborn ("farakshnt") and get angry ("broygez"). He sings many numbers including "Tradition," "If I Were a Rich Man," "To Life," "Sunrise, Sunset," and my favorite, "Do You Love Me?"

Alisa Solomon, drama critic and professor at Columbia, says that "Tevye emerges, not as a lovable shnook or a grandfatherly Molly Goldberg, but as something stronger, a male Mother Courage, a symbol of strength and endurance."

Golda, Tevye's wife, is the real strength behind Tevye. She keeps the whole family going. She is very concerned that her daughters make good matches and have easier lives than she and Tevye had. She sings in "Tradition," "Sunrise, Sunset," and "Do You Love Me?"

Yente, the matchmaker, is an older ("elter") woman who matches up the "yung" people of the village ("dos dorf") in the hope that they will marry. She is the village busybody ("kokhleff") She sings "Tradition" and "Anatevka."

Lazar Wolf, the butcher ("der katsev"), the town's wealthiest citizen, is about the same age as Tevye, maybe even older ("elter"). He wants

to marry Tevye's daughter, Tzeitel, promising to give her a good and secure life. It doesn't happen!

Tzeitel, is the first ("ershter") daughter to marry and the first to challenge the traditions. She marries Motel, the tailor ("der shnayder"). He's rather meek and miserably poor. He's a nervous, but lovable character who comes into his own. His blockbuster solo, "Miracle of Miracles."

Hodel, the second eldest daughter, becomes intrigued with the radical, young student, Perchik, and eventually leaves Anatevka to marry him in Siberia, where he has been imprisoned for his reform activities. Such "hartsveytik" (heartache) for the family!

Perchik is a visitor ("bazukher") to Anatevka, and therefore, an outsider. He brings with him "radikal" new ideas that challenge the villagers' traditions. Tevye and Perchik discuss money:

Tevye: Again with the rich! What's wrong with being rich? Perchik: It's no reason to marry. Money is the world's curse.

Tevye: May the Lord smite me with it. And may I never recover.

Chava, the third eldest daughter, is the scholarly child who falls in love and runs off with Fredka, a Russian soldier. Chave delivers the coup de grace, intermarries. This truly breaks her father's heart. He challenges Tevye's imposed silence towards him.

Grandma Tzeitel is a ghost figure who appears in the Dream Scene and sings "Mazeltov" "Mazeltov," endorsing the marriage of Tzeitel with Motel.

Fruma-Sarah is also a ghost figure. She portrays Lazar Wolfe's departed wife who becomes enraged that her husband plans on marrying Tzeite.

The Constable is the Russian military official stationed near Anatevka. He knows the villagers well, particularly Tevye. These relationships don't prevent him from carrying out violence ("gvald").

William Deresiewicz ("The Jewish Mark Twain"), wrote, "In the original ["Fiddler"], Tevye wanders off he knows not where, his narrative concluding on a note of fatalism and disorientation. Later, he and his remaining children head off for America."

And, finally, I'd like to inhabit Anatevka and join the residents in the words to this song:

...Someone should have set a match to this place years ago.

A bench, a tree.

So, what's a stove? Or a house?

People who pass through Anatevka don't even know they've been here.

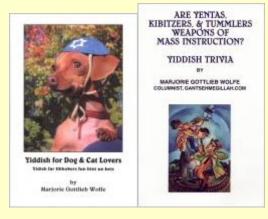
Anatevka, Anatevka.
...Underfed, overworked Anatevka
Where else could Sabbath be so sweet?
Anatevka, Anatevka.
Intimate, obstinate Anatevka,
Where I know everyone I meet.

Soon I'll be a stranger in a strange new place, Searching for an old familiar face From Anatevka.

I belong to Anatevka, Tumble-down, work-a-day Anatevka. Dear little village, little town of mine.

Search for Stories Beginning with the Letter												
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Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe is the author of two books:



"Yiddish for Dog & Cat Lovers" and "Are Yentas, Kibitzers, & Tummlers Weapons of Mass Instruction? Yiddish

Trivia." To order a copy, go to her website: MarjorieGottliebWolfe.com

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