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Queer Liberation, American Yiddish Theater, The Feminist Movement, and Jewish American Identity: The Hazentes and the World that Allowed them to Be

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They/Them/Theirs

Senior Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Cantorial Ordination and Master of Sacred Music Degree

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Abstract

This thesis aims to contextualize the Hazentes within the world in which they gained popularity. Previously, there was understanding that the First Wave Feminist movement, Yiddish theater and secular theater in America, and Jewish American acculturation allowed for the success of the Hazentes. I am proposing that there is a fourth catalyst that ignited the movement: the prevalence of queer culture in America and the popular crossdressing fads of the day. I am hoping to contribute to the general understanding of why the Hazentes found success. I have gathered this history through a variety of sources including some of the Hazentes' personal archives, newspaper clippings, books on related topics, relevant theses, and personal interviews.

Chapter One contains a brief queer history of the Jewish and non-Jewish world, with emphasis in the latter sections being on queer identities as seen in 19th and 20th century Western culture. Chapter Two discusses queer culture in New York in various neighborhoods, American Yiddish Theater, the Jazz Era, Prohibition, and the Pansy Craze and how they are all related to one another. Chapter Three discusses Jewish American acculturation, First Wave Feminism, and Jewish American religious practice at the time. Chapter Four discusses the Hazentes within the context of the previous three chapters as well as other related findings, including pre-investiture women cantors. Chapter Five weaves together the content from the previous four chapters to clarify their relations. Chapter Six discusses women's participation in other forms of Jewish liturgical leadership and discusses how Jewish transmasculinism was portrayed outside of the Jewish community and into the secular world.

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Thank you for believing in this and thank you for believing in me.

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Notes on Pronouns and Language Used in this Thesis

In this thesis, I look first at queer history in order to give context to the Hazentes. In doing so I have made choices regarding pronoun usage for some people in queer history, including "cross-dressers." I use terminology that is no longer considered polite or accurate, because this is how these phenomena were described at that time. I have tried to approach these topics as sensitively as possible, with the ultimate goal of the thesis being respect for everyone mentioned, regardless of personal identity.

For those who performed or presented as the opposite sex, but then returned to their originally assigned gender, I use she/her or he/him pronouns. For those who lived their lives as the opposite gender and were committed to this identity so strongly that they refused to reveal their assigned gender to others, I use instead "they/them" pronouns to reflect that their actual gender remains unclear. Nowadays the people in this latter group might be identified as non-binary or transgender, but these conceptions were not available during the period studied here. Where the choice is clear, I use a binary pronoun that is not congruent with the pronoun for their gender assigned at birth.

Regarding the singular "they," its use has been traced by the *Oxford English Dictionary* back to 1375, to the medieval romance novel *William and the Werewolf*.[1] While some grammarians beginning in the 18th century and even in the present day argue that a plural pronoun such as "they" can't take a singular antecedent, it is worth noting that that the singular "you," rather than thou, is also a plural pronoun that takes a singular

[1] Oxford English Dictionary. "A Brief History of Singular 'They,'" September 4, 2018. https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/.

antecedent. The singular “you” only became commonplace in the 17th century—three full centuries after the singular “they.” Nowadays, the singular “they” is officially codified as a singular pronoun in which gender is either unknown, indiscriminate, or non-binary, appearing officially in this manner in the New Oxford Dictionary of English in 1998. That is to say, the singular “they” isn’t even new in the modern sense as proper English—it was codified by the New Oxford Dictionary two and a half decades ago.

Some of the language or terms used in this thesis might be considered offensive to contemporary ears, such as the word "pansy." All of this language stems from the original cultural context of the Hazentes, and thus is necessary for a proper understanding of the time. I make note of language that is now considered offensive or incorrect as I discuss the terminology. In the course of time, even some of the terminology I use to correct offensive terms from the past may prove in the future to be impolite or inappropriate. Whenever you read this thesis, please know that I have tried to be as respectful as possible.

Introduction

The Hazentes were Orthodox Jewish women who performed *hazzanut (*cantorial music,) primarily in a performance rather than a prayer setting. The phenomenon began in 1920 with Madame Sophie Kurtzer, and continued through the mid to late 20th century. There were a handful of these women, most of them coming out of New York City and Philadelphia, though I found instances of others in my research.

Several factors from within and without the Jewish community enabled the emergence of the Hazentes as public (cross-dressed) performers of *hazzanut*. First Wave Feminism, which called for more opportunities for women in public and vocational life, spurred these women to seek out these singing roles and opportunities. Queer expression in theater (both secular and Jewish), gathering places such as speakeasies during the time of prohibition, and contemporary media, all abetted experimentation with gender presentation and performance. Prevailing sensibilities and restrictions on women in both Jewish and American society, however, led to these women being able to perform publicly, but not as a full-fledged synagogue cantors.

The Hazentes became popular in the same decades as the Pansy Craze[2] and the early Gay Liberation movement that took place in the 1920s and 1930s in New York City primarily, but also in other cities like Chicago and San Francisco. Within these movements, the gay and bisexual jazz musicians of New York flourished in speakeasies all across the country (but primarily in New York City,) and the black gay writers of the Harlem Renaissance were able to find footing. These cultural phenomena found their way

[2] The term Pansy, both then and today, is a relatively negative word for an effeminate gay man.

into vaudeville, Broadway shows, radio, and even movies. Some of the most popular movies, theater productions, and records at the time contained overtly queer material. Those who attended productions like the Broadway show *Pleasure Man* or the Yiddish theater production *Yo a man, nit a man* (Yes a Man, No a Man) were clamoring for more "pansy" material. These shows did not constitute public acceptance or celebration of LGBT+ identities, rather the entire entertainment industry was creating a spectacle of these identities. Even so, these productions brought these identities to the forefront and prompted a new awareness of alternatives identities and roles. Because of these productions, effeminate men and masculine women were all the rage from the late 1920s until the mid 1930s because they were taboo, exotic, and intriguing.[3] This was the world where the first Hazentes found their footing: a world with precedent for masculine, powerful women, and for cross-dressing.

Almost all of the Hazentes performed vocally in a manner that I have coined "vocal cross-dressing"—using tone and range that is often indistinguishable from their male counterparts in order to sound more authentically "cantorial." They also physically cross-dressed in religious regalia such as robes and *meiters*, cantorial hats.

The story being told here, though unique to its time and place, is not unique to Judaism. Jewish people have always taken ideas, music, food, and other touchstones from their surroundings. Some of the most ancient and concrete ideals of Judaism including

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[3] Zarrelli, Natalie. "The Incredible Forgotten Queer Nightlife Scene of the 1920s." Atlas Obscura, April 14, 2016. http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/in-the-early-20th-century-america-was-awash-in-incredible-queer-nightlife.

angelology and demonology, resurrection, and even the strict concept of Monotheism, are thought to have come from Zoroastrianism.[4] Much of the food we love and consider "Jewish"—from bagels to falafel—originate in other surrounding, non-Jewish cultures.

Judaism has always embraced outside influence and made it Jewish, and we still do this today. We see it now with the paraliturgical pop and rock music of people like Dan Nichols and other artists within the Reform movement (see my colleague Jordan Goldstein's thesis if you are curious for more information) and how the sound of a lot of this music sounds modern and even unaffiliated from Judaism. This same kind of outside cultural influence can be seen in the music of Salamone Rossi, a Jewish Italian composer who straddled the Renaissance and Baroque period with his music, and the style of the day was and is reflected in his compositions. While many could and have argued that adopting modern styles is assimilation, I argue that this borrowing from modernity makes our creations even "more" Jewish because of our history of Jewish osmosis.

This brings us back to the Hazentes. In the first three chapters of this thesis, I will be laying out the context for my arguments by outlining the history of queer culture, including the history of cross-dressing and queer performance, in early 20th century America, which enabled the emergence and flourishing of the Hazentes. I do not attempt to make an argument about the sexual or gender identity of the Hazentes other than what is already known, rather I suggest that the cultural context of their time enabled them to perform as they did with success and impunity.

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[4] Kaufmann Kohler and A. V. W. Jackson. "Zoroastrianism." In *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 695–97, 1906. https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/15283-zoroastrianism.

Chapter One contains a brief queer history of the Jewish and non-Jewish world, with emphasis in the latter sections being on queer identities as seen in 19th and 20th century Western culture. Chapter Two discusses queer culture in New York in various neighborhoods, American Yiddish Theater, the Jazz Era, Prohibition, and the Pansy Craze and how they are all related to one another. Chapter Three discusses Jewish American acculturation, First Wave Feminism, and Jewish American religious practice at the time. Chapter Four discusses the Hazentes within the context of the previous three chapters as well as other related findings, including pre-investiture women cantors. Chapter Five weaves together the content from the previous four chapters to clarify their relations. Chapter Six discusses women's participation in other forms of Jewish liturgical leadership, and discusses how Jewish transmasculinism was portrayed outside of the Jewish community and into the secular world.

The core of my argument is this: decades of openly queer activity that took place in cities, on stage, on the radio, and on screen, alongside feminist movements, created options for female performers in Jewish American spaces that did not exist before this time. These environmental shifts, together with changing American Jewish attitudes, created an opportunity for these women. The Hazentes were able to take advantage of this cultural context, feed it through a filter of Jewish sensibilities, and create a phenomenon that was able to outlast the openly queer movements of the early 20th century for so long that it was still around to witness their resurgence at Stonewall in 1969.

In weaving together these histories, I argue that in addition to these three trends—acculturation, Yiddish theater norms, and First Wave Feminism—there was a fourth

factor that contributed to the emergence of the Hazentes: contemporary queer culture and cross-dressing. This thesis aims to give the context for the world in which the Hazentes lived, and create understanding for the choices that they made in order to thrive as who they were. Without this history, there would be no Hazentes.

Chapter 1: Cross-Dressing, Transgender Identity, and Homosexuality

Gender Subversion and Cross-Dressing in History

Though many in the modern day will say that non-normative gender expressions are relatively new, this is not substantiated in history. The subversion of gender, as well as drag and cross-dressing, have all taken place for much of recorded history. In the case of female-to-male cross-dressing, this took place primarily due to patriarchal oppression; cross-dressing countered this by allowing women to gain economic mobility, power, safety, and freedom, as well to act on their sexual desire.[5] In the case of male-to-female cross-dressing, this took place first to prevent women from being in spaces that were deemed unsightly or dangerous for them such as theater, and later took place as artistic and/or sexual expression. Instead of having women play female roles, these tasks were given to men, who impersonated femininity on stage. For male-to-female cross-dressers who cross-dressed outside of places where it was considered normal like theater, these men often found themselves the object of oppression themselves.

[5] "History of the Transformative World of Cross-Dressing," Yoair Blog, July 3, 2021, https://www.yoair.com/blog/history-of-the-transformative-world-of-cross-dressing/.

Female-to-Male Cross-dressing

In her book *The Second Sex*, feminist scholar Simone de Beauvoir says: "It is perfectly natural for the future woman to feel indignant at the limitations posed upon her by her sex. The real question is not why she should reject them: the problem is rather to understand why she accepts them."[6] Female-to-male cross-dressing was and is a means of rejecting the limitations placed upon women, no matter why these limitations were imposed in the first place. Thus, this notion of disguising oneself as the male gender is a strategy rooted in what masculinity provides: upward mobility, financial security, and physical safety. Of course, with masculinity also comes authority, and therefore, power.

Female-to-male cross-dressing is recorded throughout history, and often appears in the stuff of legends. One of the more recognizable instances of this type of cross-dressing is the Chinese story of Hua Mulan, a woman who disguises herself as a male soldier in order to spare her father from a war. The motive of Mulan is to save her father from certain death, and the only way for her to do that is pretend to be a man. The historicity of Mulan is up for debate; it is entirely possible that she was merely the stuff of legends. She is featured in a story called "The Ballad of Mulan," and it is believed to have originated in sometime around the 5th century C.E., and has been told many times over the centuries as a novelty or folk tale.[7]

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[6] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (Jonathan Cape, 1953), 399.

[7] Julia Day, "A Brief History Of Cross-dressing," All That's Interesting, October 26, 2014, https://allthatsinteresting.com/cross-dressing-history.

Female-to-male cross-dressing roles also historically have also been featured in public performances, most notably in Shakespearean plays including but not limited to *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *As You Like It*.[8] These female characters cross-dress in order to escape their circumstances: to avoid a wedding to someone whom she does not want to marry, to escape the circumstances of her birth, or to create a world that is easier for her to live in once she stops the charade. Each of these characters suffers from lack of power in some way, and cross-dressing helps them to obtain power and control over their lives in a way they could not have as women. However, this whole circumstance becomes more complicated, because while in modern times these roles are often played by women, in the times of Shakespeare only men performed on stage,[9] so these "women" cross-dressing as men were actually men dressed as women dressed as men. This will be further discussed later in the chapter.

Historically, cross-dressing was not limited merely to mythology or stage acting. It is not uncommon in historical records to find a woman disguised as a man, having done so in order to gain access to the world in some way that would have otherwise been inaccessible to her as a woman. Some examples in the western world include: an 8th century monk called Marinus whose transition was so convincing that when they were pinned for fathering a child with the local innkeeper's daughter, they accepted

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[8] Lee Jamieson, "Top 3 Cross-Dressing Characters in Shakespeare Plays," ThoughtCo, July 1, 2019, https://www.thoughtco.com/cross-dressing-in-shakespeare-plays-2984940.

[9] Claire McManus, "Shakespeare and Gender: The 'Woman's Part,'" The British Library (The British Library, March 15, 2016), https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/shakespeare-and-gender-the-womans-part.

responsibility and raised the child as their own until their death; Joan of Arc, a French teenage girl, who helped lead a military operation of the French against the British by disguising herself as a man; Hannah Snell, born in 1723, who spent her life disguised as a male soldier named James Gray, joining the marines and eventually revealing her gender and opening a pub called the Female Warrior, and even in recent history: Katherine Switzer, who disguised herself as a man to run the Boston Marathon in 1967, though she was inevitably discovered and officials attempted to physically remove her from the race.[10]

All these people, over more than one thousand years, wanted access to a world in which they were forbidden: be it the military, religion, or even sports. By disguising their gender for a period, or even living their lives as men, they were able to achieve what was impossible for women in their time.

Additionally, in a cisheteropatriarchical society, it has also been advantageous to disguise oneself as a man in order to pursue same-sex lovers, thereby avoiding the discrimination that came with and comes with same-sex relationships. According to this arrangement, there were some women and/or transgender men who lived as "female husbands," transitioning or cross-dressing in some way in order to legally marry what would become their wives.[11]

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[10] Fustich, Katie. "12 Times Women Disguised As Men Made History." Ranker. Accessed May 25, 2022. https://www.ranker.com/list/women-disguised-as-men-in-history/katiefustich.

[11] Cambridge University Press - Academic. *Female Husbands: A Trans History*, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLJCxkCaNSw.

Male-to-Female Cross-dressing

The patriarchy also permitted male-to-female cross-dressing as well. We most commonly see this type of cross-dressing in two places: in mythology and in theatrical performances. These gender performances were seen as less scandalous—in mythology, men often dressed as women in order to accomplish a task through deception of an unknowing party, or to obtain the object of their sexual desire. There was also cross-dressing in theatrical spaces, done in order to prevent women from performing in the "salacious" or "dangerous" spaces of the theatrical world.

In mythological literature, one finds a great wealth of male-to-female cross-dressing, mostly used as a disguise in order to accomplish a task. In Norse mythology, there is a story of the hammer of Thor, which is stolen by a giant named Thrymr. Thrymr is willing to trade the hammer back, but in exchange he wants a wife: Freyja, Norse goddess of love. When Freyja refuses to marry Thrymr, Thor, along with fellow god Loki, decide to take it upon themselves to marry Thrymr: Thor posing as Freyja, and Loki as "her" handmaid. Eventually, when the hammer is placed in Thor's lap (with him still dressed as the betrothed Freyja), he rips off his veil and slaughters every giant in the hall.[12] This example of cross-dressing is an example of a strategy employed by a brilliant warrior: a means of smuggling himself into a situation in order to retrieve his weapon. Thor uses an appearance of femininity to imply weakness, making Thrymr let his guard down, and allowing Thor to retrieve his weapon and kill his enemies. One of the greatest warriors in Greek mythology, Achilles, also dresses as a woman in the court of Lycomedes in order

[12] Day, "A Brief History Of Cross-dressing."

to protect himself from Odysseus, who wanted Achilles to fight in the Trojan war. This cunning strategy was twofold: by adopting femininity he appeared weak and would not be conscripted, but he was also able to disguise his true form in order to avoid to avoid being sent to war. Additionally, cross-dressing was an important ritual in the following of Aphrodite: men would wear women's clothing, and women would wear men's clothes and fake beards.[13]

Cross-dressing was also something that was imposed upon young boys in order to protect them. For royal male children, there was often danger involved in the chaotic world of kings, and male heirs often faced the threat of death. In a famous example, there is the story of Princess Gyeonghye, in what is now South Korea in the 1400s. In 1455 she was banished to Gyeonggi Province while she was pregnant. The King sent a servant to tend to her, as she was ill, and the King threatened that should she have a boy child he would be killed. The princess did in fact have a boy child, and in order to protect him, he was dressed in girls clothes.

Of course, the most famous examples of male-to-female cross-dressing occurred in the theatrical world. For much of history, women were not allowed on stage, be it in Greek tragedies or in Shakespearian roles.[14] Women were initially forbidden to act on stage because women were considered inferior to men. This influenced much of Western society, even before the common era. Thus, as early as 532 BCE, cross-dressing men as

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[13] "History of the Transformative World of Cross-Dressing."

[14] admin, "Women in Theatre: A Historical Look," Text, NC Theatre, March 18, 2015, https://nctheatre.com/blog/women-theatre-historical-look.

women in Greek tragic plays was commonplace, and even seen as the morally correct option in order to guard the safety of women, while also theatrically representing women's lives.

While women were eventually able to participate in theater beginning in the Roman imperial era, it was not commonplace. From the Middle Ages through the Renaissance, women performing was uncommon, though there were some notable exceptions. However, in Shakespeare's lifetime, 1564-1616, only men performed female roles. Women were not permitted to perform on stage in England until 1660, though it was somewhat more permissible in other countries in Europe.[15]

With the advent of Opera in 17th century Europe, and with the dwindling use of castrati after the practice was outlawed, women began to appear more on the stage across the continent, and even began to play male characters. This period helped originate the concept of "pants roles" or "trouser roles" that are very common in popular plays, operas, and musicals, including but not limited to Cherubino in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro,* Sibel in *Faust*, or Hansel in *Hänsel und Gretel*.[16] With the phasing out of castrati, there was a vocal void left that many women were able to fill; roles of masculine, strong, heroic men who sang in an accessible octave for women. Given the lack of men who could fulfill this vocal void, it became more acceptable for women to play these pants roles. Eventually, pants roles were written explicitly for women, the first one being

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[15] Claire McManus, "Shakespeare and Gender."

[16] Kristen, "A Brief History of Pants Roles," Operaversity, January 11, 2016, https://operaversity.com/performance/a-brief-history-of-pants-roles/.

Sextus in Handel's *Giulio Cesare*. The types of roles also expanded to include young boys, and even romantic leads in operas. Pants roles are still popular today, and can be seen in stage plays, musicals, and operas.

There is also evidence of cross-dressing that took place solely for the purpose of personal enjoyment, and expression of sexuality. In Victorian England, famously a prudish time in history, there is historical record of many cross-dressers. Two notable gentlemen among them are Frederick Park and Ernest Boulton, also known as Fanny and Stella.[17] These were young men who were members of society, holding office jobs during the day, but performing in drag in the evening as theatrical performers. This was not considered controversial considering that this was still a common practice at the time, however, these two men didn't just reserve their feminine wares just for the stage, but often ran about town in women's clothes. Other times, they would wear men's clothes, but also have a face of makeup on. These men were also notably gay, and even had relationships with powerful men. Eventually, this behavior went beyond the scope of what was acceptable in Victorian England, and after sitting in the audience of a play in drag, and even using the women's restroom, the two were arrested. They were charged with "personating a women," and later with sodomy, which was a much more serious crime. Law enforcement could not prove that any sodomy had taken place (though Boulton was in fact a part-time gay sex worker,) and they were found not guilty. These

[17] Melanie Radziki McManus, "The Scandal of the Cross-Dressing Men of Victorian England," HowStuffWorks, August 27, 2018, https://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-figures/scandal-cross-dressing-men-victorian-england.htm.

men were not adhering to patriarchal norms by dressing as women; quite the contrary, they were pursued by law enforcement and tried for their crimes. There is an important distinction to be made with this case, though: these men were also gay, which changes the lens through which we must view this situation.

A Brief Understanding of Homosexual Activity and Gender in History, from Ancient Times through the Late 19th Century and Early 20th Century

The vast majority of historians agree that there have been homosexual activity and same-sex relationships in every documented culture.[18] The modern gay rights movement did not even begin to form until the 1870s, and yet there were many documented cases of homosexuality in ancient cultures, with homosexuality having been tolerated, celebrated, and admonished, depending on the culture and the time period. I will provide several examples in this section, though this is by no means a comprehensive presentation of the entire historical world of homosexuality, and rather some relevant examples for the sake of context.

Homosexuality and Gender in the Ancient World

Queer relationships and non-cisgender genders and sexes were seen as ordinary, and without stigma. Homosexuality was so common in much of the ancient world that there

[18] Bonnie J. Morris, "History of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Social Movements," https://www.apa.org, 2009, https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/history.

was no distinction between heterosexual relations and relationships and homosexual relations and relationships,[19] and words connoting transgender and gay and bisexual people did not exist until coined in Europe in the 19th century.

Many of the great cultures of the ancient world had documented cases of people we would now see as gay, bisexual, or transgender. Mesopotamia had a goddess named Inanna (also known as Ishtar) who had an ability to turn men into women and women into men, known as the power of transformation. Inanna's father Enki created a third gender, "neither male nor female," who became her clergy-servants. Same-sex couples were also expressly blessed by the Gods, with blessings for opposite sex and same sex couples existing in the same document, "The Almanac of Incantations." There are records of same-sex male relationships in China that date back to 600 BCE, though female same-sex relationships were overlooked by record keeping of the time. There is a famous story of Emperor Ai of the Han Dynasty, who was resting with his lover Dong Xian. Dong Xian fell asleep on Emperor Ai's robe. Rather than wake his lover, Emperor Ai cut the sleeve off his robe. In Japan, Kūkai, known as Kobo Daishi, "the great teacher," founded Shingon Buddhism c. 806 CE, and encouraged male same-sex relationships. These relationships were common and were even written of in books from the time period. Ancient Egypt also acknowledged same sex relationships. Bisexuality was common, and the only thing that was considered shameful was when a man engaging in homosexual

[19] Joshua J. Mark, "LGBTQ+ in the Ancient World," World History Encyclopedia, June 25, 2021, https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1790/lgbtq-in-the-ancient-world/

sex "played the part of the woman," as it was seen as surrendering his power to another in sex.

Regarding gender in the ancient world, third genders are recognized in many cultures throughout ancient history. The Kama Sutra, written around 400 BCE, references a third gender known as *Shandha*.[20] Native American tribes recognized a third gender known today as Two-Spirit, though the ancient term has been lost.[21] Two-Spirit people were of great value to the community, having been transformed by the gods into the opposite gender. In Africa, the *Ashtime* were assigned male and identified as women and performed traditional women's tasks, even having been married to men.[22]

Homosexuality and Gender in Ancient Greece and Rome

Perhaps the most famous chapter in the history of homosexuality in the ancient world is that of Ancient Greece and Rome. There is a great deal of documented history of Greece that shows homosexual relationships between men as well as women. One of the more famous examples of homosexual attraction between women was that of Sappho, the 7th century B.C.E. poet who was so influential to the realm of lesbianism, that female same-sex attraction is called "Sapphic," a derivative of her name. Sappho was also from

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[20] Wilhelm, Amara. "Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex (1)." galva108, May 13, 2014. https://www.galva108.org/single-post/2014/05/13/tritiyaprakriti-people-of-the-third-sex-1.

[21] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Health. "Two-Spirit | Health Resources." Accessed February 14, 2023. https://www.ihs.gov/lgbt/health/twospirit/.

[22] Murray, Stephen O. "Africa: Sub-Saharan, Pre-Independence." *GLBTQ Archive*, 2015.

the isle of Lesbos, which is what the term "lesbian" derives from. In Ancient Greece, it was common for there to be age-differentiated relations between women and girls, as well as relationships between adult women.[23] Among the male population, it was common for homosexual relations to be between adolescent boys of similar ages, between boys and men who were not yet married, and less commonly, between fully adult men. The point of the age-gap relationships among men was often to foster mentorship and masculinize the younger male participating in the practice.

However, homosexuality was not universally accepted in all city-states for all of the time of Ancient Greece. As the age of marriage declined and the prosperity of some city states were more distributed among all people, larger families became more desirable. Because of this, non-procreative sex and sexuality fell out of fashion and even became a dodgy practice. This move against homosexual practices even became characterized in some texts from the 4th century B.C.E. as "beyond nature."

While some disagreed with homosexuality in Ancient Greece, there was no system of punishment, nor anything beyond the practice being somewhat frowned upon in the wider culture, and only in times of prosperity due to the non-procreative nature of homosexual sex.[24] Homosexuality or homosexual behaviors were common among both men and

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[23] Hubbard, Thomas K. "Historical Views of Homosexuality: Ancient Greece." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics, May 29, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1242.

[24] In modern times, it is possible to have homosexual sex for procreation due to acknowledgement of transgender identities and differences in reproductive organs between same-gender sex partners in a way that ancient populations did not recognize. To clarify, this notion of homosexual intercourse being non-

women, and were often seen as fostering maturity and creating bonds of mentorship between younger and older partners. For the most part, the notion was seen as neutral or positive for the majority of the time of Ancient Greece, and was a common part of life at the time.[25]

It is also important to note that gender expression outside the cisgender and binary was not unheard of in this time and place. The cult of Phrygian goddess Cybele and consort Attis prospered in Ancient Greece c. 300 BCE. They too had non-cisgender clergy, the *Galli*, who were assigned male at birth and identified as female. It is believed that this cult began in Mesopotamia before spreading across Asia Minor, and that these *Galli* may have been inspired by the cult of Inanna and its transgender clergy.

Rome followed in the footsteps of Greece, keeping its same-sex relationships. Married Roman men had regular affairs with men, and the only stigma regarding this was toward the male in this scenario who played the role of a woman, i.e., the one who was passive in the relationship. Even noted emperors Julius Caesar and Hadrian engaged in homosexual relationships.

All of this changed for Rome when Christianity was introduced to its Empire. Initially, homosexuality was still tolerated, though it did not last long. Laws with Christian influence and against homosexuality started being written in 390 A.D., when Theodosius I issued an edict, declaring: "All persons who have the shameful custom of

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procreative between every gay couple was a perception of pre-modern understanding of gender and sex that is being commented upon, and not my personal understanding or belief.

[25] Hein van Dolen. "Greek Homosexuality - Livius." Accessed July 12, 2022. https://www.livius.org/articles/concept/greek-homosexuality/.

condemning a man's body, acting the part of a woman's to the sufferance of alien sex (for they appear not to be different from women), shall expiate a crime of this kind in avenging flames in the sight of the people."[26] Essentially, any male engaging in homosexual sex who acted as the "woman" should be burned to death—though records are unclear if execution by fire were ever enforced. Typically, men caught in this act were tortured, or extorted or fined for large sums of money. It is important to note that this exaggeration of punishment is purposeful in Roman law, in order to deter people from committing crimes, even if the Romans did not intend to use the punishments. In 533 A.D., homosexuality was outlawed in Rome for both parties engaging in homosexual sex, and men found guilty of homosexual practices were castrated.[27] Still, the law decreed that the punishment for homosexual sex was death—and still, it was not frequently enforced.

Homosexuality and Cross-Dressing in Jewish History, from the Temple Cult to the Diaspora

There is evidence that among ancient Israelites during the First Temple period homosexuality was tolerated by the general population as normal cultic behavior.[28] In 1

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[26] Stephen Morris, "The Gay Male as Byzantine Monster: Civil Legislation and Punishment for Same-Sex Behaviour," in *The Horrid Looking Glass: Reflections on Monstrosity* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2011), 127.

[27] Gayle Zive, "A Brief History of Western Homosexuality," n.d., 3

[28] Elon Gilad, "Judaism and Homosexuality: A Brief History," *Haaretz*, June 2, 2016, https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/2016-06-02/ty-article-magazine/.premium/judaism-and-homosexuality-a-brief-history/0000017f-e6a5-dc7e-adff-f6adec1f0000.

Kings 14:24, there is mention of sodomites—male and female prostitutes—who resided in the temples where Asherah was worshipped, and these prostitutes had sex with patrons as an act of veneration. The male prostitutes dressed in women's clothing and might have been castrated. This practice of sacred prostitution, both heterosexual and homosexual sacred prostitution, was not so uncommon for the time and place. This practice was common among Mesopotamian cultures, and was common among Canaanite cultures.

Though sacred prostitution, homosexual or otherwise, was practiced in the era of the First Temple, eventually it was put to a stop. In II Kings 2:8, Hilkiah the high priest finds "the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord"—what is believed to be an early version of Deuteronomy—and upon reading it, King Josiah tears his robes, and becomes afraid of God's anger against the Israelite people for not following the laws of the book. King Josiah, because of this book, works to reform the Temple Cult. This included the elimination of sacred prostitution, which is expressly forbidden in Deuteronomy 23:18 which says, "No Israelite woman shall be a prostitute, nor shall any Israelite man be a prostitute." It is important to look at the words used for prostitute in this verse—Deuteronomy uses the words "*k'desha*" for a woman and "*kadesh*" for a man. This Hebrew root implies holiness, and specifically bans "holy" prostitution. King Josiah destroys the image of Asherah in the temple, and tears down the dwellings of the prostitutes in II Kings 23:7-8.

These verses indicate that some of the men who dwelled in ancient Judah were not only practicing homosexual sex, but even doing so inside the temple. If we look at Torah now, we can see that there are two explicit bans on homosexual sex in Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13, supposedly having been handed down in the desert, long before the

first temple period. However, these verses were written after the first temple period, either during the Babylonian Exile or during the early Second Temple period, meaning they were written after this sacred prostitution was struck down, sometime between the 6th and 4th century BCE (though it is harder to pinpoint an exact moment within this timeframe.) Scholars speculate that these verses were written as an expansion of the ban of sacred prostitution; others think it was to eliminate contact with surrounding cultures who did practice male homosexual sex. However, nobody knows for certain why these bans were created. What matters regarding these verses is that, once codified, they became *Halacha,* Jewish law.

Regarding *Halacha* and the codification of Jewish law against homosexual sex, is important to look at lesbianism and how it was viewed in the Torah and beyond. There was never any mention of lesbian sex outright in Torah; though mentions of female homosexuality do exist in rabbinic texts such as Sifra (Acharei Mot 9:8) where the laws of Egypt and Canaan mentioned to express the prohibition on the Israelites. An example given is "a man would marry a man, and a woman a woman"—not only indicating lesbian sex and sexuality, but ongoing lesbian relationships and marriage.[29] There are several other mentions of lesbian sex in rabbinic writings, such as in the Babylonian Talmud, where in tractate Shabbat Ran Huna states that "woman who play around with (a euphemism for sex, *hamesolelot)* one another are unfit for the priesthood [i.e., unfit to marry a High Priest]. Though this is refuted in Yevamot 76a, which says that "an

[29] Jonathan Magonet, ed., *Jewish Explorations of Sexuality*, European Judaism 1 (Providence Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995).

unmarried man who cohabitated with an unmarried woman with no matrimonial intention renders her therefore a prostitute (*zonah*, not *k'desha)*, this qualification ensues only in the case of a man, but when the case is that of a woman [playing around with another woman] the action is regarded as mere obscenity." Essentially, this tractate does not regard lesbian relations as sex as defined by Jews at the time. High Priests could only marry a virgin, and this tractate confirms that the women who engage in sexual activity with one another are still considered virgins and may marry a High Priest. The issue of lesbian sex is not brought up again until Maimonides in order to clarify the *halachic* position on it in *Mishneh Torah (Hilkhot Issuer Bi'ah* 21:8), writing, "though such conduct is forbidden, it is not punishable by lashing since there is no specific prohibition against it and in any case no sexual intercourse takes place at all." Eventually, even though it was not expressly stated in Torah or codified as sex by rabbinic writings, sex between women was seen as *assur*, forbidden.[30]

Even though *halacha* expressly forbade homosexual sex, and the rabbis at large considered lesbian sex to be *assur*, this doesn't mean that Jews stopped engaging in homosexual activity—from the time of these laws being codified, and later under the Roman Empire, Jews lived in societies that routinely practiced homosexuality, specifically between men and boys. The writers of the Talmud responded to the homosexuality around them with fear, stating that homosexual sex causes solar eclipses (Sukkot 29a 13) and earthquakes (Jerusalem Talmud 9:2.) However, rabbis in Talmud are more permissible of gay male sex that does not involve penetration, and if they emit

[30] Magonet.

semen “by way of other limbs” they are not subject to death by stoning, which is the penalty of anal sex. In late antiquity, homosexuality was uncommon and practiced in secret.

With the rise of Christianity, and the diaspora of the Jewish people across the globe, homosexuality was permissible some places and expressly forbidden in others. Christianity had an outright ban of homosexuality, and actively persecuted people who practiced it. However, in the Arab world homosexuality was tolerated, and the practices of homosexual sex that were common in the Greek and Roman world were common there world too, even with an explicit ban on homosexuality in the Quran.[31] Because of this, homosexuality was not mentioned in rabbinic writings of Europe until the modern era, while in writings of the Jews in the Arab world, mentions of homosexuality were much more common. In fact, the practice was so common it was mentioned in the *Shulchan Aruch*, where Joseph Karo writes “In these generations, which are filled with licentiousness, one should avoid sleeping with a man”—that is to say that these practices were happening often enough and openly enough that Karo felt a need to repudiate it. Even his followers acknowledge it, saying that Karo wrote this in the *Shulchan Aruch* because where he was located, “the sin was common.”[32]

Meanwhile, while homosexuality was not permitted or even discussed in writings by Jewish people in Christian Europe, cross-dressing was: at least by Jews regarding the

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[31] Elon Gilad, “Judaism and Homosexuality.”

[32] Elon Gilad.

safety of Jewish women.[33] Sefer Chasidim, published in the 13th century, states that in order to avoid being sexually assaulted, women could disguise themselves in these ways: as a Christian woman (even perhaps a nun), and as men. This permission to cross-dress directly goes against the law against it in Deuteronomy 22:5, "A woman shall not put on a man's apparel, nor shall a man wear a woman's garment." However, the writer of this tract thinks of *pikuach nefesh*, or protecting the life and safety of the woman, and even goes so far as to say she should carry a sword so that enemies may think that she is a man. Jewish women in Medieval Europe, therefore, were permitted to cross-dress in order to protect themselves from danger.

Homosexuality, Law, and Capital Punishment

Because homosexuality was seen by such a great sin by the Abrahamic religions, there were punishments that were handed down for people caught in the act of homosexual sex. Primarily, these punishments were handed down by Christian courts. Unfortunately, this means that people were given harsh punishments, and often put to death.

The Byzantine Empire, under Christian influence, forbade homosexuality and its punishment for homosexuality was death by burning.[34] This idea of men committing this

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[33] Lena Roos, "Cross-Dressing among Medieval Ashkenazi Jews," *Nordisk Judaistik/Scandinavian Jewish Studies* 28, no. 2 (December 2, 2017): 4–22, https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.67749.

[34] Stephen Morris, "The Gay Male as Byzantine Monster: Civil Legislation and Punishment for Same-Sex Behaviour," 127.

act being worthy of burning—thereby destroying the body. If merely execution was the goal, it could have been done nearly any other way. The destruction of the body was done intentionally, as the body had to be rendered uninhabitable so that its soul could not reanimate it for sinful purposes.[35] It was believed that many supernatural creatures like vampires and witches used bodies they had in life and reanimated them to conduct evil. People of this time considered the act of being penetrated as a man to be so troublesome and so against the social grain that there had to be no chance of that body gaining re-entry into society; the corpse had to be completely destroyed and disposed of so there was no chance of infiltrating polite life ever again. In the era of Byzantine Christianity, with the acts of God present in their mind (such as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah due to their sexual sins,) this act of burning gay men at the stake (or at least the threat of it,) was a direct continuation of God's punishment against sexual sinners.[36]

Entering into the Middle Ages, Christian influence grew, and sexual sin became of great concern to the Catholic Church, who was the dominating source of authority in Europe.[37] However sexual sin was not reserved solely for homosexual relations, but for non-procreative heterosexual relations as well; if people were not having sex in order to reproduce, it was not acceptable. During this era, theologian Peter Damian coined the

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[35] Stephen Morris, "The Gay Male as Byzantine Monster: Civil Legislation and Punishment for Same-Sex Behaviour," 128.

[36] Stephen Morris, "The Gay Male as Byzantine Monster: Civil Legislation and Punishment for Same-Sex Behaviour," 129.

[37] Jaymie Stopforth, "Homosexuality in Medieval Europe," PRISM, July 11, 2021, https://www.prismfl.org/post/homosexuality-in-medieval-europe.

term “sodomy” specifically to talk about what was happening between (male) monks in monasteries; however the term sodomy was soon used for any non-procreative sexual act. Upon hearing of this, Pope Leo IX called these acts “crimes against nature,” and theologian Thomas Aquinas ascertained that non-reproductive sex as sinful. Because of this aggression towards non-reproductive sex, and specifically monks engaging in gay relations within monasteries, homosexuals were soon targeted by the church, within and outside of monasteries, including urban cities. This is when legislature was created to punish those who partook in homosexual relationships (especially within towns in Italy) though there were few prosecutions for same-sex relations.[38] Notably, for the Byzantine and Medieval eras, there is little recorded history of female homosexuality, either due to lesbianism not interfering with childbearing to legal husbands, or because of misogyny in general.

Meanwhile, as the years went by, more and more countries and cities began to codify homosexuality as illegal. In Britain, homosexuality was deemed a crime by the Buggery Act of 1533, the year before England left the Catholic Church in favor of Protestantism, which was passed under the reign of Henry VIII.[39] This law also made sodomy between men and women a capital offense, as well as between a person and an animal a capital offense—importantly, not under ecclesiastical courts, but under state courts.[40] However,

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[38] Stopforth.

[39] Dryden, Steven. “The Men Killed under the Buggery Act | The British Library.” Accessed June 6, 2022. https://www.bl.uk/lgbtq-histories/articles/the-men-killed-under-the-buggery-act#.

[40] “The Buggery Act 1533” (British Library, The British Library, 1535), https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-buggery-act-1533.

convictions between for acts of sodomy between men were the most commonplace and most widely publicized out of all of the acts made illegal. Many men lost their lives for engaging in homosexual sex in the UK. Men engaging in homosexual activity were being put to death until November 1835, though sex between men was punishable by death until 1861 in the UK.

In the Americas, things were not so different. As Europeans came and colonized the Americas, they often brought their laws with them. This included capital punishment and the death penalty against homosexuals and homosexual behavior. One notable case one took place in Florida in 1566, with the Spanish executing a French man for homosexual behaviors.[41]

After the founding of America as a unified country, every single state in the United States enacted anti-sodomy laws, making homosexual sex illegal in every state in the union.[42] While some states still have sodomy laws on their books, a Supreme Court case from 2003 called "Lawrence v. Texas" caused the Supreme Court to rule that sodomy laws were unconstitutional, and that no sodomy law in the United States can be used to charge a person with a crime.[43] Though eventually sodomy laws changed so that the act was no longer punishable by death in all states, punishments for these acts could be as

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[41] Morris, "History of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Social Movements."

[42] Marshall Cavendish, ed., *Sex and Society* (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2010).

[43] Lawrence et al V. Texas, No. No. 02–102 (the court of appeals of texas, fourteenth district June 26, 2003).

severe as life in prison[44] until Lawrence v. Texas was handed down by the Supreme Court.

Homosexuality and Sexology in the 19th and 20th centuries

In the mid to late 19th century, the study of sexology began forming, and a privileged few medical experts in the West began promoting some tolerance for homosexuals. The first among them was Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, who formed a theory in the 1860s that same-sex male love was inherently biological, and therefore natural.[45] Ulrichs coined the term "urning," meaning a man who desired men. He believed that this identity of "urning" stemmed from an internal "female physique," insinuating that homosexuality had somewhat to do with gender, gender perception, and gender identity. Ulrichs fought against the sodomy laws in Germany but ultimately failed. Homosexuality was criminal in Germany until 1969, even with his efforts.

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[44] The New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Divison, "Penalties for Sex Offenses in the United States" New York Public Library Digital Collections." (New York Public Library Digital Collections, 1964), https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/671159d8-0456-a33c-e040-e00a180655cb.

[45] Clark A. Pomerleau and Jennifer Miller. "Profile: Institutionalizing Sexuality: Sexology, Psychoanalysis, and the Law | LGBTQ+ Studies: An Open Textbook," n.d. https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-lgbtq-studies/chapter/research-profile-institutionalizing-sexuality-sexology-psychoanalysis-and-the-law/.

Ulrichs paved the way for sexologists and psychologists to study homosexuality on an objective and scientific level. There was some study of homosexuality before this time, but it was mostly punitive through the lens of religion and sin, and without consideration of the sexuality as a whole. The approach of sexologists that began in the last 1800s was far more sympathetic, if not a little misguided to the modern eye. Some of the sexologists of the 19th century, such as Cal von Westphal, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Havelock Ellis were if not accepting, sympathetic to homosexuality or bisexuality occurring naturally in the human population. However, Krafft-Ebing and Ellis also called homosexuals a "third sex," again referencing the purportedly inextricable link between homosexuality and sex or gender identity, and considered them degenerate and abnormal. This idea that homosexuals were of a third aberrant sex or had some a confused gender identity was popular until the mid 1900s. Gender and sexuality were considered inextricably linked: the importance of which shall be detailed later in this thesis.

Beginning in the 1900s, Sigmund Freud began producing materials and theories about homosexuality: some of the most liberal attitudes towards homosexuals at the time. He did not consider homosexuality a mental illness nor consider homosexual acts to be crimes, but also did not believe that homosexuality was innate, but rather influenced by societal expectations and developmental processes of people. Freud did however suggest that bisexuality was innate due to undetermined gender development in the womb. In general, Freud asserted that the height of sexual development was reproductive heterosexuality, with masculine, powerful men and passive women in relationships with one another. Freud even believed that women could overcome lesbianism by engaging in heterosexual relationships with dominant men. Many female psychologists, philosophers,

and writers throughout the 1900s set off to debunk Freud's beliefs that women were inherently inferior in physique and nature. Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 book *The Second Sex* and Karen Horney's 1950's book *Neurosis and Human Growth* made important contributions to this effort.

A contemporary of Freud, Magnus Hirschfeld held radical and new beliefs regarding queer and transgender individuals, and did not see people in these communities as inferior or mentally ill. Dr. Hirschfeld was critical to advancing the movement, believing that homosexuality was inborn and innate. Dr. Hirschfeld also believed gender was a spectrum "between which...there are no empty points present but rather unbroken connecting lines," which aligns with the modern understanding of the vast spectrum of nonbinary genders. Dr. Hirschfeld even coined the word "*Transvestit,*" or transvestite in English, which encompassed a range of people who were gender non-conforming. It included people who dressed in drag, as well as people whose gender identities were not the ones which were assigned at birth. Dr. Hirschfeld broke away from common belief at the time, stating that people who were "transvestites" were not inherently attracted to members of the same sex, and arguing outright that gender identity and sexuality are separately occurring phenomena. Today, transvestite is a word that is considered offensive in the LGBTQ+ community. However at the time, this idea and word were indicative of progress that had yet to be made in the world of sexology, and signaled a new hope for the future of the LGBTQ+ movement.

Hirschfeld's ideas on sexuality and gender were challenged repeatedly by fellow sexologists of his time, and many scientists believed his ideas were misguided and wrong. Hirschfeld felt these contributions to be so important that he founded the Berlin

Institute for Sexual Science, an archive on gay and transgender history and theory. This was considered the most comprehensive archive of LGBTQ+ history complied at the time, and contained many valuable historical resources that framed homosexuality and transgenderism within history.

However, due the rise of the Third Reich, homosexuality and transgender identities became less tolerated in Germany and Europe as a whole during this time. Hirschfeld's library was destroyed, and the books burnt by the Nazis in May 1933. Hirschfeld was threatened, even having a bust of him paraded through the streets and then set aflame in a bonfire. Having received threats from the Nazis regarding his "degenerate Jewish sexuality," Hirschfeld had already fled to Switzerland a few months before this took place. Though a proud German, he knew it was no longer safe in the country. Hirsch never returned to Germany, dying in Nice in 1935, though remaining a symbol of anti-German ideals for Nazi propaganda for years after his death.

Across the sea in America, homosexuality was taking root in urban centers across the United States beginning in the late 1800s and becoming a thriving culture by the early 1900s. In cities, homosexuality, drag, and "Pansy" culture became more and more popular, often attracting spectators from outside the community of all races, genders, and religious backgrounds. This will be explored further and in depth in chapter two.

The Intersection of Cross-Dressing, Transgender Identity, and Homosexuality

The culmination of centuries of cross-dressing and the budding beginnings of sexology and the homosexual rights movement began to collide in the mid 19th century

through to the mid 20th century. Though many of the aforementioned cross-dressing situations may look "queer" on the surface, much of male-to-female and female-to-male cross-dressing that this chapter was distinct from sexuality and often even gender. Cross-dressing often had to do with pragmatic considerations of safety, social expectation, and access to power. That said, though, cross-dressing was also used as an aspect of expressing sexuality; beginning famously with the practice of drag (then called female/male impersonation.) This was most apparent in the mid 19th century, with cross-dressers Frederick Park and Ernest Boulton in England. It also starts popping up across the pond with the advent of the Drag Ball.

In America, drag balls began springing up in Harlem, and a bubbling gay and drag culture started coming to the surface at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The norms of the Victorian era were shifting, and the hints of the first wave of feminism began to rise to the surface. People started living much more openly gay or bisexual lifestyles in places like the Bowery, Greenwich Village, and Harlem in New York City. This shift in societal perceptions of these ideas was influenced by a variety of cultural norms, political scenarios, and even laws of the time. All of these things combined made America's cities a perfect storm of LGBTQ+ culture and society in the early 20th century.

Chapter 2: Queer Culture, Yiddish Theater, Prohibition, and Jazz

At the Intersection of Gay Life, Jazz, and Yiddish Theater

The queer scene on the Bowery, Greenwich Village, Times Square and Harlem, alongside the jazz scene and eventually the Pansy Craze were a revolution for the United States. Middle-class polite society was upended, and the combination of prohibition and the end of World War I created the perfect environment for queer entertainment, and the gay and lesbian community took their opportunity, making their own spaces in cities and creating gay enclaves in places like New York. And all of this happened alongside of and intertwined with Jewish immigration, Jewish immersion in American life, (which will be discussed more in the next chapter,) and the advent of American Yiddish Theater and its intersection with secular theater. Side by side, these movements grew in parallel with each other, occasionally crossing over at important touchstones such as the English production of *God of Vengeance*, or the prominence of *Eili Eili* in the black and queer worlds of Jazz. These fifty or sixty years set the precedent for the Hazentes' existence, alongside the Jewish culture at the time, feminism and the Jewish women in that movement, Jewish Americanism and its effect on Jewish life, and Jewish practice and law during this era.

The Early History of the Bowery

In the 1800s, the Bowery, established with the execution of the New York street grid in 1811 as being between Chatham Square and Astor Place, was teeming with life and excitement. In those days it was a thriving secular theater district, overflowing with opera houses and amphitheaters, putting on everything from minstrel shows to Shakespeare.[46] Commercial buildings such as hotels and taverns were common in this area of New York. Before the era of public transit, the Bowery was easy to reach on foot and was therefore more accessible than other neighborhoods. Irish and German immigrants from the Five Points neighborhood just east of the Bowery frequented the neighborhood. Because it was separate from this immigrant neighborhood, the Bowery was initially deemed safe. Still, even with areas around it being more seedy and violent, the Bowery continued to boom. Theaters and concert halls and lodging houses were built. But this all changed when the elevated train came through the Bowery.

The elevated train, or "El" opened in 1868 and ran up 9th avenue. Deemed a success, another line was opened in 1878, running right through the Bowery. The opening of the "El" threw the Bowery into a downward spiral. Coal and gas and steam contaminated goods being sold on the street. Customers in nice clothes became afraid that their garments would be destroyed. Shopkeepers complained that their windows became

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[46] James Nevius, "The Bowery: A Comprehensive History of New York City's Storied Street," Curbed NY, October 4, 2017, https://ny.curbed.com/2017/10/4/16413696/bowery-nyc-history-lower-east-side.

smeared with soot and grease. People complained about the rumble of the train overhead.[47]

Because of these issues, property values fell. High end shops turned into saloons, discount hotels, and cheap venues for entertainment. Some of these venues, often dime museums, were fronts for brothels. Prostitution was so open in this time and space, that Jewish writer Mike Gold said of his childhood in the Bowery "on sunshiny days the whores sat on chairs along the sidewalks… [They] winked and jeered, made lascivious gestures at passing males… calling their wares like pushcart peddlers. At five years I knew what it was they sold."[48] By the 1880s, because of these new developments, the Bowery was seen as the seething underbelly of New York City. One part of that underbelly, however, was its flourishing gay culture.[49]

The Queer History of the Bowery

By the late 1870s, the Bowery became a place where effeminate gay men and/or transgender women, known then as "fairies" would gather for friendship, drinks, and

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[47] Bowery Boys. "The Bowery under the Third Avenue Elevated: Capturing the Soot and Shadow of Old New York." *The Bowery Boys: New York City History* (blog), January 18, 2018. https://www.boweryboyshistory.com/2018/01/bowery-third-avenue-elevated-capturing-soot-shadow-old-new-york.html.

[48] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, 2. trade paperback edition (New York: BasicBooks, 2019), 35.

[49] Tasha, "LGBTQ History: Cooper Square and Bowery," Village Preservation, December 4, 2014, https://www.villagepreservation.org/2014/12/04/lgbtq-history-cooper-square-and-bowery/.

sexual encounters. Columbia Hall, also known as Paresis Hall, was one of the most notable Bowery locations that catered to gay men at this time. Known by some as a brothel and by others as a place for "female-impersonators" to gather, this hall, along with many other such places like The Slice, Walhalla Hall, Black Rabbit, and Armory Hall, were places that formed the fabric of the gay community.

The people in the Bowery quickly took note of the "fairies" in their midst, often calling them perverts or male degenerates. Said an officer of the Reverend Charles Parkhurst's City Vigilance League, who visited Columbia hall in the late 1890s, of the fairies, "[They] solicit men at the tables, and I believe they get a commission on all drinks that are purchased there."[50] These queer establishments were the center of gay culture in the late 1800s and early 1900s in New York City, and were spaces of refuge for working class and middle class people of the era who were often crowded in tenements, sometimes with no kitchens or bathrooms. Even people outside of the Bowery who took "slumming" tours[51] noticed these male homosexuals and fairies. Mary Casal, a woman who took said slumming tour in the 1890s, said she was shocked by "the ugliness of the

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[50] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 33.

[51] To "slum" was to put yourself beneath your station and visit an "exotic" or "dangerous" part of town for the purposes of personal excitement. Usually the slummer was a white, middle to upper class person and the places they would slum involved neighborhoods where people of color lived or where there was a large queer presence.

displays we saw as we hurried from one horrid but famous resort to an other in and about the Bowery," many of these resorts containing gay men and fairies, or "inverts."[52]

Notably, some of these resorts hired fairies as early as the 1870s in order to entertain the guests of the resorts. Some of these entertainers went so far as to take patrons into curtained booths for private exhibitions traditionally only offered by female prostitutes.[53] This practice of hiring fairies began in the 1870s at Armory Hall, but by the 1890s, several more halls were engaging in the same practice. The Slide, one such establishment then considered New York's "worst dive," hired fairies as waiters. A *New York Herald* reporter said of this establishment in 1892: "Here men of degenerate type were the waiters, some of them going to the extent of rouging their necks. In falsetto voices they sang filthy ditties, and when not otherwise busy would drop into a chair at the table of any visitor who would brook their awful presence."[54]

This world of the Bowery began to bring show the variety of queer culture. As people from outside of this area came for spectacle, they often found themselves pleasantly surprised by what they saw. Some commented that they spoke to fairies who were intelligent and sophisticated, and that these fairies told the people they met that they were

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[52] "The Slide, New York's Most Notorious 'Fairy Resort,'" The Bowery Boys: New York City History (blog), January 29, 2018,

[53] Chauncey, 36.

[54] David Rosen, "Rev. Parkhurst Goes Slumming: The Birth of Modern Sexuality," Sex Matters, 2016, 12.

made this way, and that there were many men[55] who behaved just like the fairies did. A medical student named Charles Nesbitt learned this from a fairy who called himself "Princess Toto." Princess Toto worked at the Slide, and befriended Nesbitt, eventually bringing him to a dance at Walhalla Hall. There Nesbitt saw some five hundred same sex couples dancing to the music of the band that was playing. In addition to the gay men he had previously encountered he saw "quite a few… masculine looking women in male evening dress" that were dancing with other women. Nesbitt noted that many of them seemed to be of "good" background. Of the scene he noted "One could quite easily imagine oneself in a formal evening ball room among respectable people."[56]

It wasn't just fairies and homosexual activity that took place in the Bowery, however. The Bowery was home to the first known informal transgender advocacy organization in the United States, known as The Cercle Hermaphroditos,[57] created "to unite for defense against the world's bitter persecution of bisexuals."[58] One of their most famous members was a young transgender woman named Jennie June. Jennie wrote a book called *Autobiography of an Androgyne*, and it is considered one of the first autobiographies to

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[55] Or, potentially, transgender women, though this is not clearly defined because of the terminology and understanding of sexuality and gender at the time.

[56] Chauncey, 40.

[57] Evan Brechtel, "#QueerHeroes Day 3 – Jennie June," Evan Brechtel (blog), June 3, 2018, https://evanbrechtel.net/2018/06/03/queerheroes-day-3-jennie-june/.

[58] Bisexual in this context means "of two sexes," rather than the modern understanding of bisexual which is in reference to the attraction of a person to people of their own gender, and people of another and/or other genders.

have been written by a transgender person. Jennie calls herself a fairy, a sexual intermediate, a sexual invert, a girl-boy, and a psychic hermaphrodite. Of her name, she says, "The feminine side of my dual nature… was now to find full expression in 'Jennie June.'… [I craved] to be looked upon and treated as a member of the gentler sex. Nothing would have pleased me more than to adopt feminine attire… [but] the mere wearing of it on the street by an adult male would render him liable to imprisonment."[59] Jennie even goes so far as to reject the understanding of the time regarding many fairies as homosexuals, then "urnings" as mentioned earlier in this thesis, saying in a footnote, "At that time I incorrectly described myself as an urning," and in the following footnote, "Psychically I am practically all woman, and physically at least one-third, although the organs of generation are completely male."[60] Jennie was a known figure in the Bowery in the 1890s, a sex worker at Paresis Hall, as well as a member of the Cercle Hermaphroditos. As she describes in her book, there were many like her in the Bowery, and many who interacted with her, as she cited at least 800 sexual contacts in her lifetime.[61]

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[59] Ralph Werther, Earl Lind, and Jennie June, *Autobiography of an Androgyne*, Homosexuality (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 62.

[60] Werther, Lind, and June, 107.

[61] Werther, Lind, and June, 8.

Yiddish Theater and Jewish Presence on the Bowery

Alongside of this growing gay subculture on the Bowery, in the same years and decades, was the blossoming of Yiddish Theater in America. Jewish Immigrants from Eastern Europe began immigrating to the "Hebrew Quarter," otherwise known as the Lower East Side, in the 1870s,[62] the same decade fairy and homosexual establishments began popping up in the same area of the city. Between 1880 and 1890, three quarters of all Jews in New York lived in the Lower East Side.

It is important to note that historically, other working-class individuals on the Lower East Side interacted with structured gay culture and fairies more publicly than Jews. It was more common to find fairy subculture in Italian neighborhoods than in Jewish ones. There were no "fairy resorts" in the Lower East Side's Jewish section, though there were many places in that section where female prostitutes worked.[63] That is not to say that there was no homosexual activity taking place in Jewish settlements: it was simply more common to find homosexual encounters taking place in the streets, in tenements, and even in synagogues—one twenty-two year old male Jewish immigrant was arrested for soliciting men from the window at 186 Suffolk Street in 1900.[64] Fewer Jews than other immigrant groups were arrested for homosexual encounters because the locations of these encounters were less commercial and less well known, most likely because

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[62] Edna Nahshon and Museum of the City of New York, eds., New York's Yiddish Theater: From the Bowery to Broadway (New York: Columbia University Press in association with the Museum of the City of New York, 2016), 52.

[63] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 73.

[64] Chauncey, 73.

homosexuality was not tolerated at the turn of the century in Jewish neighborhoods. However there is another theory: Jewish immigrants were more likely to be women than in other immigrant groups such as Italians. Almost all of the immigrants in other communities were men. Within the Jewish community, about half of Jewish immigrants in the 1890s were women, approximately 42%. While there was plenty of single-gender socializing, most people lived with their spouses and kids at home, unlike other immigrant groups who were more likely to be bachelors. Therefore, it is entirely possible that more Jewish men, in contrast with other immigrant groups, were living with their wives during this time and unable, because of these familial ties, to have extramarital homosexual relations.[65]

When the Williamsburg Bridge opened in 1903, linking Brooklyn and Manhattan, Jews began to move out of the Lower East Side to Brooklyn, and later to parts of the Bronx or Harlem. However, the Lower East Side maintained its Jewish pull for decades more. This area, specifically the Bowery, was where American Yiddish Theater was born.

The first Yiddish theater production in America took place on the Bowery at Turn Hall on East 4th Street in 1882, a mere six years after the beginning of modern Yiddish Theater in Jassy, Romania.[66] Initially, this style of Yiddish Theater was little more than a concert with a through line, as writer Abraham Goldfaden collaborated with two singers, singing a concert with narrative continuity in a local tavern. Before long, Goldfaden was

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[65] Chauncey, 75.

[66] Nahshon and Museum of the City of New York, *New York's Yiddish Theater*, 22.

running a traveling theater troupe and writing Yiddish operettas, some of which are still performed to this day. These Yiddish theater songs became popular wherever Jewish people were found and were played in shops and at home. Jews soon began to buy upright pianos for their tenement living rooms, and in tandem, the sale of Yiddish theater sheet music soared.

The Witch, the first Yiddish Theater production performed in America, was put on as a benefit by the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society on August 12th, 1882, in order to raise funds for Russian Jewish immigrants.[67] Though the first performance was perhaps amateurish, the timing of the influx of Jewish immigrants allowed Yiddish Theater to flourish. By year's end, the troupe that put on *The Witch* had moved to the Old Bowery Garden on 113-113 1/2 Bowery, which was a former beer garden and already the location of multiple theater productions in both English and German. This troupe, now known as the Hebrew Opera and Dramatic Company, performed twice a week: on Friday night and Saturday afternoon. Because Jews in America had no central rabbinical authority, there was no backlash to this violation of Shabbat, and people of all observance levels attended these plays. However, the stage productions reflected Jewish sensibilities: lights were turned on in advance, cigarettes were not lit on stage, and no paper was torn during the plays.[68] More and more Yiddish performers, ousted from Russia by the czarist ban on Yiddish performance, came to New York City as the years progressed, often coming by

[67] Nahshon and Museum of the City of New York, 24.

[68] Nahshon and Museum of the City of New York, 26.

way of London, and toting along their playwrights such as Joseph Lateiner and Moshe Hurwitz.

By the early 1900s, many of the Yiddish theater houses had moved north of the Bowery to the 2nd Avenue Strip, often called the "Yiddish Rialto."[69] This was considered upward mobility for Yiddish Theater and for Jews—no elevated train, a clean area, and lacking the saloons of the Bowery. The theaters started being built in 1911 beginning with the construction of the Second Avenue Theater. The next year the National Theater opened. The Yiddish Art Theater opened in 1926, and just a year after that the Public Theater opened as well. By the 1920s and 1930s, there were three Yiddish playhouses in the Bronx, at least nine in Brooklyn, and at least fifteen in Manhattan spanning from the Bowery to Harlem. Even beyond that, Yiddish theater productions, put on either in Yiddish or in English, were put on in other non-Jewish theater houses such as the Provincetown Playhouse on 133 MacDougal street, the Greenwich Village Theater on 220 West 4th St, and the Apollo Theater at 223 West 42nd street. And just as Yiddish Theater moved from the Bowery (and north to Second Avenue particularly,) so too did the queer subculture in Lower Manhattan move north from the Bowery to Greenwich Village.

Queer Culture of Greenwich Village

In the same years that the Yiddish Theater began to move up Second Avenue, queer enclaves started taking up their residency due north of the Bowery in Greenwich Village.

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[69] Nahshon and Museum of the City of New York, 34

By the 1910s, Greenwich Village was known as a bohemian neighborhood, as well as a gay and lesbian enclave. This area was so well-known for its homosexual characters, that a folk song known as the "Greenwich Village Epic" became popular after its 1917 publication in *The Song Book of Robert Edwards* and its republication 1920's *More Pious Friends and Drunken Companions* by Frank Shay. This song in its various iterations acknowledges the bohemian and queer lifestyle nature of this neighborhood: talking of fashion illustrators flirting with interior decorators,[70] unconventional girls who are self-sufficient and "do the courting," and last but not least the "intermediate sexes," proclaiming "Fairyland's not far from Washington Square," meaning Washington Square Park.

Greenwich Village, originally north of New York city and its disorder, and thus a sequestered enclave for the rich, had transformed by the 1900s. Most of the upper class of this neighborhood had left, and Greenwich Village was incorporated into the city, the city borders pushing far beyond that neighborhood now. Initially housing working-class Italian immigrants after the departure of the original wealthy inhabitants of this neighborhood, eventually, at the turn of the century, this area started to see writers, artists, and radicals move in and thus became known as "The Village." Why did these Bohemians choose the Village? Malcom Cowley, a writer from this area, reminisces that "After college and the war, most of us drifted to Manhattan, to the crooked streets of

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[70] The profession of interior decorating was considered so rife with homosexuality that it disqualified young men from the army at this time. This line of the epic specifically refers to effeminate gay men flirting with one another.

Fourteenth, where you could rent a furnished hall-bedroom for two or three dollars weekly or the top floor of a rickety house for thirty dollars a month. We came to the village… because living was cheap."[71] The appeal of Greenwich Village was that of a residential district, offering furnished apartments and rooms for unmarried people who wanted to have a work and social life. This bohemian nonconforming lifestyle also appealed to gay and lesbian people, who moved in thinking that this neighborhood with all its eccentricities may be a safe place for homosexuals, too.

The gay and lesbian residents of the Village easily fit into Village life. The area was already known for artistic, flamboyant people, and thus the idiosyncrasies in behavior and dress of the gay and lesbian community were rarely given a second thought. Many of the non-gay or lesbian "Villagers" were artists who practiced free love, going against the conventions of the day with their socialist ideologies and their creative endeavors. Many people outside of The Village looked upon all bohemian men in the neighborhood as queer simply because they were so like the stereotypical gay men of the era—that is, pansyish. So unmanly were these bohemian men, that calling a man "artistic" quickly became a code word for calling a man a homosexual.[72]

That isn't to say that there wasn't any pushback against these homosexuals in The Village. Greenwich Village was often criticized for its residents shunning their assigned gender roles, and for the "long-haired men" and "short-haired women" who lived there. Papers at the time accused Village women of being ashamed of their assigned sex, and so

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[71] Chauncey, 229.

[72] Chauncey, 229.

"they do their best to appear like men, claiming, however, the privileges of womanhood just the same… the majority of that type manifestly endeavor to create a third sex."[73] However, it wasn't just non-Village outsiders who criticized the queer community of the Village. Malcom Cowley disturbingly dreamed of a writers revolution in The Village, where "you would set about hanging policemen from the lamp posts… and beside each policeman would be hanged a Methodist preacher, and beside each preacher a pansy poet."[74] Clearly, there were a number of Bohemians living in this area who were decidedly anti-homosexual.

Even so, records show that homosexuals participated actively in bohemian life, and helped create the atmosphere of the Village alongside their heterosexual counterparts. Homosexuals too could identify as Bohemians and help to create the culture of the village—this is part of the reason they moved there. Until the late 1910s, the Village housed homosexuals, but didn't specifically cater to them. Gay and lesbian people created their own spaces, which was an intentional decision and not directly related to the bohemian haven in The Village.

This all changed in the late 1910s. The Seventh Avenue Subway, constructed in 1917, and the subway along Sixth Avenue, constructed from 1927 to 1930, as well as the extensions of both avenues, turned Greenwich Village from a remote bohemian enclave into one of the most central neighborhoods in New York City.[75] Because the Village was

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[73] Chauncey, 230.

[74] Gregory Woods, *Homintern: How Gay Culture Liberated the Modern World,* 2017, 187.

[75] Chauncey, 232.

suddenly more convenient to live in, and people began to move there in droves. In those same years, Prohibition made this area particularly attractive as well. People came to The Village's Italian restaurants, grocers, and other shops to gather supplies to make their liquor. Tearooms became popular with soldiers and sailors coming through New York, and speakeasies and clubs attracted the city's middle class to come "slumming:" with people of all genders seeking alcohol, and men specifically seeking the free-loving Greenwich Village women.[76]

With these changes taking place, Greenwich Village soon became a tourist attraction, and the people living there aimed to capitalize on it. Establishments in parts of The Village were known for pirate-themed establishments, flapper clubs, and exaggerated "bohemian" gathering places, all in order to separate tourists from their money. Additionally, this area was also known for its non-normative sexual behavior, both free love and homosexuality, and slummers came from far and wide and across class structures to participate in it—rich and poor from all over the city to experience the neighborhood and all its oddities. Greenwich Village soon became a center for hedonism, and New York was soon known as America's Sodom and Gomorrah.[77]

As the nation's population became aware of what was happening in New York, and specifically The Village, disenfranchised people from smaller towns and cities all over the nation flocked to Greenwich Village in order to find compatriots who understood

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[76] "Before the 21 Club: Greenwich Village Speakeasies," Village Preservation, January 16, 2013, https://www.villagepreservation.org/2013/01/16/before-the-21-club-greenwich-village-speakeasies/.

[77] Chauncey, 234.

them. This is truly when the gay world of the Village began, as more and more gay and lesbian people moved there to be closer to other homosexual and bisexual people. The Village was known for its queer population before this time, but this mass immigration solidified its reputation. The Village became known for its homosexual "depravity," becoming so well known that the medical journal *Current Psychology and Psychoanalysis* published an article entitled "Degenerates of Greenwich Village," noting that it is "now the Mecca for exhibitionists and perverts of all kinds."[78] So well known was this gay Mecca that famous movies even portrayed the village as such, with scenes from popular films such as *Call Her Savage* depicting pansies in Greenwich Village as a play for laughs.[79]

By the 1920s, homosexuality was more or less an acceptable way of life in The Village, with gay and lesbian establishments becoming more common and more open, even through police raids and crackdowns in the middle of the 1920s. Gay establishments dotted the streets around Washington Square Park, spanning as far west as Seventh Avenue, and reaching as far east as Third Avenue. And who were their neighbors just an avenue away? None other than the Yiddish Rialto—the Second Avenue Yiddish Theater Strip.

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[78] Chauncey, 234.

[79] *Call Her Savage,* 1932.

Yiddish Theater and the Queer World

As the popularity of Yiddish Theater began to rise, the plays began to reflect the daily lives of the people who patronized the performances. By the 1900s, there were plays that dealt with the realities of the immigrant community in its midst. Portrayals of intermarriage, shows depicting family and familial love, and of course plays dealing with antisemitism, were popular.[80] Additionally, there were some Yiddish productions that dealt with issues previously left untreated: namely homosexuality, sex and gender identity, and cross-dressing. While once left quiet, these topics came to light in Yiddish theater both in Europe and in America, to both the horror and shock of some, and the delight of others.

Cross-dressing, Performed Gender, and Gay and Lesbian Expression in Yiddish Theater in America

Though historians often date the beginning of Yiddish theater in the 1870s, Jewish people had been putting on productions for hundreds of years before that in their *Purimschpiels*.[81] Purim is traditionally the only time Jewish people are allowed to "masquerade," and this holiday is the only day, traditionally, when cross-dressing is permitted. Coming to the forefront in the 1500s, *Purimschpiels* were productions put on by troupes who worked other trades during the year, coming together solely for Purim performances. Throughout history was considered immodest for a woman to sing or

[80] Nahshon and Museum of the City of New York, *New York's Yiddish Theater*, 72.

[81] Hayley Kobilinsky Poserow, "'Kol Ishah?'" A New Voice The Chazzantes" (2005), 9.

perform on stage (or at all,) and thus the performers in these plays would all be men. Of course, there are female characters in the Purim story, notably the valiant Queen Esther. Thus, from its earliest moments, Jewish theatrical productions involved cross-dressing performances.

By the 19th century, these norms were beginning to change. As modernity set in, the first female Yiddish actresses started to become acceptable as well as popular, most notably with Sophie Goldstein-Karp.[82] Despite the tides changing and women being permitted to perform in these troupes, cross-dressing remained a fixture in Yiddish Theater, even in America. Soon, cross-dressing included not just with men playing female roles, but also women who played male roles, as well as "pants" or "trouser" roles.

Yiddish theater in America included cross-dressing from the beginning. In one of the very first performances of Yiddish Theater in America, thirteen-year-old Boris Thomashefsky was asked to fill in for an actress who was presumed ill. Thomashefsky wore a dress onstage, to little public fanfare.[83] Bessie Thomashefsky performed in a pants role in "*Der griner bokher"* or *The Green Boy* at the People's Theater in New York in 1905. Famed Yiddish actress Molly Picon was best known for her cross-dressing roles, including in the show *Yankele*, which she reprised many times. Notably, Picon cross-dressed for film as well, performing in these roles in *East and West,* and most famously,

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[82] Hayley Kobilinsky Poserow, 9.

[83] Digital Yiddish Theatre Project. "A Timeline of Yiddish Drag." Text/html. Digital Yiddish Theatre Project, June 29, 2021. https://web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/a-timeline-of-yiddish-drag.

in the 1936 classic *Yidl mitn fidl.* Importantly, Freydele Oysher, a Hazente, who initially got her start on stage in New York City as a child, and eventually became a singer of *hazzanut* as well as a well-known Yiddish theater actress who was well known for pants and cross-dressing roles. Freydele often played men on stage in musicals that were written specifically for her, such as "*Freydele's chosone*" (Freydele's Wedding), and *"Mazal tov Freydele"* (Good Luck, Freydele)[84]

From the inception of the *Purimschpiel* in the 16th century until the absolute peak of Yiddish theater (and even beyond,) for more than 400 years, cross-dressing was an essential component in Jewish theatrical productions, though it evolved and changed with the shifting tide, creating space for pants roles and cross-dressing parts for women as well as men. While cross-dressing originated from a desire to protect women from appearing on stage, soon women themselves began cross-dressing, with the popularity of these roles spiking in the late 1920s and early 1930s—notably, at the height of the Pansy Craze.

During this time in Yiddish Theater, there were also shows put on with homosexual themes, such as *God of Vengeance*, remembered because of the arrests in 1923 of the cast and director on obscenity charges.[85]

The 1922/1923 production of *God of Vengeance* was in English specifically, meaning that it was not solely intended for Jewish consumption, as a majority of Jews in New York at this time did not speak English as their first language, with most of them having immigrated from Eastern Europe. The play included overtly lesbian content and it was

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[84] Hayley Kobilinsky Poserow, 24.

[85] Nahshon and Museum of the City of New York, *New York's Yiddish Theater*, 41.

put on in English during a period where gay men and lesbians were prominent and popular in speakeasies, drag shows, and other queer establishments in Manhattan, meaning it would be a draw for queer people and slummers alike. The initial run of this production was staged at the Provincetown Theater at 133 MacDougal street due south of Washington Square Park. By 1922, MacDougal street had been a lesbian hot spot for an entire decade, and the theater sat literally next door to where the Liberal Club (135 MacDougal Street), Heterodoxy (Often seen frequenting Polly's Restaurant), and Polly's Restaurant (137 MacDougal Street) had been since as early as 1912—that is to say, this precise locale had been an overtly homosexual, and specifically lesbian, block for all of what was then recent memory. Though this location was temporary, a way-station on the way to a later run on Broadway, it would be naive to believe that this theater was randomly picked, considering the public opinion and knowledge of Greenwich Village (and of MacDougal street specifically) as hedonistic and queer. More likely, the location was chosen because of its proximity to the gay and lesbian community.

Several years later, in the fall of 1927, *Yo a man nit a man* (Yes a man, not a man) was put on at the National Theater. While there were queer themes in Yiddish theater at the time, with the exception of the aforementioned *God of Vengeance* most of the queer explorations remained subtextual, part of this being the aforementioned cross-dressing, as well as queer themes in plays such as *Der dibuk* (The Dybbuk) or *Der Milner shtot-khazn*

(The Vilnius City Cantor.)[86] But *Yo a man nit a man* is entirely different, overtly subverting gender presentation and further bringing the blurring of gender into the forefront of Jewish imagination in the same decade the first Hazentes began to perform.

In its four acts, we learn that the protagonist Morris Green is "different" from his family. He confides in his family that he is "undeveloped" sexually, and wishes to commit suicide. Morris, upset with his condition, puts all his efforts into business, hoping that by becoming financially fulfilled he may gain respect from his peers, and he may begin to respect himself. After a series of sad events, Morris eventually dies by suicide at the end of the play.

The play was not unlike other secular queer writings of its era. Gay novels at the time included male protagonists who identified as homosexuals, and by the end of the book they often committed suicide.[87] Supposedly, *Yo a man nit a man* was a story originally in French that was adapted and translated into Yiddish, but whether or not this person existed or not is up for debate. However, Yiddish adaptation of European works were common, so it is entirely possible that the assertion it came from a French author was a ploy to help garner notoriety for the show. Regardless, its plot was a play on popular secular queer publications at the time but made for an American Jewish audience.

Importantly, one review spoke of Samuel Goldenberg, the actor who played Morris Greens, and his physical embodiment of the character. According to Yankev Botoshanski

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[86] Zachary Baker, "'A Piquant Curiosity': The…," text/html, Digital Yiddish theater Project (Digital Yiddish theater Project, June 29, 2019), https://web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/a-piquant-curiosity-the-gender-bending-drama-yo-a-man-nit-a-man.

[87] Baker.

in *Fraye arbiter shtime*, "Goldenberg's makeup is precisely that of a tumtum… we occasionally encounter such [people] in the street and they distress us."[88] This is a crucial review, because Botoshanski claims here that he has seen others like Goldenberg in the streets, someone who is not attracted to women, or is a softer, feminine man. Pansy culture was on the rise, and fairies had existed at this point for over fifty years in and around the neighborhoods where Jewish people lived. This review, praising Goldenberg for his accurate portrayal of Morris Green, implies that people "like Morris" were present in everyday life on the streets of New York City, and while they were perhaps distressing to Botoshanski, there was interaction between (or at minimum acknowledgement of) these two distinct groups.

[88] Baker.

Boris Thomashefsky dressed as a woman for a show, 1880s. From the Digital Yiddish Theatre Project.

Bessie Thomashefsky performing in a “pants” role in *Der grinder bokher*, *The Green Boy*, at the People’s Theatre in New York City, 1905, seen here in an advertisement for the show. From the Digital Yiddish Theatre Project.

Molly Picon as a "*Yeshiva bokher*," appearing in these roles as early as 1918 in the show *Yankele*. She later performed in the famous *Yidl mitn fidl* in a cross-dressing role in 1936. From the Digital Yiddish Theatre Project.

Freydele Oysher in a suit, posed for a publicity photo. Freydele performed in cross-dressing roles as early as the 1930s. From Freydele's personal archives at YIVO.

Prohibition, Jazz, and the Pansy Craze

The queer world of the Bowery and Greenwich Village and the Yiddish theatrical world were not the only distinct groups with significant overlap that affected the reality of the Hazentes. The secular world, with its jazz music and Pansy Craze themed theater, also played into this phenomenon. As queer people, specifically "pansies" and other visibly gay performers, began to rise to fame through their drag balls, tea rooms, and speakeasies, Americans began to not only take notice, but began to demand more pansy content. With over fifty years of queer people at the forefront of slumming, jazz, and speakeasy culture, Americans may not have approved of homosexuality, but loved their parties and performances. This clamoring came to a head in the late 1920s and early 1930s with the Pansy Craze, and the rise of jazz music—all during the prohibition era. Right alongside this growing movement, the Hazentes gained public momentum.

Jazz and Speakeasy Culture and the Queer and Jewish Worlds

With Prohibition going into effect, Americans who had already begun to flock to The Bowery and Harlem to slum started to come together in a new kind of gathering place: speakeasies. Speakeasies were different because of their illegal status—often run by

mobsters, these places allowed people to engage in things usually not done in public; specifically, allowing people to engage in overt sexuality regardless of sexual orientation, and creating spaces that were integrated across races thirty to forty years before the Civil Rights Movement. Black Jazz performers often headlined at these speakeasies.

In the early part of the 20th century, the population of black people in New York increased by 66%.[89] During this time, slumming, where wealthy white Americans observed the lives of "degenerates," became even more popular with the "exoticism" that came from seeing black performers. In the first two decades of the 20th century, as recording technology improved and people hungered for jazz, bisexual, lesbian, and cross-dressing jazz divas came to the forefront.

The women who became popular singers in the jazz world were young and independent women, rarely with marital ties or with children. This kind of independent lifestyle was attractive for lesbians and bisexual women. Jazz music was already seen as deviant by the church—it was very much a subculture. And because jazz was not mainstream, jazz enthusiasts and performers alike engaged in deviant behaviors, with both heterosexual and homosexual music becoming more explicitly sexual than it had been before.

Divas such as Ma Rainey and her "Prove It On Me Blues" evinced overtly homosexual themes. Though Rainey was married to a man, her "Prove It On Me Blues" was explicit about her appreciation of women, saying "When I last night / had a bad big

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[89] Editors, History com. "The Great Migration." History, March 4, 2010. https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/great-migration.

fight /everything seemed to go on wrong / I looked up, to my surprise / the gal I was with was gone. / Where she went, I don't know / I mean to follow everywhere she goes / Folks say I'm crooked, I didn't know where she took it / I want the whole world to know. / They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me / Sure got to prove it on me." This was an anthem to hiding her queerness, saying that even though people assume she is not straight, they have to "prove it."[90] She goes on to talk about wearing men's clothes and going out with friends who were all women because "I don't like no mens." Rainey recorded over 100 songs from 1924-1928, and is just one example of queer musicians that one might have seen in jazz clubs and speakeasies. Other artists such as Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, and Ethel Waters were also bisexual or lesbians, with some of them also making music about their female partners. Singers such as Lucille Bogan, who sang the "B. D.[91] Woman's Blues," and George Hannah who sang "The Boy in the Boat," wrote songs as commentary on the many lesbians all around them—with Bogan singing that "B. D. women / they don't need no men," and going on to talk about them walking like men and seeming just like men; and with George Hannah singing about women walking "hand in hand" going to parties with "the lights down low / only the parties where women can go," and further naming a specific lesbian named Jack Ann who apparently stole women from their boyfriends. Queer activity between women was not a secret in jazz, and many of the most prominent performers of the day engaged in queer activity and relationships.

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[90] Lisa Hix, "Singing the Lesbian Blues in 1920s Harlem," Collectors Weekly, July 9, 2013, https://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/singing-the-lesbian-blues-in-1920s-harlem/.

[91] B. D. meaning Bull Dagger or Bull Dyke. These terms are considered offensive today and was also relatively offensive then depending on who was saying it and why.

However, there is one lesbian jazz performer who stands out among the rest: Gladys Bentley. Bentley was a singer prominent in the jazz era and was prominent in the Harlem Renaissance, as a blues singer as well as a cross-dresser.[92] Reportedly, she had been cross-dressing for much of her life, wearing her brothers' suits to school as a child. She ran away to New York City at 16 to become a jazz and blues singer. Donning her black and white tuxedo, she was a full-on male impersonator. She performed all through Jungle Alley, the main drag for speakeasies and clubs in Harlem, sang on the radio, and even starred in a musical revue with eight female impersonators from 1934 to 1937 at the Ubangi Club. She was incredibly successful, living in a Park Avenue apartment with servants, and she even reportedly "married" a white woman in New Jersey. Bentley wore suits in public, had interracial lesbian involvements, and still was incredibly popular and famous, the pinnacle of queer life in the 1930s.

During this period, there was direct crossover between the queer world, the black world, and the Jewish world. Such notable performers as Duke Ellington, who at one point performed with Goldye Mae Steiner, the black Hazente,[93] and Ethel Waters, who as previously mentioned was a known lesbian and even called a bull dagger by some, sang "Eili Eili," a song referencing Psalm 22 and which was written in April 1896 for the

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[92] Tisa M. Anders, "Gladys Bentley (1907-1960)," March 28, 2013, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/bentley-gladys-1907-1960/.

[93] Henry Sapoznik, "Goldye, Di Shvartze Khaznte/the Black Woman Cantor," Henry Sapoznik, August 25, 2020, https://www.henrysapoznik.com/post/goldye-di-shvartze-khaznte-the-black-woman-cantor.

Yiddish Theater Stage by Jacob Koppel Sandler.[94] Ethel Waters said of the song, "It tells the tragic history of the Jews as much as one song can… that history of their age-old grief and despair is so similar to that of my own people that I felt I was telling the story of my own race too."[95] Cab Calloway, famed jazz band leader, considered himself an "Afro-Yiddishist" and famously covered "Utt Da Zay" in 1939. Calloway developed a friendship with his Jewish manager Irving Mills, which is how he got into Yiddish music.

The Pansy Craze

The jazz era and its queer culture and subculture rose to popularity alongside other queer mediums such as theater. By the late 1920s, gay culture had been visible in New York for over fifty years in various forms, and during the prohibition era queer people gained prominence previously unheard of in polite society. The prohibition era began a "Pansy Craze"—a termed coined by historian George Chauncey in 1994—where gay performances were at the forefront of popular culture.[96]

By the late 1920s, a gay enclave began popping up in Times Square alongside the Broadway theater district. Gay men worked in all parts of Broadway, and while homosexuality was still not fully accepted at that time, people in the Broadway world

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[94] Jacob Koppel Sandler, Eili, Eili, trans. Chas. D. Isaacson (New York: Maurice Richmond Music Co Inc., 1919), 7.

[95] Contemporary Jewish Museum, "The CJM | Black Sabbath: The Secret Musical History of Black–Jewish Relations," accessed August 15, 2022, https://www.thecjm.org/exhibitions/22.

[96] Chauncey, 301.

were more accepting than most, and most gay people on Broadway would not face punishment were they found out. Yet again under the cover of their artistic nature, gay people did not stand out so much in Times Square. It was not just gay people in Times Square but also gay establishments; so much so that a male sex worker in New York at the time claimed that "all [the] restaurants and bar-rooms between forty-third and fifty-ninth, east and west are just packed with [homosexuals]… one in four [men] in these places is a homosexual."[97] So notorious was this stretch of Manhattan also known as the "Frenzied Forties" that the *Broadway Brevities* called the residential area just above Times Square the "Faggy[98] Fifties."[99]

As Prohibition continued, the theatre district in Times Square began to decline, with some theatres even being turned into burlesque houses. Hotels were losing money because they couldn't sell liquor, and as they began losing money, they let prostitutes and speakeasies occupy their buildings in order to pay their bills, and upscale restaurants, who had until then made a hefty profit on liquor sales, started turning to cafeterias or closing entirely. One restaurant even turned into a museum and "freak show." Nightlife, with Prohibition, had been ostensibly criminalized, and even law-abiding citizens soon

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[97] Chauncey, 304.

[98] The word "fag" or "faggot" in the modern era is used derogatorily, and was then too. This term comes from a term for a bundle of sticks to be ignited in a fire, and is also used for cigarettes in some parts of the world, as they are also lit aflame. As mentioned in Chapter 1, one of the punishments for homosexuality was to be burned alive; ergo, calling a gay person a fag. Because of its origins, it is deeply offensive to the gay community to call a gay person a fag or a faggot.

[99] Chauncy, 304.

found themselves in places such as speakeasies in order to get their fix. Social conventions shifted—overt sexuality was common; men drank with women; Jewish, Italian, and Irish immigrants interacted with the white middle class. Even mayor of New York Jimmy Walker was against prohibition and considered the idea of not enforcing the Volstead Act in his jurisdiction. Cross sections of the population that would otherwise be segregated became acquainted with one another, including Jews, and these different groups about each other's culture, including the practices of cross-dress and pansyism. This took place in the same years as the debut of Sophie Kurtzer, the first Hazente.

In this tumultuous setting, pansy culture took hold. The exoticism of fairies (or pansies as they were known in the late 1920s and early 1930s) took hold in places like Times Square, outside of Greenwich Village. With typical conventions rejected, the clubs were focusing on bringing in more and more exotic acts in order to make money, and pansies paid the bills. Pansy acts were common in everything from roof gardens, to burlesque halls, to the Broadway stage. Wealthy socialites such as the Vanderbilts and the Astors even participated in drag balls in Harlem and Greenwich Village. Headlines read "Fag Balls Exposed" or "6,000 Crowd Huge Hall As Queer[100] Men and Women Dance" in the papers—these events were common knowledge, and people were curious about it. Soon enough, these events were taking place in such locations as Madison

[100] Used as a derogatory term here, the word queer has been reclaimed in the last few decades as a positive way to discuss LGBTQ+ identity. Some people, particularly those who grew up in the community in the 1970s or 1980s, still find it offensive, and used positively typically this is a term that LGBTQ+ people use for themselves. To some, it is not acceptable for straight and cisgender people to use this to describe the LGBTQ+ community.

Square Garden and the Astor Hotel. Because of this popularity, soon enough pansy[101] acts made it to the stage.[102]

Initially pansy performances were not a case of gay people playing gay people; on the contrary, straight actors would wear drag or act like what they thought gay people acted like, to the delight of the audience. This was common in all sorts of genres, including burlesque, with a student who had attended a thousand of these performances saying that "homosexual situations [were] found in almost every performance"[103] By the mid to late 1920s and early 1930s, between Jazz, Broadway, speakeasies, and burlesque, queer themes were in the fabric of the world of nightlife. Even Mae West participated in this, putting on two plays called *The Captive* (1926) which depicted the "social problem" of lesbianism, and *The Drag* (1927) which featured actually gay pansy performers West found in Greenwich Village to perform on stage. West also wrote and starred in a play that was also raided called *"Sex"* (1927) — by this point she was well known for the "obscene" performances she put on. The next year, *Pleasure Man* (1928), another Mae West show, was put on Broadway, and the famous raids of the show took place. According to the New York Times from October 2nd, 1928, "The entire cast was arrested on the stage at the Biltmore theatre… last night immediately after the curtain fell on the

[101] This is an offensive term today, and wasn't entirely inoffensive in its day.

[102] Chauncey, 310.

[103] Chauncey, 311.

first performance… They were charged with violating Section 1,140-A[104] of the Penal Code."[105]

As these acts became more and more popular, major pansy performers and female impersonators became prominent, such as Gene Malin, who performed as both a female impersonator and a pansy and was believed to be gay such that when he married a woman the *Daily News* ran the headline "Jean Malin Marries Girl!" He was incredibly successful, and his success led to more clubs hiring imitators. Pansy nature, i.e., feminine men, were "in vogue." This pattern of the pansy was paralleled with "Negro Vogue" and the general affinity of New Yorkers to slum in Harlem as well as Times Square and Greenwich Village. So popular was the pansy that a club called "The Pansy Club" opened on December 19th, 1930, featuring famous female impersonators. Even clubs that were "straight" before this craze eventually took on pansies. New York was enthralled with gay culture, which reached its peak in the early 1930s. Pansy clubs started popping up outside of New York, reaching Hollywood, Chicago, San Francisco, and even places like Arizona and Colorado.

As their popularity grew, pansies started appearing in novels and films, and the newspapers continued to print articles regarding their affairs for a few more years. Even tabloids got in on the game, posting coverage about the "gay scene." Some newspapers even depicted cartoons of pansies picking up men, and talking about their sexual desires

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[104] Notably, this is the same section of the penal code that God of Vengeance violated five years prior in 1923, causing their arrest as well.

[105] "Raid Mae West Play, Seize 56 At Opening," The New York Times, October 2, 1928.

and femininity. Again, this was not celebration, but ridicule, though not particularly harsher than the ridicule heterosexuals were getting from these mediums. This pansy madness even made it to movies, with a multitude of films showing gay subjects and gay images.

Pansies, Jazz culture, Yiddish theater, and the queer enclaves of the Bowery and Greenwich Village shaped the landscape of entertainment in the early 20th centuries. This was the world that the Hazentes took form within.

Images from the *Pleasure Man* Raids, October 1928. Shown here are female impersonators being carted away in patrol wagons. From the Daily News.

Gladys Bentley: America's Greatest Sepia Player—The Brown Bomber of Sophisticated Songs by an unidentified photographer, 1946-1949

Jean Malin, famed female impersonator and pansy, pictured here in drag, 1933. Still taken from the movie “From Arizona to Broadway”

Chapter 3: The Culture that Allowed the Hazentes to Exist

The long history of gender subversion and homosexuality were the first catalysts for the burgeoning Hazente movement, right alongside the queer cultural movements that were taking place in New York both on stage and in gathering places around the city. However, none of these cultural movements would have been relevant to Jewish communities had Jews not been intent on acculturating to life in America. In the process of acculturation, they interacted with other important movements such as first wave feminism, which advocated for expanded role and rights for women in America, including the vote. Without direct oversight from a rabbinical authority, many Jews in America were able to become part of the fabric of the country and benefit from the secular life around them, which not only included secular media, but also largely secular movements such as feminism. Many of these people remained aligned with Jewish practice. The desire to blend old and new, and these influential movements, created the foundation which allowed the Hazentes to become an institution among Jewish people in America.

Jewish Acculturation into American Society in the Mid to Late 19th to Early 20th Century

Jews, alongside the Irish, Italians, Germans, and other immigrants who made their way to America in the 19th century, were seen as the "other," and were often treated as such by their neighbors. This friction accelerated and encouraged acculturation into American society—the Jewish people, specifically elite German Jews, did not want to be

Jewishly identified in a narrow or negative sense. Rather, these Jews wanted to create a distinct "American Jewish" identity.

The lifestyle of the typical American, along with the laws in place regarding work and business in America, created a speedy path to Jewish acculturation. Women worked outside the home. Many Jewish men worked on Saturday, despite the *halachic* prohibition, because of civil law that did not allow their businesses to be open on Sunday. Men, though commanded to pray three times a day, attended fewer services than they did in Eastern Europe. Women began attending more services, despite the time-bound commandment not applying to them. Rabbis even encouraged women to begin coming to synagogue more often due to the lack of men present in the pews, and women heard this call and attended services more frequently.[106] Liberty was at the forefront of every American mind, and growing social movements; feminism, temperance, and abolitionism; were present in everyday conversation.

This acculturation continued through the late 19th and early 20th century, with the Jewish population becoming more and more integrated with wider society. As more Eastern European Jews immigrated to New York City, a population of Chinese immigrants came to New York from California after being forced out of the west by the Chinese Exclusion Acts and other forms of anti-Chinese racism and violence.[107] Many of these Chinese immigrants got into the restaurant business and were welcoming to anyone

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[106] Linda Gordon Kuzmack, *Woman's Cause: The Jewish Woman's Movement in England and the United States, 1881-1933* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), 19.

[107] Gaye Tuchman and Harry G Levine, "New York Jews and Chinese Food," 1992, 4.

who wanted to come and eat in their establishments. By the 1890s, Jews felt comfortable eating in Chinese restaurants despite the food being not kosher. Jews wanted to be members of the cosmopolitan elite, and dining out in restaurants was part of that. Though Chinese food incorporated pork, shellfish, and other forbidden items, the non-kosher food items were so deconstructed—chopped, minced, pulled—that they were not recognizable to Jews as the animal it came from. Chinese food was safe *treif*, forbidden food that was okay if you didn't think about it too hard or didn't look so closely.[108] This idea of "safe *treif*" can even be found in cities outside of New York through the mid 20th century. Harvey Gornish, nephew of Shaindele di Chazente, told me about his childhood in Philadelphia. Though he came from an observant Jewish home, he said he would eat food items whose kashrut status was dubious at best. He joked with me that his method for determining whether or not an item was kosher was to squeeze the food item and "if it didn't oink, [he] was good to go."[109]

As the 20th century came into view, American Jews were becoming more secularized, less observant, and yearned to be truly American. We can see this in early Yiddish theater as well, as early performances mostly took place during Shabbat. The Jewish immigrant and first-generation population in New York saw themselves as part of the melting pot of America, and focused on secularizing and assimilating themselves into wider American society. They continued on that quest through the middle of the 20th century, with Jews working not just in public performance spaces such as Yiddish theater but on radio

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[108] Tuchman and Levine, 7.

[109] Harvey Gornish, Interview with Harvey Gornish, Face to Face Interview, June 8, 2022.

(initially considered *goyisch*, non-Jewish, because programming on Friday night and Saturdays violated the Sabbath,) on the secular stages of Broadway, and later in Hollywood. Jewish people, through their acculturation, became part of the fabric of American society. And woven into that fabric simultaneously was the Feminist Movement.

First Wave Feminism, Equality, and American Jewish Women

American Jewish women have been involved in first wave feminism since its earliest moments, namely, the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. There Ernestine Rose, a Polish-Jewish immigrant woman raised in an ultra-orthodox family, gave an address to the women at the convention. She began speaking up for women's rights even before this, petitioning the New York State Legislature in 1836 for a Married Woman's Property Law, and she continued her feminist activism after Seneca Falls by speaking at many national women's rights conventions throughout her life.[110] Rose was an active feminist in a time where there were relatively few Jews in America. Despite the minority status of Jewish people, and the secondary status of women, Rose was determined to speak out for a cause that she felt was important. This was especially difficult, as antisemitism was extremely prevalent in the feminist movement.

Alongside the burgeoning feminist movement, Reform Judaism also began to take hold both in Germany, as well as in the United States. Reform Judaism grew out of the

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[110] Kuzmack, *Woman's Cause*, 22.

emancipation of Jews in Germany, as well as the Enlightenment movement taking place in Europe. Reform Jews made calls for egalitarianism happening in Germany as early as 1837, and boys and girls were educated together.[111] As Reform Jews gained a foothold in America in the latter half of the 19th century, they also championed the secular feminist movement, and even helped influence progressive ideologies in non-Reform spaces.

These Reform ideologies quickly found their way into traditional spaces. The Hebrew Sunday School (HSS) was founded in Philadelphia by Rebecca Gratz on February 4th, 1838.[112] Gratz had seen the success of the Sunday school model in the Christian world and decided to apply the model to the Jewish community in America. Because Gratz felt so strongly about the education of Jewish Americans in their wider Christian society, the Hebrew Sunday school offered weekly classes to boys and girls from elementary school until their teen years free of charge. The Hebrew Sunday School was not Reform, but because of the prevalence of English-language Jewish materials that came from reformers, materials from the movement ended up being taught as part of HSS.[113] The Reform movement was deeply committed to equality among the genders, and despite not being affiliated with the movement, this belief was prevalent among this organization. Women were given teaching positions in the organization—roles usually reserved for men—and these women taught both boys and girls. Often, the women teaching at the

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[111] Kuzmack, *Woman's Cause*, 24.

[112] "Rebecca Gratz Founds First Jewish Sunday School," Jewish Women's Archive, accessed August 26, 2022, https://jwa.org/thisweek/feb/04/1838/rebecca-gratz.

[113] Dianne Ashton, "The Lessons of the Hebrew Sunday School," in *American Jewish Women's History: A Reader*, ed. Paela S. Nadell (New York University, 2003), 36

school were unmarried, choosing religious service and service of community over being a wife and mother. The HSS helped give women, for whom being a wife and mother was sold as a rite of passage and a necessity, an opportunity to seek out a different kind of life. The HSS, while created primarily for Jewishly educating young Philadelphian Jews, was also a movement that allowed women to thrive. Importantly, the location of the HSS was in fact Philadelphia, where Sheindele and Bas Sheva were from, setting precedent for Jewish women to create a life of their own outside of what tradition expected of them.

As the Jewish Awakening began to take place, there were even calls for female rabbis. Ray (Rachel) Frank, a schoolteacher from San Francisco, and said that were the position of rabbi not denied to women, that they would be better rabbis than men.[114] Frank became known for her impassioned speeches on the importance of Judaism and Jewish practice, preaching throughout the 1890s to a variety of audiences. For a time, she was even called the "girl rabbi." Even though Frank is seen as a feminist because of her actions, it is important to know that she opposed women's suffrage and promoted women in a domestic role, speaking of the importance of being a wife and mother. Though progressive in her actions, her ideologies were quite conservative. She lived in a dichotomy; her traditionalist words rang true to the values of Jews at the time, but by the mere virtue of her sex, she challenged the ideologies of her audiences, important to the Hazentes and their ability to eventually become what they were.

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[114] Jonathan D. Sarna, "A Great Awakening: The Transformation That Shaped Twentieth-Century American Judaism," in *American Jewish Women's History: A Reader*, ed. Pamala S. Nadell, n.d., 53.

At the end of the 19th century, with the massive influx of European Jewish immigrants and the revitalization of the suffrage movement, Jewish feminists, women and men, began to jump on the bandwagon for women's suffrage.[115] The merger of two suffrage groups after the civil war created the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWASA) and Jewish women joined in droves. Prominent Jewish American women such as Hannah Greenebaum Solomon, first president of the NCJW, and Maud Nathan, then involved in the National Consumers' League, joined the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. Jewish leaders took part in the Women's Trade Union League, with Rose Schneiderman and Pauline Newman addressing crowds of Jewish laborers in their native Yiddish. Both Jewish men and Jewish women supported the cause of suffrage, despite deep threads of antisemitism that go back from the very inception of the suffrage and feminist movements. When women got the right to vote in 1920, Jewish Americans rejoiced.

Jewish women have been on the forefront of feminist leadership since the early 1800s, championing feminist causes and progressing America forward in its thinking and ideology. These women created institutions we still know and respect in the modern day, many of these women and institutions fully supported by their men in their communities. This push for equality, suffrage, and equal education both within their communities and in the country at large was aided by progressive Jewish ideology and the fierce female leaders that espoused it. Jews of all backgrounds enthusiastically participated in the

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[115] Melissa R. Klapper. "Suffrage in the United States." Jewish Women's Archive, June 23, 2021. https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/suffrage-in-the-united-states.

feminist movement in numbers that grew throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, both within organized groups and as one-off activists. The histories of the Jewish Awakening and first wave feminism go hand in hand, garnering force and gaining traction beside one another. Simultaneously, the Orthodox Movement in America was dealing with a crisis of non-observance.

Orthodoxy, Non-Observance, and the American Jew in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

With the acculturation of Jewish Americans and the movement of feminism came and went throughout the 20th century, it is important to look too at the patterns of observance among the Jews in America. It is important to look too at the patterns of observance among the Jews in America: their adherence to the laws of kashrut, Shabbat, and holidays and Halacha, in general or a lack thereof. With the pull of acculturation and the lure of feminism there was an interesting contingent of American Jews, most of them second or third generation by the 20th century, who identified as Orthodox but did not keep *halacha* or Shabbat, kashrut, and holidays.[116] When these people did attend services they attended an Orthodox synagogue, and during the High Holidays synagogues overflowed with people so much that some *minyanim* rented out the back rooms of saloons to accommodate the overflow. These High Holiday services drew vast crowds, while weekly services barely made *minyanim*. In one city sixty miles outside of New York,

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[116] Jeffery S. Gurock, "Twentieth-Century American Orthodoxy's Era of Non-Observance, 1900-1960," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* Volume 9 (2000): 87.

93% of Jewish families attended synagogue on the High Holy Days. During the year, these same synagogues only attracted 1% of Jewish families.[117]

The observance of Orthodox Jews in America was less stringent for a few reasons. The Jews in America were a group who in the late 19th and early 20th centuries came to America against the better judgment of their Eastern European rabbis. The rabbis warned that America was uncouth and dangerous, with Rabbi David Willowski remarking famously that "America is a *treif* land."[118] The Jews who moved to America were aware of this view and came despite it. This was a self-selecting group; they were okay with this place which lacked Yeshivas and rabbinical oversight. The Jews who came to America wanted to acculturate and join the Melting Pot. Even in Orthodox synagogues, sermons were given in English, and some even had mixed seating between 1900 and 1960.[119]

Because Orthodox Jewish families were lax in their observance and did not have a Yeshiva education, there were aspects of *Halacha* that were less commonly known in the early-to-mid 20th century. When speaking with Rabbi Harvey Gornish, native of Philadelphia and nephew of Shaindele Di Chazente, I asked him if his family was ever concerned regarding his aunt's profession because of *Kol Isha*, the prohibition against men hearing women sing. He responded by saying that he did not attend Yeshiva until he was an adult and that most of his family had not attended religious schools in their youth,

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[117] Jeffery S. Gurock, 91.

[118] Rafael Medoff, "The Orthodox Union's Early Years: Fighting for Jewish Rights in a Very Different America," Jewish Action, March 18, 2016, https://jewishaction.com/jewish-world/history/the-orthodox-unions-early-years-fighting-for-jewish-rights-in-a-very-different-america/.

[119] Gurock, 102.

and therefore he and his family did not even know what *Kol Isha* was when he was young. By the time he learned about it in rabbinical school, he had been listening to Shaindele sing for his entire life, and he had no interest in discouraging her from this vocation, saying that his entire family had always encouraged her performing.[120] There is reason Rabbi Gornish did not have a Yeshiva education in his youth; Harvey claims that there were no Yeshivas in Philadelphia at the time (though I found evidence of at least one that started in 1953) and Yeshivas were not yet common in New York City, though there was at least one Yeshiva on the Lower East Side, and a smattering of Talmud Torah schools in Harlem and Lower Manhattan.[121] As the early 20th century progressed, there were even "Yeshivas for girls" that began to pop up in New York and its outskirts because of the Bais Yaakov movement. But most Orthodox children and teenagers attended secular schools, even as parents were scandalized by the insistence of their children' teachers that they sing Christmas music.[122]

Until Orthodoxy's revitalization of observance in the late 20th century, Orthodox Jews were essentially understood as Jews who held traditional values, not Jews that adhered to *halacha*. Orthodox Jews of the first half of the 20th century went to the theater on Shabbat, ate "safe *treif*," listened to the "*goyisch*" radio, and ran their shops on Saturdays. This culture of non-observant Orthodoxy, the general acculturation of American Jews, and the influence of feminism in Jewish spaces was the culture the Hazentes came from.

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[120] Harvey Gornish, Interview with Harvey Gornish.

[121] Jeffery S. Gurock, "Orthodox Judaism in the United States," Jewish Women's Archive, June 23, 2021

[122] Rafael Medoff, "The Orthodox Union's Early Years."

At the crossroads of these three converging realities, in 1920 (the very year women in America gained suffrage after more than seventy years of feminist efforts) a woman who billed herself as Lady Cantor Madam Sophie Kurtzer released a 78rpm record through Columbia Records containing the very first recordings of Hazente music.[123]

[123] The National Library of Israel. "Kol Adoshem Yecholel Ayoles .[Sound Recording] | Kurtzer, Sophie (Performer) | Kurtzer, Sophie (Performer) | The National Library of Israel." Accessed August 26, 2022. https://www.nli.org.il/en/items/NNL_MUSIC_AL003459305/NLI.

Chapter 4: The Hazentes

The Hazentes I am discussing in detail in this thesis fit a specific set of qualifications—they all grew up in a Jewish community, and they either physically cross-dressed or sang in a tenor octave/vocally cross-dressed. While I will be discussing aspects of the Hazentes lives in this chapter, this discussion is not meant to be biographical, but rather this information is included to give further context to the secular and Jewish spaces they were in as it relates to the findings in previous chapters.[124]

[124] For biographical information regarding these Hazentes, please refer to the Hebrew Union College thesis *Kol Ishah? A New Voice* by Haley Kobilinsky Poserow, and the Jewish Theological Seminary thesis *The Hazntes, the life stories of Sophie Kurtzer, Bas Sheva, Sheindele the haznte, Perele Feig, Goldie Malavky & Fraydele Oysher* by Arianne Slack. None of these Hazentes' biographies will be discussed in great detail because either it has been discussed in the publications mentioned above, because there is not enough information about them, or because they do not fit the scope of this chapter. Some of the findings that fall outside this scope, however, will be included in an appendix to this chapter.

Sophie Kurtzer

Years Active: ~1920- ~1927

The Tacoma Daily Ledger (Tacoma, Washington)

April 11th, 1921

The Courier-News (Bridgewater, New Jersey)

October 21st, 1922

Sophie Kurtzer, or Lady Cantor Madam Sophie Kurtzer as she was often billed, was the daughter of Cantor Abraham Kanefsky and his wife Rebecca.[125] Born in Odessa, Ukraine, she was taught by her father to sing Cantorial music, and she with her siblings and father made a name for themselves touring the world. Sophie immigrated to America

[125] Arianne Slack, "The Hazntes : The Life Stories of Sophie Kurtzer, Bas Sheva, Sheindele the Haznte, Perele Feig, Goldie Malavky & Fraydele Oysher" (New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, 2005)

in adulthood, and recorded hazzanut through Pathé Records, as well as performed across the United States as the "first woman cantor."

Madame Kurtzer's career went public in 1920, when the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* published a short article entitled "Woman Cantor Gives Concert."[126] This is the first mention of a Hazente I found in newspaper archives, published on October 1st, 1920 (though Sophie Kurtzer's name has a typo—it is spelled "Kurzer" in this publication.) The performance was backed by a symphony orchestra. This was a fundraiser for the Bikur Cholim Kosher Hospital, a charitable cause for which she sang a few more times over the years according to the newspaper records. Notably, according to the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* article, "She appeared in a cantor's cap and gown."

Throughout the first half of the 1920s, Madame Kurtzer sang for crowds across the country, but primarily in Brooklyn. She also sang in Chicago, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and Baltimore, drawing a crowd via the novelty of her act. Many of the concerts she sang were for charitable causes such as for the aforementioned Bikur Cholim hospital, but also for an infants home, and for fundraisers for Temple Isaac of Brooklyn. She sang at least one concert with the famous cantor Yossele Rosenblatt at a Bikur Cholim Hospital fundraiser in February of 1921: it appears he did not have an issue sharing the stage with a woman singer despite his piety.[127] Notably, she sang her music in at least one synagogue, the aforementioned Temple Isaac of Brooklyn, alongside a male cantor named Abraham Feur. Some of the later Hazentes would not be able to sing

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[126] "Woman Cantor Gives Concert," The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, October 1, 1920.

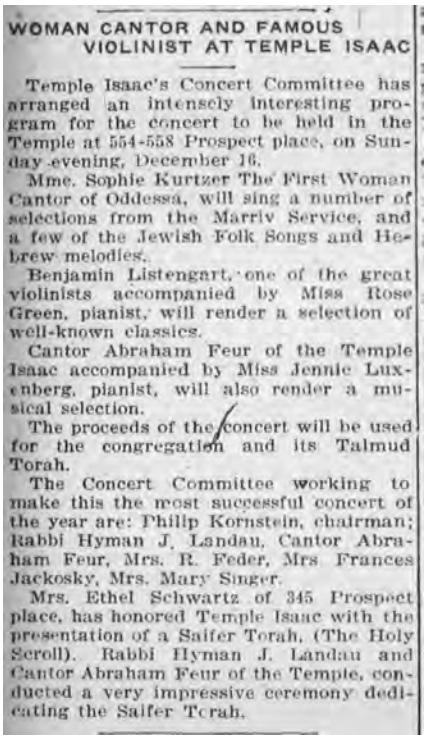
[127] "Best Hospital in Borough to be Built by Hebrews," The Chat, February 5, 1921.

alongside male cantors in a synagogue setting. It appears that Madame Kurtzer did not have this issue.

WOMAN CANTOR GIVES CONCERT.

Sophie Kurzer, the woman cantor, gave a concert Wednesday night at the Academy of Music. She appeared in a cantor's cap and gown. Municipal Court Justice Jacob S. Strahl delivered an address. A symphony orchestra and choir assisted the soloist. Leon Goldman, a pupil of Duer, played; Mme. Wanglf imitated the violin timbre of strings with her voice in a unique manner accompanied on the piano. About $1,000 was raised for the Bikur Cholim Kosher Hospital.

Brooklyn Daily Eagle, (Brooklyn, NY) October 1st, 1920



WOMAN CANTOR AND FAMOUS VIOLINIST AT TEMPLE ISAAC

Temple Isaac's Concert Committee has arranged an intensely interesting program for the concert to be held in the Temple at 554-558 Prospect place, on Sunday evening, December 16.

Mme. Sophie Kurtzer The First Woman Cantor of Oddessa, will sing a number of selections from the Marriv Service, and a few of the Jewish Folk Songs and Hebrew melodies.

Benjamin Listengart, one of the great violinists accompanied by Miss Rose Green, pianist, will render a selection of well-known classics.

Cantor Abraham Feur of the Temple Isaac accompanied by Miss Jennie Luxenberg, pianist, will also render a musical selection.

The proceeds of the concert will be used for the congregation and its Talmud Torah.

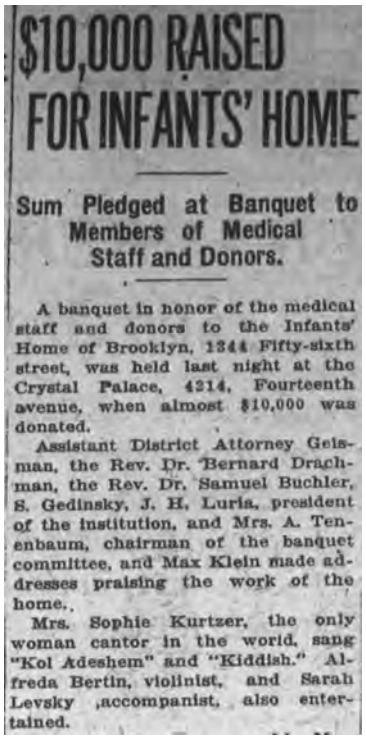
The Concert Committee working to make this the most successful concert of the year are: Philip Kornstein, chairman; Rabbi Hyman J. Landau, Cantor Abraham Feur, Mrs. R. Feder, Mrs Frances Jackosky, Mrs. Mary Singer.

Mrs. Ethel Schwartz of 345 Prospect place, has honored Temple Isaac with the presentation of a Saifer Torah, (The Holy Scroll). Rabbi Hyman J. Landau and Cantor Abraham Feur of the Temple, conducted a very impressive ceremony dedicating the Saifer Torah.

The Chat (Brooklyn, NY)

December 1st, 1923

This publication mentions Madame Kurtzer singing alongside Cantor Abraham Feur.



$10,000 RAISED FOR INFANTS' HOME

Sum Pledged at Banquet to Members of Medical Staff and Donors.

A banquet in honor of the medical staff and donors to the Infants' Home of Brooklyn, 1344 Fifty-sixth street, was held last night at the Crystal Palace, 4214, Fourteenth avenue, when almost $10,000 was donated.

Assistant District Attorney Geisman, the Rev. Dr. Bernard Drachman, the Rev. Dr. Samuel Buchler, S. Gedinsky, J. H. Luria, president of the institution, and Mrs. A. Tenenbaum, chairman of the banquet committee, and Max Klein made addresses praising the work of the home.

Mrs. Sophie Kurtzer, the only woman cantor in the world, sang "Kol Adeshem" and "Kiddish." Alfreda Bertin, violinist, and Sarah Levsky ,accompanist, also entertained.

Times Union (Brooklyn, NY) December 7th, 1925

This publication discusses Madame Kurtzer and the liturgy she sang for charity. Both pieces mentioned in this article are on the record released of her music.

Madame Kurtzer's career ended after she married cantor Arnold Kurtzer and settled to have a family in New York. [128] Despite her success as a performer, and her husband's job as a cantor, it appears that the Kurtzer's fell upon hard times. *The Times Union* reported a foreclosure on her house on January 23rd, 1934. [129] Madame Kurtzer had two children, Eddie and Ethel, and passed away at seventy-seven in January of 1979. While Madame Kurtzer did not perform hazzanut publicly that we know of after her career when she was young, she did influence her niece, Bernice Kanefsky, who eventually became the Hazente known as Bas Sheva.

Listening to Madame Kurtzer's recordings reveals an androgynous quality to her voice: not overtly masculine or feminine, not a high key nor a low key. She sings with a rich, string-like quality, as if her voice was a viola and she was merely playing it. Her androgyny did not stop with her voice; she also consistently wore a cantor's *meiter* and gown. In every photograph found in the newspaper record of her, she is wearing cantorial regalia.

Madame Kurtzer came from a family of singers, was taught hazzanut by her father who was a cantor, and even married a cantor. However, she did not bill herself as a "woman cantor" while performing overseas, but rather only in America (though sometimes she was billed simply as a vocalist, though this was the vast minority of the

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[128] Arianne Slack, "The Hazntes : The Life Stories of Sophie Kurtzer, Bas Sheva, Sheindele the Haznte, Perele Feig, Goldie Malavky & Fraydele Oysher."

[129] "Supreme Court, Kings County," Times Union, January 23, 1934.

time.) This opportunity to be a "cantor" was not afforded to her overseas—the climate was simply not right. That she was able to live as a Hazente in America, and in New York City and other large American cities, was indicative of time and place. As mentioned in Chapter 3, European rabbis warned that America was "treif"[130] because of its lack of rabbinic oversight and the pressure to acculturate to the norms of American life. There is no doubt that this lack of religious oversight together with the burgeoning gay and cross-dressing movements in New York City at that time, enabled her to perform as the first Hazente.

Fraydele Oysher

Years Active: ~1930-1991

Fraydele [131]Oysher was born to Zelig Oysher, a sixth generation cantor, in Lipkani (Lipkon), Bessarabia (now Moldova) on October 3rd, 1913. Fraydele and her parents, along with brother Moishe Oysher, emigrated to America when she was just a child.[132] Initially they lived in Philadelphia, but Fraydele eventually moved to New York. Quickly, Moishe became a renowned cantor, actor, and movie star. Fraydele's father also noticed her talent, and he sent her to work singing professionally as a young child. In the 1930s, Fraydele met Harold Sternberg whom she married. They had two children,

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[130] Rafael Medoff, "The Orthodox Union's Early Years."

[131] Also referred to as Freydele, Freidele, and Fraidele depending on the transliteration

[132] Hayley Kobilinsky Poserow, "'Kol Ishah?'" A New Voice The Chazzantes."

Marilyn (who later became famous actress Marilyn Michaels) and Michael. Though later in life she admitted to wanting to be a cantor, she never took a position leading a congregation despite claims that people had offered her cantorial jobs. Fraydele told an interviewer in 1995 that she predicted the female cantorate and rabbinate… "I was the first one that I walked with my father [as a child]… and we were walking and I said "Poppa, there'll be a day where there'll be women cantors and women rabbis… and it came to pass—there are woman cantors, there are woman rabbis."[133]

Fraydele started her career singing Yiddish folk songs in Philadelphia where she spent much of her childhood. As a teenager she moved to Brooklyn with her brother Moishe, and later toured the country and even internationally as a renowned Yiddish theater star, radio singer, and as a "woman cantor," "lady cantor," or "Hazente" depending on the publication. Many of the plays that were written for her were cross-dressing roles, with the big reveal at the end of the show being that she was a woman the entire time. Apparently, Fraydele (though her last name is misspelled "Oyster") even appeared in a show called *"Yo a Maidel, Nit A Maidel"* (Yes a girl, not a girl) at the Civic Playhouse in Hollywood — an overt nod to her notable gender bending, though I could not find any record of the contents of the show in my research.

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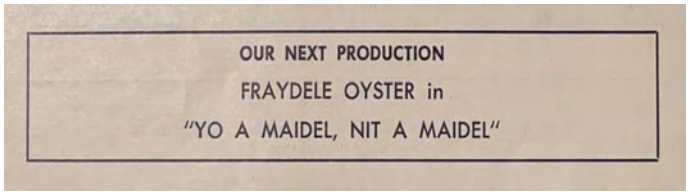
[133] Harold Sternberg. Fraydele Oysher Milken Interview, May 31, 1995. https://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/yt/lex/O/i-oysher-fraydele-milken.htm.



Both of the above are taken from a program for *A Chazendel Auf Shabes* at the Civic Playhouse in Hollywood. This photograph depicts Fraydele both in cross-dress (right) and as a woman (left). The next production in the second scan can be translated as "Yes a girl, not a girl." April, 1964.

Fraydele Oysher in a wool suit.

From her archive at YIVO. Date unknown.

Fraydele Oysher depicted as a Yeshiva boy.

From her archive at YIVO. Date unknown.

It is worth noting the disparity between the way Freydele appears in her personal archives and in English language newspapers. The English newspapers rarely mentioned Fraydele's status as a Hazente or woman cantor, but rather referred to her as a "Yiddish Theater Star" or "performer." In these English publications, Fraydele is often not billed with a picture. When she is, she appears with a feminine headshot. Within the Yiddish speaking community, however, Fraydele was heavily billed as a Hazente, and in bulletins she was often shown with a cap, suit, and *tzitzit* (fringes,) or occasionally in just a wool suit. The flyers and publications in Fraydele's archive are mostly printed in Yiddish, and such publications were aimed exclusively at the Yiddish-speaking Jewish population in the cities she was performing in, primarily New York City.

There is good reason that the English-speaking record does not depict Fraydele in cross-dress. Fraydele's career as a Yiddish stage star and Hazente began in the early to mid 1930s and took off in the 1940s. At the time of her rise to stardom, the MPPDA, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, had begun to enforce the Hays Code, which was the morality code that kept Hollywood pictures tame and family friendly.[134] Among the activities censored in these films were drag and cross-dressing, alongside homosexuality. While many films before the code was enforced in 1934 contained sex, homosexuality, and cross-dressing, the films that were sealed for approval by the Production Code Administration (PCA) after it began to approve movies, did not. Films that were not approved by the PCA did not receive wide distribution, nor did they

[134] Rafael Abreu, "How the Hays Code Changed Hollywood Censorship," StudioBinder, May 2, 2021, https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-the-hays-code-1934/.

often receive critical acclaim. In the wake of the enforcement of these codes, public opinion shifted in the decades from 1930-1960 to a more modest or conservative view. The code was eventually abandoned and replaced with the beginnings of the MPAA film rating system we know today. The MPAA rating system was codified in 1968, the year before the Stonewall uprising and the modern LGBTQ+ revolution that ensued. Thereafter movies began to contain the same queer themes it had left behind.[135]

Given Christian American sensitivity to behavior perceived as "perverse," such as cross-dressing, it is understandable that English language newspapers did not depict Fraydele in cross-dress: it was not considered acceptable. The newspaper records for Fraydele begin in the mid 1940s, which explains why she was depicted in feminine presentation. At the same time, the Yiddish-speaking world maintained its love of cross-dressing Hazentes as a Jewish cultural practice. Yiddish Theater and Hazente music were “ethnic”—both because it was in another language or languages, and because they had non-Christian religious overtones, and therefore was separate from secular society to a large extent. For Yiddish-speaking American Jews, cross-dressing was rooted in culture and Jewish performative expression rather than sexuality or hedonism, and had been since the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, if not earlier due to the history of cross-dress in Purim plays.

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[135] Rafael Abreu.

BRITH ACHIM BULLETIN

גע׳דיינקט!

איהר

האָט אַ דייט...

זונטאג, אָקטאבער 12טען, 8 אווענד

ביי דעם

ברית אַחים

אויסערגעװעהנליכער קאַנצערט

אין אונזער בילדינג, נ. א. קאָרנער 11טע און ספרוס סטריטס

עס װעלען זיך באַטייליגען:

★ פריידעלע אוישער

★ הענריעטא דזשייקאָבס

★ דזשוליוס אַדלער

★ חזן דזש. אבראמסאָן

מעסטער אָװ צערעמאָניעס

מערי סמאָגאַר ביי דער פיאנאָ

איינטריט דורך מיטגלידערשאפט קאַרטען

יעדער מעמבער פון ברית אַחים, זיהן, איידעמס,
טעכטער און שניר זיינען געלאַדען צו קומען.

דאָס איז דער ערעפענונגס אָװענד פון אונזערע פראָגראַמען פון פאַרװיילונג פאַר דעם סעזאָן.

Fraydele as depicted in a Yiddish Brith Achim Synagogue bulletin. Note that there are photographs of her both in and out of drag, but the drag photo is center to the presentation of the pictures. Date unknown.

A scrapbook page of Fraydele's Yiddish language flyers and newspaper clippings. Note that the largest pictures are of her in cross-dress, and the headshots are not overtly feminine. Various dates, unknown.

COMEDY STAR Freidele Oysher will appear in a two-act Yiddish play, "A Chasendel of Shabes," next Monday night at Syria Mosque. Miss Oysher, who plays the part of "Freide," also is producer of the comedy. Others in the cast are Pinchas Lewando, Abe Dorf, Isadore Elgard, Ben Zeidman, Peppie Lowitz, Leon Charaz, Sylvia Fishman and Rosetta Yegar.

Fraidele Oysher Coming Here

MONTREAL Yiddish theatre audiences will at last have the opportunity of seeing and hearing the sensational female - cantor Fraidele Oysher, who is scheduled to give two performances at the Monument National Theatre on Sunday evening, December 23, and Tuesday evening, December 25.

Fraidele Oysher

Fraidele Oysher, better known to Yiddish audiences as "Fraidele Die Chazante," is a

(Left) Fraydele in the *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) on January 14th, 1948. Note the bow in her hair.

(Right) Fraydele in *The Montreal Star* (Montreal, Quebec, Canada) on November 30th, 1945. This image is strikingly feminine compared to the photographs seen in Yiddish publications where she is rarely seen from the neck down in women's clothing, with Fraydele in an elegant gown.

Fraydele in *The Montreal Star* (Montreal, Quebec, Canada) on December 20th, 1945.

Again, note the bow in her hair.

The shift in presentation in the English newspapers from Sophie Kurtzer to Fraydele Oysher helps narrate the wider shift in cultural norms within secular and Christian English-speaking communities. While Sophie Kurtzer was advertised in English newspaper articles in cross-dress, Fraydele, whose entire career was built on her ability to cross-dress, was not shown in such a way. Fraydele was acutely aware of her gender presentation and how she was perceived. In an interview in 1995 she commented "there was no gender on music… there's no gender on a song." When challenged by the interviewer who said that certain songs could only be sung by a woman, she responded "No. You gotta do what you want to."[136] Fraydele knew what she was doing, and she knew why people came to her shows. Despite this, the English-speaking press did not publicize her in this way, again, most likely because of anti-perversion sentiment and norms. Perhaps outside of Jewish spaces, for her own safety and well-being, Freydele did not seek to be viewed as a cross-dressing performer. Either way, the difference in the way she was represented to the English-speaking world (as opposed to in the Jewish press) is clear and indicative.

Fraydele had a resonant chest voice and sang primarily in her lower range despite her status as a mezzo soprano. In Fraydele's own words, this type of singing "lent itself to the type of work [she] was doing" i.e., cross-dressing for the stage.[137] Fraydele also sang on radio shows across New York City and Philadelphia, both singing Yiddish folk songs and hazzanut. Fraydele started performing hazzanut as early as 1929/1930, though an

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[136] Harold Sternberg, Fraydele Oysher Milken Interview.

[137] Harold Sternberg.

exact date is unknown, and continued to perform until her final show at a sukkah party in 1991. Fraydele died in 2004 in her Manhattan home at 90 years old. Even her obituary in the New York Times mentions her proclivity for cross-dressing on stage, quoting her as saying "I was cute, I was flat and I was a terrific piece of work."[138] Meaning, she was a believable and attractive cross-dresser in her Yiddish Theater performances.

Jean Gornish / Sheindele Di Chazante

Years Active: ~1930 - ~1965

Sheindele posed in front of a WEVD radio microphone. Distributed through Planters Peanut Company. Date unknown.

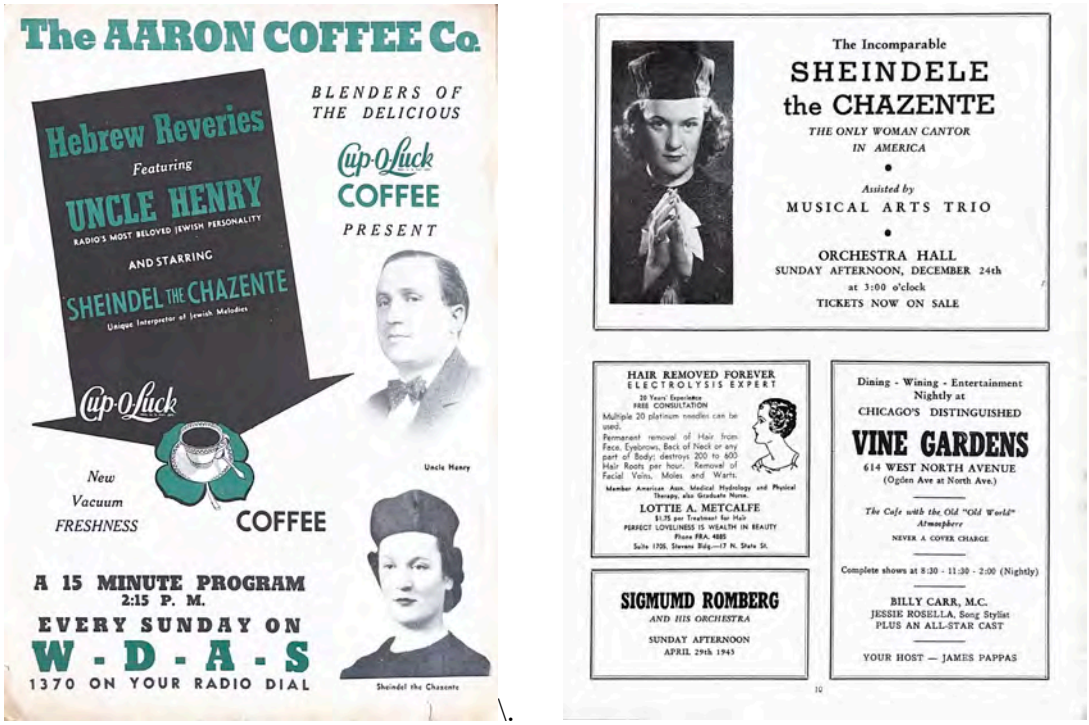
[138] Stuart Lavietes, "Fraydele Oysher, 90, Actress Who Starred in Yiddish Theater," *The New York Times*, January 10, 2004, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/10/arts/fraydele-oysher-90-actress-who-starred-in-yiddish-theater.html.

Sheindele posed in front of a poster with her name on it. Date unknown.

Jean Gornish was born between 1915 and 1916 to an Orthodox Jewish family in Philadelphia. Her father was a *ba'al t'fillah* (prayer leader) at their local synagogue. Jean's brothers were taken to synagogue; she and her sisters were not. However, she grew to love Jewish music, singing *zmirot* around the table with her siblings and parents on Shabbat evenings.[139] Jean / Sheindele was born to sing, and even had a brief stint in the early to mid 1930s performing in nightclubs as "Jean Walker Slick Songbird." She began performing in synagogue spaces as early as 1932 alongside this secular music, but by the latter half of the 1930s, she had fully devoted herself to Jewish music. She was featured in residency in places like Chicago, sang on multiple radio programs in Philadelphia and

[139] Hayley Kobilinsky Poserow, "'Kol Ishah?'" A New Voice The Chazzantes."

New York, and was sponsored by both Planters Peanuts and the Aaron Coffee Company. Sheindele made a name for herself across the country as the "first woman cantor" and even recorded an album in 1963 to showcase her musical interpretations of Jewish classics including "Eili Eili Lomo Azavtoni," the Yiddish Theater smash hit from the show *Brochoh*, known in English as *The Jewish King of Poland.*[140]



(Left) Sheindele, here billed as Sheindel the Chazente, in an advertisement for her radio show as sponsored by the Aaron Coffee Company.

(Right) Sheindele billed as the "Only Woman Cantor in America"

[140] Jacob Koppel Sandler, Eili, Eili.

Sheindele di Chazzente[141] performed liturgical music with reverence and appreciation, often stopping to explain the significance of the songs before she sang them. She sang in a rich tenor voice, potentially acquired from years of smoking, and entertained audiences across the country. Generally, the reviews of her were positive, though some balked at a woman singing liturgical music. In response to her helping to lead a "strictly orthodox" service, one Joseph Gross wrote sarcastically in a letter to the editor of an unknown publication, "I shouldn't be surprised if next year some enterprising congregation, strictly Orthodox, were to announce a Kol Nidre service lead [sic] by the Dionne quintuplets."[142] A *Chicago Daily News* article says of a performance in 1944 "She offered no apology, in either word or manner, for what she was doing. She gave the impression that she had as much right as a man to appeal to the God of her fathers to 'cast not off our people' to 'hear our voice.'"[143] The author insinuates that Sheindele would need to apologize for singing music forbidden to women—and yet she did not.

Sheindele went on to record her album *Sheindele Sings the Song of her People* in 1963[144] and but singing career ended soon after that. She moved to Tenafly, New Jersey in 1958, and in 1970 began to work for Englewood Hospital as an administrative secretary for the nursing office and the nursing school which was housed there.

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[141] Otherwise spelled as Shaindele, Sheindel, Sheindele Die Chazente, Shandele Di Chazanta, Shaindele The Chazente, Sheindele the Hazente and other permutations of transliteration.

[142] Hayley Kobilinsky Poserow, "'Kol Ishah?'" A New Voice The Chazzantes."

[143] C. J. Bullett, "Beautiful Girl Cantor Is Dramatic in Recital," *Chicago Daily News*, December 26, 1944.

[144] Ron Keller, "Jean Gornish, Female Cantor," *The Record*, May 1, 1981.

Interestingly, though she is billed in English and Yiddish newspapers and publications in the same time period as Freydele, there is a stark contrast to how she is advertised in comparison to Freydele. Across both English speaking and Yiddish speaking publications, Sheindele is billed in a robe and *meiter*, often holding a *siddur* or posing as if she is praying. It could be that Sheindele felt comfortable appearing in cross-dress before a secular audience because of her own lesbian sexuality. Harvey Gornish, her nephew and an Orthodox rabbi, told me in an interview that while he and his family were aware that she was a lesbian, it wasn't discussed openly. Gornish described Sheindele as "mannish," an often negative term for a butch lesbian—though his tone did not seem to imply any sort of negativity when he said it.[145] Over the course of her life, Sheindele had a few long term female roommates. She never married nor had children. She was engaged briefly in 1953 to a man named Robert "Bob" Siegel,[146] but the marriage never took place.

At the time when Sheindele was performing, the general understanding of gender and sexuality was that they were inextricably linked to one another, with gay people often being called "the third sex." While Sheindele was not openly gay, nor did she ever publicly identify as butch, nonbinary, or transgender, it seems that her gender presentation was more masculine than the average woman of her time, and her sexuality could have been a contributor to that expression.

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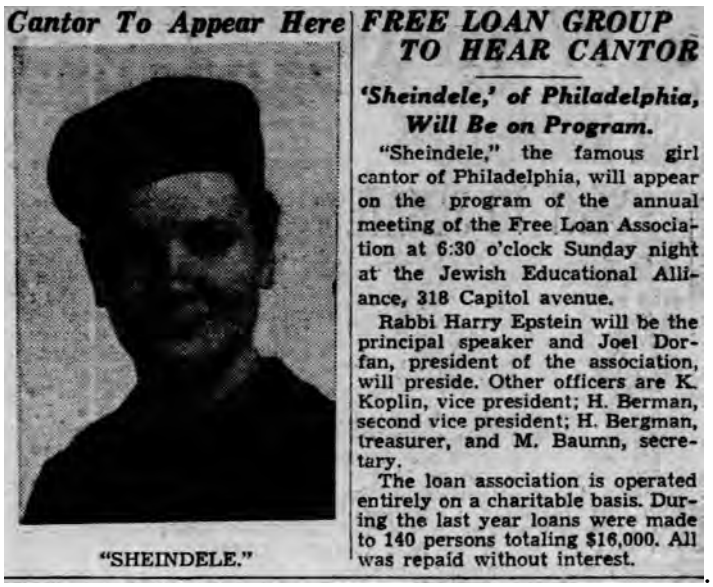
[145] Harvey Gornish, Interview with Harvey Gornish.

[146] "Siegel-Gornish," *The Philadelphia Inquirerer*, February 1, 1953.



Cantor To Appear Here

"SHEINDELE."

FREE LOAN GROUP TO HEAR CANTOR

'Sheindele,' of Philadelphia, Will Be on Program.

"Sheindele," the famous girl cantor of Philadelphia, will appear on the program of the annual meeting of the Free Loan Association at 6:30 o'clock Sunday night at the Jewish Educational Alliance, 318 Capitol avenue.

Rabbi Harry Epstein will be the principal speaker and Joel Dorfan, president of the association, will preside. Other officers are K. Koplin, vice president; H. Berman, second vice president; H. Bergman, treasurer, and M. Baumn, secretary.

The loan association is operated entirely on a charitable basis. During the last year loans were made to 140 persons totaling $16,000. All was repaid without interest.

Singing Star

MISS JEAN GORNISH

The Hebrew Loan Society will present Sheindele the Chazente, famous singing star, as the feature attraction at a benefit concert. The concert will take place at the YMHA on South Washington Street on Sunday, January 28, at 8:30 p. m. Sheindele the Chazente has won wide acclaim as the only woman cantor in America. Her fine voice and liturgical style have gained her a starring role.

Sheindele's real name is Miss Jean Gornish. She was born and educated in Philadelphia, where she still makes her home, though her concerts have taken her throughout the country. Her interpretation of synagog and liturgical music has made her a great favorite with audiences. She will present a full program of this music, in both Hebrew and English.

(Left) Sheindele in the *Atlanta Constitution* (Atlanta, Georgia) on February 10th, 1939

(Right) Sheindele in *The Times Leader* (Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania) on January 1st, 1945.

Note that Sheindele is billed in religious regalia in both English-speaking publications, however to the right she is slightly more feminine.

Progressive Beneficial Association

ISRAEL PULS, President — S. BRODY, Vice President
S. SMUKLER, Secretary — J. GOODMAN, Fin. Sec'y
M. MELAMEDSON, Treasurer

PROGRAM of BARKIN

SPECIAL OUTSTANDING CHANUKA CONCERT

Sunday, Dec. 10, 8 P. M.
at 701 Pine Street,
2nd Floor Auditorium

JACOB BARKIN
and the well known
SHAINDEL THE CHAZENTE

Enclosed find 2 tickets for your friends.

First Payment of Dues

S. SMUKLER, Sec'y

MACCABEE LODGE No. 26, I. O. B. S.

Special and Installation Meeting
Sunday, January 8th, 1939, 8 P. M.
AT 506 PINE STREET

INSTALLATION OF OFFICERS.
GRAND CONCERT. Refreshments Served Free.
Report of Finance Committee. Propose New Members.

M. ROTHBERG, President
1025 Wyoming Ave.
DAV. 1663

JOEL COHEN, Sec'y
1045 N. 46th St.
GRE. 3478

(Left) Sheindele in a Yiddish speaking flyer, 1940.

(Right) Sheindele in a Yiddish program for the Maccabee lodge, 1939.

Note that Sheindele is billed in religious regalia in both Yiddish-speaking publications.

Though Sheindele grew up Orthodox and performed her piety in her concerts, her personal life and religious practice suggest that she was anything but. Sheindele was a long-time smoker, which was considered unseemly for girls at the time when she took it up, and she even smoked on Shabbat according to her nephew Harvey Gornish.[147] Sheindele also was known by her younger family members for being crass and telling dirty jokes. Though Sheindele respected Judaism and Orthodoxy, it appears that in her private life she rebuked these principles and instead chose to live her life as she pleased. However, she loved to sing, and she was Jewish, so the Jewish way to sing was to be a Hazente in her day.

When I asked Rabbi Gornish if Sheindele wanted to be a cantor, he responded that she absolutely did, and that the reason she never pursued it despite offers from synagogues was that she did not want to disappoint her father. Being a Hazente was something that her father could accept; it appears that being a cantor was outside of that realm of acceptability. A Hazente did not function in a synagogue—they were performance based liturgical singers. That was acceptable for her father, being a cantor was not. Because of her father and his perspective, she never tried to function as a pulpit cantor.

The legacy that Sheindele leaves is complicated, rich, and nuanced. Sheindele balanced a complex life in a time that couldn't fully appreciate her. She was a woman ahead of her time. After a two-year battle with cancer, Jean Gornish died on April 23rd,

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[147] Harvey Gornish, Interview with Harvey Gornish.

1981 at 65 years old. She was lovingly remembered in an obituary in a New Jersey newspaper as "Jean Gornish, female cantor."[148]

Bernice Kanefsky / Bas Sheva

Years Active: ~1943-1960

(Left) Bas Sheva in the *Detroit Free Press* (Detroit, Michigan) on November 6th, 1957

(Right) Bas Sheva in the *Daily News* (Los Angeles, California) on July 1st, 1950

Bas Sheva, neé Bernice Kanefsky, was born in Philadelphia to Hazzan Joseph and Betty Kanefsky in 1925. She grew up in a musical family. Her mother was a concert singer, her father was a cantor, and notably her aunt was Sophie Kurtzer, of Hazente

[148] Ron Keller, "Jean Gornish, Female Cantor."

fame.[149] She began to sing publicly when she was selected to sing in *The Story of a People*, which was about the Israeli-Arab conflict. She also sang with her father the cantor in weddings and concerts. It was at a wedding just after World War II that she met her husband Al Hausman, and they began their career working together in the Catskills "Borscht Belt." Initially, Bas Sheva sang mostly popular music of the day, though she did sing cantorial pieces while wearing a *kippa* in her sets.

Bas Sheva was a sensation across genres. She was a Yiddish Theater star, sang popular music, was a Hazente and sang liturgical music in a tenor octave, and even made an album of "exotica" as it has been termed with Lex Baxter. Called "The Passions," this album almost exclusively features Bas Sheva grunting, moaning, and making other various noises. Some people loved it for its high-fidelity quality and unique musical arrangements; others hated it. Said musical reviewer Frank Arganbright in the *Journal and Courier*, "An adventure in high fidelity, composed by Les Baxter… while the recording technique of the record is excellent, the material is terrible. To make matters worse, one has to listen to the moans of a woman, Bas Sheva… If you want to test your phonograph for its reproduction ability, play this, otherwise, don't listen."[150] Others praised the material, with Charles Menees of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* saying, "The singer is a talented gal with a name that certainly must be coined, Bas Sheva. Shall she be called Bas, or Miss Sheva? Whichever, she turns loose a full assortment of effects as she

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[149] Arianne Slack, "The Hazntes : The Life Stories of Sophie Kurtzer, Bas Sheva, Sheindele the Haznte, Perele Feig, Goldie Malavky & Fraydele Oysher."

[150] Frank Arganbright. "The Passions." *Journal and Courier*. February 6, 1954.

uses the solo voice as an instrument… the music itself, though, is compelling and for the most part evidences genius."[151] Considering that this reviewer did not recognize such a common Jewish name as Bas Sheva, it appears that he did not have an understanding of Jewish culture, nor, probably, did he know her from her Yiddish and liturgical singing. Or, potentially, this was sarcastic, and meant to mock her Hebraic name. Regardless, this album apparently lifted her from the confines of the Borscht Belt and into wider society. Bas Sheva appeared in everything from liturgical musical performances on the Ed Sullivan Show (twice!)[152] to "saucy" shows with "Dozens of Stars and Exquisite Girls,"[153] to Catskill Honeymoon, a movie set in the Borscht Belt.[154] Truly, Bas Sheva was a crossover star.

However, Bas Sheva faced pushback regarding her appearances on the Ed Sullivan Show, which took place on March 25th, 1956 and February 3rd, 1957.[155] The Orthodox Union of Rabbis, who had heard about Bas Sheva's upcoming 1957 performance, wrote a letter to the Ed Sullivan Show detailing the inappropriate nature of having a Jewish woman sing on television: especially without a head covering. The letter was ignored, and Bas Sheva closed the show without further backlash. This was one of the rare public objections regarding a performance by a Hazente.

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[151] Charles Menees, "Popular Recordings," *St. Louis Post Dispatch,* January 29, 1954.

[152] George Bourke, "Night Life," *The Miami Herald*, January 28, 1951.

[153] Unknown, "So Gay - So Saucy So Wonderful!," Daily News, January 19, 1955.

[154] Unknown, "Extra Tonite! Bas Sheva In Person," *Daily News*, February 24, 1950.

[155] Hayley Kobilinsky Poserow, "'Kol Ishah?'" A New Voice The Chazzantes."

(Left) Bas Sheva on the album of The Passions. Capitol Records, 1954.

(Right) Bas Sheva being billed as the "Star of Ed Sullivan's TV Show."

Miami Herald (Miami, Florida) May 10th, 1956

Bas Sheva in an advertisement for Catskill Honeymoon.

The Philadelphia Enquirer (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) September 17th, 1950

Bas Sheva Noted 'Female Cantor'

Bas Sheva, who can currently be seen on the Esquire screen, featured in "Catskill Honeymoon," is noted as the "female cantor."

She sings three numbers in the entertaining Yiddish-American revue-on-films. Her magnificent contralto renders "Vesti La Giubba," an aria usually attempted only by men.

Bas Sheva advertised as a female cantor who sings in a contralto voice.

Valley Times (North Hollywood, California) July 22nd, 1950

Bas Sheva advertised in a Dance Revue alongside "Dozens of Stars and Exquisite Girls."

Daily News (New York, New York) January 15th, 1955.

Bas Sheva had an impressive range as a singer which she used across genres. One newspaper clipping describes her as "something new in the entertainment world—a girl who can sing tenor operatic arias with a clear bel cantor voice, and can follow up with popular numbers or soprano hymns."[156] Her range was described in another for her

[156] George Bourke, "Night Life."

Borschtcapades show as "vocalizing in male cantor manner…"[157] You can hear this rich contralto (but also her mezzo soprano range) on her cantorial album entitled "Soul Of A People" which was released in 1953—a strikingly different tone and range than her popular music such as "Flame of Love" which was released by Capitol Records in 1955. Her popular music is straightforward, feminine, and western. Her cantorial record is distinctly eastern sounding and looking—even the cover of the album appears to be set in the Middle East. She sings primarily in her lower register and chest voice for this album, sounding distinctly androgynous or masculine depending on the song. And of course, her "Hebraic Chants," as Capitol Records called them, were anything but straightforward, with consistent *dreidels* and runs in her music. She sounds distinctly cantorial in these recordings—vastly different from her secular work.

Throughout her life, she was billed as a Hazente, a cantoress, a "woman cantor" and other monikers of that nature. This is particularly interesting because she had such a significant career outside of the cantorial and liturgical world, sometimes even appearing in clubs such as the Latin Quarter Night Club in Miami Beach, which billed itself as having the most beautiful dancers in the world. While Fraydele did sing non-liturgical music, it was all within the context of Jewish culture, mostly Yiddish theater. Jean Gornish sang secular music at a tavern in the early 1930s, but once she dubbed herself a Hazente, she no longer performed such music publicly. Bas Sheva began her career as a Jewish singer. Even so, she blew past the Yiddish world and into the world of the secular and even the salacious with her work as a cabaret singer and "The Passions" album. Bas

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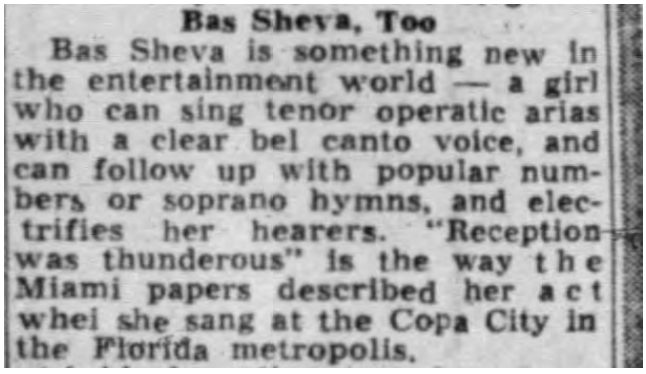
[157] Unknown, "Bas Sheva, Too," *The News*, September 12, 1952.

Sheva came from an Orthodox background, and despite her secular acclaim she was billed as a Hazente. No other Hazente had such secular success, and yet because she sang Jewish music in the style of other Hazentes at the time, she was considered one of them.

Bas Sheva's album, "Soul of a People"

Capitol Records, 1953



Bas Sheva, Too

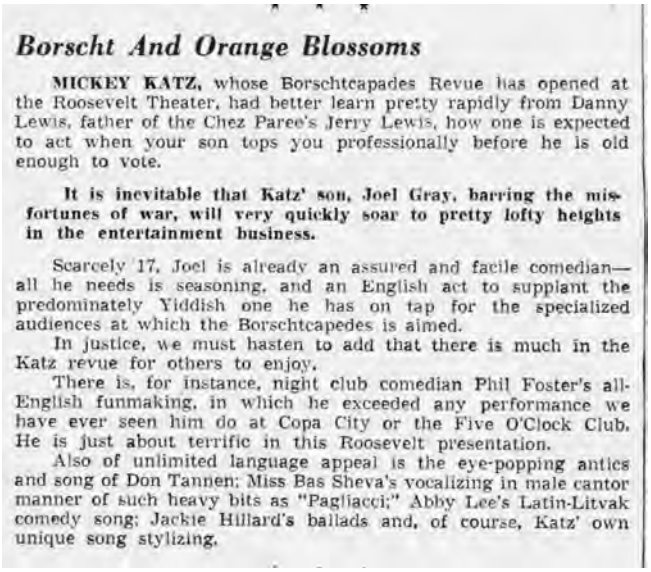
Bas Sheva is something new in the entertainment world — a girl who can sing tenor operatic arias with a clear bel canto voice, and can follow up with popular numbers or soprano hymns, and electrifies her hearers. "Reception was thunderous" is the way the Miami papers described her act whei she sang at the Copa City in the Florida metropolis.

Bas Sheva, both tenor and soprano.

The News (Paterson, New Jersey) September 12th, 1952

Bas Sheva does not appear in any of the publications I found in any form of physical cross-dress. Often, she is wearing an evening gown, or posing like a golden age movie star with a short yet feminine haircut. The only indication of her performing any sort of cross-dress is the donning of the *kippa* that took place when she sang liturgical pieces for

crowds. Though this is an instance of religious cross-dress, it is in a different category than her peers. The *kippa* was lace, distinctly feminine, more so a play on masculinity rather than an adoption of it. The only masculinity she donned in earnest was in the form of her voice, and while it was noticeable, she retained her femininity in ways her predecessors had not. *The Courier-Post* in Camden, New Jersey, even dubbed her in an article regarding the Borschtcapades in 1959 as "Bas Sheva, the curvaceous cantorial singer." This is an obvious play for both sex appeal and laughs. Cantorial singers of the day were rarely women, and often the women who did sing in the New York metro area as Hazentes at this time were less visibly curvaceous, as they often appeared in robes or a suit. A sexy, feminine Hazente was a novelty—thus, the quip was inserted in the article.



Borscht And Orange Blossoms

MICKEY KATZ, whose Borschtcapades Revue has opened at the Roosevelt Theater, had better learn pretty rapidly from Danny Lewis, father of the Chez Paree's Jerry Lewis, how one is expected to act when your son tops you professionally before he is old enough to vote.

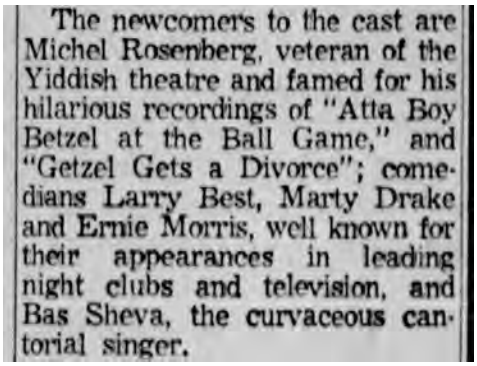
It is inevitable that Katz' son, Joel Gray, barring the misfortunes of war, will very quickly soar to pretty lofty heights in the entertainment business.

Scarcely 17, Joel is already an assured and facile comedian—all he needs is seasoning, and an English act to supplant the predominately Yiddish one he has on tap for the specialized audiences at which the Borschtcapedes is aimed.

In justice, we must hasten to add that there is much in the Katz revue for others to enjoy.

There is, for instance, night club comedian Phil Foster's all-English funmaking, in which he exceeded any performance we have ever seen him do at Copa City or the Five O'Clock Club. He is just about terrific in this Roosevelt presentation.

Also of unlimited language appeal is the eye-popping antics and song of Don Tannen; Miss Bas Sheva's vocalizing in male cantor manner of such heavy bits as "Pagliacci;" Abby Lee's Latin-Litvak comedy song; Jackie Hillard's ballads and, of course, Katz' own unique song stylizing.



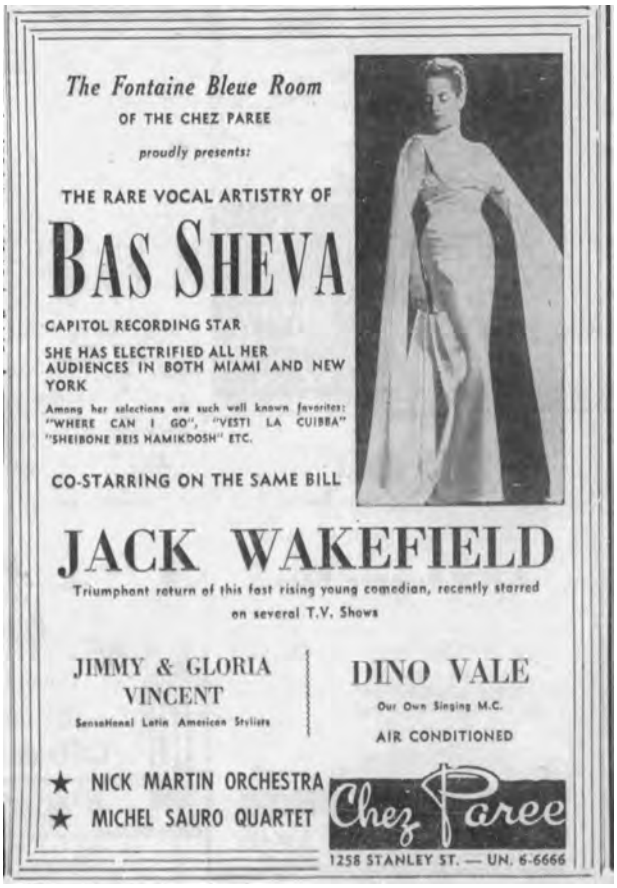
The newcomers to the cast are Michel Rosenberg, veteran of the Yiddish theatre and famed for his hilarious recordings of "Atta Boy Betzel at the Ball Game," and "Getzel Gets a Divorce"; comedians Larry Best, Marty Drake and Ernie Morris, well known for their appearances in leading night clubs and television, and Bas Sheva, the curvaceous cantorial singer.

(Left) Bas Sheva "vocalizing in male cantor manner."

The Miami Herald (Miami, Florida) January 28th, 1951

(Right) Bas Sheva, the curvaceous cantorial singer.

Courier-Post (Camden, New Jersey) January 17th, 1959



Bas Sheva billed in an elegant ballgown.

The Gazette (Montreal, Canada) June 14th, 1956

While Bas Sheva was extraordinarily famous and generally lived a successful life, she also had her challenges. She had inherited type 1 diabetes from her mother, was insulin dependent, and was losing vision by her thirties.[158] Doctors had advised her to stop performing to preserve her health, but Bas Sheva refused. Instead, she decided to take passage on a ship rather than an airplane to reach her destinations abroad.

[158] Arianne Slack, "The Hazntes : The Life Stories of Sophie Kurtzer, Bas Sheva, Sheindele the Haznte, Perele Feig, Goldie Malavky & Fraydele Oysher."

Unfortunately, this decision was one of her last. Bas Sheva became seasick aboard a luxury liner and went to the infirmary for medication. The medicine she took interacted with the insulin in her system and instantly killed her. She died at 34 years old, leaving behind her husband Al and their 7-year-old son.[159]

The legacy of Bas Sheva is one of varied professional endeavors and accomplishments, from the stage to the screen. Bas Sheva was a powerhouse of a performer who donned vocal cross-dress to enhance her cantorial music with authority, authenticity, and novelty, all the while maintaining her femininity and her own personality. Perhaps the most famous of all the Hazentes, she is to this day remembered fondly by Jews and non-Jews alike because of her discography with Capitol Records.

Perele Feig

Years Active ~1948- ~1966

Perele's headshot in *The Montreal Star* (Montreal, Quebec, Canada) on October 23rd, 1958.

[159] Hayley Kobilinsky Poserow, "'Kol Ishah?'" A New Voice The Chazzantes."

Perele Feig, otherwise known as the "Hungarian Hazente," was born on May 27th, 1910 and moved to the United States with her parents at the age of five.[160] Perele's father served as a service leader in their Borough Park synagogue, and her brother Joel became a famous conductor. Perele was inspired by the cantors she heard on the radio and learned to imitate them.

Perele's career as a Hazente began during a vacation in the Catskills, where she was discovered by Meyer Atkin, owner of the Avon Lodge, who told her that she should do something with her incredible voice. Perele took his advice and began singing for radio shows.

The first evidence of Perele's public singing career appears in 1948, which shows that Perele was slated to sing "songs" (though which songs we do not know) on WEVD at 8pm on January 31st, 1948.[161] There is no mention of her singing Jewish music specifically, though WEVD was a popular station for Jewish and Yiddish music at the time, with Freydele and Sheindele appearing regularly on that station for nearly a decade and a half before this paper was printed. At least one recording from WEVD remains, on which Perele sings Yishtabach by Berele Chagy.[162] Her voice is distinctly masculine and incredibly low on this recording, singing primarily below the staff. Her singing is

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[160] Arianne Slack, "The Hazntes : The Life Stories of Sophie Kurtzer, Bas Sheva, Sheindele the Haznte, Perele Feig, Goldie Malavky & Fraydele Oysher," 53.

[161] Unknown, "Hour By Hour On The Radio," *The Record*, January 31, 1948.

[162] As of February 2023, that recording can be found here: ttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UOXNNq41CE

perfectly clear and precise despite how low the notes are, and it would be difficult to tell her assigned sex from the recording alone, as her tone is so androgynous.

Perele primarily sang cantorial music and Yiddish folk songs, appearing in venues from the concert hall to the Yiddish stage. She toured the country singing her music, being advertised as the "only woman cantor in America," as all the Hazentes were at the time. According to one newspaper article, she even appeared on television, though what program and when is unknown.[163] Perele was billed across various publications as both a Hazente and a woman cantor, as well as an "interpreter of Jewish liturgical compositions" depending on who was publishing the article.

Notably, the only press photographs I could find of Perele were in cross-dress. Typically, the same photo is used in the papers of Perele in a *meiter* and robe, gazing to the left. It appears that her masculinity was not only shown in her costume of choice, but also in her personality. Cantor Jacob Mendelson, a family friend of Perele and her husband, described her as very masculine in an interview while at the same time saying that she "held herself like a diva."[164] In an interview with Jeremiah Lockwood, Cantor Mendelson said that she even "drove like a man."[165] The way Cantor Mendelson describes Perele I believe is not about gender expression, though she did cross-dress for publicity photos. In the same interview with Lockwood, Cantor Mendelson said she "never dressed in a casual way, always wore heels." That is to say, she had aspects of

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[163] Unknown. "Woman Cantor To Sing Here." St. Louis Jewish Light. April 29, 1964.

[164] Jacob Mendelson, *Interview with Jacob Mendelson*, Audio, 2022.

[165] Jeremiah Lockwood, "Memories of Khazente Perele Feig," The UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, March 23, 2022, https://schoolofmusic.ucla.edu/memories-of-khazente-perele-feig/.

femininity in the way that she carried herself on an everyday basis. Despite this, her voice was undoubtedly masculine which was positive in her career field, and she was dressing the part by wearing the *meiter* and the robe. It was both a novelty and crucially important that her voice was indistinguishable from a man, and that her wardrobe supported her voice. At the time Perele was working, this was the Hazente wardrobe—it wouldn't be until Mimi Sloan that a Hazente decided to put down these religious articles of clothing.

Towards the end of her career, Perele and her husband Jack Schwartz spent time in Florida, and Perele would perform at Jewish venues such as kosher hotels there. She continued to sing until she grew ill in the final years of her life. Perele was on dialysis from 1983 to 1987 and passed away Father's Day of 1987. [166]

Other Hazentes and Woman Cantors Pre-Investiture

Throughout my research, I took note of instances of other Hazentes, as well as pre-investiture woman cantors that served pulpit roles, that were outside of the scope of this thesis. I feel it is important to include some information about them to further contextualize the world that the previous five Hazentes lived in, which shall do in the following section.

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[166] Arianne Slack, "The Hazntes : The Life Stories of Sophie Kurtzer, Bas Sheva, Sheindele the Haznte, Perele Feig, Goldie Malavky & Fraydele Oysher," 59.

Gladys Sellers / Goldye Mae Steiner / Goldye Di Schwarze Chasente

Years Active 1924-1939

Goldye Mae Steiner was the second known Hazente, becoming active just four years after Sophie Kurtzer in 1924. Goldye, born Gladys Sellers, was a black woman originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She was a critically acclaimed singer on the Yiddish and the secular stage, and even had a few appearances on Broadway. Amazingly, Goldye even cross-dressed, wearing a *meiter* and a robe in publicity photos. Despite the cross-dress, she was billed as a soprano.

Goldye is outside of the scope of this research because she was not Jewish, rather born a Baptist.[167] While Goldye was a fixture in the Yiddish speaking world for almost a decade and a half, her story is one that is vastly different than her Hazente peers. She was not born into, nor did she marry into, a cantorial or rabbinic family. She was not brought up with Jewish values, nor did she have to find a way through the Jewish community as a woman from within. She did not come from a Jewish background, though her story of the mythical African Jewish tribe she came from is entertaining and inspiring. She, as far as we know, was not a Hazente out of genuine love of liturgical music due to a Jewish

[167] Henry Sapoznik, "(467) African American Cantors - Henry Sapoznik - YouTube," Youtube, May 7, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/.

upbringing, but rather solely a performer and lover of hazzanut, and her music was apparently very convincing and sincere.

Just as Jazz became popular "ethnic" music during its time, so too did the Golden Age of Hazzanut have its moment of popularity as "ethnic" music. In Goldye, we see a different kind of crossover than what we saw in Chapter 2. For the most part, the crossover existed in black Jazz Singers sang cantorial music. In this instance, we see a black non-Jewish woman crossing over into the Jewish cantorial space.

Goldye

Both above from the *Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

March 9th, 1925

Sylvia Lieberman/Sadie Richman

Years Active: 1937-1942

During my search for Hazentes, I made some exciting discoveries. I looked through several newspaper archives, primarily the *New York Times* and newspapers.com. While I conducted this research, I found that the Hazentes we know and love were not the only ones of their time. Most notable of those I found was Sylvia Lieberman. Sylvia was a Chicago area Hazente who toured with a cantor named Aaron Richman, popping up in St. Louis area newspapers in 1937, where she is not only mentioned, but shown in a photograph. She is billed, like many if not all Hazentes, as the only woman cantor in America. A Hazente of another name toured with the same Cantor Aaron Richman just a few years after—his wife, Sadie Richman, who I believe is the same person as Sylvia Lieberman.

Cantoress Richman apparently was a hot commodity in Chicago, as a draft card for her husband lists her as working at "various Chicago synagogues." While I have not found any recordings, nor did I find her pictured in any state of cross dress, nor is there any mention of her range in these clippings, this was still a significant discovery, as it showed that Hazentes were a phenomenon that was not exclusive to those who achieved fame.

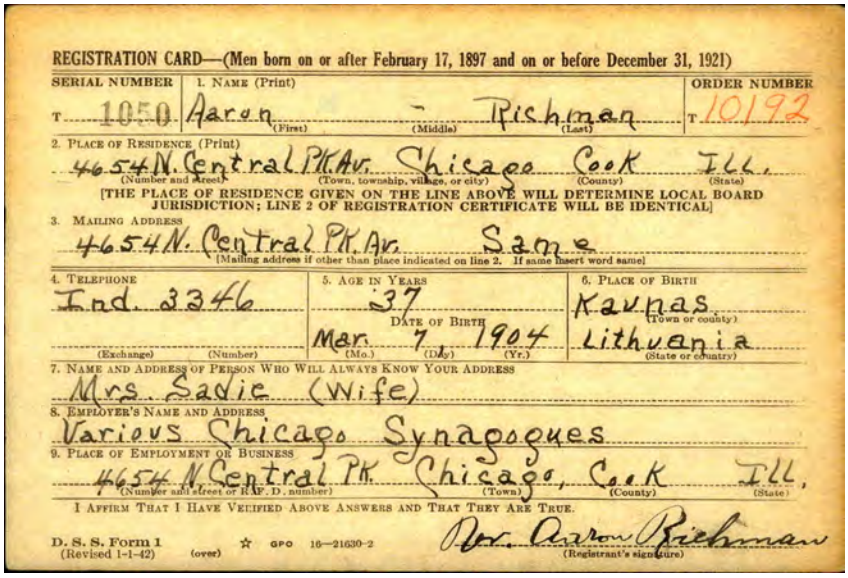
WOMAN CANTOR CHANTS HERE

—Staff Photo

Miss Sylvia Lieberman, the first American-born woman cantor, snapped as she chanted a Hebrew prayer yesterday afternoon at a meeting of the Zionist Organization of St. Louis at the Shaare Emeth Temple. In the background, their faces denoting their approval, are (left to right) William H. Goldman, treasurer of the organization; Prof. Gustave Klausner of St. Louis University and David Berenstein, head of the Zionist group here.

Sylvia Lieberman performing at my home congregation of Shaare Emeth in St. Louis, Missouri.

St. Louis Globe-Democrat (St. Louis, Missouri) December 13th, 1937



REGISTRATION CARD—(Men born on or after February 17, 1897 and on or before December 31, 1921)

SERIAL NUMBER: T 1050 | 1. NAME (Print): Aaron (First) – (Middle) Richman (Last) | ORDER NUMBER: T 10192

2. PLACE OF RESIDENCE (Print): 4654 N. Central Pk Av. (Number and street) Chicago (Town, township, village, or city) Cook (County) Ill. (State)

[THE PLACE OF RESIDENCE GIVEN ON THE LINE ABOVE WILL DETERMINE LOCAL BOARD JURISDICTION; LINE 2 OF REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE WILL BE IDENTICAL]

3. MAILING ADDRESS: 4654 N. Central Pk. Av. Same
[Mailing address if other than place indicated on line 2. If same insert word same]

4. TELEPHONE: Ind. 2346 (Exchange) (Number)

5. AGE IN YEARS: 37
DATE OF BIRTH: Mar. 7, 1904 (Mo.) (Day) (Yr.)

6. PLACE OF BIRTH: Kaunas (Town or county) Lithuania (State or country)

7. NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS: Mrs. Sadie (Wife)

8. EMPLOYER'S NAME AND ADDRESS: Various Chicago Synagogues

9. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS: 4654 N. Central Pk. (Number and street or R.F.D. number) Chicago, (Town) Cook (County) Ill. (State)

I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.

Rev. Aaron Richman (Registrant's signature)

D. S. S. Form 1 (Revised 1-1-42) (over) ☆ GPO 16—21630-2

The World War II draft card of Cantor Aaron Richman. Sadie Richman is listed as working at "Various Chicago synagogues." Circa 1940.

Mimi Sloan

Years Active ~1963- ~1988

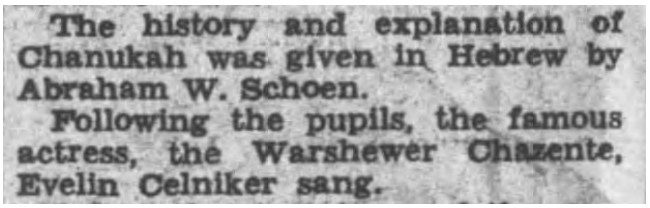
Mimi Sloan, perhaps the last Hazente, performed just before and through the beginning of female investiture into the cantorate. She does not fit into the scope of my thesis for a few reasons—she did not cross-dress vocally, nor did she cross-dress physically. However, she was an important figure in Yiddish and Liturgical music, even receiving permission from Moishe Oysher's widow Theodora to sing his music.[168] She released two albums of Hazzanut, all Moishe Oysher music likely in the late 1960s, though exact release dates are unknown. She was a known Yiddish theater star, Broadway star, and radio star. She did not consider herself a Hazente, and she was rarely billed as a Hazente. However, she made significant contributions to the world of cantorial music sung by women.

Others

As I was searching keywords to find articles relating to the Hazentes, I found mentions of multiple women other than the aforementioned who billed themselves as Cantoress or Hazente, including Sylvia Lieberman/Sadie Richman as mentioned above. However, there were even more whose names I only came across a single time during my research. The first was Evelin Celniker, who billed herself in 1934 as the Warshewer

[168] Hayley Kobilinsky Poserow, "'Kol Ishah?'" A New Voice The Chazzantes."

Chazente. The next was Molly Zeicheck, "the only woman cantoress in the northwest," who was billed as a contralto in 1940. The third was Anna Steinman, "famous cantoress" who was mentioned in a 1961 newspaper. It seems as if to some extent there were local Hazentes across the country, though little is known about them outside of these publications. Apparently, the Hazente business was attractive to lots of women before they could be invested as cantors in institutions such as Hebrew Union College.


The history and explanation of Chanukah was given in Hebrew by Abraham W. Schoen.

Following the pupils, the famous actress, the Warshewer Chazente, Evelin Celniker sang.

"The Warshewer Chazente"

The Morning Call (Paterson, New Jersey) December 8th, 1934


MUSICAL PROGRAM AT CONG. DEGEL ISRAEL

Myron Sandler, 19-year old violinist, will give a recital at Temple Degel srael, 1801 N. Eleventh street, on January 21, which will be open to the public. While at Madison he won several scholarships and many critics have acclaimed him as one of the finest violinists of the city.

At this same meeting Mrs. Molly Zeicheck, contralto, will sing. She is the only woman cantoress in the northwest. She was trained by her father in Europe, who was one of the leading cantors of his time.

As a guest speaker, Mr. Ben Rothman will deliver a short talk on "Jew and His Needs."


Israel Center Stages Concert

Israel Center is sponsoring a concert for Bar Mitzvah of Israel Saturday at 8:00 p.m. with a group of outstanding entertainers.

Among the cast are Arnold Jurasky. concert violinist, originally with New York and Los Angeles symphony orchestras Eugenia Bruman, concert pianist, former accompanist of Lily Pons; Anna Steinman, famous cantoress and fold singer and Ben Flack, operatic tenor.

(Left) Molly Zeicheck, contralto, woman cantoress.

The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle (Milwaukee, Wisconsin) January 19th, 1940

(Right) Anna Steinman, famous cantoress.

Lake Elsinore Valley Sun-Tribune (Lake Elsinore, California) April 20th, 1961

Woman Cantors Pre-Investiture

Julie Rosewald

Years Active: 1894-1891

Julie Rosewald, a German woman born to an Obercantor and raised in his musical family, was the first woman cantor in America going back as far as 1894. In Germany, she had studied in a conservatory, and later returned to Europe after moving to America to continue her musical studies. She began touring the United States in 1872 and broke into her opera career in 1875 to rave reviews.[169] She also maintained a solo career as early as 1880, even fundraising for Jewish causes with her singing voice. In 1894, Julie and her husband Jacob moved to San Francisco in order to improve Jacob's health. As soon as she landed, she was called upon for a musical emergency: the cantor at Temple Emanu-El of San Francisco had died merely weeks before Rosh Hashana, and the synagogue needed to find a new soloist. Julie agreed, and took on the cantorial role, dubbed as "Cantor Soprano" by her congregation. Though she was a woman, it seems that the rabbis in her synagogue had no issues with her sex—though she was brought on in an emergent situation, she stayed on as their cantor until 1891. Julie was the reflection of the feminist "New Woman"—a business owner, a successful artist, a world traveler, and yes, even a cantor.

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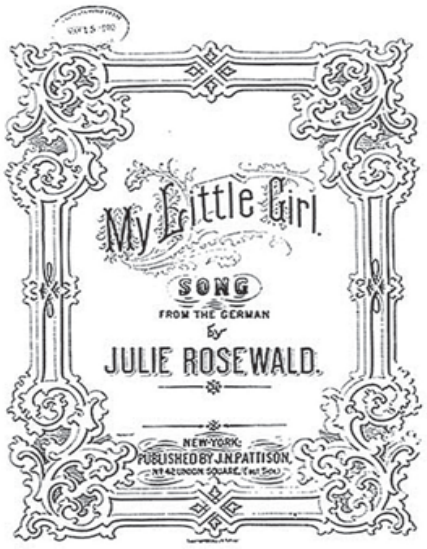
[169] Judith S. Pinnolis, "'Cantor Soprano' Julie Rosewald: The Musical Career of a Jewish American 'New Woman,'" 2010, 11.



(Left) Facsimile of Julie Rosewald's autograph. William Smythe Babcock Mathews, ed., A Hundred Years of Music in America: an Account of Musical Effort in America during the Past Century (Chicago, G.L. Howe, 1889), 201.

(Right) Song sheet frontispiece, Julie Rosewald, My Little Girl, Song from the German (New York: J.N. Pattison, 1883)

Betty Robbins

Years Active: 1955- ~2000

Betty Robbins was widely advertised as the first practicing woman cantor before Judith Pinnolis discovered information about Julie Rosewald in 2010. She is the second woman to work in a synagogue as a cantor far as we know. Betty, born on April 9th, 1924 in Cavala, Greece, moved to Poland with her family in 1928. Betty was determined to join the boys choir at her synagogue, singing loudly from the balcony until the cantor agreed to let her sing with the choir if she wore a boys haircut. She did so, and sang in

that choir for six years, until 1938.[170] Betty's family went into hiding in 1938 because of the rise of Nazism. Eventually, their family fled to Sydney, Australia. Betty met her husband Sheldon Robbins in April 1942. He was a corporal in the medical division U.S. Army Air Corps. They married in 1943, and Betty moved to America with her new husband. There, she became a member of Temple Avodah, a Reform Jewish congregation in Oceanside, Long Island, New York. Here, opportunity struck for Betty. They were without a Cantor for the 1955 high holidays, and the board of trustees unanimously appointed her Cantor of the congregation, to great fanfare. A front-page article ran in the *New York Times* saying that she may be the first woman cantor in history (though it was later discovered that this was untrue.) Betty went on to earn a teaching certificate from Hebrew Union College, used music therapy with special needs children, tutored B'nei Mitzvah students, and taught religious school. She even officiated religious services on cruise ships.[171] Betty worked as a cantor for the rest of her life—achieving the goal of an eight year old Jewish girl who just wanted to sing.

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[170] Sandra Robbins, "Betty Robbins," Jewish Women's Archive, accessed November 12, 2022, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/robbins-betty.

[171] Sandra Robbins.

Woman Named Temple Cantor, Perhaps First in Jewish History

Young Mother of 4 Selected Unanimously by Board of Long Island Congregation

Special to The New York Times.

MASSAPEQUA, L. I., Aug. 2—A young matron of this commuting village on the south shore of Long Island has been appointed cantor of Temple Avodah, a Reform congregation at Oceanside.

A spokesman for the School of Sacred Music of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion said she might well be the first woman cantor in 5,000 years of Jewish history. A cantor is a ritual singer, not part of a choir, who assists the rabbi with services in a synagogue.

The new cantor, Mrs. Sheldon Robbins, will sing her first service on Sept. 15, the eve of Rosh ha-Shanah, or Jewish New Year, one of the two holiest days of the Hebrew calendar. She was appointed by unanimous vote of the board of trustees of the temple last night.

Mrs. Robbins learned all the principal services by heart long ago. She was born in Greece of Russian parents thirty-one years ago. She received religious education in Danzig, Poland, and was soloist in the choir of the German synagogue in that city for six years.

With her parents, she fled the Hitler invasion of Poland in 1939 and emigrated to Australia,

Continued on Page 47, Column 3

The New York Times
Mrs. Sheldon Robbins

New York Times, New York, NY. August 3rd, 1955. Front page.

Susan Mandell

While I was looking through the newspaper archives, I came across a woman cantor from the pre-investiture 20th century whose name I had never heard before and for whom I had not seen articles written outside of the newspapers of the day. Susan Mandell, billed for years in newspapers as "Cantoress Mrs. John Mandell," was the cantor at Temple Emanu-El in Edison, New Jersey from 1964-1978.[172] I was able to speak to Susan on Zoom in November of 2022. When I asked Susan about being billed as this title in the newspaper, she said when she was working as a cantor, she only used her own name. She

[172] Unknown. "Susan Mandell." *The Central New Jersey Home News*. June 29, 1983.

was billed as "Mrs. John Mandell" because that was the custom at the time.[173] Susan was not aware of other woman cantors such as Betty Robbins or Julie Rosewald, nor was she aware of any of the Hazentes that were active at the time. She believed that she was the first woman cantor in America. Very likely she was the third woman in history to serve as a pulpit cantor.

Susan grew up in a Conservative Jewish home. She was active in her synagogue, and while she was in college she worked as a music teacher and Jewish educator. When she was younger, she thought it would be wonderful to be a cantor. However, she did not think it was possible due to her sex, so she did not pursue it. Susan was a talented coloratura soprano, singing in recitals throughout her college years. She was told she should pursue the opera, though she turned that down. Susan even tried out, and was offered the part, in two Broadway shows. She turned them both down at the request of her father who thought Broadway was unseemly for a young woman. To the thrill of her parents, Susan was noticed by Temple Emanu-El of Edison, New Jersey in her senior year of college, when one of the rabbis there heard her sing at Douglass College in her recital. The rabbi told her that she was fantastic and that they were looking to hire a cantor, so she should consider auditioning. She replied to the rabbi, "But I'm a woman!" The rabbi told her that they were Reform and were willing to accept her as their cantor. Susan tried out before the board, did a mock shabbat service, and then was offered the job of cantoress. Susan notes in a 1975 interview that she was a cantor in a synagogue

[173] Susan Mandell, Interview with Susan Mandell, Zoom, November 13, 2022.

"before women's lib[eration]"[174] Though Susan did wear a *tallit* and a *kippa*, traditionally men's religious clothing, Susan did not seem to be concerned about the implied gender presentation of those ritual items of clothing. In an interview in 1975, she said that this religious apparel, though traditionally worn by men, are "cantors' apparel," which is why she wore them. Susan even had her robes custom made in New York so that they would be as nice as possible.[175] Once, a woman came up to her after services and was very upset because she was referred to as cantoress instead of cantor. She said that she had a job to do, and this was merely the name applied to her job. She "couldn't care less" if she was called cantoress or cantor. However, she advocated strongly for women in the cantorate, saying that many reform women were taking up the mantle. She even mentioned that there was one woman in Cantorial School in New York City—of course, this was Barbara Ostfeld, though she was not named in this 1975 article.[176]

Susan took her job as cantor of Temple Emanu-El very seriously. She also took being a mother very seriously, spending as much time as possible with her four children when she was not working in the synagogue. As her children grew up, they attended her services, and were "very proud" of their mother being a cantor.[177] Susan helped to officiate the b'nei mitzvahs of all four of her children, and sang a Y'varech'cha that she composed at all of their weddings. Susan said she did not face consistent difficulties as a

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[174] Ann Ledesma, "Cantoress Finds Job at Temple Emanu-El Fulfilling, Rewarding," *The Central New Jersey Home News*, February 4, 1975.

[175] Susan Mandell, Interview with Susan Mandell.

[176] Ann Ledesma, "Cantoress Finds Job at Temple Emanu-El Fulfilling, Rewarding."

[177] Susan Mandell, Interview with Susan Mandell.

woman cantor, but she did run into trouble a few times due to her pregnancies. She had four children in seven years, all during her time as a cantor. She gave birth to one of her children on Simchat Torah. During that high holiday season, right before she was due to give birth, Susan said that the congregation was quite worried that she would go into labor and be unable to finish the services! Susan also faced difficulties as a symbolic exemplar as a pregnant woman. She remarked that cantors were seen as "holy," and that she faced minor difficulties with this while she was pregnant and serving in her congregation. Once, someone came up to her after a service while she was pregnant and told her that the service was wonderful, and then asked, exasperated, "but who could have done that to you?!"[178]

Susan's love for her children is also what made her decide to step away from the cantorate. She wanted to be able to take vacations with her children, and her job at the synagogue made that difficult. She left her pulpit in 1978 and after this worked as an administrator for her husband John who was an orthopedic chiropractor. Though she left her formal role in the cantorate, she still leads Passover seders in her community in Boca Raton, and some of her congregants even moved to the same community. They still call her "cantor."[179] When I asked Susan what she thought about women being ordained now, she said that she thought it was wonderful that more women were taking part in this tradition, and she is glad that Judaism is catching up and learning that women are important members of the clergy, too.

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[178] Susan Mandell, Interview with Susan Mandell.

[179] Susan Mandell, Interview with Susan Mandell.

Susan went on to have a presence in the Jewish community beyond her synagogue. After she retired from her pulpit position at Temple Emanuel El, she was installed as President of the Jewish Federation of Northern Middlesex County in June of 1983—the first female president of that group.[180] She served a second term when her local federation merged with another one in the state.[181] She even ran for District Assembly in Metuchen—only the second woman to seek nomination in the 18th District of New Jersey,[182] though she decided against accepting the role and getting into politics because of the "dishonesty" of politicians on both sides.[183] She currently serves on the board of Stand With Us Southeast, and is a proud supporter of Israel, where she visited with her husband John thirteen times.

Susan Mandell did not and does not consider herself a feminist, but rather "just a person." She said that she did not push any particular movement, but rather believed that women could do anything that they set their mind to, and that she used her God-given talents to do what she thought was right and encouraged other women to do the same. When Susan would take time off from her pulpit position, she found other women liturgical singers to substitute in her absence, and she believes that this helped shift the perceptions of her male rabbinical counterparts and their thoughts on women in the cantorate. Susan believes that she helped to influence people within and outside of her congregation regarding women's capability to be cantors, and feels as though she made a

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[180] Unknown. "Susan Mandell." *The Central New Jersey Home News*. June 29, 1983.

[181] Susan Mandell.

[182] Unknown. "Metuchen." *The Central New Jersey Home News*. March 6, 1994.

[183] Susan Mandell.

tangible impact on the Jewish world. She is proud to have been in the first cohort of women cantors. Susan Mandell currently resides in Boca Raton, Florida.

Cantoress finds job at Temple Emanu-El fulfilling, rewarding

Pains again force 2 pupils from school

The Central Jersey News (New Brunswick, New Jersey) February 4th, 1975.

Temple Emanu-El

EDISON — Rabbi Abraham Sheingold will officiate at Sabbath service today at 8:30 p.m. in Temple Emanu-El, the Reform congregation. Cantoress Mrs. John Mandell will chat the liturgical melodies.

The Courier-News (Bridgewater, New Jersey) October 21st, 1966.

Others

While doing this research, I found a few mentions of pre-investiture women cantors who performed in pulpit roles other than the three mentioned above.

The first I found was Beverly Cohen, a 19-year-old girl named cantor of Temple Sholom in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada in 1969.[184] She was discovered while singing in a production of "My Fair Lady" for her university. A Temple Sholom official said that she may be the only female cantor in North America—however, at the time both Betty Robbins and Susan Mandell were actively working as cantors. I could not determine how long Beverly worked at Temple Sholom, though it was for at least two years.[185]

The second woman I found was named Thelma Grossberg, a cantoress who officiated in 1967 at the same synagogue Susan Mandell worked in, Congregation Emanu-El in Edison, New Jersey.[186] However, I found only one mention of her in the newspaper records.

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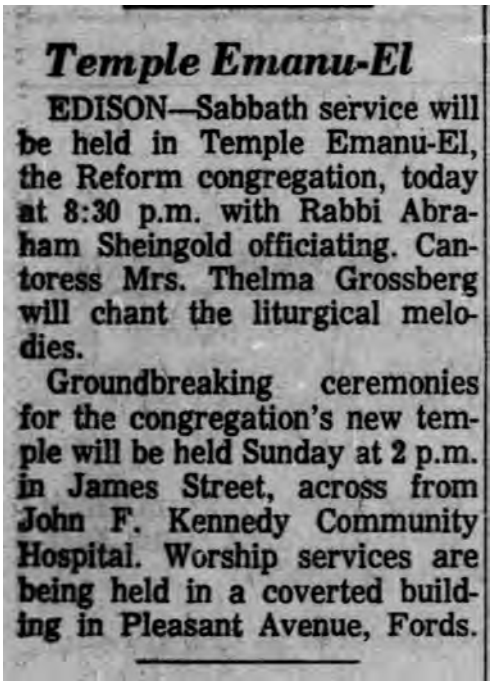
[184] Unknown. "19-Year-Old Cantoress? Canada's 1st Female Cantor." *St. Louis Jewish Light*. October 8, 1969.

[185] Unknown, "Event Will Feature Only Female Cantor," *Edmonton Journal*, January 25, 1971.

[186] Unknown, "Temple Emanu-El," *The Courier-News*, September 15, 1967.



Temple Emanu-El

EDISON—Sabbath service will be held in Temple Emanu-El, the Reform congregation, today at 8:30 p.m. with Rabbi Abraham Sheingold officiating. Cantoress Mrs. Thelma Grossberg will chant the liturgical melodies.

Groundbreaking ceremonies for the congregation's new temple will be held Sunday at 2 p.m. in James Street, across from John F. Kennedy Community Hospital. Worship services are being held in a coverted building in Pleasant Avenue, Fords.

The Courier News (Bridgewater, New Jersey) September 15th, 1967

19-Year-Old Cantoress? Canada's 1st Female Cantor

WINNIPEG — (JTA) — Nineteen-year-old Beverly Cohen, Winnipeg, a French major at the University of Manitoba, earned the distinction of being named Canada's first female cantor. Her appointment was announced by Temple Sholom here.

Miss Cohen, a mezzo soprano and prize-winning pianist, sang leading roles in three Gilbert & Sullivan operattas while in high school and appeared in the univeristy's production of "My Fair Lady." She was the winner of the French government award in first-year French at the university. A Temple Sholom official said Miss Cohen may be the only female cantor in North America.

St. Louis Jewish Light Blankets the Jewish Community

St. Louis Jewish Light (St. Louis, Missouri) October 8th, 1969

Chapter 5: At the Intersection of Queer Culture and the Hazentes

The Hazentes became popular during a time where gender subversion was an accepted form of entertainment, and they benefitted from this. In New York City alone, there had been instances of public subversion of gender as early as the 1870s with the fairy hotels and lounges that took place in the Bowery. These gender subversions continued to expand to reach both the secular and the Yiddish stage, and they also gained a foothold in Greenwich Village as Bohemians and homosexuals alike moved into the neighborhood. Sometimes this took the form of full cross-dress, such as the fairies or drag queens in this era, and other times these influences came up in instances such as the Pansy Craze. While the gay men of the Pansy Craze didn't always cross-dress, the gender subversion and feminization of these men were the crux of the entertainment, and pansies delighted people on stage and screen for years. While this did not constitute acceptance of homosexuality or gender subversion (quite the opposite,) these public displays helped the American populace grow more accustomed to LGBTQ+ individuals. The majority of the American Jewish population were in New York City during this time, and this included the Hazentes.

While not every Hazente was born in or lived exclusively in New York City, all of them spent significant time in New York City. All the Hazentes performed in New York City, and many of them sang on WEVD, the New York radio station that catered to ethnic music of all kinds, but particularly Yiddish and Jewish music. Additionally, about half of the Hazentes, including Sheindele, Freydele, and Bas Sheva, spent significant time in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. While there wasn't as much of a pansy or gender subversion movement in Philadelphia, two things were present at the time that allowed

the Hazentes to thrive in Philadelphia: national media such as newspapers and radio, and the Jewish work that took place there because of the Hebrew Sunday School movement that had been present for at least a hundred years by the time they were young women. National media was crucial because it broadcasted what was going on in larger cities out into other parts of the country. This, of course, included the bohemian, feminist, and queer movements that were taking place in New York City. Greenwich Village regularly made national news as a hedonistic capital of America. Mae West and her scandalous plays, which at least once featured cross-dress, consistently made national papers for their scandals. Because New York City was a national topic of interest, the movements that were going on there were able to spread and influence Americans outside of the city borders.

First Wave Feminism also allowed for women to become liturgical interpreters. All the Hazentes were living in a man's world as liturgical singers, so much so that the initial batch of Hazentes needed to don masculinity in order to be "legitimate" cantors, even if they were not *davening* on a synagogue bimah as an officiant. Even as later Hazentes did not bill themself in cross-dress or with any sort of discernible masculinity in English speaking publications, Jewish publications still billed them in cross-dress, and their androgyny remained present within their singing and recordings in the contralto range. All these women adopted a low vocal range, even if this was not their natural range, such as in the instance of Bas Sheva, who was billed both as a soprano and as a tenor. They were imitating the cantors of the time—all of those, other than the three noted above, were men. Masculinity was a legitimizing factor for the Hazentes, and even when it was unpopular in the English-speaking world, they maintained it due to its popularity in

Jewish spaces. However, it was not just Hazentes who were taking on masculinity and using it to promote themselves as women.

During the time of the Hazentes, many white women began to work outside of the home, and thus began to wear pants and cut their hair short. To some, this was a way to convey confidence as well as competence. As the 1926 song "Masculine Women, Feminine Men" sung by Irving Kaufman recounts, "Girls were girls and boys were boys when I was a tot / now we don't know who is who, or even what's what!" Women's suffrage had passed five years before this song was published. Women started working, voting, and even drinking and smoking publicly once prohibition began—all things typically only done by men. This song complains that gender expectations were shifting in both directions—women were becoming more powerful and masculine, and men were allowing their femininity to show through, in part thanks to 40+ years of fairy precedent in New York City. Gender roles were shifting, and the Hazentes, alongside other women who were working at the time, took advantage of this shift.

Feminism allowed this push forward into the cantorate for our three woman cantors mentioned above. Julie Rosewald was a noted "New Woman" of first wave feminism. She was a world traveler, an accomplished artist, and a pulpit cantor for almost ten years. Though she entered the cantorate by request and not by her own choice, it is indicative of the world she was living in that she was asked to become a cantor. The fact that she remained on the pulpit for the long term showed the progressive values of the time, as well. Betty Robbins too entered the cantorate at the request of a synagogue, though she very much wanted to sing liturgical music since she was a young child. Susan Mandell also entered the cantorate through recruitment of a local rabbi, though she too wanted to

be a cantor, but she never thought it would be possible. In some of these scenarios, women were seen as suitable in these roles until a "real" cantor came along—that is to say, a man. Susan Mandell was told that she would be accepted as a woman cantor, however, because her congregation was Reform. All three of the aforementioned women maintained their pulpit roles for the long term. Julie Rosewald served for nearly a decade. Betty Robbins worked as a cantor for the rest of her life. Susan Mandell worked in her pulpit position for fourteen years, and continues to officiate Passover services in Boca Raton to this day. Whether or not these women identified themselves and their actions as feminist is irrelevant, as the public opinion due to the feminist movement had shifted so radically that these women were able to work in synagogues decades, if not close to a century, before woman cantors were being invested at Hebrew Union College. This shift in status was directly influenced by the feminist movements that were taking place at the time—First Wave feminism for Julie and Betty, Second Wave feminism for Susan.

It is also worth noting that there are a few reasons that the Hazentes may have been accepted in forms of cross-dress in Jewish society even when secular society had deemed it unacceptable after the Hays Code went into effect in the mid 1930s. At this point, Jews had been cross-dressing for centuries on at least one day a year on Purim. Beyond that, many Jews in America were exposed to gender subversion and cross-dressing in large cities in America, primarily New York. By the mid 1930s when the Hays Code was enacted, there were Jewish forms of cross-dress, specifically for the Yiddish stage and in the form of the Hazentes. Jews did not see these women or these actors as hedonistic or overtly sexual; quite the opposite. Hazentes were seen as pious women who were singing Jewish music the only way they knew how—like men. Yiddish theater actors including

Freydele Oysher were not cross-dressing for reasons of gender or sexuality, but rather for Jewish themed entertainment. None of this was seen as overtly queer due to the Jewish osmosis that was taking place at the time. It was only natural for these forms of entertainment to spring up, as Jews have been taking source material from our surroundings for thousands of years and making it Jewish.

Due to the convergence of multiple factors, including American queer culture of the 20th century, the first and second wave feminist movements, Jewish acculturation in America, and interpretation of Jewish law from the time, one may conclude that the climate of the time allowed for Jewish women to take on status in Jewish life traditionally only reserved for men, either as liturgical singers on the stage or as liturgical singers in synagogues. The Hazentes were able to cross-dress both religiously and in a Yiddish context because of the climate of the time or the prior decades, and they were able to continue to perform in this way while the LGBTQ+ movement was underground from the 1930s to the 1960s, as their gender expression was not due exclusively to sexuality or gender identity, but rather had to do with religiosity and what legitimized religious expression at the time.

Early women cantors benefitted more from feminism than from queer movements at the time, but they too were products of their climate and time. Each of them, independently of one another, were brought into the cantorial fold by their local rabbis who needed cantors and believed that these three women could do that job. These rabbis had seen the roles of women change in their societies, and had changed their perspectives of women due to the feminist movements.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The Hazentes remained popular long enough to see the first woman cantor, Barbara Ostfeld, be invested at Hebrew Union College in 1975. Many of the Hazentes wanted to be cantors, others did not. Regardless, there is evidence that their cantorial work influenced at least a few people to believe that women should become cantors. When I spoke to Cantor Jack Mendelson regarding Perele Feig, he said that part of the reason he voted to allow women into the Cantors Assembly is because he saw Perele sing *hazzanut*, and he knew that women could be effective cantors.[187]

While the Hazentes had influence on at least some cantors from a generation ago, today they are largely unknown. I speak to younger colleagues regularly who have never heard of these women and are surprised to learn what they achieved in their time. I did not know about the Hazentes until Cantor Faith Steinsnyder told me about these women during a coaching in 2019. When I asked if there was any relation to the cultural climate at the time, including early feminism and the Pansy Craze as two examples, she did not know, as nobody had put these women into the context of the world in which they lived. My goal with this thesis is to provide as much of that context as possible.

After the Hazentes fell out of fashion in Jewish popular culture, non-cantorial Jewish liturgical singers exerted an important cultural influence on the cantorate. This cohort includes Debbie Friedman, Merri Arian, and even Barbara Streisand, among many others. Debbie Friedman had such an influence on the Reform cantorial world that they named the Hebrew Union College School of Sacred Music after her even though she was not a

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[187] Jacob Mendelson, *Interview with Jacob Mendelson*.

cantor. Merri Arian, close friend of Debbie Friedman, continues to teach at Hebrew Union College to this day, though beginning in 2023 she will reduce her time at the college to part time. And of course, Barbara Streisand gave the Janowski "Avinu Malkeinu" a new life after she recorded the song and released it on her album "Higher Ground" in 1997. Barbara also took a page from the Hazentes' book when she performed as a cross-dressing Yeshiva student in Yentl in 1983, a nod to the continued acceptance in Jewish society of cross-dress and gender subversion decades after it popped up on Yiddish Broadway.

On May 7th, 2023, I alongside my colleagues Jordan Goldstein (they/he) and Ze'evi Tovlev (they/them) will be ordained as cantors. The three of us will be in the first cohort of nonbinary cantors, as well as the first cohort of transgender cantors, to ever exist. While there has not yet been a history of transgender or nonbinary cantors in any Jewish movement, there has been a history of gender subversion in the cantorate for over 100 years thanks to these incredible women. Jordan, Ze'evi, and I will be standing on their shoulders come ordination day. I am honored and privileged to be part of the next chapter in the story of their incredible legacy.

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