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As Eastern European Jews made their way to America in droves at the end of the nineteenth century, they brought with them their Old World sensibilities and tried their best to adapt to their new home. Yiddish theater and music served as an invaluable tool in this process. It helped the immigrant audience deal with the day-to-day life in America, reflecting their lives back to them, suggesting what an ideal life in America should be, and helping make sense of new value systems while holding on to old ones. My goal is to mine Yiddish plays and songs to learn how family roles and relationships were portrayed, in order to gain an understanding of the stresses put on Jewish family life at the time.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first section of this work deals with life in the Old World, discussing the historical events that affected the Jewish community in Eastern Europe causing them to make the journey to America. This chapter serves as important background for the rest of the paper. The second chapter describes what life was like in America for the newly arrived Jews. The secularization of time, the dismal living and working conditions, and the disruption of the family all became a part of the community's identity. The community needed to process what was happening to them in this new environment, and theater helped accomplish this. A general overview of the history of Yiddish theater is offered in the third chapter. This chapter highlights the major developments and personalities of the theater, putting the two plays analyzed in the following two chapters in historical context. I carefully chose each play, wanting to analyze works that were successful with immigrant audiences, therefore reaching many

people. The plays serve as examples of themes commonly presented at that time. Finally, after surveying a multitude of songs, I chose a few to serve as examples of pieces about family for the final chapter. Some are better known and subsequently have been republished in various Yiddish songbooks. Others, however, could only be found in their original folio form in YIVO's rich music archives. For some of the songs, good, reliable translations already existed. I used these when they were available. For the other selections, specifically, *"Di Elterens Treren," "Familien Glik," "Di Lebedige Yesoymele,"* and portions of *"Mamenyu,"* I translated myself. All of the above components come together to illustrate what family life was like for the American Jewish community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how Yiddish theater and popular songs served as a tool to process the dynamic state of the family.

MISHPOKHE: IMMIGRATION, THE JEWISH FAMILY AND YIDDISH THEATER

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
for Master of Sacred Music Degree

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2001
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Preface

This project has opened new worlds to me. Even though I grew up with very little Yiddish in my household, Yiddish language and culture have always intrigued me. When it came time to choose a masters thesis topic, I knew I wanted to study some aspect of this rich culture, but was not sure where to focus. It was Dr. Mark Kligman who first suggested that I look at the Yiddish theater. I enthusiastically agreed and set off to find out all I could about it, only to find that it was a *huge* topic that somehow needed to be narrowed down. My first inclination was to concentrate on notable figures of the Yiddish theater, possibly comparing and contrasting them and setting them in an historical context. I began with Abraham Goldfaden, who started it all, and vacillated between other figures to study (Joseph Rumshinsky, Sholom Secunda, Abraham Ellstien, or all three...?) I ended the spring semester with a sense of indecision over what my focus would be.

The summer brought an amazing opportunity, however. I enrolled in YIVO's Weinreich Summer Yiddish Program, and found myself immersed in all things Yiddish. It was there that I became interested in Yiddish theater (and theater music) in America as a tool for acculturation for the new immigrants. As I let this new angle percolate in my mind for a bit, I remembered a topic we studied in Dr. Carole Balin's Jewish American History class: The experience in the New World, and its effect on the Jewish family. I

immediately became excited by the prospect of combining this social historical thrust with the Yiddish theater, and delved back into the research with gusto. This has been such a rich experience for me, and I feel I've only scratched the surface.

My gratitude goes to a number of people, without whom this project would have been impossible. Dr. Mark Kligman started me on this journey with research ideas. He also constantly challenged me to find something in the vast material that spoke to me. My advisor, Joyce Rosenzweig, was invaluable in all stages of this project. She served as a resource and sounding board as well as a careful editor as the written part of the project took its shape. Chana Mlotek, the music archivist at YIVO, helped me sort through hundreds of Yiddish songs in the archives. Without her guidance the song text section would have been impossible. My thanks also goes to my *Yiddishe mame*, Judy Neuburg, who served as a motivator when things got rough and who read each section carefully to let me know if anything did not make sense to her. Finally, my gratitude goes to Joel Eglash, my husband, who helped and encouraged me throughout the project and served as the most careful editor I know, reading the whole work in order, and checking for flow.

Introduction

American immigrant history is a fascinating topic with many different aspects. Each immigrant group to come to the shores of the New World brought with them their culture, history, and unique experiences. Each group had its reasons for making the difficult transition to a new home, and each had to deal with the new realities of life in America. The Eastern European Jews made their way to America in droves at the end of the nineteenth century bringing with them their Old World sensibilities and trying their best to adapt to their new home. Yiddish theater and music served as an invaluable tool in this process. It helped the immigrant audience deal with the day-to-day life in America, reflecting their lives back to them, suggesting what an ideal life in America should be, and helping make sense of new value systems while holding on to old ones. It helped shape their Jewish American identity.

The first chapter of this work deals with life in the Old World, discussing the historical events that affected the Jewish community in Eastern Europe causing them to make the journey to America. It also describes trends and movements such as the *Haskole* and its effect on the blossoming of the Yiddish language in literature and theater. Industrialization is also discussed for a better understanding of the background with which the immigrants entered the work force once in America. This chapter serves as important background for the rest of the paper.

The second chapter describes what life was like in America for the newly arrived Jews. The secularization of time, the dismal living and working conditions, and the disruption of the family all became a part of their reality. The community needed to process what was happening to them in this new environment, and theater helped accomplish this.

A general overview of the history of Yiddish theater is offered in the third chapter. This chapter highlights the major developments and personalities of the theater, and places the two plays analyzed in the following chapters in historical context. I carefully chose each play, wanting to analyze works that were successful with immigrant audiences, and therefore reached many people. The plays serve as examples of themes commonly presented at that time. There were many others I could have chosen dealing with the same issues.

Finally, after surveying a multitude of songs, I chose a few to serve as examples of pieces about family for the final chapter. Some are better known and subsequently have been republished in various Yiddish songbooks. Others, however, could only be found in their original folio form in YIVO's rich music archives. For some of the songs, good, reliable translations already existed. I used these when they were available. For the other selections, specifically, *"Di Elterens Treren," "Familien Glik," "Di Lebedige Yesoymele,"* and portions of *"Mamenyu,"* I translated myself. All of the above components come together to illustrate what family life was like for the American Jewish community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how Yiddish theater and popular songs served as a tool to process the dynamic state of the family.

Old World Realities

Jews came to America in search of a better life for themselves and their families. As immigrants sought to settle into their new lives, find employment, and support their families, they discovered that the *Goldene Medine* (Golden Land) was not all it was expected to be. Life was difficult: conditions were dismal, work was often low paying and menial, and the family was in stress. The family, always central in Jewish culture, found itself dealing with new realities and expectations.

To fully understand the tensions and challenges that faced the Jewish immigrant population, one must look back to Europe. For hundreds of years Jews had lived in closed communities in Europe, existing as an autonomous entity within the medieval corporate system. Though Jews lived side by side with non-Jews, they banded together for survival and relied on themselves for education, internal judicial rulings, and all aspects of community building. The religion of Judaism was so integrated into everyday life that it could not be separated out. The very rhythm of time flowed "Jewishly." The bulk of Jews in Eastern Europe lived in the Pale of Settlement, 386,000 square miles of land from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, where Jews were legally authorized to live. By 1897 almost 4,900,000 Jews lived in this area—94% of the total Jewish population.[1]

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[1] Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers,* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 5.

Jews lived in tense association with their non-Jewish neighbors; at times relations between the two were more peaceful than at other times. The period during the reign of Nicholas I (1825-1855) was a particularly troublesome time for the Jews. Aiming to destroy the Jewish community as a social and religious body, Nicholas I enacted six hundred anti-Jewish decrees including censorship, curriculum control, and a lengthy conscription for Jewish boys.

The situation improved a bit with the reign of Alexander II (1855-1881), who was relatively liberal in his dealings with the Jews. He reformed some of the anti-Jewish decrees put in place by his predecessor. He reduced conscription to five years, opened universities to some Jews and permitted travel by Jewish businessmen in parts of Russia that had previously been forbidden to Jews. However, it was during his reign that the feudal system began to break down, leaving the Jewish community's economic place in society in an undefined state. Paired with the demographic crisis of a Russia-wide population explosion and crop failure, the relative stability that the Jewish community had enjoyed for many years was shaken. Many additional tragedies occurred around this time causing a minor push for emigration. In 1868 there was a cholera epidemic, in 1869 a famine was endured in Poland, and a terrible pogrom was enacted against the Jews of Odessa in 1871.[2] Combined, these tragedies caused many to leave for the New World. In addition, the pogroms of 1881, following the assassination of Alexander II, added to the sense of crisis for the Eastern European Jewish community.

The face of shtetl life was also changing at this time. The economy was becoming unfriendly to those engaged in commerce or handicrafts. Prior to the 1880's

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[2] Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews 1870-1914*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 20.

the living standard of artisans was on the rise, as the gentry relied on their trade. However, the market became flooded both with artisans and with factory production. Many Jews flocked to the cities at this time. As industrialization occurred, craftsmanship became an increasingly difficult livelihood. The Jews of the area found their place in the industrialized economy. They were attracted to industries that made use of hand machinery, such as the textile trade, to eke out a livelihood. This style of industry more easily suited the Jewish cycle of time as the workers could stop working for the Sabbath. In a fully mechanized factory it was much more difficult to shut down for that period every week to accommodate the Jews. As a result, these factory owners simply hired non-Jews who were more willing to adjust to this routine.[3] In addition, many Jews in the textile industry labored at home, toiling on piecework to support their families.

Men were not the only ones to strive to support the family. Families sought after scholarly young men for sons-in-law and felt it was their privilege and duty to support their daughter's future husband's learned activities. In marriage the wife often became the financial supporter of the family. It was common for women to serve as the breadwinners of the family so that their husband could engage in the more lofty pursuit of study. Women helped manage family businesses, made wigs, and worked as domestic servants. In the 1870's, the Singer sewing machine made a huge impact on home economy.[4] With the aid of the sewing machine, women engaged in all sorts of textile industry. They brought these skills with them as they journeyed to America.

As the community was dealing with new economic realities, it was also challenged by the intellectualism of the *Haskole*, the Enlightenment (in Hebrew:

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[3] Ibid., 28.
[4] Ibid., 26.

Haskala). For the first time, Jewish intellectuals began to express themselves secularly. The *Haskole* began in the eighteenth century in Germany. It then moved eastward to the Russian Jewish community in the nineteenth century. The two communities were strikingly different in character due to the socio-political conditions in which they existed. Therefore, both communities experienced Enlightenment differently.

In Germany, Jews expressed Enlightenment by looking to blend with their non-Jewish neighbors as fellow countrymen, conceptualizing Judaism as a faith like any other, and reforming Jewish practice and ritual. Eastern European Jews lived in a different world. Unlike the Jews of Western Europe, the Eastern European Jews were not emancipated after the French Revolution of 1789. The populace of Russia, including the Jews, did not receive citizenship until 1917. They were not as interested in reforming Jewish ritual and worship as their Western European counterparts were.

The last third of the century saw the greatest intellectual activity. At this time political and cultural movements were born, secular education became valued as it had not been previously, and secular Hebrew and Yiddish literature blossomed.[5] In the beginning of *Haskole,* Yiddish was looked down upon as a mere jargon, not an intellectually useful language. Yiddish was used for discussing the mundane. Hebrew was the holy and scholarly language, and German and Russian were considered the languages of intellect. From its beginnings, Yiddish was used for romantic legends, stories, epic poems, parables, and translations of liturgy directed to unlearned men and women. Higher scholarly pursuits were conducted in Hebrew; therefore early proponents of Enlightenment looked down on Yiddish as a lowly tongue. These intellectuals soon

[5] Howe, 15.

realized that if they were to make an impact on the masses, they needed to write in their language: Yiddish. Soon Yiddish literature bloomed as a vibrant form. Famous Yiddish authors, Mendele Moykher Sforim (1836-1917), considered the grandfather of Yiddish literature, Y. L. Peretz (1852-1915), and Sholom Aleichem (1859-1916) all began their careers writing in Hebrew. In fact, *Mendele Moykher Sforim* and *Sholom Aleichem* are pseudonyms meaning "Little Mendel the Book Seller" and the greeting "Peace Be with You," respectively. They adopted these names when they began writing in Yiddish because they both feared that their intellectual reputations would be jeopardized.[6] These authors became part of a vibrant and respected literary scene, and are among the many who presented Yiddish as an intelligent, expressive literary language with intellectual merit.

As the *Haskole* opened new doors of intellectual activity all through Europe, it altered the roles and the status of women. As mentioned above, women often supported their families so that their husbands could engage in scholarly pursuits. Because of this necessity, women were granted a measure of freedom in the secular sphere. Both *Haskole* and Socialism fostered a new awareness of women's situations, particularly the inequity of the religious divorce, or *get*, and in the acquirement of education. In fact, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, girls from traditional families were more likely than their brothers were to receive a secular education in public schools or from private tutors.[7]

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[6] Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: a World History of Yiddish Theater,* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1977; reprint, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996) 35-36 (page references are to reprint edition).

[7] Paula E. Hyman, "Gender and the Immigrant Jewish Experience in the United States," in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective,* ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 314.

The *Haskole* set the stage for secular expression and understanding. These new ideas were brought along on the journey to America. Indeed, they were fostered there, both in literature and theater, as Jews sought to make sense of their new home.

Life in the New World

America was seen as the land of opportunity, the *Goldene Medine,* or Golden Land, where one could start anew and achieve anything. However, the harsh reality of the move to the United States, especially in the beginning, was anything but golden. Immigrants soon learned that economic pressures weighed solely on the individual. Life was hard, and some returned to Europe. As vast numbers of Jews moved to the Lower East Side of New York City, living conditions became dismal, over-crowded and even dangerous. By 1900 more that 700 people per acre lived in this area.[8]

To accommodate the onslaught of immigrants to the Lower East Side, tenement after tenement was erected. Older style tenements packed in immigrants into dark, dank rooms, often without running water or toilets. Outdoor privies were erected for this purpose. In 1879, the dumbbell style tenement was first erected. As the Lower East Side felt the push of mass immigration, beginning in 1881, this became the popular plan for tenement buildings. These structures were usually six to seven stories high, each having four apartments on a floor, with access to common toilets in the hallway. Each apartment contained three or four rooms with only one room receiving direct light.[9]

Families crowded into these cramped living spaces, forgoing privacy and fostering health hazards. The heat of summer made tenement living nearly unbearable,

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[8] Howe, 69.
[9] Rischin, 81-82.

and there was a constant fear of fire. In 1903, 15 percent of the tenements in this area were without fire escapes. In 1909, 38 percent of fire related deaths in Manhattan happened on the Lower East Side.[10]

An effort was made by the city to improve the dismal living conditions of tenements, and a Tenement House Law was enacted. This law attempted to alleviate the worst tenement problems by providing better ventilation, toilets and running water in each apartment, unobstructed fire escapes and sturdy staircases. Conditions were still severely crowded, as it was difficult for a family to afford the rent of an apartment on their own. To make ends meet it was common for families to have boarders share a portion of the cost.

Whereas other immigrant groups consisted mainly of young men, the Eastern European Jews migrated as families. Therefore, from the start, the Eastern European Jewish immigrants had to deal with life in the New World as a family. Close to fifty percent of Jewish immigrants were women, and one in four immigrants were children—twice the rate of other groups.[11]

Once the newcomers arrived, they had to find a means of employment. Jews found work in all manner of trades, however the largest percentage found their place in the textile industry. In 1890 the census shows that about half of employed Russian Jews were clothing workers.[12] Though it was a difficult existence, there were a number of reasons Jewish immigrants were attracted to the garment industry. First, the industry had

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[10] Ibid., 83-84.

[11] Jenna Weissman Joselit, "A Set Table: Jewish Domestic Culture in the New World, 1880-1950," in *Getting Comfortable in New York*, ed. Susan L. Braunstein and Jenna Weissman Joselit, (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1990), 23.

[12] Howe, 80.

been expanding since the middle of the nineteenth century. Shop bosses and contractors were constantly looking for new hands to complete the work. Secondly, many Eastern European immigrants brought some experience with them from their life in the Old World, and could rely on these existing skills to earn a living. Thirdly, immigrants did not necessarily need to learn English to get a job in this industry, as many shops were run by Jewish bosses who primarily employed Jews. Since the shops were also mainly located on the Lower East Side, it was easy for the new arrivals to find work there. In addition, many shop owners agreed to let workers off for the Sabbath and holidays.

Even with these allowances for Jewish time observance, new immigrants had to deal immediately with the stress of an urban, harried conception of time. The immigrants were thrust into a world that followed a completely secular clock. This new reality stressed the family structure in many insidious ways. Not only was it far more difficult to perform daily religious ritual, but scholarly pursuits—highly valued in Europe—were worthless when all time had to be devoted to supporting oneself and one's family. Even sharing a meal together became a challenge, as working members of the family were often home at different times.[13]

Unfortunately, the rush of immigrants into the garment industry beginning in the early 1880's affected a severe decline in wages.[14] Wages periodically fluctuated thereafter: improving as a result of striking, sinking during times of depression. Therefore, it was often impossible for a father to support his family without the help of his wife and children. In the early 1900s less that one in five families could support

[13] Ibid., 74.
[14] Ibid., 83.

themselves on the father's wages alone.[15] Families did everything they could to survive. Boarders entered the family sphere, helping families meet their rent needs, but causing additional strain by adding to the crowding of already cramped living spaces. It was common for women and children to work in shops or take in piecework to be completed at home. Added to the traditional household chores, women bore a heavy burden in order to make ends meet. These realities clashed with what was deemed culturally proper. Wives taking in boarders and working outside the home reflected the failure of their husbands to fulfill their responsibilities.[16] This was particularly destructive to the role of the father.

As mentioned earlier, the pursuit of study and religious observance was previously valued above all other pursuits. However, men now entered a world where they were looked upon as idlers if they were not working to support their families. There was no time for these loftier endeavors. This, added to the disgrace of not being able to support the family alone, made the degradation of man's status complete.

In fact many women were left to fend for their children on their own. Death and disability were not uncommon, as communal diseases such as tuberculosis ran rampant in the sweatshops. Before World War I, support for widows and their children accounted for the largest budget item for cash relief disbursed by the United Hebrew Charities in New York.[17]

Many women were also forced to support themselves and their families as the result of wife abandonment. Whether men came over to America on their own and never

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[15] Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter,* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 197.

[16] Hyman, 316.

[17] Ibid., 322.

contacted their wives again, or whether they left their wives after failing to provide an economically stable life in the New World, desertion during this period was rampant. Yiddish dailies ran sections devoted to finding lost husbands. In 1905, aid to deserted women and their families was the second largest budget item for the United Hebrew Charities.[18] In fact, the problem became so acute that the community founded the National Desertion Bureau in 1911 and it remained active until the 1930s.[19] Many women, however, were extremely reluctant to seek aid, often reporting their absent husband years after his desertion. They therefore found themselves in desperate situations and had to resort to extreme measures to survive. Jewish orphan asylums were established during this period and many women felt they had no other option than to place their children there for care they themselves could not provide.[20] Some women were even lured into prostitution, perceiving it as their only option. Of 647 prostitutes released from the Bedford Hills Reformatory in 1910, 19 percent were Jewish.[21] Desertion had severe ramifications for women not only economically, but personally as well. A woman needed a *get*, or religiously sanctioned divorce, from her husband in order to marry again. Jewish law prohibits remarriage without this document. Because it was often impossible to locate a run-away husband, the wife was placed in the horrendous situation of being forbidden to remarry.

All of these factors led to the emergence of the Jewish mother, rather than the father, as the stabilizing force of the family. Not only was she a constant family

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[18] Ibid., 322.

[19] Hertzberg, 199.

[20] Hyman, 322. Many children in orphanages at this time were recorded to have had one surviving parent.

[21] Ibid., 322.

presence, but the family looked to her as the protector because of her ability to contribute to the family budget, making survival and even schooling possible.[22] Since women had long worked to support the family in Europe, the mother did not suffer from the same disesteem that men did.

While men suffered the culture shock of the barrier to their religious observance due to their new time limitations, women did not experience this crisis in the same way. Traditionally, the religiosity of women was focused on the home. In contrast with men, whose traditional religious role was played out in the synagogue and house of study, women's Jewish identity and knowledge was typically nurtured by observance and celebration within the household. For this reason, women were less likely to experience the religious disruption their male counterparts did in the transition to Jewish life in the New World.[23]

In addition, children found themselves in a stressful position in the family. Often, as the family coped with the new culture at hand, it was the children who were able to adapt the most quickly. Immigrant parents did all they could to foster this, wanting their children to be Americans. The children became the family's experts on what was "American" and "proper."[24] This role reversal had an impact on the stability of the family structure by undermining parental authority.

As women became more comfortable in their new surroundings, they, too became an Americanizing force of the family. They brought their vast market experience from Eastern Europe and adapted it to their needs in the New World. Women often led

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[22] Hertzberg, 198.
[23] Hyman, 325.
[24] Hertzberg, 201.

their families in establishing their American identity through their role as consumers. Women were generally the managers of the family budget and as soon as they were able, they sought to make their homes American by filling them with parlor sets, American food products and kitchenware. The purchase of these expensive items was made seductively attainable through installment plans and loan societies.[25]

An example of this blossoming consumerism serving as the inroad to American culture, is the acquisition of a piano. Even though families struggled to make ends meet, the attainment of a piano was given priority because it symbolized high American culture. Pianos were widely advertised in the Yiddish press as affordable due to installment plans, and teachers were in great demand. The immigrants understood that the performance and appreciation of music helped create a genteel, suitably domesticated home environment.[26] The piano became the tool to achieve this aim.

This need for the Eastern European immigrants to Americanize the home was bolstered by the German Jews who had already established their presence in America. The bulk of the German Jewish immigrants had found their way to the New World much earlier, in the 1820s and 30s. By the time the wave from Eastern Europe hit American shores, many of the German Jews had already entered the middle class. The newcomers seemed to be superstitious, backward and primitive to the German Jews who had already "made it." The established community saw a need to integrate the new immigrants into society as quickly as possible. One of the ways the "uptown" Jewish community achieved this was by setting up schools and programs to educate Lower East Side women

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[25] Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America,* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994) 143.

[26] Joselit, "A Set Table,"36.

in the basic tenets of American domestic culture.[27] Institutions such as the Henry Street Settlement, the Educational Alliance, the Hebrew Technical School for Girls, the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls and the Louis Downtown Sabbath School all provided instruction on cleanliness and housekeeping. Curricula included model budgets, precise recipes, rules of hygiene and instruction on how to suitably furnish a tenement flat.[28]

An array of literature in Yiddish targeted at women began to appear as well, instructing them on proper behavior, advertising American food and household products, and offering an idealized version of day-to-day behavior. In 1912, *Etiquette: A Guide to Proper Behavior, Politeness and Good Manners for Men and Women, Assembled According to the Best Authorities,* was published by the Hebrew Publishing Company. This manual provided instruction for numerous social situations, from chance meetings on the street to proper conduct at an opera, as well as etiquette tips on table manners. Similarly, *Froyen Velt,* a series of women's publications, was introduced in 1913. This "Jewish Ladies Home Journal" brought immigrant women up-to-date on fashion, housekeeping strategies, and health as well as providing advice on topics ranging from family relations to stain removal.[29] Publications such as these not only educated the newcomers who desperately wanted to blend into their new surroundings, but also encouraged consumerism through the domestic suggestions they proffered.

As the immigrants adopted American values, a phenomenon took place. Jews began to pick and choose what it meant to be Jewish and which rituals and traditions they would perform. The individual's own identity was the primary focus in this new society,

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[27] Ibid., 25.
[28] Ibid., 32.
[29] Ibid., 40.

and Judaism's communal character had to be altered to fit life in America. Many Jews began to live Jewish lives separated from the religiosity of being Jewish. As time went on, American Jews became more and more detached from the rhythms of the Jewish calendar cycle. Instead, life cycle events became emphasized, and holidays were recast to be celebrated in the home with family. The American Jewish identity became bound to family identity and domesticity. The responsibility of Jewish continuity shifted from the community as a whole to the family. *Halachic* Judaism became downplayed for the emotional experience of domesticated Judaism. For example, since it was often difficult for men to leave work to go to synagogue on Saturdays, Friday night Sabbath meals became an important weekly focus for the whole family. The mother became the orchestrator of this family time, providing a special meal and creating the proper mood. In fact, publications from the 1920s stress the Jewish woman's role in guiding her family to a meaningful and warm family Sabbath experience.[30] In addition, holidays such as Chanukah and Passover took on a distinctively domestic flavor. Special foods were emphasized, as were home celebrations. The Passover *seder*, a ritual that is completely home based, became the highlight of the year.

The bringing of Jewish ritual into the home was a solution to the "problem" of successfully becoming American. As Jews rose in class status, it became more and more difficult to fulfill ritual obligations. Publications such as Esther Ruskay's *Hearth and Home Essays* endeavored to persuade readers of the continued importance of Shabbat, Passover, Chanukah and Purim by transforming ritual moments into a celebration of family togetherness. Ruskay herself was a Russian Jew who had risen to the bourgeoisie

[30] Jocelit, *The Wonders of America*, 254.

and worried about the abandonment of ritual by her peers. In her work, she emphasized the Passover week with its special preparations and foods as the most important family time of the year.[31]

[31] Jocelit, "A Set Table," 44.

Yiddish Theater: From Old World to New

For many, theater served as an escape from daily woes. It was a place to socialize and be socialized, a place to relax and a place to dream. Theater dealt with all manner of life from the nostalgia for the old country, to the everyday stresses of poverty and the sweatshop. It showed both the realities of life, and how life should be. Family, therefore, figured prominently in Yiddish theater, as it dealt with the new problems of life in America.

In Europe, before the nineteenth century and the *Haskole,* Yiddish theater found its beginnings in *purimshpils,* or plays celebrating the holiday of *Purim. Purim* is the time when Jews are charged to be frivolous and jolly, and entertainments were common. By the sixteenth century, organized *purimshpils* appeared, usually based on the Esther story read from the *megile,* (*megilah* in Hebrew) the parchment scroll read every year on this holiday. However, the subjects of these plays were not limited to the Esther story; other Biblical themes were presented, as well as secular stories, though these were usually used as interlude pieces.[32] *Purimshpils* were designed to be accessible to all—learned and unlearned alike. Stories were familiar to everyone in attendance and contained elements of current events and social satire.

For centuries the *purimshpil* was the only outlet for this kind of expression. This

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[32] Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars,* 6.

kind of play-acting was considered to be religiously inappropriate at any other time of year. Before the *Haskole,* secular expression was limited, but as Jews began to explore secular ideas and literary forms, theater began to emerge as an entertainment vehicle. The first Yiddish play produced was *Sirkele* by Solomon Ettinger, marking the beginning of modern Yiddish theater. Ettinger wrote *Sirkele* in the 1830s, but it was first formally produced after his death in 1862. Though other plays were written before *Sirkele's* debut, they were never actually produced.

Appearing in the title role, was Abraham Goldfaden, a young rabbinical student of twenty-two. This experience changed his life, beginning his journey into a life of theater. Goldfaden was a product of the *haskole*. He grew up in a household that embraced Enlightenment ideas and was therefore exposed to Western history and literature. He also began writing songs that became well known around his hometown.

Goldfaden tried his hand at numerous professions before finding his place as the "Father of Yiddish Theater." He attempted teaching at a school, but could not support himself. He ran a shop, but went bankrupt and had to leave Russia to escape his debts. He even attended medical school for a brief time, but quickly realized that he needed to pursue a more literary career. After serving as editor of several Yiddish papers that all failed, Goldfaden relocated to Jassy, Romania, where he heard that there were many Jews that could possibly support a Yiddish newspaper. It was in Jassy that Goldfaden began his career in theater in earnest.

There he met up with Israel Grodner, and together they constructed the first Yiddish theater company in 1876. Grodner had been a member of the Broder Singers—a well known travelling singing group, and had been singing Goldfaden's songs for years.

Their company, consisting of Goldfaden, Grodner and a boy helper, put on plays in the improvisational style of Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Goldfaden concocted the plot, wrote the songs, and described to the actors the characters they were to portray. It was up to the actors then to improvise their own lines and movements.[33]

Soon Goldfaden's plays became more complex. By 1880 he had written *Shmendrik, The Witch* (in Yiddish, *Di Keshifmakherin), Shulamis* and *The Fanatic, or The Two Kuni-Lemls*—all well known plays that came to be performed regularly by many theater companies in Europe and America. As the company became more and more popular, he began to recruit actors wherever he could find them. Because most of the famous actors of the first half of the century began their careers with Goldfaden's company, he had an enormous impact on shaping their craft and therefore the character of Yiddish theater in general. These actors include notables such as Jacob P. Adler, Sigumund Mogulesko, David Kessler and Keni Liptzin.[34]

The Jewish community was hungry for this kind of entertainment, and Goldfaden opened the theatrical frontier. The time was ripe for Yiddish theater, and within the first year of Goldfaden's success, other theater groups began to crop up. Goldfaden's group grew; both acquiring new talent and losing actors who then struck out on their own. Some of Goldfaden's actors made the journey to the New World before he did, bringing Goldfaden's works with them.

Yiddish theater was forced into a new direction with the enactment of a Russian edict in 1883 prohibiting the performance of Yiddish plays. This forced Yiddish theater westward to Western and Central Europe and to America. Theater had just begun to

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[33] Ibid., 45.
[34] Ibid., 51.

move to the New World with the large wave of immigration. The Russian edict, however, served to accelerate theater development in the United States. The first professional theater production in America was Goldfaden's *The Witch,* performed at New York's Turn Hall in 1882. The immigrant audience fully embraced the theater, recognizing in it characters they knew from their lives, and feeling nostalgia for the Old World. Writers could not produce material fast enough to satisfy the audiences.

Two writers stepped in to fulfill this demand for theater: Joseph Lateiner and "Professor" Morris Hurwitz. Working at rival theater houses, these two prolific playwrights churned out play after play, often creating them in just a few days for immediate performance. They competed against each other with similar plots, and constantly recycled old successful story lines to please the audience. It was also common for well-known plays from the secular world, those for example by Shakespeare, to be reworked for the Yiddish stage. Due to the hastiness of their output, Lateiner and Hurwitz's style was flexible, allowing for the actor to ad-lib their lines in a highly stylized form of Yiddish called *daytshmerish. Daytshmerish,* a product of the *Haskole,* was a mixture of Yiddish and German. It was thought to sound more stately and educated than everyday spoken Yiddish by the early proponents of Enlightenment. Though by the end of the nineteenth century most *haskole* writers had abandoned it for pure Yiddish, writers like Lateiner, Hurwitz and Boris Thomashefsky—another important actor and writer of this time—preserved *daytshmerish* for the stage. Their plays, and works like them, were not considered to be fine art theater. They were strictly popular drama with many musical moments thrown in to distract the audience from the discrepancies in the plot. The writers (and theater composers) of the time felt that their

audience was not ready for weightier plays. They wanted easy entertainment.[35] These works became known as *shund,* or trash, by the elitist intellectuals who sought to enlighten the Jewish community.

Shund plays generally fell into three categories: historical operettas, *tsaytbilder* (pictures of the times), and domestic dramas. Historical operettas took the audience to exotic times and lands, often using pseudo-biblical plots. *Tsaytbilder* used the theater venue to portray current events and issues. Generally sensationalist in their treatment of events, *tsaytbilder* presented audiences with plays about subjects such as immigration, the Dreyfus trial, and tragic fires in New York. The third kind of *shund* play was the domestic drama. Domestic dramas came to dominate the Yiddish stage with stories meant to mirror real life.[36]

Another force emerged in Yiddish theater at this time: the Yiddish theater star. Plays hinged on popular performers. Fans, known as *patriotn,* were intensely loyal to their favorites. The stars had power over which roles they wanted to play and therefore which plays would be produced. They were known to indulge impersonal displays of talent and temperament without regard to the integrity of the play. Operating in this "star system," important actors would often demand to be cast in upper-class leading roles that would be favorable to their image. They felt that their audience wanted to see "finer" people on stage.[37]

The 1890s saw another developmental shift in Yiddish theater. Jacob Gordin, an

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[35] Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants,* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982) 93.

[36] Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars,* 113-114.

[37] David Lifson, *The History of the Yiddish Art Theatre Movement in New York from 1918 to 1940,* vol. 2, (NY: T. Yoseloff, 1962), 225.

intellectual from Russia, was dissatisfied with the lowly nature of the Yiddish theater he encountered on his arrival to the New World. Gordin was educated in Western literature and had seen fine theater in Russian and other languages. He felt that Yiddish theater could be raised to a higher level. Gordin, with the support of Jacob Adler—a very prominent actor—began writing serious plays meant to educate his audience morally as well as intellectually. (A more lengthy discussion of Gordin follows in the analysis of his work, *God, Man, and Devil.*)

Shund plays remained popular, but the theater-going audience was ready for Gordin's weightier dramas. This opened the field for others to begin creating a new kind of theater. It was a difficult transition as theater proprietors tended to prefer the easy money of popular *shund*, but slowly playwrights emerged, bringing literary and political drama to the stage. Notable figures of this phenomena include: Leon Kobrin (1872-1946), Sholom Asch (1880-1957), David Pinski (1872-1959), H. Leivick (1888-1962), Peretz Hirschbein (1881-1948), and Osip Dymov (1878-1959).

A new kind of venue was needed for these new works, and in 1918 Maurice Schwartz (1890-1960) acted on his dream to open a Yiddish art theater. To announce his acquisition of the Irving Place Theater for this purpose, he published a manifesto outlining his vision of Yiddish art theater:

1. The theater must be a sort of holy place, where a festive and artistic atmosphere will always reign;
2. A company of young artists who love beauty must strive to bring the Yiddish theater to a beautiful fulfillment;
3. To play good dramas, fine comedies, worthy farces, and nice operettas. And if a melodrama must be played, it must have interest and logic;
4. Every play must be put on as it should be, and the author should also have something to say about his play. To rehearse enough that the actor has time to

> learn his role. And every play to have a full dress rehearsal with costumes and scenery...[38]

Schwartz renamed his theater the Yiddish Art Theater, and found artistic and commercial success for over thirty years. Taking Schwartz's lead, others soon opened theaters with similar goals.

As the Jewish community in America began to blend into its surroundings, Jews began moving out of the Lower East Side, and children began to grow up with English as their first language. In addition, the Reed-Johnson Act of 1924 restricted immigration so that Yiddish speaking newcomers were cut down to a trickle. Although the end of WWII brought refugees from the Holocaust to the United States, theaters found it more and more difficult to find an audience. Its purpose as acculturator, socializer and meeting place was no longer needed by the Jewish community, the bulk of whom were losing their nostalgic ties to Yiddish and were living as modern American Jews.

The Yiddish theater fulfilled many needs for the immigrant community. It served as a meeting place to find exciting *shund* entertainment to take one's mind of the daily stresses of life. It was also a looking glass for the community, sometimes presenting a realistic view, and other times an idealized one. Yiddish theater also often sought to moralize and educate the community. The plays *God, Man, and Devil,* by Jacob Gordin and *Bronx Express,* by Osip Dymov are two examples of plays that were extremely popular. The sanctity of family figured prominently in both examples, though the two plays deal with the subject differently. Although *God, Man, and Devil* is set in an Old

[38] Maurice Schwartz, *Forward,* quoted in Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars,* 262.

World shtetl, the protagonist's struggle against the evil temptation of wealth resulting in the destruction of his family and himself, resonated with American audiences. *Bronx Express* deals with a similar theme, though in a much more light-hearted way. Here we also see the striking destructiveness of greed.

God, Man, and Devil (Got, Mentsh, un Tayvl), by Jacob Gordin

Jacob Gordin's (1853-1909) work, *God, Man, and Devil* deals with issues of values, morality, and the sanctity of family. When he arrived in the United States in 1891 he was not a Yiddish writer; in fact writing in Yiddish was at first difficult and alien to him.[39] In the Old World, he had been an intellectual and a revolutionary. He was a fully acculturated Jew who wrote for St. Petersburg newspapers and became well known as a social activist. Like many newcomers to America, Gordin faced the realities of having to support his family, so he took a position on one of the radical Yiddish newspapers of the Lower East Side.

Gordin remained a member of a group of intelligentsia who revered the Russian language and looked down upon Yiddish literature and theater. They regarded the popular plays that were being written and performed as *shund*, and saw them as reinforcing parochialism by presenting a characature of all Jews. These intellectuals felt that *shund* plays projected a problematic image of the Jewish people to the world.[40]

After writing a dramatic piece that contained a large amount of dialogue for a Yiddish newspaper, another Yiddish writer took notice and dramatized the piece for Sigmund Mogulesko, a prominent actor.[41] Soon after, Gordin attended his first Yiddish

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[39] Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 133.
[40] Ibid., 135.
[41] Ibid., 136.

play, which dismayed him; yet also inspired him to produce something better. He immediately began working on his first Yiddish play, *Siberia,* which opened in 1891. Thus began his prolific career as a Yiddish playwright—a time many still refer to as the Golden Age of American Yiddish Theater or the Gordin Era.[42] Gordin was constantly writing in order to support his large family.

His approach was completely new to Yiddish theater. He looked to the theater of Russia, Germany and America as a model for what Yiddish theater could be. He believed that if fine theater could be produced in these other languages, then it could also be done in Yiddish. Strict in the method in which he achieved his ideal, he insisted on maintaining the integrity of the text of his plays. It was common practice for actors to ad-lib their lines, both in speaking and singing. Gordin, however, insisted that all actors strictly follow the script. He was known to stop a show if an actor stepped out of character, and scold him or her. He was intent on creating a sense of realism with believable characters, and wanted the audience to believe that the characters were behaving as real people would, given the circumstances presented in the play. Gordin therefore only permitted music that could be integrated believably into the action and railed against the use of *daytshmersh*, the heavily Germanized form of Yiddish that was commonly used for theater performance. He felt that it was affected, and that no Jew on the street would speak that way naturally. Instead, he insisted on using everyday, spoken Yiddish—a decision that was very controversial at the time.[43]

Gordin preferred to work within the structure of the melodrama. Dealing with the

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[42] Ibid., 132.
[43] Sandrow, *God, Man, and Devil,* 7.

struggle between good and evil, the melodrama was a common dramatic form that enjoyed intense popularity at that time. Gordin was concerned with teaching moral lessons, and as a socialist, his political views also infused his works. He was an educated writer who wanted to inform his audiences, so he often chose themes from the "classics" of Western culture.[44] *God, Man, and Devil,* for example, acquainted Gordin's audience with the Faust story. His most popular plays include *The Jewish King Lear, The Kreutzer Sonata,* and *Mirele Efros.*

In 1900, Gordin wrote *God, Man and Devil* in America for American audiences. The play however, is set in an Old World shtetl and deals with the dangers of losing one's values for the attainment of riches. It begins with a prologue, which takes place in heaven. After a poetic introduction by a host of angels, Satan engages God in a conversation about the mortals below on earth. Satan claims that humans continue to do the same stupid things over and over again, and that they have not progressed at all since being expelled from the Garden of Eden. God disagrees, pointing out God's "true beloved servant Hershele Dubrovner."[45] Hershele is a Torah scribe whom God considers to be pious, generous and pure. Satan claims that Hershele is only that way because he is poor and does not know any better, and that he can be easily corrupted by money. God agrees to let Satan test Hershele.

The first act takes place in a big impoverished room on a cold winter day, the fifth day of *Hanukah.* We immediately meet Hershele's family as they are going about their business around the house. Pesenyu—Hershele's wife, is peeling potatoes; Leyzer—

[44] Ibid., 9.
[45] Ibid., 39.

Hershele's father and Freydenyu—Hershele's niece, are both preparing quills for Hershele's Torah copying; and Tsipenyu—Hershele's younger niece, is tying up the sole of her shoe with a rag. We learn that Leyzer was a *badkhen,* a wedding jester who likes to drink, act silly, and randomly make up rhymes.

Soon Hershele's closest friends arrive: Khatskl; Dobe—his wife; and Motele—their son, who are coming to the house to celebrate the engagement between Freydenyu and Motele. The ensemble is having a jolly time visiting, when Hershele returns from the *mikveh* (ritual bath) to finish the last verse of the Torah he has been working on. When he finishes, he gives his nieces his last money for *Hanukah,* and apologizes to Motele for not having any more to give him. He relates that he met someone in need on his way home and therefore has no money left. We also witness the great honor Hershele gives his father, the jester, when he insists on including him in discussing the wedding plans with Khatskl.

Suddenly the devil arrives as Uriel Mischief (*Mazik* in Yiddish), a businessman from Warsaw selling lottery tickets to all the Jews in town. He claims that Hershele can win fifty thousand rubles. Hershele is dubious, but Mischief convinces him to take a ticket. Mischief also notices that Hershele is raising his nieces as his daughters, but has no natural children of his own. Hershele gives the ticket to his niece, Tsipenyu, to look at and becomes agitated when Motele grabs it, tearing it. Then, before leaving, Mischief offhandedly suggests that Hershele should divorce his barren wife, Pesenyu, and marry his young niece, Freydenyu instead.

In the second act we see that Hershele's family is now living very richly. Tsipenyu and Leyzer are discussing whether or not they are happier now that they have

money, and Leyzer admits that he is afraid of Hershele and feels out of place in his home. Pesenyu also expresses that things are different with the money, and that Hershele does not seem as close to her. Just then Hershele enters the room with Mischief, who is now his business partner. Mischief is plying Hershele with ideas that freewill is more important than acting piously.

Hershele expresses regret that he hasn't found time to copy any Torah scrolls since he won the money. When Mischief suggests a business plan, Hershele is resistant, claiming that commerce is robbery. Mischief convinces him by proposing to open a *tallis,* or prayer shawl, factory. This way they will be producing "Godly merchandise," an idea that seems good to Hershele.

Then Hershele admits that he is troubled by the comment Mischief made that first night he arrived regarding divorcing his wife for his niece, Freydenyu. Mischief argues that divorcing Pesenyu is the best and most pious way, since the purpose of marriage is to have children. Hershele eventually agrees and approaches Freydenyu. Freydenyu admits that she loves her uncle, but is worried about Pesenyu. They decide to propose it to Pesenyu, and if she refuses, to let the matter drop.

As they come to their decision, Khatskl, Motele, and Dobe enter to solidify the wedding plans between Motele and Freydenyu. Freydenyu admits to the potential in-laws that she is not very interested in Motele, and Hershele announces that he wants to have children, and therefore wants to divorce Pesenyu. Pesenyu, feeling that Hershele is a pious man and therefore must be correct in his thinking, tearfully agrees and accepts that Freydenyu will take her place.

Act three takes place three and a half years later. Now Hershele's house is much richer and we see Mischief counting large packets of money. Hershele is away on business. While Mischief and Leyzer are in conversation, Leyzer admits that he is more at home when Hershele is away. Freydenyu enters and we learn that she is not a happy woman. She has become preoccupied with gazing at herself in the mirror and feels guilty that she took the place of her aunt. We also learn that she has not yet given Hershele a child.

Dobe, Pesenyu, and Tsipenyu, obviously very poor and in rags, enter to ask Freydenyu if she could urge Hershele to help them financially. Tsipenyu married Motele in Freydenyu's place and now has two children. They inform Freydenyu that the *tallis* factory has ruined Khatskl and Motele, who were *tallis* weavers themselves. Tsipenyu and Freydenyu argue over the state of their relationship and the financial state of Khatskl's family. Freydenyu says that Hershele told her that it is Khatskl and Motele's own fault for attempting to compete with the factory.

Hershele returns and the women leave the room in a frenzy. Hershele tells Mischief that he borrowed as much money as he could, per Mischief's instructions. Then Mischief easily convinces Hershele that they go bankrupt to make a profit, asserting that because Hershele is considered to be a pious Jew, no one would question that he is honestly going bankrupt. Their plans are interrupted by the arrival of Khatskl and Motele, who have come to ask Hershele to help them. Khatskl accuses Hershele of running his business dishonestly and ruining the other weavers' businesses in town. Hershele refuses to give them money for help, but offers to hire the two of them to work

in the factory and give Pesenyu an allowance. Realizing that that is the best Hershele will do for them, Khatskl and Motele accept and leave.

Freydenyu emerges to express her emptiness and sadness to Hershele, but Hershele does not understand and brushes her off to count his money. Mischief enters, offended that Hershele does not trust his earlier accounting and accuses him of scheming against him. They have an explosive argument in which Hershele becomes very proprietary over the money. They struggle over the strongbox, and in a dramatic moment, Hershele stabs Mischief in the neck.

The first scene of act four occurs in a poor room in Khatskl's house. We see that it is some time later, and Dobe happily informs Khatskl that Tsipenyu is pregnant again. We also learn that Hershele has forced Leyzer to board at Efroyim the Fiddler's house, that Freydenyu has gone mad with "melancholia," and that Mischief and Hershele are once again friends. Suddenly, a worker from the factory arrives informing the family that Motele's hand was torn off by one of the machines at the factory. They bring him into the house, his bloody arm wrapped in a *tallis,* and a surgeon arrives to treat him.

In scene two Mischief tries to comfort Hershele, who in inconsolable. Mischief asserts that Motele's injury is no big fuss, that these things happen and that Hershele should just get used to it. Motele's injury has affected Hershele greatly, however, making him realize that he has been acting abominably.

The third scene takes place back in Hershele's office at his house. Pesenyu is trying to comfort Freydenyu who is obviously very depressed. Hershele and Mischief arrive from the factory. Mischief is still trying to bait Hershele with all the money in the strongbox, but Hershele is no longer interested. He apologizes to Leyzer for sending him

to live with strangers. Hershele has a discussion with Mischief about the sins he has committed against man in the name of money. Dobe and Tsipenyu join Hershele's household to wait for the doctor to finish treating Motele. Before Tsipenyu goes to join the women in another room, she angrily tells Hershele that he ceased being her relation the day he divorced Pesenyu. A distraught Hershele then orders Mischief to leave him alone. Leyzer bursts in and sadly announces to Pesenyu that Motele is dead. Hershele learns the news and in complete despair, hangs himself with the *tallis* bloodied by Motele's own injury.

Gordin uses *God, Man, and Devil* as a moralizing vehicle. His aim is to warn the audience how easily money corrupts, and he uses the breakdown of Hershele's family to illustrate his point. Immediately Gordin asserts his view of what righteousness is through the discussion between God and Satan. The prologue, full of biblical allusions, helps to set up Hershele's character. God claims that Hershele's attributes include piousness, generosity, devotion to his friends, and purity in his family life. Satan explains that Hershele is protected from temptation by the way he lives and is confident that he will be able to easily corrupt him: "...Oh, just let me at him with a little bag of gold, and you'll see what becomes of his piety, goodness, righteousness, family life, friendship, and all the other virtues you brag about."[46] Satan even claims that family life is just a lie and that he will not need money to destroy Hershele's family, just a little help from his niece, the Evil Impulse.

The first act introduces us to an ideal family—rich in friendship, love, and loyalty,

[46] Jacob Gordin, *God, Man, and Devil,* trans. Nahma Sadrow (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 40.

but poor in wealth. The seeds of future problems are sown throughout this act. For instance, though a match is being arranged between Freydenyu and Motele, it is clear that they do not love one another—Freydenyu is unenthusiastic about the idea, and Motele is uncomfortable around Freydenyu. However, we see that Motele and Tsipenyu get along very well. Gordin is setting up a situation that his audience can empathize with. The corruption of Hershele taking Freydenyu as his wife in the next act is all that more insidious because it can be easily justified on many levels. This first level is introduced here: Freydenyu did not love Motele, so her heart was free to go to Hershele. Later Hershele also justifies his decision on grounds of piety.

We also learn details of Hershele's righteousness so that we can witness the utter destruction of his morals throughout the play. First, we learn that he never drinks (unless it is the Sabbath,) smokes, nor eats well. Secondly, we learn of his generosity in his giving his last coins to a needy person he met on his way home. Thirdly, we learn of Hershele's great respect for his father, Leyzer, who he includes in all his discussions.

As soon as Mischief enters the scene he begins working to undermine Hershele and his family. He counters all of Hershele's objections to accepting the lottery ticket with convincing arguments, and when Hershele is finally persuaded to take the ticket, he immediately begins to change. We see this by Hershele's reaction when Tsipenyu snatches the ticket away from Motele and accidentally tears it. He is beside himself and begins to curse them. He does catch himself, but it is evident that the experience has begun altering Hershele's usual demeanor.

Upset by his own reaction to the torn ticket, Hershele is immediately confronted by Mischief's parting suggestion to leave Pesenyu for his niece. Mischief not only leaves

the two families in complete confusion and disarray, but he has succeeded in leaving the ticket with Hershele—the first part of his plan is complete.

The second act shows us the beginnings of the breakdown. Tsipenyu has already begun to realize that life is not necessarily better with lots of money, though she cannot quite put her finger on why she feels this way. Leyzer shares with Tsipenyu that he has become frightened of Hershele, hinting at a change in Hershele's behavior toward his father. He no longer affords Leyzer the respect he gave him before winning the money. Gordin is using this as the first important and tangible sign of family breakdown, and emphasizes the point by having Hershele dishonor his father more and more throughout the play.

Pesenyu expresses the next hint of family dysfunction. She tells Tsipenyu and Leyzer, "The truth is, since we won the big prize, I don't know what to do with myself. And Hershele has become like a stranger, too, somehow. Always preoccupied, worried. Somehow, in poverty people are closer to each other."[47] We see evidence of Pesenyu's experience when Hershele arrives with Mischief:

> HERSHELE. Pesi, forgive me, we (Hershele and Mischief) have to talk. *(He gestures that she should leave.)*
>
> PESENYU. Once upon a time, when you used to copy Torahs, I used to be able to sit and darn a sock, and watch you and enjoy you. But nowadays? Well, that's how it is.[48]

Hershele is already separating himself from his wife.

Later, after Mischief has used his twisted logic to persuade Hershele to join him in opening the *tallis* factory, Mischief once again suggests that Hershele may yet have

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[47] Ibid., 56.
[48] Ibid., 57.

children. Hershele, though tempted by the idea, still has some qualms about leaving his wife of twenty-two years. Mischief has a fairly easy time convincing him that not only will it be better for Hershele to leave her for his pretty young niece, but that it is the pious thing to do, as it is a great sin for a man to remain in a childless marriage. Once Hershele learns that Freydenyu is willing, he immediately takes action to dissolve his marriage. He justifies the terrible thing he is about to do to Pesenyu by making the final decision hers. She, of course, agrees because she trusts that Hershele's intentions are pure and well considered. Her heart, though, is obviously broken. She acquiesces, "No, Hershele, you are a pious Jew, a fine man. If you believe we have to get a divorce, then it can't be helped. Probably it's a decree from Heaven. We'll get a divorce. Father in Heaven. *(She weeps.)*" And thus Hershele's family structure is completely destroyed—the "daughter" becomes the mother and the mother is removed.

When we meet Hershele again, it is obvious that the more money he has gained, the greater his moral degradation. He smokes cigars and freely drinks wine; he is easily talked into cheating his creditors by going bankrupt. This time Mischief did not even need to camouflage his scheme with pious justifications, he simply suggests that it has nothing to do with Hershele's Jewishness:

> MISCHIEF. When business is bad, it's already late to go bankrupt. The time is now. My friend, this is even better than winning the lottery. In one stroke we become three times richer.
>
> HERSHELE. *(Jumps up)* We do? *(Thinks)* But excuse me, Reb Uriel, God be with you, what do you mean? You know that what I want above all is to do business decently and remain a decent man and a righteous decent Jew.
>
> MISCHIEF. Certainly. You are a decent man and a decent Jew. That's why it's so good for us to go bankrupt. From such a fine, decent man as Reb Hershele, the creditors will happily accept fifty kopecks on the ruble. In business, being decent means being smart, taking as much as possible in and giving as little

as possible out. That's what all the big businessmen we owe money to do, and we'll do it too. But of course you'll remain a decent man and a good Jew, because what does this have to do with Jewishness? And the money will remain in the strongbox. Just count it yourself.

HERSHELE. Yes, let's count it right now and see how much the total comes to....[49]

Hershele's greed reels him into the scheme right away.

Next, we see that Hershele is no longer the loyal friend he was before winning his prize. Previously, he treated Khatskl and Motele as family, though they were not. Now they are family, as Motele is in effect Hershele's son-in-law, yet Hershele treats them like strangers. When they approach him for help, Hershele refuses, claiming that their financial situation is their own fault for daring to compete with Hershele's factory.

We also sense the strangeness of Hershele's relationship with his new wife. This is obviously not a normal marriage. Not only is Freydenyu wracked with guilt over taking her aunt's place, she cannot seem to help herself from calling Hershele "uncle." In addition, they are not close in the way we witness Hershele and Pesenyu had been before the money. Freydenyu tries to talk to Hershele about her emptiness, but he does not hear her.

Finally, Hershele's treatment of his father sinks to a new low. When Leyzer adds his opinion, Hershele has him dragged out of the room by a servant. He declares that Leyzer is an embarrassment and resolves to pay to board him somewhere else.

By the end of the act we see how far Hershele has fallen. He has become so greedy that he wants all the money for himself and in a rage, attempts to kill Mischief.

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[49] Ibid., 76.

In the beginning of the fourth act, Gordin once again shows us the model of a happy family. Khatskl is happily helping Dobe around the house and discussing Tsipenyu's third pregnancy. It is obvious that they are poorer than ever, but that they take joy in each other and their family. We are shocked when Motele is brought home, severely injured by Hershele's machines.

Motele's injury forces Hershele to confront the enormity of his corruption. He no longer will listen to Mischief's advice and is horrified by what has come to pass because of his actions. To counter Mischief's double-talk, Hershele recites the *Ki Keshimcho* prayer from High Holy Day liturgy—references that would be very familiar to theatergoers of the day, whether or not they were observant. This symbolized Hershele's return to his values.

When he returns home, he attempts to repair the situation with his father. He realizes that for his own convenience he forced his father to live with strangers in his old age. The point is emphasized by the fact that because their relationship has deteriorated to such a state, Leyzer actually prefers living with strangers than with his own son. Here again Hershele alludes to repentance on *Yom Kippur,* the Day of Atonement:

> HERSHELE. One can set thing straight with God. And Satan counts for very little when one already considers himself skillful and wise. But man? Our rabbis say: The sins *beyn odom le-mokem,* "between man and God," are atoned for every year on the Day of Atonement. But *beyn odom l'odom,* "what one man sins against another"—to redeem that, tears don't help, or charity, or pleas and prayers and fasting...[50]

Tragically, Hershele's new understanding comes too late. His greed has banished his beloved wife, driven his new young wife mad, undermined his regard for his silly but

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[50] Ibid., 91.

sincere father, destroyed all his friendships and finally killed his son-in-law. With no family left to afford him support, he sinks into complete despair.

Gordin shows us that Satan was wrong and Hershele could not be completely corrupted in the end. Hershele realized the grave error of his actions. But Gordin also asserts that this is not enough, that greed is so dangerous and its damage so complete that in the end it can destroy us, as it destroyed Hershele's family and finally killed Hershele himself.

Bronx Express (Bronks Ekspres), by Osip Dymov

Bronx Express, by Osip Dymov[51] (1878-1959), was one of many productions dealing directly with the process of Americanization. Dymov, himself an immigrant from Bialystock, was an acculturated Jew who, until 1907, wrote only in Russian. After receiving a secular education, he began his career writing pieces for Russian journals and small newspapers, as well as dramas for the Russian theater. Dymov began dealing with issues of Jewishness only after the wave of Russian pogroms in 1903.[52] In the following years he wrote *Shema Yisroel* and *Der Eybiker Vanderer* (The Eternal Wanderer). In 1913, Dymov came to America and began writing for the Yiddish newspaper, *Der Tog* as well as creating plays in Yiddish. His largest success was *Yoshke Musikant* (Yoshke the Musician), a love story that takes place in the Old World. A popular playwright, Dymov's works were performed at many theaters, including Thomashefsky's National Theater, Adler's Grand Theater, Second Avenue Theater and the Yiddish Art Theater.[53]

Bronx Express, written in 1919, takes place in New York and discusses the price of becoming a "successful" American. The play opens with a prologue where we meet two Jewish men commuting on the "Bronx Express" train. The main character, Khatskl

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[51] Osip Dymov, a pseudonym for Joseph Perlman, was adopted while a he was a Russian writer and used for his entire career.

[52] Sandrow, 193.

[53] Caraid O'Brien, "Osip Dymov," *Second Avenue Online (Web site)*.

Hungerproud, is on his way home from the button factory, when he runs into Jake Flames. Flames and Hungerproud were "ship-brothers" and have not seen each other in over twenty years. Flames is well dressed and claims that he has struck it rich. Hungerproud catches Flames up on his life and invites him home to dinner to reminisce. In turn, Flames ridicules Hungerproud for his failure to become an "American." He mocks his clothing, his neighborhood, the Yiddish paper he is reading, his family, and even the food that he will be coming home to. He tells Hungerproud that he should have married a rich American girl instead of staying with his "old lady." After borrowing a dollar from Hungerproud, Flames takes his leave.

The first act takes place in Hungerproud's Bronx dining room. His family is preparing for the Sabbath and waiting for Hungerproud's arrival. We are introduced to Sara—his wife; Yosele—his thirteen-year-old son; Reyzl—his eighteen-year-old daughter; Moyshe—Reyzl's suitor; and Smarozhanski—Hungerproud's old teacher. Sara is cooking a traditional Sabbath meal including challa, gefilte fish, stuffed derma and pot roast.

Hungerproud arrives in an obviously foul mood from his meeting with Flames. As the doorbell rings, Hungerproud admits that a liar and good-for-nothing on the subway confused him. Flames enters the room at this point, commenting on everything from the food to how Sara is keeping Hungerproud back in the Bronx and away from his potential millions. Flames upsets everyone in the room and Hungerproud throws him out. But Flames' ideas have taken seed in Hungerproud. After an argument with Moyshe, Hungerproud decides to go to Broadway to find a millionaire to marry his daughter.

The second act takes place in a lavishly decorated parlor on Broadway. Here, Hungerproud meets up with Flames to see about becoming a real American. The first thing he does is to change his name from Khatskl to Harry. Flames informs him that the only way to become a millionaire is to bluff. Hungerproud then attempts to bluff Mr. Pluto of Pluto Water by pretending to call J. P. Morgan, Mrs. Coolidge, and J. D. Rockefeller. Pluto is not fooled, but is impressed with Hungerproud's bluffing ability and decides to promote him as a man with great ideas. We then meet Mr. Pluto's friends and business associates—all represented by famous advertising personalities: the Smith Brothers from Smith Brother's Cough Drops, the Wrigley Twins from Wrigley's Chewing Gum, Aunt Jemima from Aunt Jemima Pancakes, the Arrow Collar Man, Murad from Murad Cigarettes, and the Nestlé baby. All of these characters were meant to be easily recognized from advertisements of the day and are dressed as they are seen in the ads. Murad, for example, wears a relatively revealing harem outfit, Pluto is dressed like a devil, the Arrow Collar Man is a dapperly attired blond man, etc.... Hungerproud is smitten with Murad the cigarette girl and begins to court her after being convinced by Flames that "a millionaire is never married."

As this is taking place, Moyshe and Smarozhanski arrive to attempt to bring Hungerproud back home to his distressed wife and family. He refuses to go back with them before he makes a million or two. Hungerproud is then struck by his millionaire making idea: to Americanize the Jews by abolishing Yom Kippur and making it an overtime work day for more money. Flames insists on receiving a commission on for Hungerproud's big idea, however Hungerproud ignores him.

In act three we see how Hungerproud's idea has paid off. Hungerproud and Murad are on their honeymoon in Atlantic City with their newly adopted child, the Nestlé baby. Hungerproud has made his millions and we see its far-reaching effects as we encounter his family and friends from the Bronx. First Hungerproud is given a series of telegrams by a messenger boy who turns out to be his old teacher, Smarozhanski. Next Hungerproud and Murad ride in a rolling chair and talk. Hungerproud becomes melancholy and tells Murad about his "friend" who has a beautiful daughter, Reyzl, who almost married a worthy young bridegroom. This friend also has a son, who on that very day was bar mitzvah, and who would be winding the *tfilin* straps for the first time. To Hungerproud's astonishment, it is Moyshe, still pining for Reyzl, who is pushing their rolling chair. Then Hungerproud calls for a shoeshine and is dismayed to find that his "bar mitzvah boy" is the one shining his shoes. He is further horrified when he finds that one of the old Smith brothers is pursuing Reyzl for marriage. In his distress, Hungerproud attempts to drown himself in the sea, only to be saved by Flames who is now a lifeguard. Flames explains that when Hungerproud refused to pay him commission on his big ideas, he was forced to take Hungerproud's old job at the button factory. When the bosses abolished Yom Kippur he had to leave the position. They dine at a fine restaurant where Hungerproud orders an amazing amount of food, including shellfish and a boiled ham. Flames only orders a cheese sandwich. Hungerproud admits that no matter what he eats it does not feel right in his mouth because he is a sinner. The cook is brought out and we see that it is his wife, Sara, who has been reduced to cooking for strangers. When the crowd realizes that Hungerproud has married twice, mayhem breaks loose, and Mr. Pluto tries to hang him....

Suddenly Hungerproud wakes up at the end of the line of the Bronx Express. In the epilogue we see that it has all been a bad dream, and that Hungerproud slept so soundly that he missed his stop. Moyshe, Smarozhanski and Reyzl enter the train. They had been to the park to get flowers to honor Hungerproud's twenty-fifth anniversary of working at the button shop. Hungerproud is moved by the gesture, and happily they begin their way back home.

Dymov's work is a prime example of a play that deals directly with the tension between wanting to become a successful American and struggling to maintain Jewish culture and values. Dymov, in *Bronx Express,* cleverly used a dream sequence to emphasize this point. The breakdown of the family structure became a symbol of the evil side of Americanization. Immediately in the prologue Dymov has the character of Flames chip away at traditional Jewish family roles. Flames tries to convince Hungerproud that he is not a real American, and therefore not happy. He tells Hungerproud that if he had married a rich American girl he would not need to work; that he is wasting his time in the Bronx with all the Jews and should go to Broadway and Wall Street to the "high-windows." Flames' opinion of marriage becomes clear in this passage:

> FLAMES. Yes, sir. That's where life is, not by you in the Bronx. On Broadway, on Wall Street. Aha, it's cooking, it's burning, it's setting off sparks. They're running, they're grabbing, they're pushing. Hoo-ha! There a friend is no friend, a word is no word, a wife is no wife. That's life!
>
> HUNGERPROUD. What do you mean a wife is no wife?
>
> FLAMES. One wife today, another one tomorrow. How do you do, good night, take care of yourself. Go to the Americans, I'm telling you. You get an idea, one new thought, a little gimmick, that's all—they drown you in gold. They buy, they sell, they jump up and down and ring bells. Bluff! Hoo-ha! Business!
>
> HUNGERPROUD. What have I got to sell?

FLAMES. Buttons, cotton, silk, milk, yourself, your wife, your people.[54]

Act one portrays the epitome of Jewish family life: preparation for Sabbath dinner. Though this family is the model of a traditional Jewish family for this play, they are still portrayed as possessing modern sensibilities. Reyzl breaches the subject of marriage with the bashful Moyshe by asking him how many times a week a person needs to shave. She informs him that she absolutely does not want to marry a man who wears a beard. Bearded men represented the Old World and an old fashioned way of living.

When Hungerproud enters the scene, he finds fault with all of the traditional trappings around him. He criticizes the lack of a cushion on his chair, the food, Moyshe's behavior, and the way his children talk to him. Food becomes one of the foci of the act. It represents family and Jewish tradition and is used throughout the play to illustrate how far the characters have departed away from Dymov's view of Jewish values.

Just when Hungerproud snaps out of his mood, realizing that he is acting irrationally, Flames enters this family tableau, upsetting everyone with his unwelcome opinions. Flames is doing his best to come between the husband and wife, and Sara recognizes and accuses him of this. One of the tools Flames uses is the food Sara prepared. Sara is deeply hurt by his accusations that she is keeping Hungerproud from his millions, but it is the insult to her food that is sufficiently upsetting to all, causing Hungerproud to throw him out.

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[54] Osip Dymov, *Bronx Express,* trans. Nahma Sadrow (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 272.

When Hungerproud leaves the Bronx to seek out Flames to pursue his fortune, he is immediately confronted with the reality that he will have to live a dishonest life to get his millions. The corruption of family plays its role in this process again and again. When Hungerproud meets the Nestlé Baby, he asks where the mother or father are. He is horrified to learn that the baby never had a father or mother, and exclaims, "What good is money without a mother or father? Poor little orphan."[55] This played into the Jewish community's sensitivity to the tragedy of orphanhood.[56]

As the old teacher, Smarozhanski, tries to bring Hungerproud back to the Bronx, he states clearly the main theme of the play: when family breaks down there will be nothing left of Jewish culture. He pleads, "Three weeks after Yom Kippur is his bar mitsva, and bar mitsva without a father is no good. Next Yom Kippur he already won't fast, and when Yom Kippur goes, everything goes: no holidays, no religion, no traditions. Everyone all mixed up in the American schmaltz pot."[57]

Hungerproud understands that to make his million he would be betraying his people. Throughout the play he struggles with this knowledge. However, he still comes up with his idea to abolish Yom Kippur so that the Jews will be absorbed into the American mass of consumers. He explains by turning around the very argument Smarozhanski used on him:

> Yom Kippur breaks down, everything breaks down. No holidays, no religion, no tradition. Everything one pot of schmaltz. Everyone cooked in the same pot. The iron grinder grinds them all up together, with the Poles, Italians, Chinese, Japanese, Negroes—everyone thrown in the iron wheels. Wheels and people—a machine with no holidays, no language, no traditions—a great mass of workers

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[55] Ibid., 288.

[56] Irene Heskes, *Yiddish American Popular Songs, 1895 to 1950: A Catalog Based on the Lawrence Marwick Roster of Copyright Entries,* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1992), xxx.

[57] Dymov, 291.

> that works and buys, works and buys, and eats, and chews, and swallows. Two for a quarter, five for a dozen. The nicest, the best, delicious, you need it. Historical process, capital and labor.[58]

He still tries to resist selling the idea to Pluto, but he is distracted by Murad, and sells himself, his family and his people to the devil.

At last, in Atlantic City we see the effects of Hungerproud's desertion of his family and the implementation of his great idea: Smarozhanski is reduced to serving as a messenger boy, Moyshe must push a rolling chair on the boardwalk, and Yosele, who was to become bar mitzvah that very day, has to shine shoes for money. In addition, since Hungerproud forbid Moyshe from marrying Reyzl, she considers a marriage proposal from the rich but elderly Smith Brother. This time Hungerproud is not in the fatherly position to ban the match and watches in horror as she accepts on her own behalf. Finally, Sara is forced to become a cook in a restaurant.

Dymov again asserts his main theme in a final conversation between Reyzl and Moyshe. Moyshe, who is heartbroken that she has accepted the Smith Brother's proposal, asks her how she could do it. She admits that she would rather be with him but cannot because of her father's actions. They argue:

> REYZL. But whose fault is it that everything got turned upside down? Whose fault is it, I ask you? My own father's.
>
> MOYSHE. Don't talk like that. If your father heard your words, he would commit suicide from heartache. Gedalye Bitterzon would call it the last stage of Americanization.[59]

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[58] Ibid., 295.
[59] Ibid., 299.

Moyshe considers Reyzl's abandonment of the Fifth Commandment, honoring your father and mother, the final stage of Americanization.

Later, in the restaurant, Hungerproud and Flames' conversation about Sara's whereabouts points to common problem faced by the Jewish immigrant community. When Hungerproud admits that he has no idea where Sara is, Flames suggests the she can be found in the "Disappeared Wives column." The joke here is that family desertion was common among Jewish men. As mentioned earlier, it had become such a problem that in 1911 the community established a National Desertion Bureau to locate missing Jewish husbands.[60] Yiddish papers, therefore, used to carry features to help women locate their missing husbands.

Food, once again, becomes the focal point of the situation. Hungerproud as the American millionaire will eat anything, kosher or not, even though he complains that nothing feels right in his mouth. He longs for the Jewish food Sara cooked for him in the Bronx—the very food both he and Flames ridiculed earlier. As it turns out, Sara who has been reduced to cooking for strangers, prepared all the food he had been eating.

Dymov's image of the breakdown of family, resulting in the breakdown of Jewish culture is so disturbing that we cannot help but feel relieved to learn that it was all a bad dream and that Hungerproud's family unit is intact. Dymov's agenda here is clear. The audience is meant to be moved and warned against the dangers of giving up too much and succumbing to the temptations of mass culture and its lack of morals and values. Family is what keeps it all together.

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[60] Hyman, 332.

Jewish American Family Life through Song: What the Texts Reveal

The Jewish community's love for the theater was not the only force driving the acculturation process. Music was also extremely important as an expression of the immigrant's joy and pain in the New World. Theater productions were so full of music that it was nearly impossible to survive as an actor if you could not sing. Popular songs were disseminated through sheet music. Hundreds of songs were published and performed, entering the consciousness of the community, depicting shared values and aspirations, and reflecting the experience of life as an American Jew.[61]

As previously mentioned, the parlor piano became a symbol of high American culture for the immigrants, causing a blossoming of the piano industry. Likewise, sheet music came to be in great demand. In effect, the immigrant community propelled the spread of sheet music—a cultural/musical process that the immigrants helped shape.[62] A night at the theater, for example, brought opportunities for theatergoers to purchase songs that they had heard in that evening's production.

Yiddish theater and other popular Yiddish songs tended to follow a similar structure as their mainstream counterparts. For instance, Yiddish songs followed a verse and chorus format (different from folk melodies from the Old World, which tended to use a strophic structure); sentimental subjects often were expressed by a ¾-waltz time

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[61] Slobin, 119.
[62] Ibid., 120.

signature; the vocal range was usually limited to an octave; and repetition of a previously successful theme was common.[63]

Song texts dealt with a wide range of issues, but the subject of family repeatedly appears in the repertoire. Since the community was striving to maintain their values in an American setting, the family became a focus point. From the tragedy of ungrateful children to the silly antics of in-laws at a wedding, songs of the family came in many varieties.

"Di Elteren's Treren", or "The Parent's Tears," written by Hyman Altman in 1911 and arranged by Henry Russotto, is an example of a family song dealing with the heartaches of raising children:

> Vs. 1:
> The children, when they are small, don't yet understand things. They sleep and play freely, and cry just the same. The parents stand by them, gladly imparting all their knowledge, and understanding their child's cries. When the child has sorrow, it rips at the parent's heart; their pain is great. The child also suffers pain but cannot express it.
>
> Chorus:
> Parent's tears: many run, they don't stop. In celebration—for joy, during troubles—for suffering. They flow like a river. There is no end to the tears. Every single parent, small and great, rich and poor, has troubles from children. One cannot understand another's. This is firmly established: that the whole world is full of parent's tears.[64]

The role of the parent here is to stand by their children, educating them and supporting them even though it is difficult.

Another song about family life is *"Familien Glik,"* or "Family Joy," a song

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[63] Ibid., 121.
[64] Translation: Kari Siegel-Eglash.

written in 1914 by Joseph Brody and Louis Friedsell from the play *Di Blind Oyfersikht,* (Blind Jealousy). Here the importance of peaceful family life is stressed:

> Chorus:
> Family joy, family joy, should be valued by everyone. This is your world, your life's promise, your earthly paradise; you should guard and protect it. A family truly loves each other with tenderhearted devotion. Family joy protects goodness; don't disturb it.
>
> Vs. 2:
> When parents quarrel, it brings special troubles. Heaven becomes hell, but the worst is for the children. The bright happy home is no longer sunny, but dark, like a grave. The fearful heart is invaded by trembling, becoming hard, no longer joyful. Tear after tear falls from the eyes of the children.[65]

As time went on, family songs center less and less on the family in general. As the Jewish Mother emerged as the stabilizing force of the family, her virtues became a favorite topic for songwriters. Songs such as *"Mayn Libster Fraynd is Mayn Mamenyu,"* ("My Best Friend is my Mama"), written in 1916 for the play, *Der Toyfels Makht* (The Devil's Power), and republished in 1921; *"My Yiddishe Mame,"* written in 1925; and *"Ich bin a Mame, Vu is mayn Kind,"* ("I am a Mother, Where is my Child") written in 1927 for the play *Ir Groyser Sod* ("Her Great Secret"), are a few examples of texts extolling the attributes of a devoted mother. These, like many others of the time, stressed the selflessness of the mother in her rearing of the children.

One of the most famous "mother songs" to emerge from this time was *"A Brivele der Mamen,"* or "A Little Letter to Mother," by Solomon Smulewitz. It was first published in 1907, and subsequently re-released numerous times:

> My child, my comfort, you are going away. See now, be a good son, your true, dear mother asks you with tears and with fear. You go, my only child, over distant seas. Oh arrive at that place fresh and healthy, and don't forget your

[65] Ibid.

mother. Go with health and arrive with luck. See now that you send a little letter every week to refresh your mother's heart, my child.

Chorus:
A letter to your mother shall you not miss, write quickly, dear child, send her the consolation. Your mother will read your letter and she will recover, heal her pain, her bitter heart, refresh her spirit.[66]

The vehicle of the letter song became popular. The topic of writing to loved ones left behind in the Old World resonated with the immigrant population, and songwriters flooded the popular music scene with letter songs of all kinds: *"Dem Pedlers Brivele,"* ("The Peddler's Letter"); *"A Brivele dem Taten,"* ("A Little Letter to Father"); *"A Brivele der Kalleh,"* ("A Little Letter to the Bride"); and *" A Brivele fun Khosn,"* ("A Little Letter from the Bridegroom"), just to name a few.

Songs also dealt with specific situations of family tragedy. Orphanhood was deemed a most tragic state, and the subject entered the repertoire in force. In 1914 Joseph Rumshinsky and Louis Gilrod wrote *"Leybedig Yesoymele,"* ("The Living Orphan") for the operetta *Di Fremde Feygel* or The Strange Bird; Henry Russotto and Max Zavodnik wrote *"Der Leybedigeh Yoseml, oder di Leybedigeh Yesoymim,"* ("The Living Orphan, or the Living Orphans"); and Samuel (Sholom) Secunda wrote *"Di Leybedigeh Yesoymim"* for the operetta of the same name. Immigrant audiences were fascinated by this terrible tragedy as seen in *"Di Lebedige Yesoymele"* ("The Little Orphan Girl") by Arnold Perlmutter and Herman Wohl, written in 1911, and set in waltz time for the maximum emotional impact. Boris Thomashefsky wrote the lyrics for this piece for his play *Blinde Libe* (Blind Love):

What is my life? Only pain and tears. I don't have a father; my mother has become blind. I beg God, please hear me. Why has this happened to me? For

[66] Translation: Arthur Graham, with the assistance of Howard I. Aronson, *Singing in Yiddish,* (Cedarhust, NY: Tara Publications, 1985), 24.

which sin? I am a little orphan girl, a haggard little tree. My leaves have fallen from the wind. I live with danger, with no mercy. I'm a poor wretched child.

Chorus:
I beg you, God, hopefully you will hear me, help this orphan now.
'I have no daddy, oh, give me my mommy!' Begs an orphan, a lonely child.[67]

This song is an interesting picture of the times. We see this wretched child whose father has died, but we know that her mother, though blind, is still living. She could possibly be one of the unfortunates who were placed in an orphanage because her mother could not care for her.

Another song that treats the issue of tragic orphanhood is *"Mamenyu! Oder der Troyer af di Treyngl Fayer Korbones,"* (the published English title was "*Mamenyu!* Including an Elegy to the Triangle Fire Victims"), by Joseph Rumshinsky and Anshel Schorr. This song not only uses the familiar topic of orphanhood, but it is an occasional song—a song that contains items written for a specific event.[68] Like the *tsaytbilder* of *shund* theater, occasional songs commonly incorporated current events, feeding into the community's need to process an important or tragic occurrence. Occasional song topics include the Dreyfus affair, World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the sinking of the *Titanic.*

The first verses and chorus of *"Mamenyu"* begin like the other orphan songs discussed above, and appeared in the operetta *Dos Meydl fun der West* (The Girl from the West):

Chorus 1:
'Oh woe, Mama!' Is the first word from children. But a mama's heart is what heals the child's pain. You live in danger. Woe unto you, orphan. You're a

[67] Translation: Kari Siegel-Eglash.
[68] Slobin, 133.

chopped down tree; you're lonely everywhere... 'O mama, mama, where are you?'[69]

The final verse and chorus seem to be added to this orphan formula to deal with the tragic Triangle Fire of 1911 where 146 garment workers, mostly women, lost their lives:[70]

Vs. 3:
Your heart is torn by the terrible disaster. The Jews grieve and weep and wring their hands. A fire breaks out, oh, in the light of day and hundreds of workers are burned to death. Those who tried to flee the fire found death by leaping. The morgue is full. You can become plain crazy as a mother grieves quietly:

Chorus 2:
'Oh, woe, my dear child!' The mother tears her hair, 'For a piece of bread, a horrible death robbed me of my only child. My daughter lies dead in a shroud instead of a wedding dress. Woe to my life, a child of sixteen! Oh mama, mama, woe is me!'[71]

Boarders were another reality many immigrant families had to live with. The intrusiveness of having a stranger move in and the awkwardness of the lack of privacy added stress to already difficult living situations. *"Ikh bin a 'Border' bay mayn Vayb"* ("I Am a Boarder at my Wife's") by Rubin Doctor, is a humorous look at both divorce and the necessity for boarders in the community.

Vs. 1:
I am single again, just like a bachelor; I've divorced my wife. I thought of moving and looked for a room to sleep in. But my wife convinced me: Why look for bargains and suffocate in strange rooms and be alone and talk to the wall: Stay here just like before. Be a boarder now with me. So I pay her rent like a stranger.

Chorus:
I am a boarder at my wife's. It's so good, so pleasant! Men, it's great! She gives me everything. When I come home, she asks no questions. I am a boarder at my wife's.

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[69] Translation: Kari Siegel-Eglash.
[70] Heskes, 69.
[71] Translation: Irena Klepfisz and Eleanor Mlotek, *Pearls of Yiddish Song,* (NY: Education Department of the Workmen's Circle, 1988) 251.

Vs. 2:
I'll tell you now quite frankly that I feel fortunate. Better to be a boarder than a husband. I don't have to guard my wife and come in the middle when the butcher brings in the meat. I'm free of worry. I don't have to borrow or lend, nor work and bring her the money. From the time that I've become her boarder, it's good for me without an end. I eat and drink and I enjoy life.[72]

The humor of this song is heightened by the copious use of "Americanisms" such as *singl* (single), *mufn* (moving), *rums* (rooms), *border* (boarder), *dzhab* (job), and *butsher* (butcher).

[72] Ibid., 254.

Epilogue

The immigrants did not make the decision to come to America lightly, but the New World held hope, opportunity and freedom. It also brought pain and insecurity. Everything they took granted—religious pursuits, values, and especially family— were turned upside down. But in America the Jewish immigrants thrived, built community, and grew to be an integral part of American society.

Yiddish theater reflected these strivings and popular Yiddish songs helped the community feel comfortable in their new home. Yiddish theater however, declined as the numbers of Yiddish speakers decreased—the last influx of new Yiddish speakers arriving after World War II. Jewish Americans strove to be more American, speaking English instead of Yiddish. In addition, as American Jewish identity became bound to family identity and domesticity, it became possible to move from the tight knit Jewish community of the Lower East Side of New York to the Bronx, Brooklyn, and beyond. For a brief period of time Yiddish film continued bringing Yiddish stories to the Yiddish speaking public, but that, too faded. Yiddish theater was replaced by American theater and film.

However, Yiddish theater never quite disappeared. Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater lasted until 1955. Since then semi-professional groups have kept the theater alive in New York and throughout the country, one of the most remarkable of this group

is the Perhift Players of Milwaukee, WI who operated well into the 1970s. Recently, interest has been renewed in Yiddish and Yiddish culture. The Folksbiene, founded in 1915, continues to put on yearly productions with great success. Klezmer music, once only heard at Jewish weddings and celebrations, has now become wildly popular with Jewish and non-Jewish audiences alike. In addition, universities are now offering degrees in Yiddish studies, and scholars have begun to explore Yiddish theater, language, and literature, uncovering a rich and vibrant heritage.

Yiddish theater and songs have much to say about the Jewish community as they found their way in a new world. This study has only scratched the surface of what this material has to offer in understanding what life was like for the Jewish American immigrants.

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