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# Molly Picon and the Role of Yiddish-English Radio in the Acculturation of American Jews

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## Chapter 1: Background

The desire to assimilate into American culture was universal among immigrants to the United States in the early part of the last century. In the case of Jewish immigrants, starting with the first wave of immigration from Eastern Europe in the late 1800's, there was an even greater need to become Americanized than in the rest of the immigrant population, because, especially in Eastern Europe, Jews were never considered full-fledged citizens of the countries in which they lived. In the United States, with its history as a "melting pot" in which all ethnicities had the opportunity to blend, Jews had a better chance of being accepted as full American citizens.

One consequence of assimilation, however, is that Jews were less likely to adhere to religious and social traditions, such as attending synagogue regularly and observing the Sabbath in the way they might have done in the "Old Country" (e.g., not working on Saturdays). Giving up these traditions meant the gradual erosion of their Jewish identities, and created the need for immigrants and their progeny to adapt to life in the United States while still maintaining these identities. One way they were able to do this was through immersion in popular culture into which Jewish themes and concerns were woven. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Yiddish theater was the primary form of popular culture for Jewish immigrants. Later, as I will discuss, Yiddish radio emerged as a new medium, first as an offshoot of Yiddish theater but ultimately morphing into something quite different, which served not only the immigrant community, but the next generation.

Nahma Sandrow, in arguably the best written work on Yiddish theater, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater*, describes how Yiddish theater filled a need in Jewish immigrants attempting to assimilate and at the same time retain Jewish values:

> In the confusing shifting scramble for survival in a strange land, [Yiddish Theater] substituted in subtle ways for the older communal institutions that had been the basis for centuries of Eastern European Jewish life. It was a meeting place, an arbiter of fashion, a common passion. It provided, in the form of actors, popular folk heroes. [Emphasis added] *And it represented loyalty to tradition and to the community, a sort of staunch nonassimilation that still did not prevent actual full-speed assimilation*—which, in the unfriendly atmosphere of Eastern Europe, had become almost impossible. For some, it took the place of organized religion, by publicly affirming a cultural-ethnic Jewishness that was elastic and didn't require any observance or piety. And it also, in a sense, reinforced organized religion by assuming many of its values.
>
> Sandrow, 77

One of the most common assertions by those who document Yiddish language and culture is that the two peaked at the turn of the 20th century and have been in decline ever since. Sandrow states that, "it is obvious from the statistics that by 1912 the Lower East Side had already passed its peak population. More and more Jews were speaking English rather than Yiddish, and the flow of immigrants that constantly replaced the Jews who assimilated into American life was soon to stop short" (Sandrow, 253). According to Lloyd Gartner, by the 1930s, "the majority of Jews became American born. Moreover, American Jews became an older group as their birthrate continued to decline. The immigrant world and its Yiddish press, speech, synagogues, theatre, and literature was

passing...." Gartner goes on to say that, "Religious and cultural life was dominated by the quest for an American form of religious tradition....," which supports the earlier assertion that Jews were looking to become "Americans" while at the same time inventing new ways to remain in touch with their heritage (Gartner, 264-265). I do not disagree that Yiddish language and culture in its "original" form have peaked and declined, but what Yiddish culture became, as a result of the inevitable adaptation to the culture in which Jews found themselves in North America—a combination of Yiddish and English culture—is just as worthy of study as is the "peak years" of the original culture. Yiddish theater stars, the "folk heroes" of American-Jewish culture, were the agents of the metamorphosis of Yiddish culture into something distinctly American-Jewish: "Yinglish" culture, as it were.

One Yiddish theater star, perhaps above all others, is a symbol of this metamorphosis of Yiddish culture into American-Jewish culture: the actress Molly Picon (1898-1992). Around 1917, when Molly Picon first appeared on the Yiddish theater stage, Yiddish language and culture were already beginning to decline. Picon and others such as Menashe Skulnik and Seymour Rechtzeit are considered part of the "second generation" of Yiddish theater performers. Most scholarly works on Yiddish theater, including Sandrow's, devote much writing to the lives and careers of earlier Yiddish stars, such as Jacob P. Adler, his wife Sarah Adler, his eldest daughter Celia Adler; the first comic genius of the Yiddish stage, Sigmund Mogulesko; and impresario-actors Bessie and Boris Thomashefsky. In scholarly works about Yiddish theater, Picon is an inevitable

presence, but one gets the sense that the authors wrote about her simply because she was so ubiquitous in the Yiddish theater that she was impossible to ignore. Picon herself seems never to have officially retired. In her two autobiographies, it is evident that she kept working on new theater, movie, radio, and television projects well into her senior years, and remained a favorite with the public. Respect, however, was something I am not sure she has received in the scholarly world. She was not perceived a "serious" actress like Bertha Kalish, or, in one opinion at least, as good a singer as others, such as her occasional understudy, Lucy Levin (Sapoznik 1999, 126). Picon herself mourned the passing of Boris Thomashefsky and Bertha Kalish, saying that "no other performers of their stature were left" to take their place in the Yiddish theater (Picon 1980, 80). A comedienne, a purveyor of so-called *shund* (lit., "trash"—refers to the kind of sentimental, nostalgic, vaudeville-type theater popular with the masses), Picon still exists in the public consciousness, not because any scholar has taken the time to write a book about her, but because of her own savvy. She (with the help of her husband and agent, Jacob Kalich) was an expert at self-promotion, at keeping herself in the public eye.

In surveying what has been written about Molly Picon in major works about Yiddish theater, the most positive comments come from Sandrow, who describes Picon as "adorably impish" (Sandrow, 288), and writes a short, loving tribute to Picon, who was still living and performing at the time of the original publication of *Vagabond Stars* in 1977 (Sandrow, 330). Irving Howe, in *World of our Fathers*, is rather dismissive of Picon and her contemporaries, mentioning the

"next generation" of Yiddish actors only in terms of the "decline" of Yiddish theater:

> By the late thirties and the decades to follow, very little was left of [Yiddish theater as it had been]. Each year the audience shrank in size; those actors able to find a place for themselves on the American stage or in Hollywood were long gone; and the few stars who remained, like Menashe Skulnik and Molly Picon, often stooped to mere imitations of earlier plays, watering their scripts with English and exploiting sentiments of nostalgia."
>
> (Howe, 491)

The labeling of later Yiddish theater (and Yiddish-English radio scripts) as "watered down" and tending toward nostalgia is common in writing about the subject. This may be true on the most basic level, but the beneficial role of nostalgia in the lives of Jewish immigrants should not be overlooked, because in some ways it is shorthand for a history that is deeply rooted in collective memory.

Most of the writing that exists concerning Molly Picon, an icon of this type of nostalgia, is either affectionate or dismissive. The fact of her long career and her continuing status as an American-Jewish icon, however, indicates that there was more to her than "adorable impishness". The first "serious" essay I have seen about Picon is one that deals with her cross-dressing roles as a form of "gender rebellion" (Solomon, 94-129). Picon, in her own writing, mentions once in a while a need to be taken a little more seriously, as a woman and as an actress, (Picon 1980, 85-86) but it is difficult to judge how much she was preoccupied with this, especially since she wrote that she was "not one to philosophize or psychoanalyze" (Picon 1980, 143). For the most part, she appears in both

autobiographies to be exactly what she seems to be, a (very) hard-working actress and humanitarian who made a point of not taking herself too seriously. That said, Picon's life and career were important enough to her that she documented it meticulously and, in 1971 and 1972, donated the ephemeral fruits of her life's work to the archives at the American Jewish Historical Society in New York City. The collection is a large-scale, untapped goldmine of private correspondence, sheet music, playbills, scrapbooks, photographs, theater scripts, and radio scripts in both Yiddish and English. It is, unfortunately, impossible to deal with the entire collection within the scope of this thesis, but I will attempt to scratch the surface with a discussion of a very small selection of the more than 200 radio scripts contained in the collection. Even though there are a great many radio scripts in the collection in Yiddish, there are an equal or greater number in English with Yiddish songs, phrases, and words interspersed. I will be dealing mainly with these English-Yiddish scripts, because they are an example of the bridge by which Jewish immigrants and children of Jewish immigrants crossed over into mainstream North American culture.

A majority of Yiddish radio stars, including Molly Picon, began with careers in Yiddish theater, so it makes sense to start with a review of the beginnings of Yiddish theater. As stated before, the best study of Yiddish Theater is Nahma Sandrow's *Vagabond Stars*. David Lifson's *The Yiddish Theatre in America*, an earlier work, is also a source. From an ethnomusicological approach, Mark Slobin's *Tenement Songs* contains groundbreaking work on the subject of Yiddish popular music at the turn of the last century. Supplementing scholarly

works are memoirs about and by individual Yiddish theater stars, such as those of Jacob P. Adler, Joseph Buloff, and the Burstein family. Molly Picon's own memoir, *Molly!* belongs in this category. Her earlier memoir, *So Laugh a Little*, is a lighthearted tribute to her grandmother, in the vein of *I Remember Mama*. In fact, according to the Chattanooga Times' blurb on the inside cover, it is "...better than *I Remember Mama*" (Picon 1966, cover page)!

There is not a whole lot of material written on the subject of Yiddish radio. No one seems to have been interested in the subject until Henry Sapoznik created from the chance discovery in 1985 of hundreds of radio transcription disks from the "Golden Age" of Yiddish radio a 2-hour radio program, The Yiddish Radio Project, broadcast on NPR's *All Things Considered* in 2002. The disc and the liner notes from the CD recording of the NPR program, plus an earlier recording, *On the Air*, by Sapoznik's Klezmer band, Kapelye, inspired by the old radio programs discovered on the transcription disks, are, to my knowledge, the most substantial work done so far on the subject of Yiddish radio. Several good general studies on radio from its beginnings in the late 1800s until the present day have been written, notably Michelle Hilmes's *Radio Voices* and Susan J. Douglas's *Listening: Radio and the American Imagination*.

After a review of the history of both Yiddish theater and Yiddish radio, I will discuss Molly Picon's life and career in the context of both, and look at some Yiddish-English radio scripts written by and for her that reflect both her personal issues as a second-generation female Jewish immigrant, and broader issues facing the first- and second-generation Jewish immigrant community. I will attempt to

show, with the radio scripts as evidence, that Picon's Yiddish-English radio programs were a useful tool for facilitating the assimilation of immigrant Jews into the wider American culture, while at the same time allowing them to maintain their Jewish identities.

## Chapter 2: Yiddish Theater

Until the mid-1800s, theater was not a typically "Jewish" medium; in fact, Jewish authorities frowned upon it as immoral and "goyische," except during Purim, in which troupes of performers would perform *purimspieln* at private homes for brandy and pastry. Other early influences on Yiddish theater were the tradition of the *badchen*, or wedding jester, and the *Broder* singer, Jewish troubadours who sang narrative poems, sometimes in the persona of different characters.

The person most often credited with bringing together all of these elements to originate modern Yiddish theater is Avrom Goldfadn (1840-1908). Goldfadn was born Avrum Goldinfodim in Volhynia, Ukraine, which was at the time under the auspices of Imperial Russia. As a child, he loved to recite poems and sing songs. His father, a watchmaker, arranged to send Goldfadn to a government school to avoid his getting drafted into the Imperial Army (a common fate among Jewish youth of the time). This enabled him to further his education at a rabbinical/teaching seminary in Zhitomir, Ukraine, where he was exposed to Jewish teachers, writers, and composers heavily influenced by the *haskalah* (the Jewish enlightenment). It was there that he began to write Jewish stories, poems,

songs, and plays, and to perform in productions. His first published works, collections of his own poems in Hebrew and English, appeared in 1865 and 1866. In the following 10 years, Goldfadn developed a reputation as a prolific writer and performer, and attempted several times to establish Jewish newspapers in places such as Galicia and Bukovina. Moving to Iasi, Romania, originally to start up another Yiddish newspaper, Goldfadn frequented the Pomul Verde (The Green Tree), a "wine garden" that presented evening entertainment—mostly songs and slapstick routines. It was here that Goldfadn dreamed up the formula for modern Yiddish theater, i.e., combining spoken word, and a plot, with song. The idea was immediately successful. His early works gave birth to characters that are still part of Ashkenazic Jewish culture, characters such as "Shmendrik" and "Kuni-Leml."

Once Goldfadn drew in the crowds with broad caricature and comic themes, he used the medium's popularity as an opportunity to teach his audiences Jewish history and tradition. Utilizing theater as a conduit for education is an idea that goes as far back as Ancient Greece. In Odessa, he wrote two of his most serious historical-political operettas. *Shulamis* (1881) and *Bar Kokhba* (1883), both of which, especially the former, were to be revived again and again in Yiddish theaters in Eastern and Western Europe, and in the United States. *Shulamis* was, in Idelsohn's words, "a romantic melodrama of the last period of the Second Temple." Idelsohn states that it is in the style of operetta, but "more serious than the German *Sing-spiel*." (Idelsohn, 451) All of Goldfadn's works were "dramas with interspersed songs, in the form of couplets, arias, and choruses, with primitive orchestral accompaniment." (Idelsohn, 451) Goldfadn

had no musical training and could not read music, so the lyrics and/or melodies were often taken from other sources. For instance, the lyrics from the most famous of the songs from *Shulamis*, "Rozhinkes Mit Mand'len" (Raisins with Almonds), come from the Jewish folk song, "Unter dem Kind's Vigele." Other tunes from the operetta are taken from such diverse sources as Naumbourg's *Zemiroth Israel*, Verdi's *La Traviata*, Turkish and Ukrainian folk tunes, and a Chassidic dance in the Hashem-Malach mode. The irony is that the theater-going public was exposed, in many cases, to traditional, religious, and "art" music without ever knowing it. Mark Slobin states: "...the Jewish public made no musical distinction between folk, popular, and classical styles; their major musical heroes, whose voices were equated, were Rosenblatt the cantor and Caruso the opera singer, both of whom drew on art music models....yet...the audience...was ready to accept neither an art drama nor a drama based on art music. Nor were the composers of Yiddish theater prepared, until well into the 'teens, to consider themselves writers of 'serious' music" (Slobin, 93).

Some other luminaries of the Yiddish theater who owe the start of their careers to Goldfadn are Sigmund Mogulesko, Jacob P. Adler, Yisroel Grodner, and Sophie Goldstein-Karp—the first woman ever to appear on the Yiddish theater stage. However, by the time Goldfadn arrived in America to try his luck there, Yiddish theater was a booming, competitive business dominated by his successors, and his writing style was already considered outdated. Moreover, his paternalistic, egotistical personality caused his "children" (the actors and playwrights who got their start in his productions) ultimately to rebel against him

and seek their own fortunes. The result was that, at the end of his life, he was a pauper dependent on handouts from his former *protégés*. However, his successors in America still widely acknowledged him as the "Father of Yiddish Theater."

This sentiment was underscored in 1896, during celebrations in Europe and America honoring the birth of Yiddish theater. A huge production of *Shulamis* was staged in New York, starring Sigmund Mogulesko and Bertha Kalish, both originally *protégés* of Goldfadn. In addition, the work, already deemed a classic of the Yiddish stage, was performed all over Europe. Goldfadn died during a comeback, a staging of a new play, *Ben Ami*, at Boris Thomashefsky's theater, in 1908. His funeral was accompanied by a procession of 30,000 individuals, and it almost certain that his death made *Ben Ami*, which opened with less than favorable box office receipts, one of the hottest tickets in town (Sandrow, 69).

Nahma Sandrow notes that none of Goldfadn's plays were "great or profound literature"; in this respect, they were a product of the times in which they were written. However, she says, "...the best of them are touching, stirring, lyrical, comical. They tap the communal sources of Purim play, folk song, and poem, and they channel that energy into a more complete form. Unlike most of the Yiddish dramatists who rapidly appeared to compete with him, Goldfadn remained true to his source. Thus many of his plays have a freshness, energy, and theatricality which time has not diminished and which accounts for their frequent and successful revivals to this day" (Sandrow, 45).

In the United States at the turn of the 20th century, Yiddish theater companies proliferated, and the plays showed the influence of American-style vaudeville and mainstream Broadway productions. Boris Thomashefsky (1868-1939), actor, playwright, and theater manager, became one of the first and most successful purveyors of these productions in the United States. Playwrights such as Joseph Lateiner (1853-1935) and Moshe Horowitz (ca. 1850-1910) succeeded Goldfadn as writers of plays that were of questionable literary value. Playwright Jacob Gordin (1853-1909) attempted to elevate the quality of Yiddish plays, with some success. A few years later, actor/manager Maurice Schwartz, through his Yiddish Art Theater, also championed a much more intellectual form of Yiddish theater. The performance of works that came out of this venture, such as Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, Gordin's *Mirele Efros*, and Y. L. Peretz's *Golden Chain* (Edelman, 122), were admirable and integral landmarks in the history of Yiddish theater. However, audiences still gravitated toward popular, or *shund*, theater, with its broad, ethnic, slapstick routines and sentimental songs, much as the biggest-selling movies today are Hollywood "blockbusters." In fact, Schwartz's theater often included Goldfadn's plays in its repertoire, alternating with more "artistic" fare.

The most important point to be gleaned from this short history of Yiddish theater is what Yiddish theater meant to the masses. Yiddish theater was so important to immigrant Jews at the turn of the 20th century that, as poor as they were, they would find a way to set aside a significant portion of their hard-earned wages to attend at least once a week (Slobin, 72). More often than not, it was not

the "artistic" version of Yiddish theater that drew these audiences, but the popular version, so-called *shund*. Despite the criticism it received from those who tried to infuse Yiddish theater with a higher, artistic purpose, *shund* played an important role in the socializing of Jewish immigrants: "Yiddish popular theater asserted Yiddish identity, and not only Yiddish, but more specifically American Yiddish. In fact, *shund* was the first art form to express the distinctively American Yiddish community" (Sandrow, 129). In contrast, theater that attempted to be "high art" struck the masses as "elitist" and even "anti-Semitic," trying too hard to assimilate Jews into a secular, "civilized" ideal, devoid of what were considered traditional Jewish values (Sandrow, 408). Popular Yiddish theater served as a mirror of the concerns of the immigrant population, issues such as parent-offspring relations, loss of Old Country traditions, and living and working in close quarters with unfamiliar ethnic groups. While at the theater, these working-class audiences were anything but passive onlookers. Yiddish theater audiences empathized with the actors and the situations their characters experienced onstage, weeping openly at the plight of the characters and loudly voicing opinions, sometimes even forgetting that they were watching a play. They would often accompany the actors home, under the assumption that the actors were like family. Rival groups of fans (*patriotn*) were common. *Patriotn* came to blows over, for instance, who had played the best *Yiddish King Lear*, Jacob P. Adler or David Kessler. The bottom line was that popular Yiddish theater was, and remained, actor-centered as opposed to writer-centered (Sandrow, 94-95). It was also a medium with which audiences merged their own identities. It can be argued

that the actress that audiences identified with and took into their hearts for longer than anyone else was Molly Picon.

**Chapter 3: Molly Picon in Yiddish Theater and Beyond**

It seems that, of all the actors from the Yiddish theater days, Molly Picon in particular worked her way into the hearts and minds of Jewish audiences. From the moment Picon entered Philadelphia's vaudeville scene at the age of 5, her personal magnetism and versatility made her a favorite with audiences. She was a naturally gifted actor, singer, dancer, and acrobat from childhood. Her family quickly discovered that her talent could bring in much-needed income. Often, her work would keep her at the theater until well after midnight, and then she would attend school in the morning, exhausted. Her mother, Clara, became a wardrobe mistress at the Arch Street Theater in Philadelphia, and the two of them supported the family (including her father, Louis, even after he left the family to live in a boarding house). A major break for young Molly was a Yiddish version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (as "Topsy"), produced by Mike Thomashefsky, brother of Boris. Picon appeared in vaudeville and Yiddish theater throughout her childhood and as a teenager.

The turning point in Picon's career was meeting her future husband, manager/actor Jacob Kalich, in 1918. Stranded in Boston during a flu epidemic, Picon could not work because all of the theaters had closed. Kalich offered her a job in the only theater that was still open during the epidemic, the Grand Opera House. It was the beginning of a successful, life-long business collaboration, and

also the beginning of an enduring love relationship. Kalich became her manager and mentor, writing many of her signature roles, including her most famous—that of Yankele, the mischievous little yeshiva boy with the heart of gold. *Yankele* was truly a breakthrough in her career, because until then, managers had dismissed Picon's potential as star material. At the time, the most popular actresses in the Yiddish theater were large and *zaftik (*voluptuous). At only 4'11" and about 95 pounds, managers refused to take her seriously.

One of the most astute moves Kalich made for Picon's career was to take Picon on tour all over Western and Eastern Europe to learn to speak Yiddish "authentically" (i.e., without an American accent), thereby developing a fan base of Jews abroad who wrote to their families in America, raving about the sensation, Molly Picon, in her hit, *Yankele*. Back in the United States, after convincing the manager of New York's Second Avenue Theater to give it a trial run, *Yankele* was a huge hit. In fact, some of the audience came because their relatives had written to them from abroad about the show (Picon 1980, 43-44). With that, Picon quickly became one of the most beloved of Yiddish theater stars. In the 1920s, she starred in many other vehicles that capitalized on her talent for sprightly, comic roles, such as *Shmendrik* (by Goldfadn), *Tsipke*, *Gypsy Girl*, *Molly Dolly*, *The Little Devil*, *Oy is dus a Maidel* (*You're Some Girl*!), and *Circus Girl*. In *Circus Girl*, Kalich had her doing aerial rope stunts that left the audience gasping (Picon 1980, 44-45).

Picon was to continue her legacy of child and cross-dressing roles in two films, *Yidl Mit'n Fidl* and *Mamele*, made in Poland in 1936 and 1938, respectively. In

*Mamele*, the last Yiddish film ever to be filmed in Poland, Picon played a 12-year-old orphan girl who takes on the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings. Picon herself saw the irony of playing a 12-year-old at the age of 40 (Picon 1980, 76), but, since Picon had not changed much physically since her 'teens, and since she had been typecast for years in similar roles, audiences seemed willing to suspend disbelief. Significantly, in both films, the composer was Abe Ellstein, with whom Molly collaborated on many projects and individual songs, including radio shows, sometimes writing the lyrics herself.

As she became more adept at writing her own material and getting cast in roles without Kalich's help, there came a point in Picon's career where the dynamic of her relationship with Kalich changed. After a period of marital trouble related to Picon's outgrowing the mentor-student relationship and her need to be seen as a grown woman rather than as a little girl, she and Kalich entered into a professional partnership of equals, with their marriage better than ever. Around this time, she starred in one of her first "mature" roles, in the play, *Morning Star* (1939), by Sylvia Regan (Jewish Women's Archive, 2006).

With the gradual closing of Yiddish theaters on Second Avenue, there was less demand for performances for strictly Jewish audiences. Still, whenever there was a demand for a Yiddish-English theater production, Picon was likely to be starring in it. When there was no Yiddish theater in which to perform, Picon kept busy, with USO tours during World War II, and heartbreaking trips to the DP camps after the War. At the same time, Picon and Kalich produced a steady stream of radio shows into the early 1950s. At one point, Kalich was writing 12

radio programs a week; half for Molly and half for his own radio show (Picon 1980, 125).

Picon was one of the few Yiddish Theater stars to "cross over" onto Broadway and into mainstream Hollywood movies, albeit with limited success. Others, such as Paul Muni (originally Muni Weisenfreund) and Stella Adler, crossed over and never looked back (Sandrow, 292). Picon seemed to be one of the few who were able to make a name for herself in the wider "show-business" world, yet still not forget her roots. She had one sure Broadway hit, *Milk and Honey* (1962), for which she was nominated for a Tony Award. Other shows, such as *Majority of One* (1962) and *The Second Time Around* (1976), met with limited or no success on Broadway but were successful regionally or abroad (the former was a hit in London). The critics often praised her work but hated the vehicle. However, she seems consistently to have been a favorite of audiences, no matter what critics said about the shows.

Picon also appeared in movies to some acclaim, notably, *Come Blow Your Horn* (1963), for which she received an Academy Award nomination for her role as Frank Sinatra's mother, and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), in which she played Yente, the Matchmaker. She also appeared in a handful of television shows, such as episodes of *Car 54, Where Are You?* (1963) and, later, in *Trapper John, M.D.* (1980). In her 70s and 80s, she was still appearing in movies. Unfortunately, she was often typecast as the stereotypical, overbearing, "Jewish Mother," but how many Yiddish theater stars of her generation were actually appearing at all in mainstream Hollywood movies at the same time? Not many. The first time I was

introduced to her was as a teenager, when I saw her in the commercial Hollywood comedies, *Cannonball Run* (1981) and *Cannonball Run II* (1984), playing, what else? A "Yiddishe Mama."

Picon never stopped working, so never completely left the public imagination. There has been a renewed interest in her, as evidenced by the recent off-Broadway play, *Picon Pie*, based on her autobiography. For me, this musical play was a lukewarm experience, and it seems only to have scratched the surface of Molly Picon's persona and appeal. Her appeal is more easily seen in film clips, such as the one in the 1968 film documentary, *The Golden Age of Second Avenue*. In the film, the 70-year-old Picon sings an excerpt from her breakout role as 15-year-old yeshiva boy "Yankele," in a private living room for Bertha Gersten and Jacob Ben-Ami, two actors who were also major names in the business. With her lively patter and her clear, youthful voice, she almost becomes young again right before our eyes (Silverstein 1987). As for *Picon Pie*, the production ran for over 6 months and was moved during the run from a theater near Union Square to a theater closer to the heart of Broadway: this says something about Picon's place in the public imagination. It is almost impossible for a production to continue running off-Broadway unless there is an audience for it.

Opera singer/teacher Sandra Alesi relates a personal anecdote about how, in the 1970s, she performed in a New York concert in which Molly Picon was appearing as well. Alesi relates how old and bent Picon appeared while sitting backstage in a chair. When it came time for her to go on, she got out of the chair and transformed into a younger-looking, vibrant, consummate professional and

did her act flawlessly, to a standing ovation. After leaving the stage, Picon transformed back into the "old woman" she had been before going onstage. (Alesi, 2005). Molly Picon was a prime example of how the personality of an actor could keep the essence of Yiddish theater alive well past its heyday. It seems that, for the Yiddish theater audience, the actors were the most tangible aspect of the whole theater experience, the aspect with which audiences could directly identify.

The same may be said for Yiddish radio, with some differences, not the least of which is that audiences listening to the wireless at home could no longer see the actors and were thus, through the power of their imaginations, able to identify with the voices on the radio on a deeper level than they could at the theater.

**Chapter 4: Yiddish Radio**

After being introduced to the general public in 1899 as "wireless telegraphy," radio broadcasting during the first two decades of the 20th century was a sort of "Wild West." Amateurs ("hams") transmitted, often from their own homes, attached to homemade sets by earphones, whatever they wished, and received whatever they could glean from the "ether"—the early term for the airwaves. By the late 1920s, the wireless radio had become an essential piece of furniture in most households in the United States. It was at around this time that order was imposed on broadcasters and stations by the Federal Radio Commission (FRC), "headed by then secretary of commerce, Herbert Hoover" (Sapoznik 1999,

126). The public began to see regulation of the airwaves as a necessity, for a variety of reasons, the least of which was the need for regulation of the content that was being broadcast. In the early days of radio, stations were fair game for any radio enthusiast or entrepreneur who was able to gain access to them. This resulted in a lot of early broadcasts being interrupted by competing broadcasts: "It was not uncommon to have a soporific broadcast of "Poetry at Sunset" interrupted by a hot jazz band broadcasting from the "Hotsy Totsy Club" muscling in on the frequency" (Sapoznik 1999, 126). More seriously, the presence of so many enthusiasts with access to random wavelengths interfered with the military's rescue of the survivors of the Titanic in 1912 (Douglas, 60). Even more significant to this study, there was a widespread public anxiety that listeners, especially youth, would be corrupted by unchecked elements on the radio, such as the new Jazz music, which a then highly segregated public considered immoral and dangerous, not the least because Jazz music had African-American origins (Hilmes, 48).

In this context, it is ironic that the first wildly successful radio show, which began broadcasting in 1926, was *Amos n'Andy*, starring two black characters (played by *white* actors!). Of course, *Amos n'Andy* made sense in terms of the theater-going public's long history with minstrel shows and vaudeville based on ethnic stereotypes. The only other radio show that rivaled *Amos n'Andy* in popularity and longevity was *The Rise of the Goldbergs*, created by (and starring) Gertrude Berg in 1929. This was a mainstream show about, of all things, a Jewish family. Other Jewish characters appeared on mainstream radio, such as

"Mrs. Nussbaum" on the *Fred Allen Show*, but they were heavily stereotypical. Sapoznik believes that *The Rise of the Goldbergs* was the only mainstream radio show about Jews that was true to life and did not rely on stereotypes (The Yiddish Radio Project CD, Track 1).

Radio programs produced by and for the Yiddish-speaking population, then, seems to have presented a somewhat more rounded portrayal of immigrant and second-generation Jews than those in the mainstream did. Sapoznik also makes the observation that, while mainstream radio programs contained a touch of the "exotic," and enabled listeners to escape to worlds not their own, Jewish audiences tended to tune into Yiddish programs to see a "mirror" of themselves and their own experiences with broader American culture (The Yiddish Radio Project CD, Track 1). This is not unlike the relationship Jewish audiences had earlier with Yiddish theater. By the 1930s, radio programs proliferated that were targeted to Americans of all ethnic backgrounds. Radio stations broadcasting such fare were ubiquitous, if not high-profile. The programs were usually broadcast on the weaker bandwidths, at the very ends of the dial. They served a population of first- and second-generation immigrants attempting the balancing act of hanging onto their roots while at the same time becoming fully accepted into mainstream American culture. What was available to listen to on the radio dial illustrated very clearly how much a melting pot the United States was at that time, sometimes to comical effect. It was not uncommon for different ethnic or religious groups with widely different agendas to share the same place on the dial. As Sapoznik states in

the liner notes to the recording *Kapelye: On the Air*, a clever homage to Yiddish radio days,

> Like its listeners living in enclaves such as New York's Lower East Side, Chicago's Douglas Park or Philadelphia's Strawberry Mansion, Jewish programs found themselves on stations crowded into the 'broadcast ghettos' at the undesireable [*sic*] extreme ends of the radio dial. Whereas network stations would normally transmit at 50,000 watts, Jewish programs would be heard on stations averaging 1,000 watts or less, reflecting in a way, the 'low-power' social status of the emerging immigrant community. Sometimes, stations were obliged to share their on-air time with other broadcasters, producing some unusual contrasts (in New York, this resulted in the Socialist/Yiddish WEVD splitting its on-air time with WBBR, owned by the Jehovah's Witnesses...).
>
> (*On the Air* liner notes, p.)

The difference between radio and theater was that, in listening to a radio program, one did not have to leave one's home to be connected to what was going on outside—each ethnic group's unique perspective on American culture could be beamed directly into a family's living room. The impact of radio may even have been greater than that of the later invention of the television, because, since there were no images to be seen; each of the listeners had an active role in the process. If the listener closed his or her eyes, he or she could imagine that the radio performers, through broadcasted music, comedy routines, dramatic serials, and commercials, had actually been invited into the comfort of the home. Susan Douglas, Michelle Hilmes, and others maintain that "[Radio] stimulated the imagination instead of stunting it" (Douglas 2004, 4). This almost sounds like a cliché perpetuated by our pre-television parents and grandparents, along the lines

of, "When I was your age, I had to walk 10 miles to school in the snow...."

However, Douglas and other radio scholars make a convincing case for radio's being a more active form of entertainment than television:

> A listener could ornament a radio broadcast, whether it was a political speech, Inner Sanctum, Fibber McGee and Molly, or the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, with appropriate visuals. This meant more than imagining the people and their expression, the setting and its architecture and décor. It also meant that with words and tone of voice as your only clues (often reinforced by sound effects and music), you conjured up people's emotional states, their motivations, the tenor of their interactions with others. You envisioned Mary Livingstone rolling her eyes at Jack Benny's unfounded vanity; you winced as the entire contents of a closet cascaded out into a hallway; you even glimpsed the elusive, invisible Shadow. You had to fill in the other senses—taste, touch, and smell—also. Even though you might be lying on the living room floor, or lounging in a chair, you were anything but passive."
>
> (Douglas, 4)

On the radio, music often served as much more than "reinforcement" for the dialogue. It was a necessary part of the whole process of listening to a radio show. A single song was able to stimulate the listener's emotions and memories in a way that mere words could not. I will discuss this more later.

**Chapter 5: Molly Picon and Yiddish Radio**

For Jewish Americans, there existed ethnic programming exclusively in Yiddish, but after the first wave of immigrants in the late 1800's, as they settled into their lives in the United States, audiences became less conversant in the language. Consequently, there was a fair amount of "Yinglish" (English spoken by announcers and actors, with copious Yiddish words, phrases, and Yiddish

songs thrown in) programming that bridged the gap between the Old Country and the New.

The "Maxwell House Coffee" radio scripts (named for their sponsor) from the Molly Picon archives at the American Jewish Historical Society, written by and for Molly Picon from 1938 into the late 1940s, are a great example of this. The official name of one series of these scripts was *The Molly Picon Theatre of the Air*, which, by its title, is illustrative of how the two media, Yiddish theater and Yiddish radio, began to intersect by the 1930s and 1940s. The scripts are written in English, interspersed with Yiddish songs and commercials in both Yiddish and English (Picon, as stated above, also did an equal or greater number of radio shows that were completely in Yiddish, which are also available in the archive). The radio scripts themselves, not unlike others of the era, were most often incomplete, partly ad-libbed, and loaded with typographical errors, which is not surprising, since most of them were written very fast, meant to be performed, then forgotten. As Douglas emphasizes, radio, especially early radio, is one of most difficult, ephemeral media for a historian to document, because it was so much about being in the present (Douglas, 9). Sapoznik's discovery of the radio transcription disks that formed the basis for *The Yiddish Radio Project* was nothing short of a miracle, given their scarcity and fragility. Apparently, they were only made so that the FCC could have a copy of the radio programs in their files in case someone "filed a complaint" (Sapoznik, CD track 1)

Molly Picon participated in hundreds of radio shows between the 1930s and the 1950s, for both Yiddish- and English-speaking audiences. They were

deliberately Jewish in character, with stories taken from Jewish history and literature and interspersed with jokes and popular Yiddish songs. Scripts were simplistic, filled with what we now would call "sound bites," cultural cues of one or two words or phrases that would deliver to the listeners a world of meaning. Music on these programs, in the form of whole songs or snatches of melody, was essential, and was a particularly effective vehicle for the conveyance of Jewish values and culture. The scripts and the music are the direct ancestors of Goldfadn's theater, which tried to be an educative experience for Jewish audiences, but often ended up a celebration of sentiment and *shund*. Nevertheless, the scripts mirror what the concerns of their audiences were.

One good example of how radio did this, through dialogue and especially song, is the radio script from Picon's *Theater of the Air* series, "Unser Rebenu," broadcast December 19, 1944, starring Picon, Seymour Rechtzeit, and Harry Lubin. "Unser Rebenu" ("Our Rabbi") is cleverly based on a "famous Jewish folksong" of the same name. The song was originally written "or arranged" by Joseph Rumshinsky for the 1919 operetta, *Dem Rebns Nign* (The Rabbi's Melody) (Mlotek, *Pearls of Song*, 125). It is a simple song, made up of the two words, "Unser Rebenu," the stereotypical syllables, "oy, oy," and surely meant to be an imitation of a chassidic niggun. The orchestra plays the tune repeatedly throughout the script to "punctuate" the action, changing its tempo and mood depending on the lightness or seriousness of the scene:

> ANNOUNCER: One of the most beloved of Yiddish folk songs is 'Unser Rebenu,' and that's why Jacob Kalich has chosen it for the theme of our play tonight. In days of old it was sung by the Rabbi's disciples in joy and gladness...

ORCHESTRA: PUNCTUATE
SEYMOUR: SINGS FIRST PHRASE OF SONG HAPPILY
ANNOUNCER: And oftimes [sic] it was sung by the chassidim in sorrow and sadness...
ORCHESTRA: PUNCTUATE
SEYMOUR: SINGS SONG SADLY TO THE END
ORCHESTRA: OUT
ANNOUNCER: But tonight we hear it sung quite differently.
DICKY: (SINGS THEME IN SWING) UNSER REBENU REBENU
GRANDMA: (MOLLY AS GRANDMOTHER) Yitschok, stop that. Shame on you. The great grandson of a Rabbi, the grandson of a Rabbi and the son of a Rabbi should know better than to make fun of such a sacred song.

(pp. 1-2)

The above scene sets up themes that resonated with most immigrant families of the time: the clash of Old Country and New Country values, as played out between first-generation immigrants and their American-born offspring. When "Dicky," the grandson, complains that becoming a Rabbi would mean that he wouldn't be "able to have any fun, like the other boys" in school, Grandma replies:

GRANDMA: No, my child, of course you'll be able to have fun. Chassidism is an expression of joy, of happiness. That's why they sing.
DICKY: But do the Kasidim swing it too?
GRANDMA: Not Kasidim, cha...with a cha...
DICKY: That's what I said, Kasidim. Do they jive?

(p. 2)

Note that the "third generation," represented here by the grandson, has already lost the ability to speak Yiddish properly. Also significant is the reference to Jazz music, which represents the break from tradition that caused so much anxiety in

the previous generations. Nonetheless, the "swing" style worked its way into the gamut of Yiddish music, by way of acts such as The Barry Sisters, who routinely appeared on the radio in the 1940s. Yiddish "swing" music—old Yiddish standards re-orchestrated with a modern, light Jazz tempo, with the tight vocal harmonies popular in mainstream music of the time, was one of the ways Jews assimilated into mainstream culture while retaining their Jewishness.

The script continues as a flashback, in which Grandma ("Sarah") tells Dicky the story of his Grandfather ("Jacob"), a Rebbe in Eastern Europe, who accompanied his followers into battle in World War I:

> JACOB: War is for no decent thinking man, but when a beast attacks you, you must fight back.
> SARAH: How then, Jacob?
> JACOB: By staying with my followers. By bringing them a word of comfort in their hour of need. A word of joy.
> SARAH: A word of joy to men in battle?
> JACOB: Yes, Sarah, even in battle men can sing and my Chasidem [*sic*] will sing and I will go with them and bring them solace and joy...even in battle...we will sing...
> ORCHESTRA: SINGS UNSER REBENU into bridge
> (WAR EFFECT IN MUSIC)
>
> (p. 10)

This script, written in 1944, at the height of US involvement in World War II, sparks the patriotism of the audience. By speaking of the Chasidim in conjunction with the war, it sends the message that being "Jewish" does not preclude full participation in the war effort. One can be both patriotic Americans and Jewish. It is revealed in the course of the script that Dicky's father, also a Rabbi, but one "without a beard" (i.e., a Conservative one) is a soldier serving in World War II. This presents an opportunity for another song which would be very familiar to

Jewish radio audiences then—Fregt Die Velt An Alte Kashe [The World Asks an Ancient Question]:

> DICKY: But why, Grandma, why do we always have to have war?
> GRANDMA: Why? That's an old, old question, my child. A question the world has been asking for many years...
> SINGS: FREGT DIE VELT AN ALTE KASHE
> (p. 11)

The song itself is another simple, chassidic-type melody in the Jewish mode known as "Ahava raba," or "Freigish." The lyrics are also simple, but enigmatic. The English translation is as follows: "The world asks an ancient question: Trala-tradi-ridi rom? The answer is: tradi-ridi reylom, oy, oy, tradi-ridi rom. And if you want, you can even say: tray-dim! Still the ancient question remains: Trala-tradi-ridi-rom?" Mlotek points out that the song was used as the basis for Maurice Ravel's "L'Enigme Eternelle," in his *Deux Melodies Hebraiques*. (Mlotek, *Songs of Generations*, 207) The ambiguity of the lyrics and the brevity of the song itself make it the perfect "sound bite" for a radio show—one that can be imbued with a world of meaning in the short amount of time (15 minutes to a half hour) allotted to a radio program. After the song, Grandma continues:

> GRANDMA: If you ask a question, it's *traif* [non-kosher]...your father didn't ask why this and why that? When we came to America, he was a good boy, he studied his Hebrew, he went to school. He was even a good baseball player too.
> DICKY: Was he a Dodger fan or a Red Socks fan [*sic*]?
> GRANDMA: Red socks, blue socks, plenty of his socks I darned, until I saw him graduate from the seminary and become a Rabbi...I would have liked better an orthodox Rabbi like his father and his grandfather but conservative is

not bad either...your great-grandfather used to say, better a Jew without a beard than a beard without a Jew.
(p. 11)

In the above excerpt, we are aware of different elements: Dicky's father is presented as the ideal Jewish-American, studying at Hebrew school while at the same time attending "school" (probably a reference to secular American public school), and still having time to be a "good baseball player..." By the 1940s, baseball was already a symbol of being "American" (along with Mom and apple pie). The script also shows that, in America, Jews could be "modern" rabbis, i.e., adapt to American culture and remain religious, in a specifically American way. The script ends with a telegram coming to inform Grandma that her son has been killed in the war, and with Dicky promising to carry on the tradition of becoming a rabbi, just like his grandfather and father before him.

As I mentioned earlier, theater, and later, radio, in some ways stood in for older Jewish traditions; in fact, they served almost as proxy for traditional worship. A series of the Maxwell House shows were broadcast on Friday nights, a night one would not immediately imagine appropriate for a Jewish radio program because traditional Jews would not even think of tuning in. Even more significant, the actors on the shows make a lot of references to "Shabbos." Surely, listening to the radio was not on the list of traditional "*shabbosdik*" activities—but a look at the scripts shows that no one was apologizing for tempting the radio audience to tune in on Shabbos. In fact, it is exactly the opposite—the radio audience is encouraged to tune in and celebrate Shabbos by listening to the radio show. This

is another illustration of how Jews in America managed to become Americanized while still finding ways of maintaining their Jewish identities.

At the center of these shows, even more than in the *Unser Rebenu* script, is Molly Picon, whose name was already a household word by the 1920's, an "Everywoman" with whom American Jews felt comfortable identifying. A respectable mixture of old world and new—modern but not too modern—tomboyish, but ladylike at the same time, Picon was the perfect model for being both Jewish and American. Having been, by the 1940s, a familiar part of the Jewish audience's world by way of Yiddish theater, she made people feel as if she was a part of their families—which created the atmosphere that made it easy to accept her into their homes on a Friday night. The following script is the first installment in a serialized version of Molly Picon's life story, performed by Molly Picon herself, and entitled, "I Give You My Life." By portraying her own life on the radio, Picon becomes a character in public mythology as much as "Shulamis" or "Unser Rebenu" had already become.

The following are excerpts from the January 14, 1938 broadcast (Note that the all-capitals format of the original scripts is reproduced here):

> MAN: COME IN. (DOOR) OH, GOOD SHABOS [*sic*] MR. MISHKIN WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE ON A FRIDAY NIGHT?
>
> SECOND MAN: YOU SEE MR. FREEDMAN, MY RADIO IS OUT OF ORDER. A TUBE BUSTED. SO IF YOU DON'T MIND, I'LL LISTEN IN ON YOUR RADIO. IT'S MOLLY PICON TONIGHT.
>
> (p. 1)

One may see from this excerpt that, judging from the typically Ashkenazi "Jewish" last names of these two characters, the show's writers had certain assumptions about who was in the radio audience, or, at least, about the audience they were hoping to attract. Since the above example is from the first of this particular series of radio shows, it is possible that the actual number of loyal listeners had not even been set. The assumption here is that neighbors living in the same building would all be Jewish, and that there was a family-like relationship among them that encouraged one neighbor to invite himself in to listen to another's radio. The script also contains a powerful example of how Jewish families attempting to be good Americans, yet retain their Jewishness:

> MOLLY: HELLO EVERYBODY. GOOD SHABOS. THIS IS MOLLY PICON SPEAKING. AS I STAND HERE BEFORE THE MICROPHONE, I CAN SEE YOU ALL SEATED AROUND YOUR SHABOS TABLES....
> (p. 3)

In the above excerpt, the audience at home is assumed to be sitting around the dinner table, sharing a Sabbath meal, or, at least, the script is trying to set a mood that makes listeners *feel* as if they are sitting around a Shabbos table. Whether or not they were assumed to have attended synagogue for services before dinner is not indicated in the script, but it is significant that the listeners have chosen to listen to the radio on a Friday night as an alternative to other *shabbosdik* activities. In fact, it does not even matter if they were attending synagogue; The producers of the program broadcast Jewish atmosphere directly into the home by way of key words and music choices. For example, in this particular script, one of the songs on the program is "Gut Shabbos, Gut Yohr." Listening to Jewish music

in this setting could be seen as a modern variation on the centuries-old tradition of the entire family's singing of Shabbos songs after the meal. In the excerpt below, the image of the Shabbos table is taken further, with the song sung by Picon. It is significant that the audience at home, in the act of listening and perhaps singing along to a Shabbos standard, during Shabbos, on the radio, have accepted Molly Picon in a role that resembles that of a cantor-clergy person. So, in a sense, by listening to her program, they were participating in a type of worship. The script also creates the "ideal" Jewish home atmosphere, and, whether or not people at home really were sitting around the Shabbos table with the candles lit, they were as good as doing so by listening in.

> MOLLY: AND NOW, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, IT'S SABBATH EVE, THE TIME FOR PEACEFUL MEDITATION. I IMAGINE THE FLICKERING OF CANDLES IN EACH JEWISH HOME, SWAYING BACK AND FORTH IN THEIR OWN LIGHT, AND THEREFORE I PERMIT MYSELF TO GREET YOU WITH THE TRADITIONAL-----
>
> (INTO SONG; GUT SHABOS, GUT YOHR)
> (AND BEFORE THE LAST CHORUS OF THAT SONG)
>
> MOLLY: ACH, HOW MY FATHER USED TO SING THAT BEAUTIFUL PRAYER.
>
> (p. 4)

Picon, in invoking the memory of her father's singing at the Shabbos table, sends the message that she shares common ground with her assumed audience; they assume that she shares common myths with them concerning traditions that were assumed to have been experienced in a not-too-distant past. Adding to the dreamy fictitiousness of the whole endeavor is the ironic fact that

Picon's own father abandoned the family shortly after the birth of Picon's younger sister, Helen. He remained in contact with the family, living in a boarding house away from the family throughout most of Picon's childhood. It is therefore not certain that Molly had many memories of her father singing at the Shabbos table, so, even on her part, the writers of the show (of which she was one), were invoking a myth.

As the excerpts indicate, the Maxwell House radio shows not only starred Molly Picon, but used the story of her life as a vehicle for the plots. In this semi-fictionalized version of her life, iconic Jewish themes are touched on regularly, in shorthand that the audience was presumed to understand. The story of her life begins as follows:

> ANNOUNCER: A SINGING AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A LITTLE THING CALLED MOLLY PICON. THE FIRST INSTALLMENT OF "I GIVE YOU MY LIFE" BEGINS SOME YEARS AGO IN A TENEMENT HOUSE ON BROOME STREET, FOURTH FLOOR TO THE BACK.
> (p. 7)

Note that this is a SINGING autobiography. The music the show's writers have chosen is an integral tool the in the presentation of common myths to the radio audience.

Taking for granted that Picon's two written autobiographies, *So Laugh a Little* and *Molly*, are more or less the real story, the radio scripts are based on real events. The first installment in the broadcast story of her life begins with her birth. It is actually pretty painful stuff that she is airing on national radio—she makes no pretense about her relationship with her father and the fact that he wanted her to have been a boy. This is stated matter-of-factly, and may have been a common

situation in traditional Jewish households, who ritualized the birth of boys in the form of the bris, with no corresponding celebration for the birth of a girl. Molly does not go deeply into her feelings about her father's rejection in the show or in her autobiographies, but it is evident from the reading of them that her father's wish for a boy manifested in some particularly insensitive treatment of the women in his family. Apparently, Louis Pyekoon (the original spelling of Picon's last name) literally stopped talking to her mother for a full year after Molly's birth. He would visit with his daughters, maintaining that they were innocent, even if their mother was not. Even though Picon relates these events in her usual tongue-in-cheek style (Picon 1966, 15), they had to have been disturbing to her. The radio version of these events attempts to be humorous and cuts to the quick:

> FATHER: OI...IT SHOULD ONLY BE A BOY...A KADISH (*sic*) ...WHY DOES IT TAKE SO LONG...I'M SO NERVOUS...MY WIFE IS HAVING A BABY AND I LOSE SEVEN POUNDS.
>
> SOUND: DOOR OPENS
>
> MIDWIFE: MISTER PICON, MISTER PICON...MAZEL TOV! YOU CAN GO IN NOW.
> FATHER: TELL ME MRS. MIDWIFE, IT'S A BOY, YES.
> MIDWIFE: (SADLY) A GIRL—NEBACH...ONLY THREE POUNDS—NEBACH...
> FATHER: A GIRL!!!
> MIDWIFE: YES.
> FATHER: OI...(LIKE A SHARP STAB)
> MIDWIFE: GO IN...GO IN...IT'S ALRIGHT...SOMETIMES A GIRL IS BETTER THAN A BOY, SOMETIMES...GO IN, NU, GO IN...
>
> SOUND: DOOR SLAMS...PAUSE
>
> FATHER: EI, CLARA...WHY DID YOU DO THAT TO ME.....

MOTHER: I'M SORRY, LOUIS.
FATHER: LOOK AT HER....BIG LIKE A PEANUT. EI, CLARA, I'LL BE ASHAMED TO SHOW MY FACE IN THE LODGE.
MOTHER: SHE DON'T LOOK LIKE ANYTHING NOW...BUT YOU'LL SEE LOUIS...SOMEDAY....
FATHER: NO, NO! YOU NEVER SHOW ME THE SLIGHTEST CONSIDERATION, CLARA...HOW I WANTED A BOY!
MOTHER: ALRIGHT LOUIS, DON'T EXCITE YOURSELF. REMEMBER YOUR NERVES. ANYWAY SHE IS A GOOD BABY. SHE DOESN'T EVEN CRY-----

STRONG CRYING OF BABY

(pp. 7-8)

The above contains significant shorthand cultural cues, beginning with the father's referring to a son as a "Kadish". The language may seem melodramatic and even improbable, but the radio audience would immediately understand the reference to the prayer, and the implications of not having a son. The probability of the vehemence of the father's attitude and its effect on the female members of Jewish families was evidently not uncommon. Supporting this is an excerpt from a short story that does not attempt to be humorous—Dvora Baron's poignant "Kaddish":

> My grandmother bore my grandfather ten gifts—ten children, but alas, not a single son. They say that every time a girl was born, he would lift his thoughtful-pious eyes to heaven and sigh deeply: It seems, Father, that you don't consider me worthy of a son...who could say kaddish for me when I pass on....And at nightfall, he would sit down listlessly at the table, open the big Talmud, and...very softly and sadly, sing to himself. Somewhere in a far-off corner between the wall and the partition, my grandmother would sit and listen to the Talmud chant and cry in silence.
>
> (Baron, 1)

Later in the story, after the Grandmother dies, the young female protagonist of the story overhears her Grandfather weeping bitterly, many a night: "Beyla, Beyla, what did you do? You couldn't have borne me a kaddish, Beyla, huh? (Baron, 4) The author, Baron, born in Lithuania in 1887, a highly educated daughter of a Rabbi, may have based her short story on an issue that she had encountered either directly or indirectly. The point is that this kind of attitude toward the birth of a girl in a Jewish family was part of the collective Jewish consciousness. That it was being portrayed on a radio show geared toward a Jewish audience, probably not for the last time, is not surprising.

Picon's father's character in the radio show is soft compared with the grandfather in Baron's short story. The softening is accomplished by portraying him as a typical, nervous, expectant dad experiencing physical symptoms along with his wife (the loss of 7 pounds, the exact amount the average healthy child would weigh). Lines such as, "I'll be ashamed to show my face in the lodge" also sends a message to the listeners that the father is an archetype of the period (being a member of a "lodge," or, *landsmanshaft* organization was common at the time) (Sandrow, 82). The midwife says, "Sometimes a girl is better than a boy." It would not surprise me if Molly Picon herself wrote this line into the script; it echoes her stage and film portrayals in a way. For instance, in the song, "Tsipke," from Joseph Rumshinsky's 1923 operetta of the same name, Picon sings, "I was born a smart girl with a lot going for her. My parents wanted a boy not a girl but Tsipke is a smart one who can make you laugh and cry." (English translation from liner notes by Joel E. Rubin for *Di Eybike Mame* CD). The mother's line in the

radio script about "She don't look like anything now, but...but you'll see Louis...someday..." is a wink to the audience, who is already "in" on the later reality of Picon's stardom.

**Chapter 6: Molly Picon: The Personal and the Public**

It is obvious that the fact of being a girl in a man's world was an issue in Picon's life, and it is probably no accident that her signature theater roles were "pants" roles. In them, she became the boy that her father never had. After Yiddish theater became less popular, Picon reprised those roles again and again on the radio. The appeal of these roles meant, perhaps, that Picon also served as a model for Jewish women in the United States, whose traditional roles were eroding.

Picon's mother, in contrast to her father, is portrayed, in both the radio shows and in the autobiographies, with great reverence. The archetype of the sainted Jewish mother is seen over and over again in songs of this period. In fact, Picon's mother's character is introduced on the radio show with the song, "A Yiddishe Mame."

After the portrayal in the above radio script of her birth, the scene jumps to six years later, where little Molly begins her career by winning a singing contest at a vaudeville theater. Her father by this time in Picon's real life had abandoned the family, although this fact is glossed over in the radio show. Her mother is portrayed as the most important person in her life. In fact, Picon does not specify in her autobiography which song or songs she sang at the contest, but the radio play has her singing "A Brivele Der Mamen," which, like "A Yiddishe Mame," for the Yiddish-speaking community encompassed Old Country values

and sentimental feelings about mothers: "A letter from a mother to her son who is leaving for overseas. My only child, arrive in good health, and don't forget to send your mother a letter every week. She will read and enjoy each letter, and it will relieve her pain and bitter heart and ease her soul." (English translation from *Di Eybike Mame* CD liner notes; song written 1907).

This kind of portrayal of mothers was extremely common in Yiddish theater (as well as in songs by and about other ethnic immigrant groups). (Slobin, 1996, 124) Countless actresses portrayed this archetype in theater productions. The musical setting of "A Brivele Der Mamen," sung by Salcia Weinberg on a 1909 recording echoes the old-world sound of wailing klezmer instruments, and has a lot of stereotypical "Jewish" flavor by way of common "Jewish" intervals and patterns (*Di Eybike Mame* CD, Track 5).

Molly Picon, as did every actress of the time, played her share of mothers, especially as she got older (as stated earlier, her career lasted until she was well into her 80s). This is ironic, because she herself had a miscarriage early in her marriage and was unable to have children of her own. Later, she and Kalich took on the responsibility of schooling three young adults orphaned by World War II, and regarded them as "adopted" children. However, people associate her most with her tomboyish, cross-dressing roles. One of her first successes was the above-mentioned *Tsipke*. The lyrics, on some level, show her coming to terms with her father's rejection. She shouts out to the world that she's a girl and that she is proud of it. In contrast with "A Brivele," the musical setting of the song, "Tsipke," in a recording of Picon (ca. 1924) has a much more contemporary,

American music-hall sound. This befits the modern, "feminist" attitude of the lyrics (*Di Eybike Mame* CD, Track 15).

Picon's signature role, created in 1923, as stated above, was that of "Yankele" (music again by Joseph Rumshinsky), a mischievous but brave 13-year-old yeshiva boy, something like a "Jewish Peter Pan" (Picon 1980, 183). She was to repeat this type of role numerous times throughout her career, even starring in a successful revival at "nearly fifty" years old, 25 years after her debut in the role (Picon 1980, 136). The lyrics of the title song are not that much different than those from "Tsipke," in that they both describe a whip-smart, mischievous, adored, youth:

> I am still a child in kheyder and everyone loves me as their own. I have a sharp little mouth and I like to play hooky. I am mischievous, like a little devil, on good terms with everyone. Everyone trembles before me. Whoever sees me on the street begins to shout: There goes Yankele! There stands Yankele! He's such a good boy. Everyone asks how he is and what he's up to. Who is Yankele? This is Yankele. Every mother wishes that her own child may be as bright as Yankele!
>
> (English Translation from Mlotek *Pearls of Song*, 1)

The title song, "Ot geyt Yankele," became a signature song for Picon during the radio shows; showing how much Yankele became her alter ego, her name is substituted in the lyrics: "Ot geyt Malkele" (Radio Script, 10/24/44, p. 1).

In essence, what Picon did through her portrayals in theater and radio was to redefine for herself and, by extension, other Jewish women, the aspirations and changing roles of women in "di Goldene Medine" (the Golden Land). She was

able to model these changes in a non-threatening way that appealed to both men and women. The radio shows, utilizing certain iconic songs, drew on cultural cues that were already in place for listeners influenced by a history of Yiddish theater. The lyrics and musical motifs of some of the songs that appeared in her theater and radio shows help us ascertain what some of these cultural assumptions were, and how both media helped Jewish audiences come to terms with the metamorphosis of their own culture.

The medium of Yiddish radio, continuing the work that had begun in Yiddish theater, helped Jewish immigrants and their progeny assimilate into mainstream American culture without demanding that they give up their Jewishness. Highly personable actors such as Molly Picon, who was in some ways the quintessential symbol of American Jewishness, were the media's emissaries of American Jewish culture.

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