

Voices of Second Avenue:
Yiddish Theater of the Lower East Side
1880s to 1920s

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Introduction

The Yiddish theater served important functions in the lives of Eastern European Jewish immigrants between the years 1880-1920. The Yiddish theater established a Jewish cultural presence in the highly multicultural city of New York, thereby giving the immigrant Jewish community a sense of rootedness, and allowing them to build institutions that were informed by both the community's history, and their aspirations for the future. The theaters functioned as spaces of social interaction, refuge from undesirable living conditions, and reminders of their Eastern European past in which their native tongue was the language heard on the stage, and in the audience.

The body of this thesis will explore the Eastern European roots and development of the Yiddish language and Yiddish theater in Chapter One. In Chapter Two, I review Jewish presence in the United States prior to the Eastern European immigration that began in the 1880s. More specifically, this examination will focus on the political, social and economic factors that precipitated the massive immigration of Eastern European Jewry to the United States, primarily to the Lower East Side of New York City. Chapter Three will explore the Eastern European immigrant community, life on the Lower East Side and the role Yiddish theater played in their lives. Chapter Four will examine the introduction and evolution of Yiddish Theater on the Lower East Side along with a description of the actual theaters in lower Manhattan. Chapter Five will chronicle the pioneer actors and actresses who were so instrumental in the huge success of Yiddish theater on the Lower East Side and in its powerful influence on the lives of the immigrants. The concluding chapter will explore the aftermath of Yiddish theater on the Lower East Side and how the sense of belonging for the immigrant Jews in a

multicultural city eventually allowed for them to expand outward, and influence the greater entertainment industry in New York and, by extension, America.

This history of Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side resonates with me personally, as it is the backdrop for (half of) my own family's immigration story. In addition to my history and passion for theater, it is one of the reasons that prompted this thesis.

Chapter One

The Forerunners of Yiddish Theater

The Origins and Evolution of Yiddish Theater:

Though its origins are debated, the Yiddish language has played a central role in the history of Central and East European (Ashkenazic) Jewry. After classical Hebrew and Aramaic, Yiddish is the third principal literary language in Jewish history (Katz, 2010). “The basic grammar and vocabulary of Yiddish, which is written in the Hebrew alphabet, is Germanic. Yiddish, however, is not a dialect of German but a complete language, one of a family of Western Germanic languages, that includes English, Dutch, and Afrikaans” (“What is Yiddish?” 2018).

The broadest consensus holds that the language arose about a thousand years ago, when the first Jewish settlers in Germanic-speaking territories combined parts of their earlier languages with their new neighbors’ Germanic, giving birth to the earliest form of Yiddish that went on to spread across much of Central and Eastern Europe with Jewish migrations. It rapidly became the spoken language of Jews in the Germanic-speaking territory known as Ashkenaz. It was “one of the major new European Jewish cultures that arose in medieval Europe” (Katz, 2010).

By the 1700s, Yiddish was disappearing from German-speaking soil as Jews began to acculturate. Together with an increasing preference for German, the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) waged a contentious campaign against Yiddish late in the century, convinced that it was an uncivilized jargon inappropriate for use by modern Europeans. This campaign heralded the death of Western Yiddish (“What is Yiddish?” 2018). “In *Eastern Europe by contrast* [*italics added*], Yiddish was becoming more

robust than ever. The sheer numbers of speakers, numbering millions by the nineteenth century, and usually concentrated in compact settlements, combined with other factors to facilitate substantial growth of the language and its culture” (Katz, 2010).

Eastern European Yiddish culture cultivated the forerunners of Yiddish theater, most notably the customary *purimspiel*, a sometimes irreverent play or musical performed in honor of the spring holiday of Purim, in which the story contained in Megillat Ester is acted out. Cantor Janet Leuchter states that “the humble yet beloved Purim spiel (‘play’ in Yiddish) is the only genuine folk theater that has survived a thousand years of European culture, and in our day has morphed and flourished.” (Leuchter, 2017). Nahma Sandrow suggests that the Jewish tradition of the *purimspiel* is the nexis, perhaps even the first expression of Yiddish theater “indeed the only one until the nineteenth century” (Sandrow 1977, 2).

The earliest documented ancestor of the *purimspiel* was pre-Yiddish and traced back to the fifth century. It was customary for the Jews in the region near Antioch to gather informally in synagogue courtyards on the feast of Purim. They then began a procession which culminated in hanging Haman in effigy and burning the effigy in a bonfire while they sang, entertained and celebrated the triumph of the Jews in the story (ibid.).

From the 16th century to the 20th century, Yiddish speaking Ashkenazi Jews enjoyed the Purim play as the principal form of Yiddish theater (ibid, 19).

Like theater in many cultures, Jewish theater has religious roots. The spring holiday of Purim was once the only time in the Jewish calendar that religious authorities permitted *shpiel* (play) making. The first Purimplays, which began to develop in the 12th century, acted out the story of the Jews’ deliverance told in the Book of Esther, which easily lends itself to dramatic and comedic interpretation.

Early modern communities confirmed this tradition, creating skits and sketches that poked fun at local people and events. A popular folk theatre developed, though it was limited to the Purim season. (“Jewish Theater” 2007).

Along with the purimspiels but not limited by the Jewish calendar, performances by cantors, preachers, jesters, and instrumental musicians engaged Jewish audiences.

Amateur companies known as purimspielers staged skits around the holiday of Purim, but a professional Yiddish theater did not emerge until the 19th century (Steinlauf, 2010b).

It is important to note that, while the Purim plays were limited to the Purim season and usually based on the Esther story, other stories from the Torah were also reenacted as “Purim” plays: Joseph’s brothers selling him into slavery, Jonah and the whale, David and Goliath, the sacrifice of Isaac, the wise decisions of King Solomon, Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses confronting Pharaoh (Sandrow 1977, 6).

In Eastern Europe by the 19th century the *purim-shpils* had become the property of the lower classes. They were often staged annually by the same group of players, with parts and even costumes passed down from father to son. The *purim-shpilers* wandered from one wealthy home to another, often entering with the formulaic invocation, “Haynt iz Purim,/ Morgn iz oys./ Git mir a groshn/ Un varft mikh aroys” (Today is Purim,/ Tomorrow it’s gone./ Give me a penny/ and throw me out). The plays were ribald and strongly parodistic, mocking both local personages and the biblical heroes themselves. (Steinlauf 2010a)

Purimspiels were confined to one short season, but even when purimspiels were extended a little before and after Purim, such a short season could not support professional performers. Therefore the Purim performers were usually yeshiva boys or apprentices, who earned little or no money, or upstanding citizens who were raising money for their daughters’ dowries or some charity. The purimspiel was also consigned to limited spaces. The synagogues in the ghetto and shtetl were limited by local non-Jewish authorities to the amount of space they could occupy and what repairs were

allowed if any, so the plays were conducted in local dining rooms, small courtyards and winding streets (Sandrow 1977, 18).

The small performance space is a metaphor for a further kind of limitation. The holiday was bounded by the threat of disapproval and the general hostility of the outside world. A local governor could punish the Jews if the performance seemed to him to be offensive. He could arbitrarily ban performances just as he limited where Jews could live, what work they could do, what clothes and how much jewelry they could wear, and when they could marry. “For the Jews to flaunt a victory over their enemies as indiscreetly as they do on Purim was rare, and to do it on a large scale was out of the question” (ibid.).

An important connection between Yiddish theater and the Purimspiel is that they were both performed in Yiddish. Yiddish was, and is still, known as *mamaloshen* [the mother tongue]. Jews sometimes learned the language of their host countries, but Yiddish was the language of the Jews. The use of Yiddish in the purimspiel also created a particular welcoming atmosphere where all could be reached.

Purim plays derived a special warmth from their continued closeness to the source of cultural expression. First of all, the use of *mame-loshn* rather than a scholarly or upper-class language, kept the experience psychologically close to the hearer. Direct and unsophisticated, the plays were accessible to everyone, just as the *megile* [a religious scroll containing the story of Purim] was read aloud regularly in synagogue and studied as part of the body of religious writings. Even if you weren't rich, learned or related to a rabbi, you were comfortable knowing what to expect. And when comic liberties were taken from the story, they were always the same kinds of liberties, so they themselves came to be part of tradition and thus familiar. (Sandrow 1977, 20)

Although purimspiels continued to be performed throughout Eastern Europe until World War II, the Jewish experience of theater began to expand. In the mid-1800s, in East European cities and towns, a Jewish business elite emerged, and they were exposed

to West European trade and ideas. They were a natural audience for Maskilic, as well as entertainment, literature. As Steinlauf (2010a) writes, “Parallel with this new bourgeoisie, a lower class also developed, consumers of popular chapbooks distributed by peddlers and patrons of songs written and performed by itinerant singers. Both audiences had begun to attend performances of various kinds, both in Yiddish and non-Jewish languages.”

Yiddish theater’s development in Eastern Europe:

While Yiddish theater came to America in the 1880s, its roots are found in Eastern Europe. There, after secularization and urbanization had started to shift Jewish life, professional entertainment was introduced. Within the performing arts, Jews already had those talented in the area of music. Because music was nonrepresentational in character, engaging musically didn't run the risk of breaking Jewish legal requirements regarding the making of graven images. Complementing the amateur purimspielers, itinerant minstrels became the first semi-professional/professional Jewish performers.

Before all these elements of a mass musical culture were present, however, the 2nd half of the 19th century brought the appearance of something different from the traditional East European Yiddish folk song. Although folksongs presumably originate as products of individual creativity, as they spread, they lose connection to their creators and become anonymous. What was new in Austrian Galicia, Romania, and Russia was the development of a group of professional or semi-professional songwriters and performers who produced songs that began to be identified with the authors or performers. Also new is the context of performance, no longer limited to the family circle or ceremonial occasions such as weddings. Now songs began to be performed to entertain customers – in taverns, wine cellars and restaurant gardens. (Rothstein, 2011)

The most celebrated group of itinerant minstrels had their origins in the Polish town of Brody, and were aptly named the "Broder Zinger." By the mid-19th century the

Broder Singers fanned out into the villages and towns of Eastern Europe performing their songs for working class audiences. Eventually, snippets of dialogue, props and makeup were added in order to create a sense of flow and dramatic flair (Nahshon 2016b). This type of entertainment was so popular that what we now know as the beginnings of Yiddish theater were also performed in non-Jewish settings. Steinlauf writes “As early as the 1830s, Yiddish plays on biblical themes were apparently staged before mixed Jewish and Christian audiences in a Warsaw dancehall” (Steinlauf, 2010b). It is thought that some of these performers were from the Broder Singers group who started to perform in restaurants and cafes in the 1850s (ibid.).

Expanding on Nahshon's description, Steinlauf explains that the town of Brody was actually situated on the Russian/Galician border which had "crossroads where Jewish merchants traveling to and from the Leipzig fairs typically sought entertainment. The Yiddish repertoire of the Broder Singers consisted of songs and skits, often with a satirical thrust directed at wealthy Jews” (ibid.).

The transition from itinerant performers to Yiddish theater occurred with the crucial figure, Avrom Goldfadn. Goldfadn (1840-1908) was born in Russia and educated in a progressive Jewish academy in Odessa where he read Western literature and studied Talmud and Torah. He grew up in a middle class family and though they all were fluent in Russian, French and German, Goldfadn felt most at home reading and writing in the mother tongue—Yiddish (Kanfer 2004, 4). While in school he garnered a reputation as a lyricist, poet and songwriter. Even before graduating, he had published two volumes of lyrics and Broder singers used his compositions in performances (Sandrow 1977, 40). During a joint performance with the celebrated Broder Singer Yisroel Grodner, Goldfadn,

who appeared first, frustrated the impatient audience by droning on and on, reciting long poems that he himself had written. Grodner followed him and sang “Dos Freylekhe Khosidl” (“The Merry Hasid”), a song written by Avrom Goldfadn. Grodner’s rendition entranced the audience and saved the day. In his autobiography, Goldfadn recounts that the audience’s reaction to Grodner’s performance inspired Goldfadn to think about forming a Yiddish theater (Rothstein, 2011).

And so, modern Yiddish theater was conceived by the partnering of Avrom Goldfadn and Yisroel Grodner. Goldfadn became known as the “father of the Yiddish theater,” when in 1876 he started the first professional Yiddish theater company in Romania (Steinlauf, 2010b). Goldfadn apparently “took that title himself, and no one ever disputed it” (Sandrow 1977, 40). As the “father of the Yiddish Theater,” Goldfadn served “as producer, playwright, director, composer, and librettist (Nahshon 2016c, 23). After Goldfadn’s interaction with Grodner and subsequent conviction which led him to create the first Yiddish theater, he eventually “...shaped the repertory, acting style, and even the theatrical life style that were to characterize Yiddish theater from then on and in all parts of the world” (Sandrow 1977, 43).

Goldfadn put together a troupe of amateurs, and with new songs and plays he had written, moved them to Bucharest where they toured Eastern Europe. Goldfadn and his troupe were embraced in the big cities and provinces which spurred the creation of other competing Yiddish theater companies (Kanfer 2004, 5). Goldfadn couldn’t read music but had a great ear and knew what echoed with audiences. In his book *Jewish Music: Its Historical Development*, musicologist Abraham Z. Idelsohn (Idelsohn 1992, 453) describes Goldfadn’s music of “motley origin” and, through analysis, finds that many of

his songs are derived from cantorial pieces, folk and Chassidic tunes, operas and other Eastern European songs (Sandrow 2016, 68). Though not completely original, Idelsohn acknowledges that Goldfadn's songs resonated with crowds.

His early offerings resembled *commedia dell'arte*, with their combination of an uncomplicated, fixed scenario with improvised dialogue and stage business. But he soon grew into lavish operettas, some of which...became beloved classics of the Jewish stage. The tales were simple, adopted from a variety of Jewish and European sources, with a musical hodgepodge of adapted cantorial tunes, Eastern European folk songs, German and French marches and waltzes, and melodies lifted from Mozart, Halevi, Meyerbeer and Verdi. (ibid.)

As time went on, the subjects of Goldfadn's productions shifted from "farces directed against the forces of so called backwardness....to historical melodramas" (Steinlauf 2010b). Not only did Goldfadn's productions evolve; the culture within which they were performed did as well, "Goldfadn's work reflects the crucial last quarter of the nineteenth century, when the Yiddish community was breaking with tradition but still dependent on it for nourishment. "This was a period of transition between folk culture and the modern world, between folk and modern art" (Sandrow 1977, 43).

In 1883, Russian authorities started to restrict Yiddish plays (Steinlauf 2010b). Once the Eastern European exodus began, performers, producers and directors of the new Yiddish theater emigrated along with their fans. London, Paris, and especially New York became centers of the new theater. Goldfadn migrated to New York City in 1887 but after two years returned to London. He eventually settled in New York in 1903 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019a).

Yiddish theater developed from *purimspiels* to itinerant minstrels and evolved through the works of Goldfadn, who integrated written prose, songs and dance for the

first time in Eastern European Yiddish performances. The production of his play *The Sorceress* (also, translated as *The Witch*) in New York in 1882 marks the relocation of the center of Yiddish theater from Eastern Europe to the Lower East Side. In the following chapter I will explore the social, economic and political factors that resulted in the mass emigration of Jews from Eastern Europe to America and, more specifically, New York, beginning in the 1880s. Without this emigration/immigration, the fabled Lower East Side, as we know it, would not have existed.

Chapter Two

The Immigration of Eastern European Jews to America

The First Two Waves of Jewish Immigration into America

Historians have generally studied American Jewish immigration by considering three periods: Sephardic, German, and Eastern European (Zollman 2018). During each period, the Jewish immigrants were not exclusively of any one origin. Some Germans arrived during the Sephardic period, and Eastern Europeans arrived during the German period. However, each “wave” of immigration was named after the prevailing immigrant group that shaped the character of the American Jewish community of that time period (ibid.).

The first Sephardic immigrants arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654, fleeing Brazil when the Portuguese, advocates of the Inquisition, defeated the Dutch, who had controlled areas of Brazil (Soriano 1993). This first wave consisted of “twenty-three Jewish refugees—four couples, two widows and thirteen children” (Hertzberg 1997, 7). Most were Dutch or Italian Sephardim but a few probably were Ashkenazim...” (Sachar 1992a, 13).

The following decades saw Sephardic merchants and tradesmen emigrating from Holland and inhabiting American colonial ports such as Newport, New Amsterdam, Philadelphia, Charleston, and Savannah. By 1730, however, Ashkenazi Jews outnumbered Sephardic Jews, though the character of the American Jewish community continued to be Sephardic until after the American Revolution. Colonial synagogues practiced Sephardic ritual customs and shaped all aspects of Jewish religious life (Zollman 2018).

The second wave of immigration was of the German Jews who began their emigration in the 1840s. These Jews left Germany prodded by persecution, political oppression and economic deprivation (Sachar, 2004). By the beginning of WWI, approximately a quarter of a million German speaking Jews arrived in America. This German-Jewish community expanded American Jewish geography by settling not only on the East coast, but in cities and towns across the Midwest, West, and South. These immigrants often were peddlers, who planted roots in one of the towns on their route, eventually opening a small store or business there. This geographical scattering helped to establish Judaism in America as a national entity (Zollman 2018).

The Third Wave: Eastern European Jewry

The history of the Russian Empire during the eighteenth and nineteenth century is critical to understanding the story of Jewish immigration to America.

To understand the complex history of Jews in Russia, one must begin with a fundamental distinction, often effaced in the historiography and popular memory, between Russia as a state – the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and since 1991, the Russian Federation – and the geographically much smaller entity of ethnic Russia. Until the 1720s, there were essentially no Jews in the Russian Empire except for travelers and migrant merchants, and the Russian state forbade Jews from settling in its interior, out of traditional Christian hostility. (Stanislawski 2010b, 1)

In the first decades of the eighteenth century, the Russian empire expanded westward. This move westward occurred after more than a century of eastern annexation into areas where Jews did not live. As the Russian Empire expanded westward, Jews who lived in the new annexed provinces became inhabitants of the Russian Empire but not Russia proper, because this continued to be illegal by Russian law (ibid.).

In 1790 merchants in Moscow (Russia proper) complained to the municipal government about the influx of Jewish merchants from the provinces of Belorussia, which had been annexed from Poland in 1772. The Muscovite merchants claimed that Jewish fraud and deceit gave the Jews an unfair advantage over the Muscovites. While not addressing the issue of Jewish fraud and deceit, the government of Catherine the Great (reign 1762-1796) chastised the Jewish merchants, and in 1791 banned them from interior Russia, reaffirming the legal principle that Jews in the Empire enjoyed only those rights specifically given to them, and residence in the interior was not one of them (Klier, 2010a). Additional statutes specifically delineated the provinces and parts of provinces where Jews were allowed to reside. This area, twice the size of France, was named the Pale of Settlement. "...386,000 square miles between the Baltic and the Black sea that included the Ukraine, Byelorussia (modern Belarus,) Lithuania, and a large part of Poland" (Epstein 2007, 2). There were further restrictions, separating Jews from non-Jews within the Pale. Jews were barred from living in certain cities and peasant villages, and from new settlements in other villages.

The economic opportunities open to Jews of Eastern Europe over their history were limited by non-Jewish society – largely through legislation. Thus, in order to understand Jewish economic life, it is important to have a clear picture of the laws and regulations imposed by non-Jewish society. These were never monolithic and were often extremely complex. Consequently, economic success for Jews was often a result of the ability to maneuver between different – and sometimes contradictory – regulations in order to achieve their goals. (Teller, 2010)

The most influential legal prescription affecting Jews in the Pale (and throughout the whole continent) barred them from land ownership. This policy, in effect since the Middle Ages, prohibited Jews from making their living from agricultural activity as peasants or as landowners, two of the most important positions in the preindustrial social

structure (ibid.). However, Jews circumvented the prohibition to own land and cultivate agriculture by leasing land and then subleasing it and acting as middle men between the countryside and the cities (Sachar 1992a, 117). Another critical form of legal discrimination toward the Jews was their exclusion from various economic and professional fields. Guilds and professional associations refused Jews membership and barred them from participating (Teller, 2010).

Legal prohibitions were only one of the variables that shaped the economic life of Jews in the Pale. Also important were Jewish cultural attitudes and norms: widespread literacy and numeracy (the ability to work with numbers), frugality, a willingness to reinvest in their businesses, ethnic and religious solidarity, and their ability to carve out strong economic niches (ibid.). These qualities strengthened their ability to compete economically.

Czar Alexander II (1855-1881) liberalized the integration of Jews into Russian society: conscription of children was outlawed, Jewish residence outside of the Pale was expanded, and economic and educational restrictions were lifted. Some Jewish intellectuals at the time anticipated the emancipation of the Jews. But this emancipation never occurred, and the pace of reform slowed in the latter years of Alexander II's reign. However, these gains were reversed by the assassination of Alexander II in 1881 (Stanislawski 2010b, 3).

Epstein (2007, 9) explains that a group of anarchists who had conspired to assassinate the Czar chose a military parade in Saint Petersburg, Russia to be the time and place. The route changed at the last minute, and the Czar with his horse and carriage missed the planted mines. However, one of the conspirators ran up and threw a bomb that

exploded at the horse's hooves. This bomb killed two people but the Czar was unharmed. The Czar halted the parade to determine what happened. While he was examining the scene, another attacker threw his bomb, injuring the Czar, who died a few hours later. While none of the conspirators were Jewish, the place they used as headquarters for the assassination conspiracy was rented to them by a Jewish woman, Hessia Helfman. She was charged, and found guilty with the remaining conspirators. Her death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment because she gave birth after the trial; she and her infant died in prison. Her perceived participation in the Czar's assassination "inflamed those who already hated the Jews" (ibid, 9).

Czar Alexander III (reign 1881-1892) blamed the assassination of his father "on laxity and liberalism...the authorities had allowed religious Jews to grow more insular and had unwisely permitted their secular brothers to embrace socialism or Zionism" (Kanfer 2004, 5). Alexander the III's teacher, Konstantin Pobedonostev passionately hated the Jews and now found himself in a position of power which allowed him to politically act on this hatred. "He declared that 'one- third of Russia's Jews would emigrate, one-third would convert to Russian Orthodoxy, and one-third would starve to death'" (Epstein 2007, 9). This would have been the Russian solution to the Jewish problem.

Czar Alexander III began moving Imperial Russia toward a police state. He vowed to stem the forces of revolution in the country by reversing his father's liberal policies in all areas of life including his more liberal policies toward the Jews (Stanislowski 2010b, 3). The new prohibitions included popular Jewish entertainment, "almost incidentally, on August 2, 1883, a decree went up in every town square in

Russia: Yiddish theater henceforward would be illegal throughout the land” (Kanfer 2004, 6).

Pogroms of Eastern Europe

Czar Alexander III instituted a major restrictive revision of the Pale of Settlement in the wake of anti-Jewish pogroms of 1881 – 1882. Nikolai Ignatiev, Alexander’s minister of internal affairs, characterized the pogroms as a reaction by masses of peasants against “Jewish exploitation” (Klier 2010b, 2). Pogroms are defined as an “outbreak of mass violence directed against a minority religious, ethnic or social group; it usually implies central instigation and control, or at minimum the passivity of local authorities. The term came into widespread usage after the anti-Jewish riots of 1881 and 1882 in the Russian Empire” (ibid, 1).

Prior to 1881, anti-Jewish violence in the Russian Empire was rare and limited to the Ukrainian port of Odessa. There Greeks and Jews, rival economic and ethnic communities, lived side-by-side. The first Odessa pogrom, in 1821, was precipitated by the Greek War for Independence, when Greeks accused Jews of sympathizing with the Ottoman authorities. The pogrom of 1871 was precipitated by a rumor that Jews had vandalized the Greek community’s church. The Russian press characterized that riot as a popular protest against Jewish economic exploitation of the native population (ibid.).

Epstein (2007, 9) describes pogroms that occurred in succession of one another at the end of April 1881. In the short period of three days, there were more than thirty attacks. Twenty thousand Jewish homes were destroyed and over two hundred communities were attacked by 1882. Epstein asserts that “a new and even worse series of

pogroms took place between 1903 and 1906” after a boy was found stabbed to death in Kishinev in February of 1903. Rumors of blood libel circulated, alleging that Jews had killed him in order to use his blood to make matzah. The town of Kishinev began to call for revenge. When the last day of Passover (also Easter Sunday) arrived on April 19th, angry mobs stormed the Jewish area of the town pillaging and destroying Jewish homes and shops. Uninterrupted by the police, they continued their attacks until dusk, and also returned the next morning. The violence eventually escalated to murder and rape. In an effort to protect themselves, some Jews collected things they could use as weapons but were subsequently arrested (ibid, 10). At the end of it all, “forty-nine Jews had been killed and more than five hundred injured. Seven hundred houses and six hundred businesses were destroyed. In all, about two thousand families were left homeless” (ibid, 11).

In 1882 Czar Alexander III enacted new, more restrictive laws (the infamous May laws) ostensibly to protect Russian peasants from the economic control of Jews; even in the Pale of the Settlement, Jews could no longer live in any area with less than ten thousand residents (ibid.).

Its [the Russian government] goal was now primarily to restrict the harmful effect of Jews on the rest of society. In May 1882, updated regulations forbade new Jewish settlement outside towns and townlets, and Jewish trade on Sundays or Christian holidays. The government also acted to restrict access to secondary and university education and generally to restrict the presence of Jews outside the Pale of Settlement. The result was a serious deterioration of the situation of the Jewish community, one aspect of which was the acceleration of mass emigration. (Polonsky 2010, 7)

For many Jews, the pogroms and the May Laws were the final straw; all the fears, the economic deprivation, the despair, and the belief that the past would also be the future combined to tip the scale toward emigration. It is important, however, to stress that the

pogroms alone did not result in the mass Jewish emigration. Emigration had begun in Eastern Europe in the 1870s, before the pogroms.

By 1880, then, possibly fifty thousand of America's two hundred and fifty thousand Jews had originated in Eastern Europe. Like their Gentile neighbors in the Old World, these Ostjuden [Jews from Eastern Europe] were suffering acutely from the malaise of agricultural disruption. They too derived their livelihood from the agricultural economy, functioning as middlemen between the countryside and the cities. (Sachar 1992a, 117)

Though Jewish imagination recalls the pogroms as the driving force for emigration, they were not the only reason for leaving (Epstein 2007, 13).

The Golden Medina

However, following the pogroms in Ukraine in 1881–1882, the *Hibat Tsiyon* (Love of Zion) movement was established in Russia and Romania. Promoting modern Jewish nationalism began to spread from intellectual circles to the masses among Eastern European Jews. The *Hibat Tsiyon* movement was a pre-Zionist Jewish nationalist movement (Stanislawski 2010a). Some Jews wished to return to the Jewish homeland, while other Jews, seeking social and financial advancement, were pulled toward the lure of America (Zollman, 2018).

But among the common folk and most students, the talk everywhere in Eastern Europe was of the United States, the “Goldene Medina,” the Golden Land, which was really less a description of reality than the embodiment of a dream. They wanted to believe, needed to believe, that the streets were paved with gold, that the gates of the New World would open wide for them and lead to the lush fields of freedom. (Epstein 2007, 13-14)

However, not all Eastern European Jews were enamored with the idea of moving to America, nicknamed the “Treyfe Medina” [the unkosher land],

...secular criticism joined an anxious—even hostile—Orthodox religious discourse that worried about the decline of faith, tantamount to apostasy, among Jewish emigrants. In the early 1880s, three prominent Lithuanian and Polish rabbis—Shemu’el Mohilewer (1824-1898), Eliyahu Meisel (1821-1912), and Yosef Soloveichik (1820-1892)—issued a public warning against emigration to America. They dismissed the idea that Jews would find a haven from antisemitism, even in America, and warned that the country was lawless and immoral, a disaster for Judaism. Yisra’el Me’ir HaKohen (1882-1933); known as the Hafets Hayim), who feared for the spiritual fate of the emigrants, published a book of religious instruction that urged Jews to stay within the fold despite the spiritual perils around them (Nidhe Yisra’el [The Scattered Ones of Israel; 1890]). (Lederhendler 2017, 3)

Nevertheless, the economic lure of America was compelling. The Industrial Revolution and the loss of life in the Civil War (1861-1865) created a shortage of American workers. Manufacturing increased by 700%, quadrupling the country’s national wealth but workers were needed to sustain the growth. In addition, the invention and use of steamships decreased the transatlantic journey from three months to at most two weeks making the trip more reasonable (Epstein 2007, 15).

The lyrics of the Yiddish theater song *Lebn Zol Kolombus*, describe the draw of America and the excitement and hope of immigrants which made the daunting journey to America worth it. Its music, composed by Arnold Perlmutter and Herman Wohl, was featured in *Der Grine Milyoner* [The New Millionaire,] a staged musical comedy produced in New York in 1915. Abraham S. Schomer, who wrote the script of the show, claimed it was based on an actual incident that occurred in 1894. The show featured Boris Thomashefsky as the hero. Thomashefsky allegedly wrote the lyrics, though a 1918 lists them as written by Louis Gilrod (Lebn Zol Kolumbus, Milken archive.org liner notes).

Lebn Zol Kolumbus!

Long Live Columbus!

Transliterated Yiddish Lyrics:

A shtetl iz Amerike, a mekhaye khlebn.
Es rut af ir di shkhinele;
mir zoln azoy lebn.
Milkhomes, biksn, mentshnblut
darfn mir af tsores.
A gubernator darf men nit,
a keyser af kapores.
Ay, s'iz gut, zingt zhe ale mit:
lebn zol Kolumbus,
trinkt briderlekh lekham!
O lebn zol Kolumbus
far dem land dem nayem! Zayt tsufridn,
gleybt nit in di trombes.
Shrayt zhe yidn: lebn zol Kolumbus!
far meydlekh iz ameritshke
a glik, nor a ganeyden,
vayl boyz iz do kekhoh hayam,
a tayneg, oy a lebn.
Un keyn nadn darf men nit,
shatkhonim af kapores.
Un az a trombonik vil gelt,
krikt er a moyd mit tsores.
Ay s'iz gut, zingt zhe meydlekh mit:
lebn zol Kolumbus!...

English Lyrics:

America is a *shtetl*, where, I swear, life is great.
The divine rests on her;
we should all get to live so.
Wars, guns, or bloodshed
we need like a hole in the head.
Who needs an [imperial] ruler?
the hell with kings.
Ay, it's great, everyone sing along:
long live Columbus!
brothers, drink a toast to life—*l'hayyim!*
Oh, long live Columbus
for discovering this new land! Be merry!
pay no heed to the grumblers.
Jews, shout: long live Columbus!
for girls, America is a great place, a paradise,
for boys here are plentiful like the sands of the
sea, a pleasure, oh, what a life.
You don't need a dowry,
the hell with matchmakers.
And if a chump wants to marry for money,
he's liable to wind up with a wife no one else
would marry.
Oh, it's good, girls sing along:
long live Columbus!...

lyrics from Milken Archive.org

The majority of Jewish emigrants from Eastern Europe were young men, leaving few to marry in the Old Country. Many married men emigrated too, leaving an “American widow,” who remained behind (Epstein 2007, 15).

Ambivalence about America found expression in Yiddish folk songs of the period. In one, a wife left behind by an emigrant husband laments: “My husband has gone to seek his fortune/ in Columbus's land. / Oh, if he had only granted me a divorce first/ I wouldn't be so miserable now. / Oh people, people, you are leaving, / you are going on boats and on trains./Ask him why he deserted me/ should you meet my husband there.” But other popular songs held out hope for new lives or for true love fulfilled, and declared it better to be “a slave in America” than to remain in Russia. (Lederhendler 2017, 3)

Between 1881 and 1914 over two million Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe to America; approximately 1.6 million from the Russian Empire, three hundred and eighty thousand from Galicia and eighty thousand from Romania. These totaled about seventy-five percent of Jewish emigration out of Eastern Europe (ibid.).

Even though the idea of migrating to America was a dream for so many, getting there was often a nightmare. Epstein (2007) elaborates: it was very expensive to leave Russia and one had to bribe officials in order to obtain necessary travel documents; this often took months and sometimes years. Illegal emigration was just as expensive because of similar bribes and payments to smugglers. Even after obtaining documents, it was difficult to leave. Some people were smuggled to the ports through merchant carts. Those who were able to leave couldn't bring much, "mostly, they tied their few belongings in a blanket or a sheet. They took a pillow... along with a souvenir from the Old Country, some religious item perhaps, and some food (ibid, 16). Thieves and con-men were ready to cheat the travelers; even travel agents cheated by selling tickets to London but charging for a trip to New York. Often times emigres traveled on third class railroad cars for twenty to sixty hours (ibid, 17).

At points of departure, Jews faced significant problems. They suffered through additional inspections at the docks, as the steamship companies were incentivized to only transport those who would be accepted into America, otherwise the companies had to return the passengers free of charge, losing revenue (ibid, 18). In port, Jews fell victim to thieves. Additionally, they were overcharged at every turn; from hostel owners to ticket agents. Professional thieves stole baggage and con artists and white slave traders plied their trades as well. Those who made it through these inspections spent two weeks in

uncomfortable conditions on the ships, sleeping in rows on top of one another until they would be inspected again upon arrival (ibid, 19).

It must have been an exciting moment when land finally appeared. The immigrants saw Long Island first. Many immigrants had deep emotions and simply cried when they realized that their voyage had ended and the Golden land was right in front of them (ibid, 26). Passing the Statue of Liberty, they docked in the Hudson River and were shuttled to Ellis Island. The passengers realized that they were about to be examined, and that inspection could destroy their dream and send them back to Europe or pass them through the final gate to freedom and renewal, “the inspection was their last test before entering America, and most were very scared as they approached the island where their fate would be sealed” (ibid, 27).

As early as 1833, builders had decided that the Lower East Side was a perfect location to create affordable housing for new immigrants, and built extensive tenements. By 1900 the growing Jewish population had formed loose neighborhoods on the Lower East Side based on the country of origin of the Jews (ibid, 46).

When a new Jewish immigrant first set foot on the Lower East Side, he or she stepped into a Jewish world. The earliest Eastern European Jews to settle there had quickly established synagogues, mutual-aid societies, libraries, and stores. Every major institution, from the bank to the grocery store to the social club to the neighborhood bookmaker, was Jewish-owned or Jewish-run, and everyone a Jewish immigrant might speak to in the course of daily business would likely be Jewish. Even the owners of the garment factories and department stores where many immigrants worked were Jewish. For a new Jewish immigrant in a strange country, this immersion in a familiar world, around people who shared a common language, faith, and background, could be profoundly reassuring. (Polish/Russian – Introduction 2003)

Different social, economic and political “push” factors in Eastern Europe, combined with the “pull” factors towards America, inspired Jews of the Old Country to

build a new life in the Golden Medina. Though not all those with the dream could make it, some were fortunate enough to complete the journey and land on American soil. Even though these immigrants couldn't bring much over with them physically, they brought their culture and experiences, as well as hope for a better future. On the Lower East Side they found a natural home among the Jewish community (communities). Chapter Three will explore the remembered (mythic) life and the more nuanced actual life on the Lower East Side and the powerful role that Yiddish theater played in the lives of these immigrants.

Chapter Three

The Lower East Side Meets Yiddish Theater

The Lower East Side: Collective Memory and Actuality

In order to appreciate the role and powerful contributions of Yiddish theater in the lives of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants of the Lower East Side, we first need to look at the relationship between the Jews and the Lower East Side. The Lower East Side is a sacred place for American Jews, "...American Jews made the Lower East Side their common heritage regardless of where they live at the end of the twentieth century. Nearly all of them claim a piece of the Lower East Side...." (Diner 2000, 8).

Many Americans with Eastern European Jewish ancestry can trace their family's history to this time (1880-1924) and place. We visualize what life was like for them. While some of the collective memory is accurate, research has contributed more nuanced dimensions to the actual immigrant experience on the Lower East Side.

The story of the Lower East Side has become almost universally understood to be synonymous with the story of Jewish life in America. The neighborhood is understood as different than any other place where Jews lived. It emerged, and still serves, as the point of reference for all other American Jewish stories in its singularity and its mythic status. Transformed from being just a swath of the urban space where many Jews lived for some period of time and then moved on, and leaving in their wake some buildings with Jewish markers on them, it became sacred. (ibid, 13)

From 1880 through 1890, seventy-five percent of all Jews in New York lived on the Lower East Side (ibid, 49). In addition to New York, Eastern European Jews also settled in Philadelphia, Boston and Baltimore, and in the Midwest, particularly Chicago (Risichin 2003, 1). However, during the years between World War I and World War II, the Lower East Side was no longer the epicenter of Jewish population and activity in America. By

1927 fewer than fifteen percent of the New York Jewish population lived on the Lower East Side. Instead the Lower East Side began to flourish as the primary locus of Jewish memory and the geographic space for the creation of Jewish identity in America (Wenger 1). “In the 1920s and 1930s, The Lower East Side became a nostalgic center for New York Jews, a living reminder of an idealized immigrant world as well as a mirror of the past that reflected the extent of Jewish progress. By the interwar years, the lower East side was already a popular site for Jewish tourism and a place that Jews invested with cultural meaning.” (ibid, 2)

Diner (2000, 24) offers an interesting perspective on the narrative of the Lower East Side and its parallel to the Exodus of the Torah. She posits that the Old Country was like *Mitzrayim* [Egypt], the Lower East Side is akin to the *midbar* [desert], and in order to enter the New World of *Canaan* [America], the Jews must journey through this threshold, with all of its trials and tribulations full of narrow dirty streets and sweatshops. As in the story of the Exodus, the next generation of the children of those in the desert were the ones to embrace the new land, and it was so with the next generation of the immigrants; their children, born into the freedom of America were able to leave the Lower East Side and prosper. She quotes Milton Hindus who, in an introduction to the book *The Old East Side: An Anthology* (Philadelphia, Jewish publication Society of America 1969, xxvi) describes Jewish life in the Lower East Side in terms of liminality. He describes it as, “an ordeal, a transition, a painful invitation, a trauma which accompanied passage from the old world shtetl to the sense of a privileged new nationality and status which has come to American Jews in the last 50 years or so” (Hindus as quoted in Diner 2000, 24). Through superimposing our more recent ancestors’ narrative on those of our ancient people, their

sojourning takes on deeper meaning and mission, cementing the place of the Lower East Side in our collective consciousness. It was the desert where the overwhelming majority of American Jews believe their Eastern European ancestors passed the test of suffering for their children to gain access to the Promised Land.

The birth of this mythic relationship between the Jews and Manhattan's Lower East Side began in the 1880s, as Eastern European Jews began their arduous migration to the New World's point of entry, New York City. In the following decades, the population of Eastern European Jews in New York City grew rapidly. In 1910 the number was 1.2 million. By 1930 the number was 1.6 million. The most important piece of New York real estate for these immigrants was found below Houston Street and north of Division, bounded on the east by the East River and on the west by Allen Street. Referred to by many names, such as "the East Side," "the Hebrew Quarter," the "Jewish Quarter," the "Russian Quarter," downtown, or "the ghetto," this area was the heart of Jewish immigrant life in America into the 1920s. Reformer and author Jacob Riis declared the area the most densely populated place on earth, more populated than Calcutta or Bombay (Diner 2016, 52-54). "At the turn of the [20th] century, social reformers used exposés and photography to disclose squalid conditions in East Side tenements and sweatshops. In fact, most Americans first came to know the Lower East Side through the photographs of Jacob Riis and others who purposefully focused their lenses on the neighborhood's filth and poverty." (Wenger 14)

The representations that we see of tenement life in photographs of that time reinforce the destitute life we imagine, with illiterate Yiddish-speaking peasants of all ages working themselves to the bone in dismal conditions. The hopes and dreams that the

Eastern European Jews may have had before emigration were challenged by the actuality of the start of their new lives upon arrival. As one wry immigrant observed, “When I left for America, I was told the streets were paved with gold. When I got here, I found that not only were they not paved with gold, they weren’t paved at all. And not only weren’t they paved, but I was expected to pave them!” (Epstein 2007, 14).

This humorous anecdote expresses the collision of expectation and reality, which many immigrants faced when they arrived in New York, and it does so with more than a smidgen of Jewish/Yiddish humor (which may be elusive to describe but is recognizable when one sees it.) Not only were the streets not paved, the living and work conditions were tough. Arriving on the Lower East Side must have been overwhelming for the newcomers- facing dirty crowded streets and buildings, strange smells and encountering other ethnicities one had never seen before. “The living conditions in these wards must not be romanticized. There is a common notion that poor today is not like poor then; old-time poverty was clean, honest, and upright. This is utter nonsense. Poverty, as it existed on the Lower East Side of New York, was noisy, foul smelling, diseased, hungry.” (Dwork 1981, 5)

In addition to the economic opportunities the immigrants hoped to find in America, they also found squalor in the Lower East Side tenements. Many people shared the rooms in the apartments, and they often doubled as workrooms and bedrooms. The living quarters were likely closer to those in steerage than what they had imagined when they first set out for a better life in the America. However dismal, it was still better than the Old Country: “The oppressed and crowded newcomers sent word back to their

relatives overseas; America was not quite the Golden Land of their dreams. On the other hand, it wasn't the Pale either" (Kanfer 2006, 37).

While this portrayal of life on the Lower East Side reflects a portion of reality, there is a more nuanced picture of life on the Lower East Side and its vibrancy. This vibrancy allowed for the Yiddish theater and other Jewish institutions to take root, flourish and enrich the lives of the immigrants in all strata.

Though Eastern European Jews are most frequently identified with the Lower East Side, they were not the first to occupy it. Many different ethnic groups called the Lower East Side home, among them were various subgroups of Jews. It was as early as 1833 that builders concluded that the Lower East Side was a perfect place to build inexpensive housing for new immigrants. Irish immigrants fleeing the famine and German immigrants escaping political turmoil settled the area. The section north of Division Street was called Kleindeutschland, Little Germany. In the 1880s, Jews and Italians started moving in, and many of the Germans, including German Jews, having gained some prosperity, moved out, leaving more tenement space for arriving Jews to occupy. By 1900, the burgeoning Jewish population had formed loose neighborhoods on the Lower East Side. Hungarian Jews lived in the northern part, above Houston Street, where the German Jews had lived before moving uptown. Jews from Galicia lived between Houston and Broome and east of Clinton Street. Romanian Jews lived directly west of them, and Russian Jews lived from Grand Street south to Monroe Street (Epstein 2007, 45-46). Each group felt at home in their own little corner where they were surrounded by the creature comforts of their old homelands. Even though the Jews shared the same religion, there were tensions and prejudices based on ethnic culture and origin.

The stereotypical image of the Eastern European Jewish immigrant was that of a poor, unsophisticated and uneducated country peasant from the shtetl. However, the reality is that, unlike many other immigrants, Eastern Europeans Jews “arrived in America with considerable experience of urban life in a capitalist economy” (Hyman 2009, 1). In the Northwest section of the Pale of Settlement, they made up 58 percent of the urban population. In the total Pale, though only 12 percent of the total population, Jews comprised 38 percent of those living in cities and towns (ibid.). Between 1899 and 1914 almost 67 percent of employed Jewish immigrants possessed industrial skills which they had acquired in their increasingly industrialized homelands (Sachar 1992b).

The immigrants found work in the garment industry, sweatshops, and factories, making food, peddling goods on the streets, and there was even a red light district. The graphic images of destitute immigrants were only part of the picture. There was also upward mobility. According to Diner, some earlier immigrants eventually were able to purchase property, including the tenements where more recent immigrants found themselves living (Diner 2000, 45). While some jobs required that one worked on Saturday (which led to a decrease in religious observance), the jobs that allowed one to observe the Sabbath were attractive to the immigrants. The garment industry, which had undergone rapid expansion, often had Jewish employers, a Jewish environment, Jewish workers, and allowed for the immigrants to observe Shabbat. In addition, garment work was one of the occupations open to Jews in Europe in the 19th century and they were able to apply their skills and knowledge in this sector in America. By 1910, lower Manhattan was home to more than 80 percent of New York City’s garment industry, which

manufactured 70 percent of America's women's clothing and 40 percent of men's clothing (Sachar 1992b).

The Lower East Side had some important institutions to support and ground the Eastern European immigrants. In the diverse and hectic city, these institutions supported Jewish life for the immigrants, helped them to feel like they weren't just visitors but belonged, and gave them a sense of autonomy and ownership of spaces within the bustling city. Among these institutions were The Educational Alliance which helped the greenhorn immigrants assimilate, the Downtown Hebrew Institute, which aided and educated the community (Epstein 2007, 188), synagogues, mutual-aid societies, bathhouses where one could get clean and go for a *shvitz* [a steam bath akin to a sauna], as well as *mikvahs* [immersion baths for ritual purification]. Kosher butchers, delicatessens and restaurants were also crucial for living in the new land and they formed a Jewish world around the immigrants.

Even though the immigrants had the experience of a Jewish world within the Lower East Side, they also had significant contacts with the rest of New York City. In 1891 fifty thousand of them signed a petition to keep the Metropolitan Museum of Art (located on Fifth Avenue in the 80s) open on Sunday. They took excursions to the Central Park Zoo, and competed for admission to Townsend Harris High School, located on 138th St. "That they used the rest of the city with ease and without encountering overt hostility gives a claim on these immigrants as American "learners" and a suggestion of the relatively positive reception they found (Diner 2000, 45). All of these factors support the contention that the Lower East Side was not a clearly defined, uniform island of poor,

uneducated and uncultured Eastern European Jewish immigrants but rather a more varied, textured Jewish experience.

Even though times were tough, with poverty and harsh living conditions, the immigrants still appreciated artistic endeavors. Music and entertainment played an important role in their lives. Pianos and Victrolas become popular in the community; not only for amusement, but because they were symbolic and represented status. By 1904, many of the parlor rooms in the tenements contained pianos and the children were given lessons (Epstein 2007, 50). In her memoir, Yiddish theater actress Molly Picon reminisces about when her own family obtained one, “But I kept working, and so did Mama. She bought me a piano, an old upright I thought was beautiful, to be paid for in installments. We found a teacher who charged fifty cents a lesson, and I started to learn to play” (Picon 1980, 19). This story and arrangement was not unusual among the immigrants. Similarly, Victrolas began to become commonplace in homes and shops, often heard on the streets through open windows. Epstein explains that, “having a piano or Victrola or other goods was crucial, for it was a mark of respectability, a sense that the newcomers were adapting to American life and to the material abundance embodied in such a life” (Epstein 2007, 53). Not only did the music heard from the pianos or Victrolas give dimensions to their lives culturally, but they made the immigrants feel like they were becoming American and beginning to thrive in the Goldene Medina.

After spending countless hours working hard, the immigrants looked for outlets to relax and socialize in the little free time they had. In addition to the aforementioned institutions, stoops, candy stores, cafes, saloons, barbershops and pool halls became common hangout spots. These informal neighborhood institutions served to decompress

the immigrants from the difficult work week, and also to share the news and happenings around the neighborhood. Vaudeville performances were also a favorite pastime of the immigrants, but it was the Yiddish theater that reigned and was unrivaled. It served as an institution in its own right, and became so popular and essential among the masses, as is reflected in the saying, “they ate their *broyt mit teater* [bread smeared with theater]” (Sandrow 1977, 91) and became patrons to the various performers on the Lower East Side: “There was a community of some three hundred thousand souls, most of whom barely scrounged a living as sweatshop machine operators or rag and pin peddlers, that managed to support several theaters, several music halls, tens of little cabarets, amateur drama clubs, concerts, lecture series, social dance halls. Their appetite for theater was astounding.” (ibid.)

Old World Meets New World: Goldfadn in the Goldene Medina

In 1888, when Avrom Goldfadn, “Father of Yiddish theater” moved to America from Warsaw, he hoped to be embraced there and prosper as well. Unfortunately, he arrived after some of his former performers had already established themselves in New York, and his reputation for being dictatorial preceded him (Warnke 2003, 205). The performers of the Romanian Opera house went on strike when he attempted to take directorial control and after being ousted, he returned to Europe. He tried again to make it in New York in 1903. While the popularity of his works in Europe was in full throttle, in New York they were only used as fillers. Goldfadn hadn’t created new work since the mid-1890s and consequently was unable to compete with the up and coming playwrights of New York (ibid.). Additionally, his style became outdated.

In 1907, he finally wrote a new play, *Ben Ami*. During a reading of the script, the actors were very critical and were quite vocal about how they felt, leaving Goldfaden dejected. By the second reading of the script, however, the actors reframed the way they thought about the piece, considering it a “retro melodrama” (Kanfer 2004, 17).

“Goldfaden told Thomashefsky [a renowned performer and the producer of *Ben Ami*] that he lived now for a chance at vindication before the Yiddish speaking public. He would be content with one last success- a coda to his life in art. Then, he proclaimed, he could die happy” (ibid.). Goldfaden got his wish. *Ben Ami* opened on Christmas Day of 1907 and was well-acclaimed. Admirers flocked to shower Goldfaden with flowers and accompanied him from the theater down Second Avenue to his home, placing a garland around his neck at his doorstep. He watched the next five performances of his show from box seats. On the sixth night, he left early after feeling feverish, and died later that night in his sleep (ibid.).

A mass procession of 75,000 mourners accompanied Goldfaden from the People’s Theater in the Bowery to Brooklyn’s Washington Cemetery (Green 2013). Over 100,000 people attended his funeral (Wolitz 2010). Goldfaden got the acknowledgement he deserved, finally recognized in America as the “Father of Yiddish theater.” In an obituary of the legend, The New York Times referred to him as the “Yiddish Shakespeare” (Wolitz 2010). In his farewell eulogy, Boris Thomashefsky exclaimed:

If not for our old father Goldfaden...none of us would have become tragedians or comedians, prima donnas, soubrettes, playwrights. If not for Goldfaden, we’d be plain and simple Jews: cantors, choir singers, folk singers, clowns, clothes peddlers, machine sewers, cigarette makers, Purim players, wedding jugglers, clothes pressers and finishers...Goldfaden went out like a light in his dark room while we, his children, ride in carriages, own our own houses, are hung with diamonds. Union members, club members, pinochle players, decision makers,

managers, sports. We're nice and warm, all of us. But our father was cold.
(Kanfer 2004, 17-18)

Goldfadn's importance and his contributions to Yiddish Theater cannot be understated. He is the link that connects the purimspiel players and Broder Singers to modern Yiddish theater, availing countless Eastern European Jews different opportunities, and venues in which to perform. For Thomashefsky personally, Goldfadn provided access to upward mobility and acculturation quite literally. Immigrating to America as a teenager, Thomashefsky worked in a cigarette making sweatshop, singing songs from the Yiddish theater that his coworkers had enjoyed in the old country. Possessing a beautiful voice, he also sang in the Henry Street Synagogue on Saturdays. Though he had never attended Yiddish theater, he fell in love with the concept of Yiddish theater from the singing experience with his sweatshop coworkers, and wanted to bring it to America (Boris Thomashefsky, Jewish Virtual Library). Introducing Goldfadn's work to America, he ultimately became a wealthy megastar who transitioned from the ghetto to Broadway. This represents a transcending of an older Eastern European sort of Jewishness in favor of wealth and comfort.

Thomashefsky's first example of a "plain and simple" Jew is a cantor. In the old days, a talented Jew could become a cantor. Goldfadn opened up the doors so that they could do more, for example becoming a theater star, when one could use their musical skills in a secular setting.¹ Goldfadn created a Yiddish theater that was a transition point in the options that were available to Jews, giving a form of Jewish cultural expression to the Jews that operated independently from the synagogue and was grounded in different aspirations. He is a central figure whose impact affected those in Eastern Europe (who

¹ Personally significant, my own journey as an acculturated Jew is ironically the reverse: a transition from studying drama and performing in theater, to a career as a cantor.

acknowledged his greatness,) but also those in America where he largely went unappreciated. When he returned to America in 1903, he had fallen from popularity and lived in poverty. Jacob Adler supported Goldfadn with a weekly stipend (Kanfer 2004, 17). Fortunately, he was able to experience a last moment of greatness in his final work.

Not only was *Ben Ami* Goldfadn's last hurrah, but it was also the last hurrah for his style of theater, which died with him. Despite this, Goldfadn earned his rightful place in the history of Yiddish theater. Years later in 1984, when the now legendary Second Avenue Deli installed a Yiddish theater Walk of Fame (the Yiddish theater's answer to the Hollywood Walk of Fame established 1958) as tribute to those Yiddish stars who made outstanding contributions to the culture of the neighborhood, Goldfadn received a star installed by the deli's late owner, Abe Lebewohl (Paul, 2017).

Why Yiddish Theater?

Though Yiddish newspapers were popular, the busy lives of the immigrants didn't afford much leisure time. With little free time, they wanted to go out and about instead of reading, and they preferred to escape to the theater: "When the workers had their holidays and weekends free from labor, they sought the theatre. In addition to this, it may be valid to say that most people are more receptive to the spoken word than to the task of reading" (Lifson 1965, 59). This became particularly pertinent when it came to matters of education for the masses. While the second generation of these immigrants had the benefit of the American education system, the first generation had theater. A critical figure in New York's Yiddish Theater, playwright Jacob Gordin, wished to educate the crowds, he wished to elevate cultural standards and raise the art form, making the theater more sophisticated and cosmopolitan by "bringing rationality and literary truth to the

masses” (ibid, 60), in stark contrast to boisterous and often irreverent *shund* [trash] entertainment that could be found previously as in the work of Avrom Goldfadn.² Sharon Power explains the role Yiddish theater played in assimilation: “The Yiddish theatre was also a powerful and eagerly utilized tool to teach and promote Americanization and modernization, through adaptations from the modern Western literary canon and through plays illustrating specifically American settings, music, and customs” (Power 2012, 85). Gordin himself was an assimilated Russian Jew. Russian was his language. Russian literature was his literature. Shaken by growing anti-Semitism in Russia, he immigrated to America, where he was again committed to assimilation and became a force in educating the masses to assimilate for the betterment of society as a whole. His “elevation” of the Yiddish theater served to make the immigrant community more Euro-American.

The Yiddish theater served many functions in the lives of the immigrants in addition to informal education. The Yiddish theater helped to create a cultural presence for the Jewish immigrants in the diverse city of New York. This enabled their community to feel like they were grounded and established there, which encouraged them to build institutions that reflected the community’s history and aspirations for the future. It was a place that represented the journey of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants on the Lower East side by addressing crucial aspects of their lives and experience. The immigrants were able to find refuge in the physical theater spaces, as well as the enthralling productions, providing much needed sanctuary and relief from the world outside and their undesirable living conditions. For several hours, they were transported

² Jacob Gordin’s contribution to the evolution of Yiddish theater is further explored in Chapter four.

to another time and place. The theaters functioned as spaces of social interaction, and reminders of their Eastern European past in which their native tongue was heard on the stage and in the audience.

The Yiddish theater reinforced community and Jewish identity. It became a place where the *heykishness* [hominess] of the shtetl (not only the location but the way of life) was recreated temporally in an insulated environment where mamaloshen was spoken exclusively and they could reminisce about the Old Country. Jewish time was also highlighted; biblical themes, holidays and historic events and rituals were referenced or acted out on stage. Jewish music—cantorial and klezmer—was used during performances. Additionally, “for some secular Jews who were Yiddishists and theatre enthusiasts, the theatre even filled the role of traditional religion” (Power 2012, 85). The Yiddish theater gave these immigrants a space to reinforce community in their own institution that wasn’t a *shul* [synagogue]. Through the Yiddish theater, immigrants were able to maintain a connection to their Jewish roots even though they weren’t necessarily attending shul. This Jewishness in an American context meant that Jews were now afforded a path toward upward mobility and full participation in American life, while still holding onto their history and culture. Being Jewish in America was different than being Jewish in the Old Country; there were now opportunities to be part of the larger society as a whole, whereas life in the shtetl represented a demarcation of “other,” and a deliberate effort to keep the Jews from entering the mainstream of their society. In America, one didn’t have to choose one or the other; both could exist concurrently. Like so many other immigrant groups in New York, the Jews could (and often did) live in a

world of immigrants, but simultaneously were part of the larger society. The Yiddish theater is a celebration of this.

The Yiddish theater was also a venue for the immigrants to socialize (there was talking before, during and after performances,) see and be seen, and for *shidduchim* [dates arranged by a *shadchan*, a matchmaker] to meet up in a pressure free, safe, public arena (ibid.). Yiddish theater was a theater of the people, and they recognized it as such:

They used the theater building unceremoniously, as a meeting place, just as their fathers had used the little synagogue back home to study, gossip, pray, drink schnapps, and eat black bread with butter. The theater aisles and lobbies were clubhouses where *landsmanshaftn* [mutual-aid or benefit societies for Eastern European Jews from the same town] crowded their fund-raising machinery for theatergoing en masse. Spectators ate drumsticks from brown paper bags, cracked walnuts, and even nursed infants during the show. (Sandrow, 91)

Supporting this idea of a “people’s theater,” Edna Nahshon points out that theatergoers were not made up of one socioeconomic group, but rather were comprised of the “rich and poor, educated and illiterate, observant and free-thinking” (Nahshon 2016b).

Reflecting on this, one could assert that the Yiddish theater was a unifying force for the Eastern European Jewish immigrant community of the Lower East Side.

On a deeper level, the Yiddish theater was a place to act out as well as sort out the immigrants’ stories, struggles and emotions in the New World. “A flourishing Yiddish culture—poetry, prose and drama—revolved mostly around themes of the Jewish worker’s life, expressing the reality of daily existence within a community of immigrants” (Rischinm 2003). Through watching the performers on stage they were able to make sense of their immigrant experience. Themes that the immigrants experienced in their lives were explored on stage: the tensions between the traditions of the Old Country and the freedom of life in the Goldene Medina, adjusting to life in America, and the

longing for home and loved ones. “The theatre provided a nostalgic, cathartic, and communal experience to help the community cope with feelings of homesickness, guilt and loss” (Power 2012, 85).

When the actors triumphed on stage, so did the audiences. The audiences also responded to what was happening on stage while it was happening, retaining the atmosphere of the interactive and informal purimspiels and café performances featuring the Broder singers; sometimes performances were even interrupted with audience requests for favorite songs.

When the show displeased the audience, they were ready to yell comments and ... if they were bored they yelled ‘Get the hook!’ When the show pleased them they showed their pleasure lavishly. They might wait outside the stage door to carry an actor on their shoulders through the city streets, setting him down respectfully in front of his favorite after-the-show café.” (Sandrow 1977, 92-93)

This behavior demonstrates that the audience and the performers were faithful to the traditions that spawned the creation of Yiddish theater. The qualities of the origins of Yiddish theater (purimspiels and café performances) which were interactive, informal, often script-less and spontaneous are apparent here as well. This type of interaction isn’t seen in other theater settings, save for midnight showings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. This behavior also speaks to the ownership the audience felt, as well as a true sense of belonging, camaraderie and collaboration. Perhaps they saw themselves in relationship with those who put on the shows much like how God and the Jewish people are partners in creation. It is theater not only on the stage, but theater in the theater, and theater in the streets.

Off of the stage, audiences were invested in their favorite performers and idolized them, much like we see in modern day celebrity culture. Edna Nahshon asserts that “the

stars of the Yiddish theater were the royalty of an otherwise drab Lower East Side....They were familiar faces who shared the same roots, experiences and ethnic commitments as their more plebeian admirers, and they never detached themselves from their community and its concerns. When a star of the Yiddish theater succeeded on Broadway, the triumph was seen as being shared with every ghetto Jew” (Nahshon 2016c, 12). The fans were invested in and enamored with their stars. This fandom grew into a second layer of entertainment.

Yiddish theater fans had posters of their favorite stars and similar to the celebrity exploits presently discussed on television programs such as E! News and TMZ, the audiences yearned to know the ins and outs of their favorite actors’ lives: who they were romancing and with whom they were fighting. “When an actor and actress who were recently divorced from each other played a tender love scene together, the audience got two dramas for the price of one, and the emotional level was almost twice as high” (ibid. 101). The fans were such a part of the fabric of Yiddish theater that they were even included in actor’s personal affairs. Molly Picon and her husband, Jacob Kalich (Yonkel), advertised their engagement party onstage at the Grand Opera house and made a show of it. Over fifteen hundred guests (audience members) attended (Picon 1980, 28).

This adoration of the fans reached another level with the *patriotn* (uberfans of specific stars), who actively supported them through ovations, gifts, and running errands for the stars. These rabid fans organized and became similar to fan clubs. “The term *patriotn* came to denote more specifically those fans who congregated in the gallery and were part of or at least associated with organized groups of *patriotn*: those who loved, supported, and were willing to defend their star with fists and bats.” (Warnke 162)

Yiddish theater's intense involvement in the community, coupled with the community's intense involvement with Yiddish theater underscores to the powerful influence that the Yiddish Theater had on the Jewish community of the Lower East Side. The Yiddish theater was a vital institution not only for the greenhorn immigrants but also for the more prosperous and educated.

Chapter Four

The Birth and Metamorphosis of Yiddish Theater on the Lower East Side, and its Pioneer Playwrights

This chapter will explore the work of the trailblazers, as well as the actual theaters of the Yiddish theater on the Lower East Side. This will be followed by some of my reflections on this material.

Boris Thomashefsky: “Founder of Yiddish Theater in America”

In 1883, when Czar Alexander III enforced restrictive new laws against the Jews, including the shutting down of Yiddish theatrical productions throughout the Russian Empire, many of its actors and playwrights migrated to London’s East End, which “became the new, though temporary center of the Yiddish stage” (Nahshon 2016b, 2).

Unfortunately, the poor immigrant community of the East End could not support this influx of Jewish thespians. The latter were also hampered by the fierce opposition of the Anglo-Jewish establishment and by the strict fire safety rules of the municipal authorities. The freedom to flourish without such constraints was to be found in the Golden Land, particularly in New York, soon to become the largest Jewish urban center in the world. (ibid.)

These actors and playwrights, including Jacob Adler, Sara Adler, Moyshe Hurvitz and Yoysef Lateiner came to New York’s Lower East Side from London’s East End. However, that was not until Yiddish theater had already established a foothold in New York through the efforts of Boris Thomashefsky, “commonly considered Founder of Yiddish theater in America” (Lifson 1965, 45).

There is some disagreement regarding the first Yiddish theater performance in New York. According to Marvin L. Seiger, there are some memoirs claiming particular dates and shows were the first, but this information could not be verified and is likely

incorrect due to failing memory (Seiger 1984, 229). General consensus supports the fact that Goldfadn's operetta *Koldunya* [*The Sorceress*] was actually the first production of Yiddish theater in New York. It was performed on East Fourth St. at Turn Hall on April 12th, 1882 (Epstein 2007, 207). Note that this historic event took place prior to the beginning of the mass immigration of Eastern European Jews and prior to Goldfadn's first setting foot on American soil. It was mounted by Boris Thomashefsky.

Boris Thomashefsky immigrated to New York in 1881, when he was twelve. He worked in a cigarette making sweatshop and also sang in the Henry Street Synagogue. While in the sweatshop, workers sang songs they remembered from Yiddish theater in Europe, and Thomashefsky decided New York needed such theater (Epstein 2007, 210). One of his coworkers, Abraham Golubok had brothers who were popular Yiddish actors who were stranded in London. Thomashefsky convinced Frank Wolf, a tavern owner and president of the Henry Street Synagogue to supply their travel tickets in addition to the rest of the stranded troupe (eight total) and further produce the first production by renting the hall (Seiger 1984, 231).

The story of the first production is likely as entertaining as the show itself, and is perhaps why it remains in peoples' minds as the progenitor. According to Thomashefsky, a committee of German Jews who disliked the project, afraid it would encourage anti-Semitism, threatened the troupe with deportation. Despite this, the show would go on and a mob of theatergoers surrounded Turn Hall in anticipation of the performance. As the orchestra began to play the overture, the female lead, Sarah Krantzfeld was nowhere to be found. The audience began to get rowdy and Thomashefsky and Wolf went to her home where they found her in bed feigning illness. Apparently, in an act of sabotage, her

husband was bribed by the German Jews to keep her from performing. When Wolf agreed to counter with three hundred dollars cash, Sarah Krantzfeld jumped out of bed and went with Thomashefsky and Wolf to the theater. By the time they had arrived, however, the chorus and orchestra had left along with most of the audience. Those audience members who remained were irate, destroying the chairs, yelling and cursing. Krantzfeld refused to sing without the orchestra but was pushed on stage despite her protest. Uncompromising, she began to recite the lyrics instead of singing them, further inciting the audience. Fruit was thrown and more people left but the performance continued through the end, albeit with some arguments and physical altercations. It was a true debacle (Seiger 1984, 232-233).

In another account, Thomashefsky is purported to have put on padding, a dress and a wig, performing Krantzfeld's role himself and earning a standing ovation (Epstein 2007, 2010). Years later, Bernard Gorin wrote a history of Yiddish theater and interviewed some of the actors of the performance. They disputed Thomashefsky's account, claiming that there were no droves of audience members waiting to get in, no rowdy mobs, no committee of German Jews trying to disrupt the performance and that Sarah Krantzfeld was indeed ill (Seiger 1984, 234). Despite this, the legend lives on as it depicts a humorous and larger than life beginning of Yiddish theater, the imagined story, a piece of Yiddish theater in and of itself.

What we do know is that Boris Thomashefsky, as a teenager withchutzpah, was responsible for the first performance of Yiddish theater in New York City. In addition to that accomplishment, he wrote seventy-eight original Yiddish operettas and performed in hundreds of others throughout his career (Halpern 2016, 122). Beyond the stage, he

played a critical role in developing the enterprise of Yiddish theater in New York and founded the first Yiddish theater group, which among other things, built traveling stock casts that performed in theaters around America on a rotating schedule (ibid, 123-124). There were many playwrights who were also actors, but Boris Thomashefsky was the most famous and successful of them all. Embraced by the audiences of Yiddish theater, women swooned over his good looks, and he nicknamed himself, and even billed himself on posters as, “America’s darling” (Sandrow 1977, 95). Thomashefsky was known as an American patriot, weaving this sentiment into every production. Additionally, he reached the audiences of the Lower East Side by writing and acting in plays that took place in America or portrayed themes that spoke to the Eastern European Jewish immigrant audience such as Jewish ethnicity, American identity, anti-Semitism, labor relations and women’s rights (Halpern 2016, 122).

On the heels of his fame, the exploits of his private life became fodder for the fans. He lived lavishly. He had a twelve room home in Brooklyn, and vacationed in a bungalow by the sea, as well as in a summer home on twenty acres of land in Hunter New York (Adler 2001, 359), part of the Catskills that became a popular Jewish vacation spot where people were able to escape city life and relax in fresh air. There, he earned the honor of the pioneer of Borsht Belt (named for a popular Eastern European beet soup which became a colloquialism for “Jewish”) entertainment when he built an open air theatre on the property that featured shows and eventually comedians and performers (see final chapter). Despite his enormous impact and success in the world of Yiddish theater, he was unable to replicate it on Broadway. In 1923, Thomashefsky starred in *Three Little Businessmen*, the first Yiddish show to be produced on Broadway, but it was a flop. After

a few more failed endeavors, he performed in a small cabaret on the Lower East Side. His final professional appearance was in *Boris and Bessie* (1937), an autobiographical musical revue about him and his wife, Bessie Thomashefsky. The show was ironically produced by his longtime lover, Regina Zuckerberg. Thomashefsky passed away two years later; 30,000 people attended his funeral (Halpern 2016, 124-126). Although Thomashefsky's career fizzled out, his contributions to Yiddish theater in New York have left an indelible mark.

The Playwrights and their Impact

Two major factors contributed to the fading popularity of Goldfadn. First, the new Yiddish theater audience's appetite quickly gave birth to successful competing playwrights, who formed their own companies. Two of these were headed by disciples of Goldfadn: Moyshe Hurvitz (1844-1910) and Yoysef Lateiner (1853-1935). They were able to splice together plots and melodies of other works with much greater efficiency than their former master, and thus satisfy the increasing demands for new productions (Steinlauf 2010b, 2). "During the 1890s Lateiner and Hurvitz were the leading Yiddish playwrights in New York, and maintained a monopoly over the fare offered the public" (Lifson 52). Hurvitz constructed around ninety plays; Lateiner more than one hundred and fifty. For actors and managers, the works of these prolific playwrights were considered "bread and butter plays" (ibid.). They weren't the fanciest, but could be made easily, quickly, and delighted the audiences of the Lower East Side.

This was a theater that attracted mass Jewish audiences, noisy and demonstrative. Mixtures of comedy, farce, and melodrama, performances invariably included singing and dancing. Stage directors were unknown and scripts were irrelevant to the semiliterate performers. The action, on primitive stages with simple props and

backdrops, was constructed around the leading actor or actress. This Yiddish popular theater, about which we still know very little, has been subsumed under the term *shund* (trash) and disparaged by critics and historians for nearly a century. (Steinlauf 2010b, 2)

Yiddish theater has two, at times conflicting, streams. The works of the aforementioned Goldfaden, Hurvitz, Lateiner (and lesser playwrights) represent the infant/child Yiddish theater, also referred to as popular theater, folk theater, and, derisively, *shund*. The other stream, variously known as Yiddish literary theater, Yiddish art theater or Yiddish dramatic theater, was represented by such playwrights as Y. L. Peretz (1852-1915) and Jacob Gordin (1853-1909).

Y. L. Peretz, Yiddish and Hebrew poet, writer, dramatist, and cultural icon, was born to a prominent family in Zamość, a multiethnic Polish city ruled by Russia, and a stronghold of Jewish Enlightenment. Perez was a brilliant, precocious child given an accelerated private education. With the rise of the Jewish labor and socialist movements, Peretz' writing entered his "radical phase" (1893 to 1899). In stories, articles, and comic fables, Peretz broadened his satire of religious hypocrisy to include attacks on economic exploitation, and realistic portrayals of proletarian life (Wisse 2010, 1- 2). At an afternoon seminar on Yiddish theater at Philharmonia Hall in Warsaw in 1910, Peretz proclaimed:

"Let no Jewish foot cross the threshold of the old *shund* theaters! We will destroy the old theater, and on its ruins we will build the new Yiddish art theater!"...The Yiddish proletariat was not to be left (as were the masses of other nations) to stew in vulgar entertainments. Peretz insisted that the very lowest Yiddish theater should have some artistic merit and that the highest should be, by any intellectual standards, art. (Sandrow, 1977, 203-204)

Peretz strongly supported the idea that the Jewish intelligentsia needed to "return to the people" and use art in a way that would elevate and educate the proletariat. Abraham

Cahan encouraged this in New York through his Yiddish news outlets, but Peretz desired this elevation to reach the entire nation (Steinlauf/Veidlinger 2010, 1).

At the turn of the twentieth century, theater critics began to pay more attention to Yiddish theater and its reform. In New York, Yiddish theater criticism had already appeared in the pages of the *Forverts* [*The Jewish Daily Forward*]. Abraham Cahan, its editor, had even discovered a champion in Jacob Gordin, whose melodramas were the first plays in Yiddish theater to explore and reflect contemporary social reality (ibid.).

Jacob Gordin (1853-1909) a Ukrainian born, highly educated, social activist was foreign to Yiddish culture. His father was a *maskil* [follower of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment movement], and Jacob was a lot more comfortable speaking and writing in Russian rather than Yiddish. In his teens he wrote articles in Russian for left-wing newspapers and worked for underground causes (Sandrow 1977, 132-133). Precipitated by the economic situation in Russia, as well as the growing anti-Semitism, Gordin came to the United States at age thirty eight in 1891. He came with a group to establish a utopian farming commune. This utopian dream failed and he started writing for a number of Yiddish newspapers on the Lower East Side, even though writing in Yiddish was laborious for him. At this time, he was part of a group of radicals living on New York's Lower East Side. They considered themselves the area's elite but this was an intellectual elite rather than social or economic (ibid, 133-134). For these "elite" Russian immigrants, Yiddish was not their language, just as "Jewishness" was not their first loyalty. They saw Russian as the language of the Russian people, and as a language which had great literature. They had no respect for Yiddish theater (ibid, 134-135). Ironically, Gordin went on to become one of Yiddish theater's most important playwrights. Gordin's

reaction to attending his first Yiddish play in 1891 was: “Everything I saw and heard was far from real Jewish life. All was vulgar, immoderate, false and coarse ‘Oy oy!’ I thought to myself and I went home and sat down to write my first play, which at its bris was given the name *Siberia*” (ibid, 132).

Both Gordin and Peretz knew the reach, importance and impact of Yiddish theater in the lives of the Eastern European immigrants on the Lower East Side. They hoped that by elevating the Yiddish art form to educate the masses, they would in turn be able to foster a more cosmopolitan Jew, not only more educated, but more socially conscious and committed to the betterment of humanity. Their works changed the trajectory of Yiddish theater in America, ushering in a new era that would transcend hackneyed scripts and stock characters.

Famed actor Jacob Adler had a troupe and one of the comics came across one of Gordin’s Russian language pieces. Impressed, he shared it with Adler and they setup a meeting with him at a café. Adler felt the scripts for Yiddish theater weren’t serious enough; he wanted works that reflected real life and had artistic sensibilities (Epstein 2007, 212). Adler hoped Gordin would be able to produce such a work.

Gordin was pleasantly surprised in his initial meeting with Jacob Adler:

“I was curious to meet a Yiddish actor....I thought that as soon as I told him I wanted to write a play, he would start emoting; wipe his nose on his sleeve, jump on a chair, and recite one of the popular tunes of the day....imagine my surprise on meeting gentlemen with silk hats and handkerchiefs who talked intelligently. In their eyes I even detected a spark of talent. But if Yiddish actors are like other actors, why shouldn’t Yiddish theater be like all other theaters?” (ibid, 214)

The two Jacobs joined together toward a common goal. Gordin, having already written *Siberia*, gave it to Adler’s troupe to perform.

Unaccustomed to this new approach of following a script rather than adlibbing and interacting with the audience for laughs, the rehearsals for *Siberia* presented the actors with a challenge. Gordin became so upset with their resistance and attempts to change the script to reflect the current (*shund*) style of theater that he stormed out of rehearsals. The cast rehearsed and opened without him (Sandrow 1977, 139). Like the actors, the audience wasn't quite ready for this new type of play either. Though there were some songs and dances, the audience did not receive the play well initially. *Siberia* was set in the present day and not in the fabled past, and was filled with realism rather than fabulous images. A later playwright recalled that Adler was so perturbed by the audience's reaction that he went on stage before the third act and chastised them. Adler, in a passionate attempt to educate the audience, declared, "I stand before you ashamed and humiliated. My head bowed with shame that you, my friends, are unable to understand a masterpiece by the famous Russian writer, Jacob Mihaelovitch Gordin. Friends, friends, if you only understood what a great work we are playing for you today you wouldn't laugh and you wouldn't jeer" (Sandrow 1977, 139). Adler began weeping. Seeing this, the audience burst into applause and had a change of heart. At the end of the first performance, when the comic servant said a heart wrenching goodbye to his master who was being deported to Siberia, the whole theater sobbed (*ibid.*). The audience was impressed and so were the actors. That was, however, the apex of *Siberia's* run; subsequent performances were meagerly attended and the play had to close down. The same occurred with Gordin's second effort, *Two Worlds* (Kanfer, 2006, 73). His third foray into Yiddish theater was *A Yiddish King Lear*, Shakespeare's tragedy, updated to the nineteenth century, and with a Russian Yiddish setting. Kanfer explains,

“The Yiddish theater would never be the same. Gordin’s *Lear* had reached the public in a way that no spectacle, no operetta or facile melodrama could possibly have done. From here on, audiences would no longer be content to have a diet composed of nothing but *shund* anymore than they would sit still for a dinner composed solely of *kreplach* [Ashkenazi Jewish dumplings].” (ibid, 73-74.)

Yiddish theater had expanded its menu to nourish, sustain and reflect the diverse needs and composition of the Eastern European Jewish immigrant community on the Lower East side. Like students given a challenge by a teacher who knew they could do better, the masses and the performers rose to the occasion and realized a new epoch in Yiddish theater was upon them. Reflecting the realist plays of the late nineteenth century that dealt with observation of empirical reality, Gordin wished to bring this to Jewish theater. He believed that reproducing life’s reality on stage and holding up a mirror to life’s injustices would lead to social justice and progress (Henry 2016, 88). While Gordin’s reputation brought the masses back for more, it was more so “his unique blend of the real, the musical and the controversial. Gordin used his extensive knowledge of world literature to adapt and modernize the classics... to reflect the anxieties and preoccupations of his Yiddish speaking audience” (ibid, 90). Gordin gave voice to the immigrant experience in a way that hadn’t been done before while elevating the art form of Yiddish theater and his work left many patrons of the theater clamoring for more.

As a social activist, Gordin was committed to elevate, free and enlighten the proletariat. He brought secular Western learning to his audiences, which were stampeding the Lower East Side for education. There were packed adult night schools and the publication of a series of volumes in Yiddish on every subject imaginable from pre-

Columbian Native Americans to contemporary medicine. Gordin's plays also took on the role of night classes, which often featured references to significant literary works (Sandrow 1977, 157). He founded the Educational League (an institution committed to providing evening classes for the working immigrants) in 1900. Gordin wrote in journals, "exhorting Jews towards ideals of justice, enlightenment, self-respect and socialist brotherhood" (ibid, 158).

The Theaters

As Yiddish theater evolved, so did the theaters where the shows were staged. Able to escape from the grind of work and the difficulties of life, the Eastern European Jewish immigrants found solace and refuge in the space of the theaters. The Lower East Side's Yiddish theater district, known as the Jewish Rialto or Yiddish Broadway, spanned from Second Avenue to Avenue B, and from Houston Street to 14th street, though side streets also housed smaller stages (Cofone, 2012, 1). Other performances were staged throughout the city in Brooklyn and the Bronx. The first theaters to house Yiddish shows were humble and inadequate. The first performances were often in small halls or auditoriums, with "noisy peddlers and audience members unwrapping their snacks and drinks... with great urgency so that they didn't let the stage performance interfere with their desire to eat" (Epstein 2007, 205). This is a far cry from the Broadway theaters that we know today. As the popularity of Yiddish theater grew, so did the accommodations. Together, the theaters grew to house eleven hundred performances a year for two million customers (ibid, 215).

With the growth and progress of Yiddish theater came the development of the backdrops to share the stories; the stage and the theaters themselves. For a brief but critical period of time, Eastern European Jewish immigrants had their own “Broadway” they could escape to and rejoice in. There were numerous theaters in the district, such as The Thalia Theater at 46-48 Bowery, The National Theater at 11 East Houston Street, and the Second Avenue Theater/ Yiddish Arts Theater at 181 Second Ave and 12th Street (Seigel, 2014). The most well-known theater was also the first theater built specifically for Yiddish productions: the Grand Theater, located at 255 Grand Street.

The Grand Theater was founded in 1902 by Abraham Goldfaden and Joseph Lateiner and Jacob Adler, among others. It opened the following year (Bush 2014, 1). Gordin’s play *Got, Mensch un Tayvl* [God, Man and Devil] was performed here in 1903 (Seigel, 2014, 3). While built to hold Yiddish theater performances, it was also constructed with the intention to house other foreign language productions, including French, Italian, German, and Chinese (The Grand History of the Grand Street Theatre 2014, 2). This theater played a vital role in the development of Yiddish theater as well as the experiences of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Additionally, it also took a starring role in the lives of Italian immigrants. The two immigrant groups would often perform the same shows on different nights, sharing costumes, sets, and there were even posters and billboards half in Yiddish, half in Italian (ibid, 4). The Grand Theater, designed by Victor Hugo Koehler, was an impressive and elaborate building with four stories. Not only was it the first theater built to hold Yiddish theatre productions, but it was also the first theater to be managed, owned and run by the actors themselves (ibid, 2). The Grand Theater was a hallmark of Yiddish theater; its establishment symbolized a

sense of rootedness as well as upward mobility for the immigrants. For those behind the scenes, it meant they finally made it, establishing and running their own theater, built to showcase Yiddish actors, playwrights and producers.

The success of the Grand Theater was relatively short-lived. In 1909 it was leased to the Bedford Theatrical Company and by 1913 it was housing Vaudeville acts and movies. By 1930, it was demolished (Bush 2014, 2).

Thomashefsky's "founding" of Yiddish theater in New York was to have a profound impact on the lives of the immigrants on the Lower East Side. While the intelligentsia might critically judge initial Yiddish theater as *shund*, it is clear that the works of Goldfaden, and the extensive, non-creative, cutting, pasting, and recycling of material by Hurvitz and Lateiner, nonetheless, provided entertainment and sustenance to large audiences who clamored for more of the same. Without them, Jacob Gordin might not have had a springboard for his more cerebral, dramatic, socially conscious plays. One does not arrive at adulthood without an infancy and adolescence. When analyzing this history, one must also recognize that the audience was made up of highly diverse Jewish immigrants. While some had the education in literature that was helpful in appreciating Gordin's brand of theater, others were attracted to more accessible plays. The immigrants were also comprised of greenhorns as well as those in the evolving process of assimilation. All had different needs and different tastes. Both *shund* and literary art addressed the needs of the immigrant population.

This chapter has presented a more nuanced three-dimensional picture of the birth pangs and early years of Yiddish theater on the Lower East Side. The following chapter will focus on the most celebrated pioneer actors and actresses of the Yiddish theater

stage, whose immense talent captivated the masses and without whom, Yiddish theater might not have had such a powerful influence on the immigrants of the Lower East Side.

Chapter Five

Pioneer Actors and Actresses of Yiddish Theater

The pioneer stars of the Yiddish stage helped to grow Yiddish theater, as they drew larger and larger audiences with their immense charisma and talent. These actors and actresses were critical to the success of the institution of Yiddish theater and helped shape it, contributing greatly to its Golden Era. They inspired audiences and gave them much needed refuge from their very difficult lives, while also becoming personal heroes to their fans. With similar backgrounds and immigration stories, these stars were of the people and were able to “make it” in America, instilling the immigrants with hope for upward mobility. Moreover, the immigrants experienced great pride that their stars were welcomed, recognized and celebrated by the uptown critics and theaters of Broadway, encouraging greater acculturation.

Popular Yiddish theater has traditionally been an actor’s theater as opposed to a writer’s theater; in this it resembled popular American theater of the late nineteenth century, in which such stars as Edwin Booth, Joseph Jefferson, and James O’Neill (Eugene’s father) overshadowed their vehicles. Americans, including Jews and the other immigrant groups of the era, felt special adoration for, and a passionate wish to identify with, stars of drama and vaudeville. Perhaps one reason was that the stars embodied the American idea of success. Thus, whereas very few of the hit plays of the Yiddish theater at the end of the nineteenth century are remembered today, the names of such stars as Boris Thomashefsky, David Kessler, and Jacob P. Adler remain household words in households that don’t retain a word of Yiddish. (Sandrow 1977, 94-95)

The Pioneer Actors

Boris Thomashefsky

Several months after his introduction of Yiddish theater into America at Turn Hall (as described in the previous chapter), Thomashefsky, still only a teenager, reorganized

his company and experienced some success “with German Jews and even non-Jews arriving in carriages, formally dressed” (ibid. 76). However, that success was followed by lean months during which the whole company went back to working in the cigarette factory (ibid.). With some success in his endeavors, Thomashefsky, a precocious thirteen years old, convinced his friend and backer, Frank Wolf, the successful tavern owner and president of the Henry Street Synagogue, to appoint him as producer and director of the company (“Boris Thomashefsky”, Jewish Virtual Library).

In 1883 there was an invasion of Yiddish actors and playwrights, competitors from Eastern Europe by way of London. These were talented professionals whose reputations had preceded them to New York. They were good, and they were ambitious. “Many of them had already worked together in various towns in Europe; in America they immediately began to perform and compete” (Sandrow 1977, 76-77). Perhaps responding to the threat of this fierce competition, Thomashefsky became the pioneer of taking Yiddish theater “on the road” in cities such as Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Boston and Chicago (Adler 1999, 312-314). His Yiddish theater troupe performed a wide repertoire of primarily Goldfaden’s plays, entertaining enthusiastic audiences of Jewish immigrants. His later tours came to include such outstanding actors as his “rivals” Jacob Adler and David Kessler (ibid.).

In 1887, Thomashefsky’s troupe performed in Baltimore. There, a fourteen year old Bessie Baumfeld-Kaufman attended the performance.

Young Bessie was enchanted by the female star’s performance. ‘Her hair was piled high with ringlets,’ Bessie recalled, ‘and she had all this sparkling jewelry... She was the center of attention and flirting and all the men were watching her.’ Bessie made her way backstage to meet this *sheyne meydele* [beautiful girl], who turned out not to be a meydele at all but Boris Thomashefsky. Not long after, Bessie ran away from home to join the company and, in 1891, married Boris.

Bessie took over the female roles Boris had been playing. She claimed to have learned everything she knew about coquettishness from watching Boris. (“Boris Thomashefsky”, Jewish Virtual Library)

Working outside of the New York ghetto, Thomashefsky had been forced to improve his English and his diction. While on an extended stay in Philadelphia, he read the local papers and learned of New York’s popular and financial prosperity, which motivated him to return to Second Avenue. The Yiddish papers gave him another reason to return. A young actor named David Kessler, who had come from Eastern Europe via the East End of London to the Lower East Side, had become a celebrity of Yiddish theater on Second Avenue. Stuck in Philadelphia and full of envy, Thomashefsky decided to see Kessler for himself. In his memoir, Thomashefsky wrote:

“I came out of the House in a trance. I had never even fantasized such an encounter on the Yiddish stage, then still in its infancy, and certainly never confronted such a talent. I remained in New York another few days and saw him in a few more roles. Each time, at each performance, I was more surprised. To my company of young assistants I said, ‘now we have in New York a great actor, a wonderfully worldly artist, who should not be ashamed on any stage in the world, and this is David Kessler.’” (Kanfer 2006, 61)

Performing in their own repertory companies, the stars might very well play several different roles, in several plays, within several days (Kanfer 2006, 60-61). Hence, Thomashefsky was able to see Kessler several times during his visit to New York. In this memory of Thomashefsky’s, he uses the royal “we,” demonstrating the kinship the audience felt with the actors. In this particular example, Kessler represents the ambitions of upward mobility not only to the audience but specifically to Thomashefsky, who is awestruck with Kessler’s talent and his potential impact on Yiddish theater.

In 1891, the same year that Boris and Bessie were married, Boris’ desire to return to New York was fulfilled. While Kessler and Adler were engaged in starting productions

at the Union Theater, Moishe Finkel liberated Thomashefsky from the City of Brotherly Love to come back to New York and star at his National Theater. Thomashefsky genuinely enjoyed peacocking, preening, and grand gestures. He played successfully in more serious roles too, but he was supreme in musical comedy, operettas and melodrama (Sandrow 1977, 96). Thomashefsky repaid the confidence that Moishe Finkel had in him by becoming an enormously popular success in Moses Halevy Horowitz's operetta *David ben Jesse*. Kessler, Adler and the Union Theater temporarily had to abandon its more literary, progressive programs to compete with the popular (*shund*) theater at the National Theater (Adler 1999, 318).

Adler did find a way to draw larger audiences to serious literary theater with his production of Gordin's *The Yiddish King Lear*, and then Shakespeare's *Othello*. Thomashefsky rose to the challenge and competed on that ground as well, with the first Yiddish production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which, by all reviews, he excelled (ibid. 329-330). "These productions ushered in what is generally seen as the first great age of Yiddish theater, centered in New York and lasting approximately until a new wave of Jewish immigration in 1905-1908...." (ibid, 359).

Jacob Pavlovich Adler

Born in Odessa, Russia in 1855, Adler was raised in the traditional Jewish world, as well as the more modern European one. His granddaughter Lulla Rosenfeld, who published his memoirs with a commentary, believes that he probably knew little of the Haskalah as an organized system of ideas (Adler 1999, xxiv). His education was inconsistent, as his family's fortunes rose and fell, depending on the social and political

factors in the Pale. He would attend Jewish religious school or a Russian language county school, or pulled out of school altogether, with some private tutoring along the way.

Adler wrote, “the sum of my learning was a little arithmetic, some Russian grammar, and a few French phrases” (Adler 1999, 11-13).

At fourteen Adler began working in a textile factory, where he graduated to a white-collar position earning ten rubles a month, an amount that was good even for an adult. He left the factory to become a peddler plying his trade, with seductive attention to servant girls and chamber maids. At the same time, Adler’s interest in the theater was encouraged by his wealthy uncle, Aaron "Arke" Trachtenberg, whom he described as the real patriarch of the family. Arke would become the model for his portrayal of roles such as Gordin's *Yiddish King Lear* (Adler 1999, pp. 9–10). His interest in theater was further intensified by the beauty of an actress named Olga Glebova, whose performances in Odessa he regularly attended (*ibid.*).

In writing about this period, Adler reports attending and admiring performances by Israel Grodner, the Brody singer and improvisational actor (who would later collaborate with Gorfadn) and become one of the founders of professional Yiddish theater. Adler writes that he would have become a Brody singer like Grodner, except "I had no voice" (Adler 1999, 36).

At the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878), Adler, then twenty two, bribed his way into working with the Red Cross Medical Corps, rather than being conscripted into the Army. Following the war, along with a few friends, Adler began a Yiddish theater troupe in Odessa. His productions were popular successes, drawing on the translations of classics and modern European plays. His acting career, while

successful, was cut short when Yiddish theater was banned in Russia in 1883 (“Jacob Adler,” Jewish Virtual Library).

Shortly after the Russian ban on Yiddish theater was issued, Adler immigrated to London to pursue his theatrical career. By the end of 1885, he had established his own theatrical club, the Princes Street Club. Though his fame grew, his earnings were minimal. In 1887, he sought greener pastures in New York City but, unable to find work, he traveled to Chicago. There his acting troupe experienced initial success, but then followed failure, and in the fall of 1887, he was back in New York with more failure. Adler returned to London but did not remain long there; after some successes in Warsaw, he returned to New York in 1889 (ibid.).

After some moderate success in New York, Adler joined Boris Thomashefsky on the touring circuit of Yiddish theater; they played in Philadelphia and Chicago. Then Adler received word that there was an opportunity to take over Poole's Theater in New York. Adler returned to New York, took over Poole's Theater and also recruited Kessler for his troupe (Adler 1999, 313–315).

Adler was Thomashefsky's principal competitor for the affections of the Yiddish audience. Adler was a more serious and accomplished actor. “His voice was thin, and he didn't have a good ear for music. His personality and this defect were crucial for the development of Yiddish theater, however, because the combination made him seek to turn away from the musical operetta and the melodrama” (Epstein 2007, 211).

Adler means “eagle” in Yiddish, and he was reverentially referred to as “The Great Eagle.” The doyen of the Yiddish stage, he was a magnetic stage personality with a striking physique and a sonorous voice, as well as a flare for scenic effects and a

flamboyant temper. These qualities were assets, vital in creating his “unparalleled stage charisma” (Nahshon 2016, 104). A great admirer of Russian culture and theater, he introduced literary drama to the young Yiddish stage. In 1891, having acquired the Poole’s theater in New York and renaming it the Union Theater, Adler recruited Jacob Gordin, the newly arrived, well-respected Russian Jewish dramatist, to become the theater’s main playwright. Continuing to support Gordin, even after *Siberia* (in which Adler starred) was unpopular with the public. Adler’s faith was rewarded with the phenomenal success of Gordin’s next work in which Adler also starred, *The Jewish King Lear* (ibid.). The Union Theater quickly became the most serious Yiddish-language theater in New York. Following the success of *The Jewish King Lear*, Adler gave an outstandingly memorable performance as Shylock in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* on the Yiddish stage, and again in a 1903 Broadway production (Jacob Adler, Jewish Virtual Library). “In so doing, he presented himself to the world at large as an actor on par with the other great Shakespearean interpreters of his age...” (Nahshon 2016, 104). “Would that some of our managers – and actors too, for that matter – made the pilgrimage downtown to receive lessons from this gifted actor who is unquestionably one of the great players of our times. If Adler could perform in English in a Broadway theater he would be idolized” (Theater magazine, November 1903, p. 8 as cited in Adler 1999, 355).

Adler’s literary theatrical triumphs demonstrated to non-Yiddish audiences that Yiddish theater had arrived on the American scene. It provided not only melodramas, operettas and even lighter fare, but it was also capable of providing inspirational artistic

theater, celebrated by non-Jewish critics and audiences. Thus the “new” Yiddish theater enhanced the drive toward assimilation.

David Kessler

David Kessler was born in Kishineff, then part of the Russian Empire. His daughter, Sylvia Kessler Newman, in her introduction to David Kessler’s “Reminiscences of the Yiddish Theater,” (Landis 1984, 3) states that David’s father, a traditional Jew of the old school planned to make a scholar of him. David, however, had a deep love of nature and spent a great deal of time outdoors, studying and communing with nature, while paying little attention to his studies. His frustrated father gave up hope of David’s ever becoming a scholar, took him out of school and sought a vocation for him (ibid.).

It was while I was serving a three years’ apprenticeship in a cutter’s shop that the town “intellectual” took me to the theater for the first time in my life. That night I couldn’t sleep. Visions of the hero and the songs of the heroine disturbed my slumber. There was born in me a fervent desire, an uncanny drive to become one of those glorious beings that had the power to send an audience into ecstasies.

The poor writer, who used to take me to the theater occasionally, became my teacher and my idol. I could already differentiate between comedy and drama, and I knew what an operetta was. I became a messenger boy for the itinerant actors. I also used to help around the theater doing menial jobs; and always saving my pennies to pay for admissions. It was in this way that I saw many of the contemporary dramas, heard great singers... And who could compare to me when I came home and sang the ditties that I had learned in the theater. (Kessler 1984, 10-11)

Kessler’s memoir details his trials, his successes, his failures, and his constant state of literal hunger. After hearing David sing, a close friend who happened to be a cousin of Jacob Adler, arranged an audition for David with Adler. The walls shook when David sang “Wake Up My People!” Adler invited Kessler to join his troupe. Family and friends, however, thought it would be a disgrace for him to be an actor, and prevailed

upon David to refuse the invitation to join Jacob Adler. “I resolved once and for all to forget about becoming an actor. Resolved and done away with!!” (ibid. 12-13). This was easier said than done.

After the assassination of Alexander II, Kessler was called up for conscription into Alexander III’s czarist army, and was rejected. He celebrated the event by reviving the Yiddish theater in Kishineff. He played the leading role in an operetta. It was a great success. Eventually, he toured Roumania with the troupes of Judah and Tobias Goldfadn, brothers of Avrom (the Father of Yiddish theater). He remembers this as a time of poverty and hunger and was contemplating throwing away his career on the stage (ibid, 14-15). However, in July 1886, the noted Yiddish comic, Magilescu arrived in Roumania from America to recruit Eastern European Yiddish talent. “He brought with him fabulous stories of actors’ lives there, claiming that actors earned a thousand francs a week in America.” He was so convincing that Kessler didn’t even take time to deliberate. He bade farewell to family and friends, packed his things and headed for the rendezvous point, where the recruited actors would begin their trek from Roumania to Hamburg to Liverpool and then to America. It is significant to note that sources (Nahshon 2016, 308; Jewish Virtual Library) have Kessler living and working in London for several years prior to coming to New York, contrary to Kessler’s autobiographical account (Kessler 1984, 14-15). It is plausible that the primary resource of Kessler’s memoirs were not used when the other two sources did research and/or that Jewish Virtual Library used Nahshon’s information as their source. According to Kessler himself, he was already in New York when Goldfadn arrived in 1888:

We received word that Avrom Goldfadn was on his way to America.... We all went down to the boat to meet Goldfadn.... We invited him to attend the theater

that same evening, when we were going to play his *Bar Kochva* especially in his honor. We were sure that he would gratefully accept our friendly overtures. But it never worked out that way. He couldn't just come to us as an ordinary guest. He would join us only on the condition that he become the director. I don't think I will ever forget his audacious straightforwardness when he said, "If I go into a theater, it will be my own theater. I don't visit strangers' theaters."

Hearing this we all became very excited and nervous, and began to group together like a bunch of sheep when they see a wolf approaching.... We had no official union, but we decided to be united nevertheless, and under no conditions to let Goldfadn get the upper hand over us.

Goldfadn, however, got together with our managers.... The managers let us know that we were going to put on *Bar Kochva* under Goldfadn's auspices. We all got together and declared a strike.... We picketed the theater. There were a few arrests.... To the best of my knowledge this is the first time that actors ever went on strike in America, and probably the first time anywhere in the world. The result was our managers gave up on their plans. The strike was won. Goldfadn walked out. (ibid, 51-52)

As soon as he was center stage, David was the talk of the Lower East Side. The Yiddish papers were full of stories about him; within a year he was a Second Avenue celebrity, the romantic idol of shopgirls and the bane of more established performers, none more distressed than Boris Thomashefsky, who enthusiastically acknowledged his profound talent (Kanfer 2006, 61).

Kessler was a perfectionist. In his earlier years, he won favor from the crowds with his powerful singing and emoting. Though not formally trained or educated, he had resources for artistry. He committed himself to fine realistic drama in Yiddish; he was capable of playing quietly, gently, and sensitively. However, the masses who made him a star also wanted broader and more sensational material. Many anecdotes picture Kessler facing away from the audience during some melodramatic scene and muttering savage asides to his fellow actors, parodying the silly dialogue that "Moyshe" [the appellation of

the masses clamoring for *shund*] forced him to mouth, and cursing his fate (Sandrow 1977, 96-97).

Kessler had the instincts of an artist and detested the frivolous, heavily costumed roles he had to endure to maintain profitable lines at the box office. “All day long I am a human being,” he complained. “I speak like a human being, act like a human being. At night I must dress myself up like a turkey, like an idiot! If I went out into the street like this, people would throw stones at me for a lunatic. Here they shout bravo!” (Kanfer 2004, 8).

David Kessler, like Jacob Adler was a “Gordin actor.” He produced, directed and acted in Gordin’s plays whenever he could. As a manager he made them part of his repertory. A number of intellectuals preferred Kessler to Adler. “They raved about his strength and sensitivity which grew as he played roles ranging astonishingly from *Apollon* to *Hershele Dubrovner* (the Faust – character hero of *God, Man, and Devil*) to the brutal husband in *The Slaughter*” (Sandrow 1977, 153). Adler no longer had a monopoly on “good” theater. The volcanic David Kessler matched and outmatched him in certain roles, and even the melodramatic Thomashefsky, all his artistic ambition aroused, did outstanding work in the dramatic plays of immigrant life (Adler 1999, 359).

There was great competition between Adler, Kessler and Thomashefsky, sometimes even with comedic results. Thomashefsky explained, ““If David Kessler wore a big hat with a long feather, Jacob Adler wore a bigger hat with three feathers and a gold scarf. I piled on colored stockings, coats, crowns, swords, shields, bracelets, earrings, turbans. Next to me, they looked like common soldiers. If they rode in on a real horse, I had a golden chariot drawn by two horses. If they killed an enemy, I killed an army””

(Kanfer 2004, 7). There was only one show in which Adler, Kessler and Thomashefsky shared the stage and it devolved into a spectacle worthy of *shund* theater.

Kessler upstaged Thomashefsky late in the play, aping the younger man's broad gestures. Boris caught the stage business in the corner of his eye. The scene called for him to break a plate; furious, he smashed two. Staying within character, Kessler, who wasn't supposed to touch the plates, broke four. Partisans in the audience cheered on their favorites. Adler was playing a mild-mannered rabbi, but he had no intention of missing out on the excitement. He broke some plates himself. The others shattered more crockery. At the finale, shards of china covered the floor, and Adler, Kessler, and Thomashefsky were starting in on a table and chairs when the curtain came down. (Kanfer 2004, 8-9)

Thomashefsky, with his history of producing Goldfadn's *shund* plays ("Boris Thomashefsky," Jewish Virtual Library) was more comfortable with slapstick, melodramas and operettas than his current co-stars, Adler and Kessler, who both detested it. However, this episode demonstrates that even they, motivated perhaps by anger and competition, could, under the right circumstances, engage in and seemingly relish performing *shund*.

According to Nahshon, Kessler died in 1920 when he ignored his doctor's orders, performing on stage hours after undergoing an intestinal operation (Nahshon 2016, 308). However, in the introduction to his memoirs, his daughter, Sylvia Kessler Newman explains that he fell ill, was taken to Beth Israel Hospital, where the doctors wanted to operate on him immediately. Instead, he insisted on performing that night and forced his way out of the hospital. David Kessler gave a rousing last performance and collapsed in the final scene, a dying man, as the audience gave him his final ovation (Newman 1984, 9).³ Kessler's reputation lives on as one of the three great actor-managers of Yiddish theater, alongside Jacob P. Adler and Boris Thomashefsky (Nahshon 2016, 308).

³ Parallel to Goldfadn's death, it is interesting that part of Yiddish theater memory involves stories that link a performer's death to a successful performance. It is hard to

This trinity of celebrated actors expanded the scope of Yiddish theater to include both *shund* and literary theater. Both coexisted on the Lower East Side. Thomashefsky reveled in both, while Adler and Kessler advocated for literary theater supplanting *shund*. However, the successive waves of new greenhorn Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the Lower East Side brought new audiences who preferred melodrama. As they became acculturated, these audiences attended these “cultural” plays “as long as their favorite actor was starring in the title role and a few song and dance numbers were interspersed with the more serious plot.” (“Boris Thomashefsky,” Jewish Virtual Library).

“At the People’s Theater Kalisch and Kessler were playing Gordin,” Bessie Thomashefsky writes “Well, they had made their reputations with Gordin, so who could blame them? But at the Thalia Thomashefsky and I were making fortunes. Very soon they began envying our big houses, threw away the art, threw away Gordin, and began delivering the goods to the great almighty Public.” (Adler 1999, 363-364)

As Jacob Adler observed, “Ultimately, of course, both tastes had to be served. As in every theater, including our own, both the best and the worst, “art” and *shund* would alike find their audience” (Adler 1999, 367).

The Pioneer Actresses

Men were not the only talented and revered performers of the Yiddish stage. Sarah Adler, Jacob’s third wife, and Bessie Thomashefsky, Boris’ wife, had stellar careers, though Bertha Kalich was the most accomplished of the three (Epstein 2007, 211).

know what is true or untrue, but we can observe a trend in these stories. The tales seem to equate death after a successful performance to a sort of redemption.

Bertha Kalich

Known for her majestic bearing, great beauty, and fine diction, Bertha Kalich was the first female actor to make the transition from the Yiddish to the English stage....Kalich was one of the great stars of the golden age of the American Yiddish theater and, for a time, a leading light of mainstream American drama as well. (Soyer 2009, 1)

Bertha Kalich was born in Lemberg, Galicia, (which is now Lviv, Ukraine) on May 17, 1874. She was the only child of Solomon Kalakh, a brush manufacturer and amateur violinist, and Babbette Kalakh, a dressmaker whose specialty was making costumes for local theaters. Babbette loved the opera and took her daughter with her. There, Bertha fell in love with the stage and she studied music and drama in private schools and attended the Lemberg Conservatory (ibid.).

At age thirteen she began her career in the chorus of a Polish theater company. She also performed roles in Romanian and German; she learned Romanian in a matter of months in order to perform at the Romanian Imperial Theater as a member of Goldfadn's troupe (Nahshon 2016, 307). In addition to her theatrical talents, she also had a linguistic talent, estimating that over her long career she had played some 125 roles in seven languages. She was well-received wherever she went, so well-received that it was rumored that jealous rivals were plotting her assassination (ibid.). In light of this, Kalich accepted an offer by Joseph Edelstein to appear at the Thalia Theater in New York's Lower East Side. She arrived in New York in 1894, though according to some sources it was 1895 or 1896 (Soyer 2009, 1). In New York, Kalich emphasized her dramatic skills over her musical talents and supported the movement for a Yiddish theater of higher artistic quality (ibid, 2).

Kalich's talents lay in her grace and stately elegance, her playful femininity, and the womanly wisdom she seemed to possess – particularly when she spoke Gordin's words. Gordin was once in her dressing room admiring her as she brushed her wealth of long dark hair. "Write a play for my hair," she coaxed him coquettishly. So he wrote for her, according to the story, one of his most popular plays, *The Kreutzer Sonata*. She also played Hershele Dobrovner's innocently adoring niece in *God, Man, and Devil*. Gordin wrote *Sappho* especially for Kalich. (Sandrow 1977, 154)

By 1903, she shocked the Yiddish theater, performing in the title role in the Yiddish version of *Hamlet*. Her outstanding performance won favorable notices not only from the Yiddish papers but also from outside the ghetto. The theater critic for the *New York Morning Journal* reported, "there were no airs, there were no frills. There were no poses, no struggles for elusive effect." The female star "got down to the solid bedrock of the idea and hammered it" (Kanfer 2004, 12-13).

Kalich's remarkable performances drew the attention of American theatrical managers and producers, and in 1905 she became the first Yiddish actress to perform on Broadway (in English), in Victorien Sardou's *Fedora*. After 10 years as a diva on Broadway, she often returned and performed for her adoring fans at the Yiddish theaters of the Lower East Side (Nahson 2016, 307). There is no question that Kalich played a critical role in raising the artistic quality of the Yiddish theater, whose status and reputation she also helped to raise with her success with English-speaking audiences.

Sara Adler

Sara Adler was one of the most celebrated figures in the American Yiddish theater (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019b). Born in Odessa, Russia in 1858, Sara Levitsky came from a prosperous Jewish family. Educated in Russian-

language schools, Sara made her debut on stage at the age of eight in Schiller's *The Robbers*. After winning a scholarship and studying voice at the Odessa Conservatory, Sara decided on a stage career. The Jewish Theater Circle hired her as a between-acts entertainer, singing Russians songs. She proceeded to learn Yiddish, joined the troupe of Maurice Heine and studied with the Viennese stage director Gritzkopf. On tour in Russia she married Heine. Following the Russian ban on Yiddish plays in 1883, the troupe immigrated to London where Heine joined up with Jacob Adler; their combined troupes went to America that same year. As Madam Heine she became the leading lady in Shomer's *The Orphans*. After divorcing Heine, she joined up with Jacob Adler, who was then with the Finkel-Feinman-Mogulesco troupe as their principal actor in both dramatic and operetta roles. In 1891, Sara became Jacob Adler's third wife (Elkin, 2009).

Shunning *shund*, the Adlers together utilized the theater to play out the immigrant drama and introduce their audiences to the world's dramatic repertoire in translation. Jacob Adler gave Jacob Gordin his first break in Yiddish theater by staging and appearing in Jacob Gordin's *Siberia*, which was followed by many more successful Gordin's plays. Sara Adler's major roles included: Fania Zorchis in Gordin's *Emese Kraft*, Batsheva in Gordin's *The Homeless*, the woman in Gordin's *The Stranger*, Beata in Gordin's *Elisha ben Avuya*, Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Yelena in Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*, Katyusha in Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness* and the gypsy in Tolstoy's *Resurrection* (Elkin, 2009). Gordin wrote *Without a Home* especially for Sara Adler; she played the emotional role of an immigrant woman who suffers, and eventually goes mad, because her husband and son adjust to American ways but she cannot (Sandrow 1977, 154-155).

The Power of Darkness was followed by *Resurrection*, adapted from the Tolstoy novel by Gordin. The production remarkable in itself, must also be noted for Sara

Adler's electrifying Katyusha. With her portrayal of Tolstoy's peasant heroine, Sarah rose to the starring position she would hold for the next fifty years. The simplicity and grandeur of her performance, the transition from peasant girl to prostitute, the scene of her spiritual "rise from the dead"—all this was achieved with the restraint and artistry that were uniquely her own. (Adler 1999, 355)

Jacob and Sara Adler's dysfunctional marriage was punctuated by marital and artistic turbulence, unfaithfulness, separations and reconciliations but this did not necessarily interrupt their appearances together. Sara coped with the ongoing domestic disarray at one time by entering a sanatorium to recover her peace of mind after one of Jacob's infidelities. At another time she took a lover herself and planned to strike out and establish a rival theater, but a bout of tuberculosis diverted these plans and eventually she returned home to Jacob (Elkin, 2009).

Bessie Thomashefsky

Bessie Thomashefsky, actress and comedian, delighted and inspired audiences for over thirty years with leading roles on the Lower East Side, and later on tour throughout the United States, in London and in Toronto (Schlissel 2009, 1).

Born in Kiev, Ukraine in 1873, young Bessie came with her family to America in 1879, eventually settling near Baltimore, Maryland in 1883. After attending school for two years until she was twelve, she went to work in a sweatshop stocking factory. At 14 she first met her future husband, the then nineteen-year-old Boris Thomashefsky, while he was performing in a Yiddish play in Baltimore. At that time he was performing the women's roles in the company. A few years later she joined the Thomashefsky players. Though she was overcome by stage fright the first time she appeared, she quickly found success as an actress and became the star of the company, initially playing the women's

roles that she had first seen Boris perform so exquisitely. In 1891, at the age of eighteen, Bessie married Boris (ibid.).

At Boris' People's Theater in New York City, Bessie performed in Yiddish adaptations of plays by Chekhov, Wilde, and Shakespeare, as well as contemporary Yiddish creations. As immigrants desired more and more American fare, she performed a Yiddish version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1901. Bessie made famous a number of songs that Boris (modeling a Yiddish Irving Berlin) composed, such as "Der Yidisher Baseball Game" and "Der Yiddisher Yankee Doodle" She portrayed a number of strong women, including *Minke, the Housemaid* (where a servant – turned-lady rejects the Pygmalion who transforms her), *Jenny Runs for Mayor*, and *Di Sheyne Americaner* [The Beautiful American], in which she shocked and delighted audiences by playing an emancipated woman in a riding costume (ibid. 1-2). This embracing of American culture is a celebratory response to being freed from constricting shtetl life where one couldn't be part of the broader society.

In 1911, Bessie separated from Boris, because of his extramarital liaisons, though the couple never officially divorced. However she continued her independent career in the theater, taking over management of the People's Theater in 1915 and renaming it after herself. Bessie's theater troupe focused on important social issues of the day, especially those affecting women's rights (Nahshon 2016, 313).

The extraordinary passion, talent and charisma of these celebrated pioneer actors and actresses of Yiddish theater exercised a powerful influence on the culture of the immigrants of the Lower East Side and represented upward mobility. It is remarkable that of the six, only Bertha Kalich and Sara Adler had formal education and training in music

or drama. Yet, except for Jacob Adler, they all sang beautifully, and they all performed at the level of Tony Award nominees. The marital lives of the Thomashefskys and Adlers were the stuff of *shund* melodrama, but that didn't sabotage their performing careers.

Their magnetism and expressiveness helped to build the Yiddish theater and bring in large, passionate audiences. Their star power went beyond superficial publicity; they brought the scripts to life, vitalizing the works of the writers, both literary and *shund*, and made them relatable to the audiences. They were the bridge between the writers and the audience. They provided the immigrants with entertainment, refuge, hope, possibility, pride, and celebrating their roots, while encouraging acculturation.

Chapter Six

The Aftermath

The Decline:

Just as there was a confluence of factors, economic and social, that fostered the Golden era of the Yiddish theater, the same applied to its decline. The Yiddish theater was dramatically impacted by the economic crisis in America, the Great Depression of the 1930s. Theater expenses increased as returns from the box office dwindled. This, coupled with more stringent immigration quotas, greatly reduced the population of new Yiddish speaking immigrants needed to produce, maintain, support and attend Yiddish Theater. This situation was exacerbated as earlier Yiddish immigrant families achieved upward mobility and moved out of the Lower East Side. The once packed theaters were increasingly empty (Lifson 1965, 537-545).

In contrast to the first generation immigrants who sought out Yiddish culture, the generations that followed may have been less conflicted about assimilation to American culture. Some had only been exposed to Yiddish as a secret language their family would speak purposely so they wouldn't understand, and others were embarrassed by the immigrant language. This generation, estranged from Yiddish language and culture, was also not filling the theater seats and was more interested in other forms of entertainment. Yiddish vaudeville (similar in its conventions to the first productions of Yiddish theater) which arose in popularity alongside Yiddish theater, moved from small concert saloons to music halls, flourishing until they too were squeezed out of the market by moving-picture theaters (Thissen 2016, 254).

Kanfer explains that “by the late 1930s, the Lower East Side’s Jewish population began to disperse to the outer boroughs, to better digs uptown, or to the burgeoning suburbs. Only a few signs of life remained. WEVD (“the station that speaks your language”) continued to entertain listeners with plays and interviews in Yiddish (Kanfer 2004, 23). Radio programs from the 1930s-1950s gave those who did desire to experience Yiddish culture and language the convenience of doing so from the comfort of their homes (Lifson 1965, 551). The Yiddish Cinema came into popularity, greatly influenced by Yiddish theater and yet ironically, was part of its demise. “...Yiddish films, largely based on Yiddish theater, were not made as documents of a dying culture. Rather, they were produced by savvy Jewish businessmen who understood the essentials of commercial filmmaking and whose goal was to entertain Jewish audiences. And these Jewish audiences loved the melodrama and humor of Yiddish stage and cinema” (Weinman-Kelman 2004, 3). Yiddish cinema was the shiny, new, preferred version of Yiddish theater, but also eventually declined with the fading of Yiddish culture in America.

As the popularity of Yiddish theater declined, performers as well as directors and others involved in production sought opportunities in other venues of entertainment, such as Broadway or Hollywood. In the 1910s and 1920s, “Jewishness” in films was a comic staple, but with the rise of anti-Semitism, Jewish characters and themes declined during the 1930s and were largely absent from the screen by the Holocaust. In an effort to blend in, those Jews who made their living in Hollywood often anglicized their own names as well as the names of their stars (Miller 1984, 1).

After the 1940s, Yiddish theater in New York was almost extinct; from 1928 to 1948, the number of New York's Yiddish theatres decreased from fourteen to three (Lifson 1965, 538). In the 1960-1961 season, there was only one Yiddish production, *Mother's Sabbaths*. It was mounted by the Folksbeine theater, a theater group dedicated to Yiddish art theater which had done away with the star system and was comprised of a semi-professional ensemble (ibid.).

The Legacy:

Yiddish theater was an art form that aided in the process of assimilation for the Jews in America. It allowed the Jews to retain their "Jewishness" while simultaneously being part of the broader society, a huge shift from life in the Old Country. Yiddish theater acted as an agent of upward mobility. America offered more than the monetary dreams of the "Goldene Medina," it offered the opportunity to impact and influence society as a whole. The Jews, removed from the shtetl, maintained their sense of satire, expressiveness and wit and now had the chance to share it with the rest of the nation. This did however, come at a price. Although these Jews were able to be part of the larger society while maintaining their Jewishness, the pull toward Americanization has impacted subsequent generations (see Conclusion below).

Yiddish theater "set the stage" for both Jewish entertainment and Jews in entertainment in America. The Yiddish theater's style, humor and *chutzpah* has made its way into the various modes of entertainment as well as America's cultural lexicon. The influential reach of Yiddish theater throughout entertainment is far reaching.

In the early days of film not only did some Lower East Side immigrants become interested in Hollywood, so much so that they relocated there, but Hollywood also became interested in the Lower East Side. A handful of films were set in the Lower East Side, featuring immigrant life. One of the most famous of these is *The Jazz Singer* (1927) often referred to as the first talking picture. The film was based on a story called “The Day of Atonement,” written by Samson Raphaelson who turned it into a play in 1926 (Epstein 2007, 267). The plot could have been lifted straight out of Yiddish theater, exploring the tensions of Old World loyalties and American assimilation; a young man named Jackie (played by Al Jolson) loves ragtime and wants to be a performer but his father, a Cantor, wants his son to follow in his footsteps. He leaves the family tradition to become a jazz singer. In a deeply moving scene towards the end of the film, Jackie returns to sing in a Yom Kippur service in his ill father’s stead and delivers the Kol Nidre prayer to the congregation. His father, in bed, is able to hear him through the window. As Jackie sings, his father declares that his son has returned, and then passes peacefully. Famed Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt was offered the starring role but turned it down. Instead, he made a cameo appearance, singing in a concert that Jackie attends; Jackie remembers his father and his roots. This film was able to reach a wider audience than a Yiddish theater performance and resonated with those who felt the tensions between assimilation and tradition.

Those immigrants and their children who left for Hollywood took the Lower East Side with them. William Fox, of 20th Century Fox, was raised on New York’s Lower East Side. During hard times when his father was out of work and the family had little or no food, his mother sent him to the local butcher. There he asked the butcher if he could

“borrow” a pound of meat. The butcher playfully asked when the meat would be returned. Fox explained that when the butcher was old and unable to work, Fox would be wealthy and would take care of him; the butcher acquiesced. Fox was serious. Years later, he brought the butcher out to his studios in Hollywood, where the butcher worked for fifteen years (Epstein 2007, 65). According to author Michael Freedland (2015), “Hollywood was invented in 1911 when Sam Goldfish (née Shmuel Gelbfisz) teamed up with his brother-in-law Jesse L. Lasky to make the first feature film, “The Squaw Man.” Other Jewish Hollywood studio moguls included Marcus Loew of Loew’s Theaters and MGM, Adolph Zukor of Paramount Studios, Carl Laemmle of Universal Studios, the Selznicks of Selznick International Pictures, producer and film executive B.P. Schulberg, Harry Cohn of Columbia films, Jack and Harry Warner of the Warner Brothers and Louis Mayer of MGM studios (Friedman, 1).

During the 1930s and 40s, though Jews were involved in all aspects of production, whitewashing occurred in an attempt to obfuscate their Jewishness (Miller 1984, 189). “When at the end of the 1940s, the House UnAmerican Activities Committee came to town to root out Communists, it [Hollywood] was as antisemitic as it was anti-Red” (Freedland, 2015). This hiding of “Jewishness” was in contrast to the earlier days. In the heyday of Yiddish cinema, ethnicity was on display. The age of ethnic rediscovery of the 1960’s changed the landscape of Jews in Hollywood, and they have since continued to achieve. Co-host Steve Martin, during the welcome at the 2010 Academy Award ceremony “...turned to German actor Christoph Waltz and continued his spiel. ‘And in *Inglorious Basterds*, Christoph Waltz played a Nazi obsessed with finding Jews. Well Chrstoph...’ Martin paused, then slowly spread out his arms to embrace the

audience--which exploded with laughter, followed by a second explosion when Martin added, with arms still spread wide, ‘...the Mother Lode!’” (Brook 2017, 1)

A similar joke was made previously on stage at the 2001 Tony Awards, when Mel Brooks, accepting an award for *The Producers*, referred to the “avalanche of Jews” behind him (indeed a very large group) who contributed to the success of the show (*Broadway Musicals: A Jewish Legacy*, 2013, 123 min).

The success of Yiddish theater, as well as the Borsht Belt and the institutions that descended from it, encouraged Jewish entrepreneurs to expand into other areas of the entertainment industry. The network of connections that they built through this collective endeavor created a path toward success in other avenues of entertainment, including film and television. In addition to this, I believe that there are many Jews involved in the entertainment industry because they are a people with an affinity for stories and drama. This is rooted in the relationship with religious texts like the Torah and Midrash. Ever since the innovation of Midrash, they have been offering satirical commentary on contemporary issues, albeit in a carefully worded manner. The Jewish people have had a long history of satire and commentary, which is also the basis for comedy. With a past of being the “outsider,” Jewish people have had to be very careful what was said about others, especially if those others could harm them. I also attribute the relationship to the idea that the Jewish people like to express themselves, similar to and perhaps rooted in the expressiveness found in the Yiddish language. Epstein writes: “[Eastern European Jews] had a vibrant language as well in Yiddish, a language that became a substitute weapon, filled with wisdom in its proverbs and fire in its curses” (Epstein 2007, 4). One might potentially assert that Yiddish is a secret language of the Jews that enabled them to

talk and express themselves without fear that neighbors would retaliate. There is also an inherent wryness, and sense of humor that may have developed in response to being the persecuted outsider. These qualities diverted into different avenues once the Jews were out of the shtetl.

The story of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to New York, while particular in its nature to a specific group and time, has universal elements. The tensions between family, traditions and the new world are experienced by many other immigrant groups. Yiddish author and playwright Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye* stories, which explore Jewish life in a village in the Pale of the Settlement, were adapted for the stage in 1919 for the Yiddish Art Theater by Maurice Schwartz, its founder. In the 1930s, reflecting the growing anti-Jewish sentiment in Europe, Schwartz turned the play into a film. In the 1950s, a musical based on the stories of *Tevye and His Daughters* was produced Off-Broadway. In the early 1960s, librettist Joseph Stein and music and lyric duo, Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick were drawn to Aleichem's work while searching for material for a new musical (Solomon 2016, 300.) Jerome Robbins came on as director and choreographer. The Broadway production titled *Fiddler on the Roof* made its debut in 1964. It starred Zero Mostel in the title role. It was the longest running production, with over 3,000 performances (Solomon 2016, 300) and nine Tony awards (The Broadway League, "Awards"). *Fiddler on the Roof* was made into a film in 1971, featuring Yiddish stage and film actress Molly Picon in the role of Yente. In 2015, the show was revived for a fifth time on Broadway and is currently touring America. Currently, there is a Yiddish language production that is very successful (see below). In the PBS documentary, *Broadway Musicals: A Jewish Legacy*, Boch explains its appeal, "the

opening number, 'Tradition,' was common to every culture, so the show was as common to Japanese family life as it was to Jewish family life and it went all over the world, and every single place it went it became their family's story despite the idiosyncrasies of what was Jewish about it" (2013, 105 min). The Broadway adaptation and subsequent movie had Tevye and his family immigrating to America, not Palestine as Sholem Aleichem originally wrote (Solomon 2016, 300). For many Jews in America of Eastern European ancestry, this ending represented their own family's story and journey. After the huge success of *Fiddler* on Broadway, Broadway embraced more Jewish stories, even tackling Nazi Germany in the show *Cabaret* (1966) starring Joel Grey (*Broadway Musicals: A Jewish Legacy*, 2013 107 min). This timing coincided with the era of the aforementioned ethnic and cultural resurgence.

During the Golden era of Yiddish theater, Jewish immigrants longed to be on Broadway, a symbol they had made it in America. Decades later we see that this was achieved, and not just achieved, but accomplished in inordinate numbers. Music critic and scholar Josh Kun, recognizing the huge shift, remarks that, "many have claimed that in the late twentieth century Jews became the mainstream American culture, that in the literary world, theater, in film, Jews were American pop culture in a way that was very different from the pre-WWII years, where no longer were they outsiders working in, but they were now insiders working on the inside" (ibid, 117.50 min). *Spamalot's* song "You Won't Succeed on Broadway," demonstrates how times have changed with tongue-in-cheek lyrics describing how integral to success on Broadway Jews are (ibid, 2:06 min). The character Sir Robin explains to King Arthur:

In any great adventure
That you don't want to lose
Victory depends upon the people that you choose
So, listen, Arthur darling, closely to this news
We won't succeed on Broadway
If you don't have any Jews... (lyrics by Eric Idle and John Duprez, 2005)

Many of Broadway's successful composers and lyricist came from Jewish roots and were either the children or grandchildren of Jewish immigrants, from George and Ira Gershwin, to Rodgers and Hammerstein and Stephen Sondheim. Some even incorporated Jewish musical motifs into their works.

Around 1905, ("Timeline", The Thomashefskys Official Website) Yiddish stage impresario Boris Thomashefsky singlehandedly began the tradition of Borsht Belt entertainment when he built the first theater in the Catskills on his 40 acre tract of land in Hunter, New York (Adler 2001, 359). Borsht Belt entertainment, coined by *Variety* in the 1930s (Nahshon 2016a, 258) refers to the performances found in the Catskill Mountains where many Jewish immigrants would go to vacation and escape from the city air. The trip was a tolerable car ride away from New York City, and not so far that huge expenses were incurred in order to get away. Reflecting on Borsht Belt entertainment's impact, Nahshon writes:

Borscht Belt culture is greatly ingrained in the collective memories of both American Jews and American entertainment. Its mention evokes nostalgic reminiscences of gastronomic overindulgence and an inescapable roster of who's who in American 20th century entertainment: Jerry Lewis, Red Buttons, Danny Kaye, Sid Caesar, Phil Silvers, Mickey Katz, Jackie Mason, and many others who got their start in Catskills hotels." (ibid.)

The Borsht Belt hotels had their own performances spaces where many comedians grew and developed their craft, often riffing on immigrant experiences as a way to get through the tough times or ameliorate their pain. Comedian George Burns, joking about the lack

of light in his tenement apartment said, “We had gaslight but very little of it, because about once a week when the gas ran out you had to put a quarter in the meter. My mother always kept the flame turned down very low to make the quarter last as long as possible... I was eight years old before I knew what my sisters looked like. Then one night my mother turned up the light. I got a look at my sisters and blew it out” (Epstein 2007, 58). This type of wry humor was typical of Borsht Belt comedians, and can be traced back to Yiddish theater.

Many current day comedians were influenced by the Borsht Belt comics who in turn influenced sitcom writers:

The creative nature of the contemporary Sitcom Room had its origins in Radio to be sure, but in irreverence and combative spirit I believe it derives from the late night post-gig gatherings of primarily Jewish comics in the ‘40s and ‘50s. Meeting at legendary Manhattan delis like the Carnegie or Stage...struggling comics, Rodney Dangerfield (born Jacob Cohen), Allan King (born Irwin Alan Kniberg) and Lenny Bruce (born Leonard Schnieder)... nursed coffee and deli till the wee hours, trading stories, riffing on “melodies” and fine tuning their comic voice. (Isaacs 2017, 130)

Some have argued that the affinity between Jews and comedy is perhaps due to the feeling of being alien. Isaacs notes that “a great deal of the psychology of funny has to do with the notion of being the outsider, or in modern parlance, the outlier...there is no ethnicity, religion, race or interest group that has a history of being labeled, or identifies more as the outsider than the Jewish people (ibid, 130-131). Other scholars have disagreed with this analysis, but I believe it to have some merit. A surefire way to survive the hard times is to be able to laugh about it or oneself. Jokes also serve as a unique way of complaining as well as teaching through story telling.

Jewish comedy and comics from Woody Allen to Jerry Seinfeld and even more current, Sarah Silverman and Amy Schumer have these qualities and are able to embrace

their “Jewishness” because of the Borsht Belt comics who came before them like Mel Brooks, Jerry Lewis and Jackie Mason. Larry David, (comedian and creator of *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*) embodies the Yiddish *schlemiel* [a person with consecutive bad luck] while playing himself in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. His plans always go awry by his own inadvertent doing, ending with comedic results.

While Jews and comedy are closely intertwined, the field of dramatic acting was also greatly influenced by a number of Jews with connections to Yiddish theater. Countless actors have been impacted by acting greats Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler. Strasberg, a Jew born in Austria-Poland, immigrated to New York’s Lower East Side (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018). Strasberg was inspired at a young age by Yiddish stage actor David Kessler (Kanfer 2006, 185). He ultimately founded the Actors Studio and has two acting schools based on his method, one in New York and the other in Hollywood, both called The Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute. Stella Adler, youngest daughter of Yiddish theater stars Sara and Jacob Adler, was a contemporary of Lee Strasberg and a Yiddish stage actress in her own right, also achieving success on Broadway and in Hollywood (ibid.). Adler and Strasberg had different interpretations of Stanislavsky’s method acting and Stella opened her own acting school, the Stella Adler Conservatory of Acting (Slater 1994, 15).⁴ Many actors’ education can be traced back to both Strasberg and Adler. Among others, students of the two include Marlon Brando, Meryl Streep, Paul Newman, Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, Ellen Burstyn, Jack Nicholson and Robert De Niro. “‘If there wasn’t the Yiddish theater,’ observed Marlon Brando, ‘there wouldn’t have been Stella. And if there hadn’t been Stella, there wouldn’t have been all these

⁴ On a side note, when researching acting schools to study at myself, I looked at both the Stella Adler Conservatory of Acting and The Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute, where I ultimately pursued my studies.

actors who studied with her and changed the face of theater—and not only acting, but directing and writing” (Kanfer 2004, 18).

The above examples of how Yiddish theater informed the various venues in the entertainment industry as we know it today are only a few of many. The extent to which Yiddish theater’s roots have been embedded into our culture is astounding.

Yiddish Theater in New York, 2019:

Though the Golden epoch of Yiddish theater is over, we can still experience a “taste” of it in New York. Presently, there are Yiddish theater performances through the now named National Yiddish Theater Folksbeine, currently at 36 Battery Place in New York. They are the only remaining group of fifteen Yiddish theater companies that performed on the Lower East Side during the Golden Era (NYTF History, 2018). The NYTF serves the Yiddish entertainment seeking audience through full productions, staged readings and concerts. Their repertoire includes classic productions from Yiddish theater, new adaptations of Yiddish literature as well as new works. Their 2018 production of *Fiddler Oyfn Dach* [*Fiddler on the Roof*], directed by Joel Grey was so successful that its run was extended and then further extended, moving the production to 42nd Street for an additional twenty weeks.

The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research located on West 16th Street (an institution with a wealth of information pertaining to Yiddish, including a library, archives and a museum), offers concerts of Yiddish music, and sometimes features songs from Yiddish theater. Additionally, they hold lectures, seminars and other programs focusing on the Yiddish language. They also have the Uriel Weinreich Program in

Yiddish Language, Literature and Culture, a Yiddish summer intensive that even offers an elective in performing Yiddish theater. YIVO was founded in Vilna in 1925 but was forced to open a new headquarters in New York City in 1940 after Nazis looted the archives (“About YIVO”).

During the Sukkot season, one may encounter the Sukkos Mob, a company that performs Yiddish street theater in an ambush style around the public spaces of Manhattan to celebrate Sukkot. The group is spearheaded by Jenny Romaine, a performer, director and puppeteer (*Sukkos Mob: Street Performer Jenny Romaine's New Spin on a Jewish Tradition*). Sukkos Mob keeps the Yiddish theater’s purimspiel origins and spirit alive through their informal and playful performances.

Once a year, Yiddish New York, located at 32 Broadway with programs at 14th street, partners with other organizations to support Yiddish culture. They offer an annual festival which includes events, workshops, and education featuring, among other things, klezmer music, Yiddish songs and theater. Faculty, performers and speakers are renowned in the world of Yiddish art and culture (“Yiddish New York”).

New York remains a multicultural city that embraces diverse groups of people and allows them to thrive as themselves. The link between Jews and New York still persists. There is a sense of nostalgia that comes from thinking of the Jewish Lower East Side and all that is associated with it, like being able to hear Yiddish around you, fabulous delis, pickle shops, and the best egg creams. I believe in part due to this nostalgia, Yiddish culture still has a home in New York. Many Jews still live in the New York Area. A 2011 population study conducted by the UJA-Federation of New York found that “New York State has about 1.75 million Jews, comprising approximately 9

percent of its total population of 20 million. Nearly all the Jews live in or around New York City, with 1.1 million in the five boroughs” (Heilman 2017). People, (like me) are doing “me-search,” trying to connect with their roots and learn about the stories and lives of their ancestors. Additionally, there is a Queer Yiddishkeit movement, with a contingency in the (comparatively) liberal and gay-friendly city of New York: “in 1996, The Village Voice reported that there was ‘a groundswell of gay and lesbian interest in Yiddish culture’...The affinities between gay people and Yiddish, and especially bundist, culture are, when you think about it, obvious: both are staunchly secular, cosmopolitan, progressive and often marginalized” (Peratis, 2007). Beyond the LGBTQ community, many view Yiddish as a way to connect with their Jewish ancestry without having to engage religiously at a time when religious observance and affiliation is generally declining. New York makes a natural home for those interested in studying and immersing themselves in Yiddish culture.

Conclusion:

From the 1880s to the 1920s, Yiddish theater on the Lower East Side served valuable functions in the lives of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. The Yiddish theater established a cultural presence for the Jewish community in New York’s diverse and multicultural city, which helped the immigrant Jewish community to feel established and rooted. This consequently allowed them to build institutions that were influenced by both the community’s past, as well as their aspirations for the future. The Yiddish theater gave the immigrants hope and a sense of belonging in a strange land, as well as an avenue for upward mobility. The theaters acted as forums of social interaction, a place to escape

from undesirable living conditions, and a space to reminisce of their Eastern European past in a setting where Yiddish, their mamaloshen could be heard on both the stage and in the audience.

Michael Tilson Thomas, Boris and Bessie Thomashevsky's grandson (Founder and Artistic Director of the New World Symphony, Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony and Conductor Laureate of the London Symphony Orchestra) recalls, "An old lady once said to me when I was a kid—we went to the theatre; I don't remember what the play was—but I remember seeing these big red velvet curtains and on the bottom in Jewish letters in gold it said 'Thomashevsky' and she said, 'Just seeing that name in those gold letters made me believe that we could have a future in this country, and that someday we'd amount to something'" (*The Jewish Americans*, 2008). The impact of Yiddish theater beyond the stage and into the entertainment industry across America exemplifies a fulfillment of this immigrant aspiration.

Even though Yiddish theater in New York no longer exists as it did in its Golden era, its mark on the American entertainment industry is irrefutable and far reaching:

This "other kind of expression"—authentic, concentrated, persuasive—was the true spirit of the Yiddish theater. It animated the professionals who acted on its stages, and they in turn breathed it into their colleagues on Broadway and in Hollywood. The phrases of the Yiddish theater are no longer in the original tongue, but the fervor, the intensity, and the chutzpah persist, now part of the deepest essence of American drama. (Kanfer 2004, 24)

Yiddish theater was so important that we still see reverberations of it in our everyday lives. Serving as a vehicle of upward mobility, Yiddish theater allowed some of the immigrants involved to ultimately branch out into other institutions of entertainment,

such as stand-up comedy and film. The cultural impact that stems out of Yiddish theater has left an indelible mark on American entertainment.

The sense of rootedness that the institution of Yiddish theater gave Eastern European Jewish immigrants energized and invited the immigrants to grow, and confront the dialectic between Jewish identity, assimilation and acculturation. As a soon to be cantor, the tension between these is still very present in my life. It seems that in some communities and regions, the attraction to be part of the larger society has overshadowed the importance of maintaining Jewish identity. Where I am serving currently in a Reform synagogue setting, people are finding and experiencing community in secular venues, such as groups that support mutual hobbies or interests. At Shabbat and festival services, it is clear that acculturation and assimilation have fostered a decreasing engagement in the Jewish community, impacting religious affiliation as well as synagogue attendance. Similar to those immigrants who worked long hours and preferred to attend theater instead of reading in their free time, in the present day, many of us are overextended, though not only with work. We are constantly busy and almost always connected through email, text messaging and social media. In our free time, we are opting to go out with friends, see a movie, or stay in and watch Netflix on a Friday night instead of attending services.

On one hand, Yiddish theater was a path to Americanization. The immigrants fought tooth and nail to make it in America, and Yiddish theater was a way to accomplish this, both symbolically and economically. At the same time, one of the consequences is the price to be paid, which I am noticing as a religious leader. In some ways, the opportunity to become American was great, but at the price of sacrificing religious

affiliation and attendance at synagogue. Religious leaders in the Jewish community are now tasked with writing the next chapter of the American Jewish story, in which we build upon the successes of our immigrant ancestors, like those who built the Yiddish theater, by incorporating religious practices in a symbiotic fashion that speaks to contemporary sensibilities.

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