

Chana Kowalska- *The Shtetl*- Oil on canvas- 1934.



Overview of painting

The painting shows a traditional village '*Shtetl*' in Eastern Europe during the 1930s. A *Shtetl* is the Yiddish word used to describe the small towns or villages of Jewish communities which were commonly found in Russia or Poland during the 19th and 20th centuries. The village's population consisted mainly of Jewish residents although non- Jewish residents also resided within some of these communities. The *Shtetl* was typically seen as a rural market town, with the residents living a simple life centred on religion, community, family and tradition. All of these activities focused on living the life of a 'good Jew'.

Life in the *Shtetl* however began to change with the economic and political upheavals of the 1900s across Europe and Russia. As in all industrial countries of the age, the rural population began moving into the rapidly expanding industrial cities. This was particularly prevalent in Soviet Russia where the ruling **Bolshevik/Communist party** placed great emphasis on industrialisation and production targets through measures such as Stalin's **Five Year Plans**.

As a result of these changes many Jews and non-Jews alike moved out of the countryside and away from rural life.

In Kowalska's painting we see a view of everyday life in these communities. The old way of life continues, here the residents are seen fetching their own water from the communal well, but it is being encroached upon by the new industrial world. The telegraph wires and street lamps show the arrival of modern amenities.

Looking closely:

Content and Ideas

The painting depicts a small, traditional village or *Shtetl* in Eastern Europe during the 1930s. The painting was made before the Second World War, but seems to depict a time that could have been even earlier than 1934. Stetl life had been common for many Jewish people throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. It was a simple way of life based on shared religious and moral values and a strong sense of community. Kowalska creates this sense of community by depicting the houses around a square with a shared focal point of the water pump to reflect the shared outlooks of the Stetl inhabitants. There is also no sense of the outside world. The village seems to exist in isolation which adds to the sense of the Stetl being a self-contained community. Furthermore the 'dreamlike' depiction of the scene creates the impression of nostalgia and memory, as if the artist is fondly remembering a time passed. However the telegraph wires and street lamps show the arrival of modern amenities and the threat to this traditional way of life.

Materials and Techniques

The painting is made with oil paints using strong and vivid colours. Colour is very significant in this painting. There are lots of pastel colours which are often associated with childhood. The walls and roofs of the houses are brightly coloured with greens, reds and yellows, which makes the houses appear slightly child-like and friendly. It almost feels though we are witnessing a childhood memory.

Form and composition

Many artists use rules of perspective to create an illusion of space and distance in their work. This can be done in a number of ways, through the use of a vanishing point, aerial perspective, the viewpoint or the scale of each object in relation to one another. Chana Kowalska uses linear perspective in this work to pull us into the scene. In the *Shtetl*, she makes us feel as though we are at the centre of a village looking down on the water pump. This focuses our attention on the main activity of the scene. The water pump would have been the centre of daily life in the village as it reflects gossip, community spirit, and a sense of neighbourhood.

The positioning of the viewer is also one of a 'floating' position. In reality it would be very difficult to view the scene from this viewpoint. This gives the painting a magical, dreamlike and nostalgic quality.

The artist uses other compositional techniques in the painting which create different effects and dimensions. For example the houses and scenery seem flat, like scenery for a stage set. They meet at the vanishing point, blocking out the golden temple behind. There is no view behind or beyond the houses on the street, only sky. The side streets do not lead anywhere. The telephone post is out of scale with the rest of the picture. It also has no wires attached. Again these techniques and the absence of logic, add to the 'dream-like' quality of the painting as if the artist is reliving a memory.

About the Artist

Chana Kowalska was born in 1904 in Wlockawek, Poland and was the daughter of a rabbi. She started drawing at the age of 16 and became a school teacher at the age of 18. In 1922, she moved to Berlin and later to Paris. She worked as a journalist and wrote articles about painting for Jewish newspapers. In the Second World War, during the German Occupation of France, she worked for the French Resistance. Arrested by the Gestapo, she was first imprisoned with her husband, then deported and shot by the Nazis in 1941.

Why is the work important to Holocaust studies?

The image of the *Shtetl* itself holds great significance as a reminder of a lost way of life. Whilst industrialisation may have begun to erode this lifestyle, the frequent violence or **pogroms** against these Jewish communities throughout the late 19th and into the 20th century also saw a gradual decline of the Shtetl communities as the population moved either into the industrial cities or further afield to other countries in Western Europe and America.

In 1941, less than 10 years after this painting was produced, the Nazis breached their pact with Stalin and invaded Russia. In the months that followed over 500,000 Soviet Jews were killed by Nazi soldiers. By 1942 Nazi leaders were looking for more organised and faster methods of killing, in January of that year they met to discuss the 'Final solution' to the Jewish problem. In many cases entire villages were rounded up and deported to labour or concentration camps. The Holocaust physically wiped out any semblance of these villages from Eastern Europe. Today this distinct folk/traditional way of life is often remembered and celebrated by the descendants of those villagers who emigrated before the war began, many of whom settled in areas as far afield as America.

Terms explained

A Shtetl is a term used to describe a small Jewish town or village in Eastern Europe that were common during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Bolshevik/Communist Party - A political party which came into power in Russia after the 1917 October revolution. Some of the primary beliefs of the Communist party concerned the redistribution of wealth and equality, with the view to creating a state free from class.

The Five Year Plans - The Russian leader Stalin decided that in order to create a powerful state the country needed to industrialise rapidly, to bring them in line with other global powers. In order to do this he created a series of 5 year production targets, from 1928-1938, for various industries such as coal, iron, oil and electricity.

Pogrom - a term used to describe the violence and riots against Russian Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries. These riots were overlooked by those in positions of authority who allowed them to continue.

The Final Solution - a name given to the plan to murder of all the Jews of Europe in an organised and methodical way.

Linear perspective - If you stand in the middle of a straight road, the sides appear to meet at a point (called the vanishing point) on the horizon. Artists depict the same effect to create a sense of distance in their pictures.

Viewpoint - Artists paint things that seem far away higher up on their paintings than things that seem nearer.

Aerial perspective - When you look at any view, distant objects look much bluer and contrasts in texture seem weaker. This is an optical illusion. Water vapour and dust in the air partly obscure colours and forms faraway. Artists increase the feeling of distance in pictures by painting strong foreground colours and paler colours with bluer tones for things in the far distance.

Scale - Artists paint things in the foreground larger than the same sort of things in the background.