



## MAX GROSS: THE LOST SHTETL

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**Joshua Holo:** Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our acclaimed author series, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion together with The Jewish Book Council. We'll meet authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards and discuss their celebrated books. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball campus in Los Angeles, and your host. Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and our acclaimed author series in partnership with the Jewish Book Council. It's my great pleasure to welcome Max Gross. Author Max Gross worked for 10 years at the New York Post before becoming Editor-in-Chief of the Commercial Observer. He wrote a book about dating called "From Schlub to Stud" and "The Lost Shtetl" the subject of our discussion today, won the National Jewish Book Award and the Jewish Fiction Award from the Association of Jewish libraries and it's his first novel. It's about a small Jewish village called Kreskol in the Polish forest that's so secluded that no one even knows it exists, until now. Max Gross, welcome to The Commons Podcast. Thank you for joining us.

**Max Gross:** Thank you for having me, it's good to be here.

**JH:** I wanna start off with the public presentation of the book in one of the press releases which aptly describes "The Lost Shtetl" as, "Written with the Fearless imagination of Michael Chabon and the piercing humor of Gary Shteyngart." In particular in relation to the style and imagination of the book, I wanna ask you about the conversational Yiddish style of the early 20th century where occasional asides to the reader always offer a kind of a wink and a nod to the reader, and I wanna ask you your relationship with the Yiddish classic Sholem Aleichem, Mendele Mocher Sforim etcetera, how you were exposed to them, how they influenced your style and how you adopted a style.

**MG:** Well, I loved those Yiddish folktales and I loved those Yiddish writers. I don't speak Yiddish, but as a kid, I remember I was invited over to... My parents had a friend, they had a house in the country, I was given my own room, we go for the weekend and I found this little book, this little very worn paperback copy of "Gimpel The Fool" by Isaac Bashevis Singer, his collection of stories, and it was, for me, love at first sight. I was probably around 11 or 12 at the time, but I thought the voice was so piercing and so funny. Singer was always my great love, but there were so many others that followed, not that all of them were funny, but Mendele, you mentioned,

Chaim Grada, you know, there were so many that I looked at over the years, and Shmuel Agnon. And I did fall in love with those Yiddish folktales and those old Shtetl tales. And what was very funny for me was I did not come from a religious background at all, I was actually very, very secular, and the joke around our house was that we were expressing our Jewish roots if we ate a bagel on Yom Kippur, and I was always regarded in my family as the nut because I actually went and got a Bar Mitzvah, and once after college, I moved to Israel for a year. And anyway I'm not a religious person, but I have always been really taken and fascinated with that lost world.

**MG:** When I was a kid, I did know a great-grandfather who was born in Poland and who came to America before the Holocaust, it was probably in World War I that he came to America. I was very interested in this little man who could speak like three words of English, but who came from this really vanished place that was such an encompassing universe and so mercilessly snuffed out. But to your original question, yeah, throughout college, even in high school and beyond, I was reading those Yiddish stories, and it was really important to me that this become a little bit like a Yiddish folktale, a modern day Yiddish folktale. And I engaged in a little bit of bait and switch in the sense that it started off very much like a wise men of chelm. It got a lot darker and a lot more carnal and a lot more realistic, was my hope, quickly, which I think is what Singer did a lot. It was a tribute to Isaac Bashevis Singer, some might say it's a rip off of Isaac Bashevis Singer. I'll tell them a tribute.

**JH:** I wanna go back to one of the themes and your love affair with Yiddish literature and the classics. I think one of the great advantages, and this goes to the darkness you referred to before, one of the great advantage of reading Yiddish Classics is that they often don't romanticize the Shtetl or the ghetto, often their authors are running away from that. And they're explicit about the critiques, whereas today, in the comfort of our American diasporic existence and our distance from that history, sometimes we contemporaries, we do romanticize the Shtetl a lot. And so I wanna ask you where the Shtetl is in your personal imagination and in the imagination of the book. What did you wanna celebrate? What did you wanna critique? What did you wanna grab by the lapels and shake up a bit?

**MG:** Well, look, one thing that I will say is... And I really do love "Tevye The Dairyman" and I think that it's a great part of this literature, even if it's not the full story of the literature, I think that "Fiddler on the Roof" probably softened the image quite a bit, and not even that there were... It was that soft in the sense that there are real things that Tevye and [Hebrew] are dealing with. They're dealing with cross-sections and they're dealing with intermarriage, and they're dealing with all this...

**JH:** Poverty.

**MG:** Poverty, exactly. But everybody's motives are very pure. [laughter] And I think that that... These are little folk tales, if you read the original Sholem Aleichem, they are, but I think that I wanted to dirty up a little bit some of the motives, and some of the characters, in terms of their priorities and whatnot. I think that you're absolutely right. A lot of the Yiddish writers were very explicitly critiquing that life. And that was the great boon in Yiddish literature 100 years ago, coming out of these places, but I do think that popularly, so much of it comes back down to

Fiddler on the Roof with Sholem Aleichem. And I always believed that the Shtetl life was not dissimilar to every other kind of life, it's just a more enclosed, insular world. And look, when I was just coming out of college, I spent a couple of years writing for The Forward newspaper.

**MG:** I was general assignment. I used to call it the freak beat, because they didn't put me on anything, they just gave me whatever came through the door. And I would spend a lot of time in these Orthodox communities in New Square, New York, and [chuckle] Borough Park, and all these places, which I always thought of as very much Shtetl-like, in the sense that they were living the same way that they did except the technology was a little bit different, but even that, they rejected so much of the technology that a lot of our contemporaries use, but you see in those things like problems, and real issues, and people who are venial, and people who are noble. And I remember when... Pre-COVID, I'm a degenerate gambler, and I would occasionally go to some of these poker rooms in Brooklyn, and the moment that the sun went down on Saturday night, it would be filled with Orthodox Jews playing cards.

**JH:** Right.

**MG:** And human weakness travels across all boundaries and all other kinds of things, and I thought it was important to showcase that. One of the things that I also wanted to show was that there are real comforts in that world, and in that life, and in the structure of living a religious life, a life amongst the familiar. I think it's what a lot of people yearn for, and then that goes well beyond Jews.

**JH:** I wanna expand the conversation to some other themes which are prominent, and for the moment, I wanna go into the Holocaust. And I think it's fair to say that this is not a Holocaust story, per se. The Lost Shtetl is a story framed by the Holocaust. And in one scene, before embarking on this adventure of discovery to the modern world, our protagonist, Yankel, articulates his understanding of the risks, or you articulate them for him. I'd like to ask you to read this passage for us to frame this theme.

**MG:** Yankel was no fool. He had never yearned to see the city. Certainly not a Gentile city, because it had been drilled into his head from the time he was still a toddler the world outside Kreskol was a dangerous, treacherous place, and that he should consider himself fortunate that he was born far away from it. The other students in Haether told ghost stories of what happened to boys who had strayed too far into Kreskol's woods, how there were demons and warlocks lying in wait ready to rip the flesh from one's bones, and fry one's liver in chicken schmaltz. He had heard tales, the howling in the trees at night, or the moans of disobedient boys who had trespassed and been turned into wolves by whatever witch they had come across. Not all of it was witches either. There were stories of boys who had been chased, captured, put in cages, and turned into bars of soap at the hands of mad, blood-thirsty Gentiles, who did so out of a limitless loathing for Jews.

**JH:** I found this passage very compelling. I feel that we, the reader, are still waffling at this point in the story between the mindset of the inhabitants of Kreskol and their innocence, and our own modernity. And in that waffling space, I think we hear these fears, as you specifically articulated them, these fears of anti-Semitism articulated as a kind of bogeyman, a highly trouped paranoia

on the one hand, but on the other hand, as contemporary readers, we know that in fact that exaggerated fear is in fact not exaggerated at all, but in fact understated, because we know the Holocaust, as the reader, even though the hidden away inhabitants of Kreskol have yet to discover it. And so I wanna ask you to muse for a minute, if you would, on the power of imagining the Rip Van Winkle awakening as a vehicle for confronting the human condition afresh.

**MG:** The protagonist of the book is sent out into the big city, and he's put in a mental hospital when he starts talking about like, "You know what... " Because nobody believes him, that he could come from this secluded little corner. And they eventually... They try to educate him about the modern world, and they dump it all on him with the Rolling Stones, and Botticelli paintings, and the Holocaust all at once. And he hears the story of the Holocaust and he goes like, "How dumb do you think I am that I could believe that a whole country would seek out, search, murder, and burn millions and millions of people, that it would be a global project that would expand its reach into every corner that they could reach?" And it's so diabolical and hideous, but it's real, that it just seems beyond the human imagination.

**MG:** And that's one reaction, but I think that there were numerous reactions, and I tried to get a lot of different reactions to being suddenly woken up after the slumber and finding this. And it's essentially what causes the great fissure in the town between Katsnelson and Sekulow is that Sekulow is like, "Alright, let's move on," and Katsnelson is like, "No, we're not moving on from this." And there is this view of the town of like, "This is a really big deal," and a view from the town of, "Well, it was three quarters of a century ago, so it's really not a big deal anymore." And one of the advantages of doing a story about a town is that you can gauge a lot of different opinions and get that, so I tried to do that.

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**JH:** Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu) for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click Sign Up at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

**JH:** The Lost Shtetl is, among other things, a coming of age story, and that quality of coming of age in which even for a moment you think that your discoveries are unique to you before you realize that your discoveries are in fact just education about the world around you. You write as Yankel awakens to the modern world, specifically on his journey out of the forest, his drive from the forest onto paved roads and into the modern world. You write the following, "For a moment, Yankel felt wiser and more sophisticated than his fellow townsmen, like he had just uncovered for himself one of the mysteries of adulthood that children are never privy to." And in this passage, speaking of coming of age, I couldn't help but think of Eve in the few seconds after she bites into the apple, but she hasn't yet given it to Adam. And in that moment, she has a monopoly on insight. And I wonder what was going through her head, and I see you giving us

one version of this as we think about what's going through Yankel's head when he has just taken his first bite of the apple, and re-encounters the universe, the world, knowing that all of his compadres, all of his people, his world, his points of reference, haven't yet done so. Reveling at a moment, from the point of view of a coming of age story.

**MG:** That was one of the more fun parts of the book, was getting this up to speed on all the things that we've grown so comfortable with. And there is a lot of great excitement on first encountering the unknown, which was a real advantage of this plot, was that I was able to delve into those kinds of fantasies and delights upon seeing them. And I think wisdom too, I think you're absolutely right, that there was a really fascinating moment to think about, is this moment where there is a stark divide between what Eve knows and what Adam knows. And it's just a moment, but it's a very literary moment, for sure.

**JH:** I wanna layer onto the Holocaust, this Polish experience, which for the Poles today, I think it's fair to say that the Holocaust is embedded in the other great Polish trauma, which is the Soviet experience. Non-Jewish Poles, I think, allied the two into this mid-20th and second-after-20th-century tragedy of the Polish experience. And the Jewish component of that is certainly there, but it's complicated, by virtue of the Poles' own sense of victimization, both at the hands of the Germans and the Russians. It's just, it's very layered, very rich, it's very interesting, but it's also very troubling. And in your story, when non-Jewish Poles encounter this wayward, stereotypical, anachronistic Jew, they seem to have reactions to him that reflect this very deep complexity in relation to non-Jewish Poland and Jewish Poland, recent history, ancient history, etcetera. And so, I wanna ask you if you've been to Poland, if you have a taste for this quality of the Polish experience that inspired some of your writing, which I found very evocative in that regard, having visited Poland myself for the first time only as an adult and really being impressed by these difficulties.

**MG:** I have been to Poland. You mentioned my past as a journalist for the New York Post. I was a travel writer there for a while, and I've been following the current goings-on in Poland with greater and greater alarm over the last couple of years, just in terms of how the government has gotten very, very ultra-nationalistic and extremely... I don't know what the word would be, censorious of anything that smacks of any criticism of how Poland behaved during World War II. And as you say, it was complicated. I would never for a minute suggest that there wasn't incredible heroism on behalf of some of the Poles who resisted the Nazis and went to their deaths willingly, honorably. It was a great moment. And then there were Poles who were incredible collaborators, who did everything they could to help the Germans and who were as brutal as the Germans were in terms of hunting of Jews and trying to help in that mission. I think that Poland resisted the Soviets very, very honorably. Like there was great public popular contempt for the puppet governments, there was great resistance, and it's hard not to look at the period from '45 until, I guess, '89 without incredible admiration for what the Poles did in those years.

**MG:** And yet you've seen that the anti-Semitism that was there, that was always there has not died away, it's only been growing in recent years, and I think that it's been very alarming. The ending of the book did change over the course of my writing it in terms of just how there was this growing political... Explicit political hostility towards any kind of criticism of Poland and that

was something that I altered and it became what it was. My research, I did read a lot of books about Poland, I did go to Poland, and I have a number of friends who were Polish and who told me about conditions there, and I have a friend who I would send these annoying questions to about what's going on with this, and they were not even political questions, they were more like, "Where would you get jeans in Warsaw? Like what would be the best shopping mall to do this?" Then I actually have a friend who... She was there in the 1990s as a student, she's Jewish, and she told me one of the more interesting things, that I did wind up stealing for the book, which was, she said that there was a very paranoid component of Poles that Jews would some day show up at their doorstep asking to be allowed back in their houses.

**MG:** That this was something that was very much in the consciousness of a lot of Poles and look, the book is being published in Poland, I think later this year, although it might be next year, and I've been corresponding with the Polish publishers and their view was like, "Yeah, that is like a big part of a lot of people there and a lot of people there know," and that's one of the things that I find... The complications that I find so interesting is that I know Poles who are extremely upset about the current government, who are extremely upset about these speech laws, and who think that this is a disgrace and that it should be thrown out and which should be out. The last election was very, very close, it was like 51-49 situation, so there is a divided opinion and a divided polity in Poland.

**JH:** I wanna close by asking you what your favorite part of the book is, when you go to give your book talks or your readings, what do you tend to cite? What do you like to convey?

**MG:** I think that the passages that, for me as a writer, I'm most close to or most like, are the ones that were a surprise to me as a writer, but I thought like, took the book into a very different realm, and I am assuming that it's okay to do spoilers, but my favorite passage is when Yankel goes to the brothel with Carol, simply because I started that passage thinking it was gonna be one thing, and then I was surprised at who he sees in the brothel, and it was a great surprise to me, it felt like, afterwards like, "Oh, well of course, that was what it should have been," but I didn't know it as I wrote it, and I was like, all the things that I was planning on doing later I wound up changing because of that. [chuckle] But I thought that that was my favorite passage.

**JH:** I welcome all of our listeners to pick up a copy of *The Lost Shtetl*, it's an absolute joy to read, wonderful turn of fancy and language and a little bit of a journey into some of the stories that many of us grew up with. And to Max Gross, thank you so much. It was really a pleasure.

**MG:** Thank you so much. Pleasure being here.

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