

The Jewish community in Antwerp has fascinated me all my life, both personally and professionally. To the extent that I have now made many Jewish friends and feel fully integrated and accepted in their community. This close bond has led me to write 'Our Shtetl', a comprehensive work that surveys the entire history of the Antwerp Shtetl, based on a large number of poignant conversations, extensive historical overviews, and useful descriptions of the ins and outs of that typical Jewish culture.

When writing the chapter about the Red Star Line and Jewish emigration at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, I was struck by the presence of numerous Jews in their new Jewish neighborhood or Shtetl in New York and Antwerp, up to today. By making that connection, I found the migration wave so essential to the whole story that I decided to turn the chapter into a separate booklet, 'From Shtetl to Shtetl'.

I dedicate this short story, among others, to the character of Motl from the famous Jewish author Sholem Aleichem's novel, renowned for his masterpiece 'Fiddler on the Roof'. Every single day Motl's family feels the existential threat in Ukraine and, to survive and then afford the escape, they sell their household belongings and home, even their menorah: the candelabrum that every Jewish family lights with Shabbat. An experience that must have been emotionally extremely heavy. Motl's escape from Ukraine is still very recognizable today: buying tickets on trust, adventurous border crossings, and shady smugglers ready to strip the refugees of their last possessions... Even in these times, emigrants experience it every day.

Motl and his family fortunately arrive safely at Antwerp Central Station. This impressive place and the De Keyserlei, along which they walk into the city, are real icons of prosperity and progress. They open up an unrealistically majestic world for them. From there, Jewish families head to the Rijnkaai to make the crossing to the famous Ellis Island in New York. Many Jews succeed in their endeavor, reach New York, and can build a new future there. This explains why millions of Jews still live in the Big Apple to this day.

But sometimes the stay in Antwerp of Jewish families also leads to a story of tears when emigrants are medically rejected and must return. Very often, the families then choose to stay in Antwerp. They find shelter, support, and work in the warm Jewish community that has flourished there for centuries. And so their journey does not end in the New York Shtetl but in the Antwerp Shtetl...