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## 8<sup>th</sup> IAYC Conference: in Baltimore: Yiddish Teachers: Heroes Then & Now

### Report #10 TOP TEN REASONS TO COME TO BALTIMORE

Very early registration has far surpassed our expectations when considering geographic distribution. We have always had a great representation from areas outside of the conference city, but **never before was early registration so widely represented.**

#### 1. Your friends are coming from:

- Canada: Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg
- Midwest: Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin,
- New England: Connecticut, Massachusetts
- Mid-Atlantic: New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland and DC,
- South: Florida, Georgia, Louisiana,
- Far West Arizona, California, Colorado .....  
come join them and make new friends.

#### 2. You've been to one or more IAYC

conferences, so you know how great they are. Come again. We have a very high percentage of repeat attendees. It has to be great. We must be doing it right.

3. **You've never been to one, and you've heard how great they are.** Come on down. If you belong to a Yiddish club, this is especially the time to attend.

4 **You are a Yiddish teacher or club leader** – come learn and share ideas. There will be

special workshops for your interests and needs. Meet and share ideas.

#### 5. **Come honor those who taught you Yiddish.**

This says it all. It will bring back fond memories of those special people.

6. **You went to a Yidishe shule or camp** – come have an alumni reunion. It is amazing how many of us have met old friends, and even distant family.

7. **You love Yiddish music** – come hear klezmer, folk, theater, art songs, shule and camp songs and more. Our evening entertainment is meant to relax and yet invigorate your Yiddish funny bone.

8. **You like to perform** – come to our bigger than ever Talent Cabaret with Mitch Smolkin. Each conference has seen an increase in interest in this event. Mitch has brought it to new heights.

9. **You haven't seen the fabulous Baltimore Inner Harbor** ... come try the paddleboats and shop 'til you drop. Even great for those who come only for the entertainment.

10. **You need a change of pace** – come to a memorable 4-day getaway!!

**A Student Shraybt**  
Marilyn (Miryam) B. Cohen,  
Metairie, Louisiana  
marilynbcohenyahoo.com

Before class begins in Fannie Yokor's, "Lomir Lernen Yidish" group, *gib a kuk*—look at the chalkboard. There you will see a numbered list, an outline of what Fannie hopes to cover that afternoon. "Oh, no!" you might say, "a lesson plan—how boring!" *Punkt farkert!*—just the opposite—we the students are ensured of a varied, well-organized two hours of learning, participation, and fun. We sing songs and recite dialogs, easily learning vocabulary without realizing it. Jewish poets and playwrights, holidays and customs are all familiar to us. We recite poems, and, *eyder vos un eyder ven* before we know it, we have memorized them.

The class is learning to read and write in Yiddish, and there is even some grammar sneaked in. (Personal note: I love the grammar, but resist learning cursive writing in Yiddish). Fannie encourages us to compose our own individual dialogs in Yiddish, using proverbs we have learned. Many of the dialogs we learn are student-generated. Once a month we view a Yiddish film with English subtitles. The Yiddish class has even performed a few programs of songs and skits for the entire Jewish community.

Our group is a close-knit, *heymish* one. We care about each other, noticing who is absent from our more than twenty student group, and calling the absentees to inquire about their well-being, or to offer rides where needed.

I have been in the Yiddish group for ten years. I consider it a privilege to be in Fannie Yokor's class. I don't let anything else interfere with my time on Monday afternoons. It is the most pleasurable time of the week for me.

**A Teacher from Alsace, France**  
Pascal Curin CurinP@aol.com

Thanks for word lists and the free using for teachers (in my case in Alsace, France, an old Yiddish-speaking region). However, it would be more practical for me to have the possibility to get all subjects in one time, it is tedious to save one list after each other. Dou you have a folder where all files are in it and that you could download? It would be very nice!!

Ich bin iwerraschd, dass Jiddisch (aü vum Oschde) 'm Elsassisch ähnlisch!! ich kann fäscht ohn Wordlichte verstehn, wann de hebräisch Weerder net dozwise kumme täte !!

e Grüessle vum Elsass

**E-mail #2**

Thanks for your quick answer! No problem with YIVO, just a little surprising! But Yiddish singing artists use it here as well. I never saw current Yiddish in Europe which was written with German alphabet. I mean it would be more practical to read when you know German or German dialects such as Alsatian.

I agree with an article about Yiddish activity in Alsace, a former important Yiddish center in the Middle Ages until the Revolution. The Yiddish-speaking people I knew are almost all dead! I see only one in my neighborhood (Mr. Katz), he is very active and organizes with the Region Alsace every year a big cultural programme about Jewish Life in Alsace as a big component of Alsatian past. I took part in his programme and have contact with him.

If I had to write this article in English (?) I would rather send the text to a Jewish friend living in Chicago, President of a Jewish Congregation whose mother still speaks Yiddish. He will be able to correct my English. Please tell me what you'd like to get as an article linguistics or history etc.?

**From Natal, South Africa**  
Rochelle Winer rochel@icon.co.za

Ikh hob bakumen July 2003 *Der Bay* un ikh bin geven zayer gliklekh. Ober ikh mayn az a por bleter hob ikh nit. Inhalt - Ikh hob nit bakumen Pg 3,4,5 8,9 10. Bite shikt mir di bleter. Ikh bin zayer farinteresirt tsu layenen vegn di temas vos es shtayt in ayer inhalt, biklal Oystsugen fun briv, Farvos iz mayn Yidish nisht azoy gut? A briv fun Kharkiv, Ukraine un andere. *Der Bay* is zayer vikhtik in mayn lebn.

I would not have any contact with the Yiddish world at all, if it weren't for the fact that you keep me so well informed and then I can pass on the information to the members of my Yiddish Group. I eagerly look forward to receiving this every month. I would be so grateful for the back copies that I did not receive.

**A Request for Help**  
Gail Erlichman, Lakeland, FL gaile@concentric.net

I met you at an Israeli Fair a few years ago. I am friends with your daughter Deb Herman and didn't know who else could help. My mother in Rochester NY was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Both of my parents are survivors of the Holocaust and are fluent in Yiddish, not so with English. I would appreciate greatly if you could help me with translation of info on Alzheimer's and caregiver needs from English to Yiddish so I could help dad understand it. Where can I get this info in Yiddish.

## Managing Change in Yiddish?

Why is change threatening to all of us at times, and to some of us most of the time? Of what are we afraid? How can we feel comfortable about inevitable change? How can we initiate change in others who feel uneasy about making changes?

First we must understand that change is the norm. Each day's weather is different. Plants and animals, including we humans, are growing and dying each moment of our lives. So this first step is being aware that all about us, in every sphere, change is the norm—albeit often imperceptible.

Second is to learn what it is that causes us to resist change. It is fear of the unknown. If we do the same thing each time, we can predict the outcome. If we don't feed the baby, the child will cry.

Change is like entering a dark room. It is scary. We don't know the outcome. Once we turn the lights on our fear is reduced. People like what they can do well. Saying, "I don't like to bowl" is synonymous with "I'm not good at bowling."

Perhaps we can agree on a few basics about Yiddish. If you disagree then, one or all of this set of assumptions needs to be modified or discarded.

- Even though many Yiddish organizations are losing membership or stopped growing, we must increase the size of our groups or else we shall pass from the scene as have many of the others.
- If we wish to contribute to worthy causes, such as awarding scholarships, then we must raise money.
- At our peak of Yiddish speakers and activities we had many more Yiddish publications, theaters and Yiddish being taught. We may consider revitalizing several former ones and be willing to innovate new ideas like expanding Yiddish online, and video-conferencing club meetings and conferences.
- Cooperation is the basis of success. We ought to have greater contact with other groups like—The National Yiddish Book Center, YIVO, Arbeter Ring, League for Yiddish, Yugntruf, FOY, Congress for Jewish Culture, YKUF, Forward, Folksbiene, IAYC, Yidishkayt LA, Congress of Jewish Culture, CSJO, Institutes, Universities, Vendors, Museums, Libraries, Clubs, Klezmer Groups,

The above is only a partial list, and you can add others. The key thing is that we initiate a dialogue on how to give our mame-loshn even more vitality. Because we all are interested in maintaining our own turf, we lose sight of the greater picture.

What is needed are not leaders, but facilitators. Facilitators are non-threatening and can work with organizations and individuals for the common good. Let us start with a Yidish Kalendar so that we all know each other's events and try to minimize scheduling conflicts.

## Zi kukt far a briv fraynd

Ikh heys Shulamis. Ikh bin 25 yor alt. Ikh hob gelernt geshikhte in dem universitet. Ikh arbet in undzer kehile shoyrn 10 yorn: ikh bin lererin fun hebreyish, yidish, yidishe traditsie. Ober same vikhtikste zakh far mir iz muzik! Ikh zing un bashaf muzik af yidish. Yidish hob ikh ongehoybn lernen mit a yor tsurik af dem seminar "Yidish un yiddishkayt" in Poyln. Zint septembr hobn mir organizirt "Yidish-Tsentr" in undzer shtot. Izt hobn mir 12 yunge mentshn (fun 16 biz 30 yor alt) in undzere grupes. Mit harzike grusn! Shulamis.

**Shulamis Lupotnik**

**Artyoma str. 14 app. 12**

**Kharkov 61002**

**Ukraine**

## A Request from Germany

I am very interested in learning Yiddish. About a year ago I heard on the radio a documentary about the Yiddish language and culture, and it really interested me, so I decided to find out more. However, I've been having difficulties in finding ways and places to learn the language. I can already speak good German and have heard that this is a good start. Could you recommend any websites or books? I have heard of "arele" but am finding it difficult to buy this book.

I would like to take part in the Yiddish pen-pal plan. I can't speak Yiddish yet and I'm not Jewish, would that be ok? I live in a small village near Bonn. I've already had a quick search around the local area but couldn't find any clubs or classes. If you know of any that would be a great help or of someone in Germany I can get in touch with.

**Robert Cooper <robcooper42@hotmail.com>**

## From *The World of Yiddish*

by **Morrie Feller**

I have succeeded in copying the reading of some of the Onkelos stories that are to be found in Leonard Prager's *World of Yiddish*. I think you might enjoy listening to these stories while reading them either on your computer screen, or from hard copy that has been printed out.

The simplest way to access the Prager Web site is to go to the *Der Bay* Web site. Select Yiddish links, and scroll down to *The World of Yiddish* by Leonard Prager. Click on this, and you will see a large circle with *Yiddish* in the center. Click on the circle, and you will get a square with a smaller circle in it. Click on this circle, and you will get a line that says: *Yiddish Stories*. Click on this, and the texts of twelve stories are shown which have all been read by Sara Blacher-Retter.

Click on a PDF selections to bring up the text.

## Let's Play Pinochle in Yiddish

In an attempt to improve the Yiddish classes, we instituted the conversation period. The first attempt was with the kitchen. The table was set with dishes and silverware. A copy of the words on *Der Bay's* website was handed out. The class went well and we decided to continue on with new themes.

Next we tried to have the speaking/leaning session center around playing games starting with pinochle. Other card games or board games will be used. While this is being tried in a classroom situation, it could easily be adapted to club meetings.

Below is the list of words used for the pinochle class. None of the students had ever played the game, but most said that their parents had played it. One can set up games of 2, 3 or 4. A pinochle deck has no jokers and only nines and higher. Also there are 2 of each card from 9 to ace. Thus a pinochle deck has only 48 cards, unlike a regular deck of 52 cards.

Your editor hopes that readers will give further suggestions and evaluate the word list.

Pinochle	pinokl
Ace	toyz di, tayz di
Bid	(v) bot, (n) onbot der
Cards	kortn
Clubs	shpog der
Count	tseyl
Cut	shnayd
Deal	geb
Deck	pash der, peshl dos
Diamonds	lekekhn der
Fewer	vintsiker
Hearts	royts dos, eykhl dos
Higher	hekher
Highest	hekhster
Jack	poyer der
King	kinig der
Lower	nidiriker
Lowest	nidirikst
Meld	leyg oys
More	mer
Nine	nayn
Pair	por
Pass	pas
Points	pintlekh
Queen	kinigin, malke di
Shuffle	tash (iber)
Spades	pik, shvarts
Suit	kolir der, mast der
Take in	nem arayn
Throw out	varf aroys
Trick	trik
Trump	kozer der
Ten	tsen
Void	posl

## Selecting a Conference Site

Just like the birth of a baby, all the work in conceiving and carrying the fetus is done out of sight. It is only after the child is born do we see the fruits of all the labor. So it is with the selection and preparation processes with and for a conference.

- How does the IAYC select the next conference site?
- Where will it be held?
- Who will be the co-ordinator/s?
- When will it be?
- What will the theme be?
- What are the accommodations?
- How much will it cost?

We hope to have the next site selected and announced at the Baltimore Conference. We have been able to do so at the last two conferences. It is interesting to note that no two conferences have been alike. Each has had a different theme and no two have been in the same place.

Conferences have been held in hotels, universities, conference centers and even where the meetings, dining and sleeping all were in different locations at a single conference. In fact one was at a Catholic College. All worked well.

There has been a single coordinator, a pair and a team of three coordinators. There have been Yiddish teachers as well as coordinators who could not make a good presentation in Yiddish. All worked well. In several instances someone came to us at a conference and said, "I would like to have a conference in our city. Whom do I see?" In each case the person became the coordinator for the following conference.

Accommodations have been in a luxury environment and in dorms with shared bathrooms down the hall. Obviously there was a difference in comfort, but other benefits more than compensated for it so that the overall result was excellent.

Themes are selected by the hosting city, and usually depend on the unique resources of the local community. In Milwaukee Yiddish and the Holocaust was selected because of the unusually active Second and Third Generation Holocaust Survivors. They were a significant part of the planning committee. Many wonderful themes will be used in the future—Yiddish Organizations, Yiddish Publications, Yiddish Theater, Yiddish Humor, Yiddish Songs, Yiddish Writers and Poets.

If you would like to know about how to have your city sponsor a future Yiddish Club Conference, contact the editor or see any of the IAYC officers or board members at the Baltimore Conference. Every conference has been financially successful, and the IAYC will put up the deposit.

# The American Yiddish Theater: Origins & History—Part I

## by Israel Kugler

There is a close connection between theater and language. A *lets* —a jokester—once said: Az di mame shrayt, vert der tate on loshn—when mama screams, papa is speechless—the origin of mame-loshn.

Until the end of the 19th century it was largely the everyday language of the Jewish masses. Hebrew was the holy language, Loshn Koydesh, to be used in the synagogue mainly by men, and in studying Torah and the Talmud—largely by men. The Enlightenment (Haskalah) looked westward toward German as the civilized language and to the east to Russian. The Khasidim, expressing their joy in their religious continuity used Yiddish. Traditional Misnagdim (the Orthodox rabbis) tried to keep that wall of separation between Hebrew and Yiddish. In the Orthodox synagogue the women sat behind a curtain. Instead of reading the Torah in Hebrew, they followed along in a form of Yiddish called Tseyne Areyne.

Jewish creative intellectuals recognized the need to wed the everyday language to standards of grammar, pronunciation, syntax, and spelling. In 1908 at the Tshernowitz Conference, Yiddish writers led by Yitzkhok Leyb Peretz proclaimed Yiddish as a Jewish national language.

Jewish culture always contained an element of the arts, despite the prohibition against making graven images. Theatricality was an important factor:

The following elements continued into the diaspora in a kind of *goldene keyt*—a golden chain—to today.

- A single G-d who was invisible, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient;
- The chosenness of the Jewish people who alone could communicate with the supernatural;
- G-d's will to justify suffering as well as joy;
- Abraham and the attempted sacrifice of Isaac;
- Moses from the basket on the Nile to the plagues visited upon the Egyptians;
- To the parting of the Red Sea as the way of escape;
- To proclaiming the Ten Commandments;
- The secret entry of the prophet Elijah at Passover;
- The miracle of the lamp oil in Khanuke;
- The heroics of the Maccabees and Bar Kokhba;
- The vengeance of Mordekhai in slaughtering Haman
- The victory of David over Goliath;
- David the psalmist and harpist;
- Solomon the wise and creative poet;
- The cantors and the choirs;
- The candle-lighting in hushed tones on the Shabes.

Thus going back to the Renaissance in the Italian city of Mantua, Jews formed *Universita Israelita* where Jewish writers, actors, stage craftsmen, musicians, costumers and dancers performed in public.

Two celebrations in Jewish religious life were the settings for theater directed to the Jewish people, but attracted the attention of dominant forces—Moslems and Christians. These were:

- Simkhes Torah, celebrating the end of the cycle of Torah reading and beginning again with Genesis
- Purim celebrating the end of Haman, the Jew-killer, at the hands of Mordekhai in the service of the Persian King Ahasuerus, and his Jewish Queen Esther as set forth in the Megillah.

On Purim there were excesses, of wild dancing, drunkenness and garish costumes. The Jewish religious hierarchy issued warnings, but to little avail.

### Purimshpil

Here's the scene of a Purim festival in the Prague ghetto in the 1740's. There is a public parade:

- Led by the lord, the *Marshalik*, riding a horse and wearing a baroque, gentleman's costume;
- Then came the *Nar*, the fool, on a horse, wearing a garish woman's costume, bedecked with pastries, eating and bleating on a trumpet;
- Then the clown-hero—*Der Payatz*, astride a wine cask pulled by a gang of Yeshiva boys,
- A crazy Purim King,
- A Bacchus waving an enormous wine glass.
- Then came more and more clowns—
- A Harlequin called Pickle Herring; a half fool;
- Biblical figures of Abraham, Moses and Aaron;
- The various Jewish trade guilds;
- Finally outlandish clown-musicians, one a dwarf playing a fiddle on top of a flagpole.

Purimshpilers would burst into their neighbors' homes, usually the wealthy, perhaps numbering 30, including musicians. These were the targets for joyous, food festivities, and money. The Homentashn are triangular poppyseed cakes filled with raisins and almonds. Whenever Haman's name was mentioned, the noisemakers, the Graggers, were quickly activated. Unfortunately sometimes these public displays were also periodic occasions for anti-Semitic rumors by the non-Jews and even pogroms occurred. The Purimshpil continued well into the nineteenth century as the main theatrical event in Jewish life. It gave rise to the wandering musicians—*Klezmorim*—who breached the confines of playing at weddings to go from one town to

another town and perform street concerts. These actors were often the *Badkhonim*—the jesters at weddings and the *Payatsim*—the clowns skilled at rhyming — alternating Hebrew and Yiddish:

### Broderzinger

They came from the town of Brod—located in Galicia in the relatively free Austro-Hungarian Empire. These bards and troubadours, who were influenced by the Enlightenment (Maskillim), also enlisted the *Badkhonim* and *Payatzim* in wandering the countryside from town to town playing at taverns (kretchmas) in rudimentary playlets with lyrical tunes. They wore costumes, and the leader was attired in a frock coat. Some of these presentations were sheer poetry:

#### Night Watchman

I'm a poor night watchman  
I lie awake and think all night  
That my lot is harder than any other man's  
For me there is no night  
Every other creature God created,  
Rests with his kind in their nest  
But I lie on this cold ground, ill-fated  
For God sends me no rest.

I carry loads all day, for I'm a porter.  
All night I watch in the streets,  
I carry heavy bricks. I carry mortar.  
Whose body aches as mine does, and whose feet?  
I would only thank God and bless Him  
If I could only rest and ease my weary bones  
But whenever someone comes, before I pass him  
I must not fail to call out, Halt Who Goes?

Sleep, sweet sleep, your dearest brother,  
You strengthen people with your art  
If I could rest my limbs like any other  
I'd have fresh energy to start  
Another night of wakefulness and cold,  
You'd give me life. But I must go again  
To watch the streets. For bread, my life is sold,  
Again you've flown away—Sleep, from My pain.

### Change in Jewish Population

Together with the development of Yiddish as a recognized language of the East European Jews, was an important change in the character of the population. By the end of the 19th century there were over 500,000 Jewish artisans, 100,000 day laborers and at least 50,000 Jewish factory workers. This was despite the enormous emigration to America. They formed unions, embraced socialist ideology of the Labor Zionist and Bundist varieties. The ordinary worker was disdained by the aristocratic rabbinic Judaism; by the snobbish upper class *Haskala* Enlightenment; by regular Zionism which was bourgeois and philanthropic. Yiddishist

school systems were organized by the Jewish Workers Bund and some Labor Zionist elements—explicitly secular, but embodying traditional values such as social justice.

### Avrom Goidfaden: (1840-1908)

#### Founder of the Modern Yiddish Theater

It was in this setting that 36 year-old Goldfaden began his theatrical career in Jassy, Romania in 1876. He wrote the first professional plays, music and all, and produced them. He was a folksinger, folk poet, Maskiel trouper, artist, dreamer, intellectual hustler, scrapper, and con man. He succeeded the Broderzinger and corresponded with Sholem Aleichem and Peretz in hoping through drama to elevate the status of Yiddish. His plays were not profound, but touching stirringly lyrical, and comical.

In his play *Shulamis*, the heroine is left with her new-born child and faithfully awaiting her husband's return which occurs after many years of loneliness. Here is his most popular song: *Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*

In dem beys-hamikdosh, in a vinki kheyder  
Zitst di almone, bas tzion aleyn,  
Ir ben-yokhidl, yidele, vigt zi k'seyder,  
un zingt im tzu shlofn a lidele sheyn:

"Unter yideles vigele  
Shteyt a klor-vayse tzigele,  
Dos tzigele iz geforn handlen  
Dos vet zayn dayn beruf;  
Rozhinkes mit mandlen  
Shlof-zhe, yidele shlof!

Goldfaden took the audience at its level—a song, some slapstick, a quarrel, a kiss, a jig—and elevated it to a sense of responsibility. Some themes: *Bobe mitn Eynikl*—marriage for prestige gives way to granddaughter marrying for love; *Shmendrik* and *Tsvey Kunilemls*—forced marriages in Khasidik families; *Koldunye*, the witch aimed against witchcraft; a wicked stepmother causes the stepchild Mirele to leave home. Mirele meets up with *Hotsmakh*, a merry wandering peddler who foils the plan; Interspersed were songs of with everyday characters—a butcher, a woman selling latkes, buyers—singing, dancing and declaiming.

Goidfaden recruited people who became legendary actors both in Europe and America —including Jacob P. Adler, the dramatic tragedian; Sigmund Mogulescu, the comedian; David Kessler the most versatile; and Kenni Liptzen, the exciting tragedienne. But Goldfaden found himself in murderous competition with proponents of *Shund* (trash theater) who pirated his plots and songs and catered to the lowest popular taste. When Goldfaden came to America he found that his plays had

preceded him and he became old hat to the theater audiences.

### Theater in America

Initially it was based on the needs of the semi-literate working-class families, for their life was *Bread and Theater*. After hours of dreary sweatshop labor Jewish masses flocked to the Shund presentations with varied and extensive repertory that was designed to titillate audiences and based upon superficial changes in plot. House lights were on all the time, and people would feel free to converse, eat, and identify with what went on by shouting at the actors. The *Star System* soon prevailed where theaters were owned and managed by the superstars. Thus Thomashefsky Kessler, Adler, and Liptzen, had their own theaters, competed with each other for casts and developed followings of fanatic *patrioten*. The many societies based on the towns and cities of European origin—the *Landsmanshaften*—depended on additional income from their tickets to finance sick and death benefits. These organizations in addition to the Workmen's Circle / Arbeter Ring branches bought discounted blocks of tickets.

### The Theaters

The Yiddish playhouses were originally places for simple English dramas on the Bowery and then moved to over a dozen theaters on Second Avenue. The casts dwelt on types: the prima donna, the flirtatious soubrette, a lover, comic, villain, old men and women character roles. It took some time to overcome the Orthodox prejudice against women acting. Another barrier that finally was breached was the use of Yiddish for low characters and Daytshmerish (Germanism) for noble and prestigious types.

### Goldfaden's Contribution

Boris Thomashefsky gave a tribute to Goldfaden in the final and impecunious stage of Goldfaden's life: "Goldfaden made us comedians, tragedians, playwrights, prima donnas and soubrettes. If not for him we'd be plain and simple Jews--cantors, choir singers, wedding jugglers, peddlers, and garment workers."

### Jacob Gordin (1853-1909)

Gordin was a revolutionary intellectual. He came to the U.S. in 1891 at the age of 38 with his 8 children. He wrote 35 plays and sought to elevate Yiddish drama with a purer language, serious topics, and with the dramatist in command. He was hailed by Ab Cahan, the editor of the Yiddish Daily Forverts, as a welcome change from the popular Shund Theater. Gordin wrote

about revolutionists imprisoned in Siberia, took themes from Shakespeare, Gogol, Chekhov, and Ibsen and transmuted the plots into Yiddish life. *The Yiddish King Lear* has an old, wealthy Jew face the ingratitude of his daughters; *Got Mentsh un Tayvl* reworks the Faust story with a poor weaver buying a winning lottery ticket from the Devil, becomes a rich exploiting boss in his factory, and then hangs himself in remorse. His most famous play, a kind of Yiddish Queen Lear, entitled *Mirele Efros* starred Esther Kaminska and later her daughter, Ida. It had the will of a matriarch standing up to an avaricious daughter-in-law and her weak son. The famous diary of the self-made Glückl of Hamlin dating back to the 17th century may have been a model for Gordin. I have my own memory that play put on by Polish Yiddish refugees in WW II Shanghai when I was in the navy. Gordin lost favor by obliterating the Jewish tradition and having actors orate and pontificate from the stage. But the cast *ad libbed* and he himself made some artistic compromises to *feed his family*.

The principal actors; Adler, Thomashefsky, Kessler, Moguiescu and Kenni Liptzen swung between their yearning for a purer Yiddish theater and succumbing to shund to make the theater business a going concern. Even the Hebrew Actors Union that antedated Actors Equity, became a job trust in deference to the star theater owners and their casts. Through *auditions* they prevented such coming stars from being admitted as Maurice Schwartz, Jennie Goldstein and Peysakh Burstein. Even Herman Yablokoff, known theatrically as Der Payatz, was initially rejected but later became the head of the Hebrew Actors Union.

Actors, critics, and producers of the English stage paid profound respect to the Yiddish actors and actresses. Eminent critic, Stark Young, found in Yiddish acting "expressiveness of hands and eyes and shoulders—tremendous and inexhaustible vitality. It had the realism of intense feeling and a deep respect for that feeling. Its best efforts come from a compulsive rendering of that intensity; and the beauty of these effects is a spiritual beauty, almost without appeal to the eye." Gilbert Seldes, Jed Harris, and John Barrymore expressed similar sentiments.

### Toward a Yiddish Art Theater

Beyond Jacob Gordin, there were outstanding literary figures who enriched the quality of Yiddish drama and entered into a race between Yiddish survival in a less and less compact Yiddish-speaking population and its cultural expression. The grandfather of Yiddish literature, Mendele Moykher Sforim; the father, Yitzhok Leyb Peretz; and the grandson, Sholem Aleichem had their plays performed on the Yiddish stage. Mendele wrote of the Meat Tax and Military Conscription.

Later a movie starred David Opatoshu in *Fishl der Krummer* that featured the love of a blind girl for a crippled young man. Peretz wrote more directly for the theater:

- *Shvester* is about 3 young women; a widow with starving children, one who is seduced and made pregnant, and a third whose boyfriend was stolen by the middle sister.
- *Frimorgen* pictures poverty and despair in a slum basement.
- *Kvoves-Nakht* deals with an abused wife crying on her mother's grave,
- *Di Goldene Keyt* concerns a rabbi who wants to preserve the very essence of Jewish continuity through the creative device of an eternal shabes,
- *Bay Nakht Afn Altn Mark* employs symbolism in the interaction among the ghosts of the past. They include; a poet, a streetwalker, and a water-carrier.

### **Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916)**

Among Sholem Aleichem's one-act plays was *Mentshn* set in a wealthy Jewish household with the servants being abused. In my college days I worked as a waiter in Rosenblatt's Hotel in the *Borsht Circuit*. The owner, Lebke Rosenblatt was a Yiddishist who staged a play in Yiddish. Since I knew Yiddish from my Arbeter Ring Shul days, I acted in *Mentshn*. The word *mentshn* has 3 meanings—a person, an outstanding human being, a servant. In this play the head of the household castigated his children for their nefarious acts toward the servants. Sholem Aleichem's punch line was, "Mentshn zaynen oykh mentshn" (Servants are also people).

Then there is the often-produced *Groyse Gevins*. This is a happy play of a simple tailor whose lifestyle changes when he thinks he won a 200,000-ruble jackpot. Still another is *Shver tsu Zayn a Yid* where two students, a Russian Christian and a Jew trade places for a year. *Fiddler on the Roof*, the successful musical, is derived from *Tevye the Dairyman*.

### **Sholem Asch (1880-1957)**

His reputation, outside Yiddish Theater, was as a novelist.

- *On the Sanctification of the Name* is about martyrdom in a Yiddish stage
- *Kiddush Hashem* in a 17th century Cossack pogrom.
- *Motke Ganef* about the underworld.
- *Uncle Moses* dealt with love and money in the Lower East Side garment trade.
- *G-t Fun Nekome* (G-d of Vengeance) was notorious—dealing with a Jew who owns a whorehouse, is

married to a former prostitute, and their daughter who defies the father's effort to save her when she is involved with a lesbian prostitutes.

### **David Pinski (1872-1959)**

The 1903 Kishenev pogrom caused him to write the *Family Tzvi* about a bourgeois family awaiting a pogrom with the patriarchal grandfather confronting his three grandsons—a Zionist, a Bundist, an assimilationist. His *Yankl der Schmidt* concerns a virile blacksmith who wants his neighbor's wife as well as his own. One of his plays was translated into English and produced by the Theater Guild—*The Treasure* about a town getting wild with greed about a treasure supposedly hidden in a cemetery.

### **H. Leivick (1888-1962)**

Maurice Schwartz staged three of his plays dealing with the clothing business on the East Side—*Shmattes*, *Shop* and *Bankrupt*. His *Der Goylem* is set in 17th century Prague where a rabbi fashions a mechanical man out of clay to defend the Jews against a blood libel. The Golem then turns to the rabbi's daughter, at which point the rabbi destroys the Golem to a heap of clay.

### **Ossip Dymov (1878-1959)**

*Yoshke Musikant* (adapted by Joseph Buloff) was produced by the Folksbiene Yiddish Theater). A fiddler loves a servant girl and wins a fortune in a lottery. He turns the money over to a rival wastrel (a spendthrift) who then marries the servant girl. Yoshke commits suicide over his broken heart. *Bronx Express* appeared on Broadway in English.

### **Peretz Hirshbein (1881-1949)**

He wrote of rural Lithuanian Jewish life. In *Grine Felder* a Jewish farmer hires Levi Yitzkhok to tutor his sons. The daughter Tsine tries to prevent him from taking a job with a nearby farmer and wins Levi's hand. Other plays include—*Der Schmidt's Tekhter* and the *Puste Kretshme*.

### **. Anski (1863-1920)**

Anski's *Der Dybbuk* was one of the most popular Yiddish plays, put on also in English and Hebrew. It deals with exorcism of a spirit in the bride's betrothed who dies and afflicts the bride to a rich suitor.

### **Maurice Schwartz (1890-1960)**

After moving from Irving Place to the original Madison Square Garden, Schwartz amassed funds to

build his own theater on Second Avenue and 12th Street. Its greatest successes included J.J. Singer's *Yoshe Kalb*. The actresses were Bina Abramovitch, Jennie Goldstein, Celia Adler and Berta Gersten. The actors were Jacob Ben-Ami, Lazar Freed, Maurice Schwartz, Muni Weisenfreund (Paul Muni), David Opatashu, and Joseph Buloff.

### The Vilne Troupe

This company was made famous by the avante-garde production of the *Dybbuk* in Vilne (Yerushelayim di Lite). Led by Leyb Kadison, his (daughter, Luba and her husband Joseph Buloff, his company achieved world-wide recognition. It arrived in New York's competitive theater in the late 20's and was pulled in many directions by rival companies. After Muni Weisenfreund left Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater, Buloff took his place acting in such classics as *Three Cities* by Sholem Asch, J.J. Singer's *Yoshe Kalb* and *The Brothers Ashkenazi*. Buloff's ability as an actor resulted in his joining the English stage where he appeared as the Greek landlord in *My Sister Eileen*, the peddler in Oklahoma, and in Arthur Miller's *The Price*. He also acted in a Yiddish version of Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. He held one man shows with readings from Chekhov and delightful humorous pieces by Lutsky (*A Piece of Paper Driven by the Wind*, and *A Pot of Bubbling Soup*).

### Yiddish Comedy

Yiddish comedy was always an important phase, of Yidish theater, but some of it descended to *Shund*. Ludwig Satz, Aaron Lebedeff, and Peysakh Burstein were outstanding followers after Sigmund Mogulescu in their ability to use mime—a variety of vocal expression, facial plasticity and body language to caricature a character. Last in this male line was Menashe Skulnik—the perfect player of Shlemil and Shmendrik.

The diminutive Molly Picon stands out all by herself, in her ability to sing, dance, turn cartwheels, and sparkle as a gymnast. All of the comedians were capable of acting more serious roles if called upon.

### ARTEF

ARTEF was the artisan politicalization of Yiddish theater. It is the acronym for a group tied to the Jewish sector of the American Communist Party. Existing in the glow of the Moscow Art Theater of Stanislavsky and the great Yiddish actor-producer Shlomo Mikhoels (later murdered by Stalin along with Soviet Yiddish writers) ARTEF drew a following under the direction of Benno Schneider. The Yiddish plays had expressionistic staging and adapted some standard Yiddish plays with a party-

line twist. Many Broadway actors came to ARTEF performances. David Opatashu got his start there and appeared in movies and on Broadway. Jules Dassin who was associated later with the great Greek actress Merlina Mercuri also was a product of ARTEF.

### Music & Dance

Much of the music for Second Avenue came from the pens of Joseph Rumshinsky, Abraham Ellstein, Alexander Olshanetsky and Sholem Secunda. Secunda composed *Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn* and in the depression years sold it for 15 dollars! Many plays had choreographed dance developed by Binyumin Zemach, Felix Fybush, & Pearl Lang.

### Yiddish Theater Today

Despite growing numbers of Vinklen, Yiddish courses at universities, at the Workmen's Circle, and well-attended outdoors Yiddish festivals, the Yiddish theater leads a tenuous existence. The Folksbiene, founded in 1915 as a branch of the Workmen's Circle with amateur actors and actresses, continues to carry on. Once housed in the auditorium of the Forward Building on East Broadway, it moved to the Central Synagogue on East 55th Street. Since the fire there, it has had two seasons on West 55th Street, starring Yiddish actresses Mina Bern and Shifre Lehrer.

The 2002 season of the Folksbiene opened with *Yentl*, a play based on a story of I. Bashevis Singer. It stars Eleanor Reissa with excellent support of the veteran actress Minna Bern. It is hoped that the Folksbiene, the Forward, and the Workmen's Circle will locate in a setting for all three kindred organizations. The Foiksbiene has a program for youngsters, *Kids and Yiddish*. There are staged readings by veteran Yiddish actors and actresses in classic Yiddish plays.

I end with a dream and hope for the future—Zukunft. The Folksbiene must dare to flourish by incorporating:

- A Chorus and Chorale;
- A Dance program associated with Pearl Lang;
- A troupe appearing in urban centers across the U.S., even in Central and South America;
- A contest for new plays in Yiddish;
- A dramatic training program for new Yiddish performers;
- A Klezmer program.

Lovers of Yiddish and Yiddish culture will help make this dream and hope a reality.

Other ethnic groups have successful theaters — Repertorio Espagnol and The Irish Repertory Theater are but two examples. Yiddish has survived many

obituaries and the Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer predicted that it will continue. As for the Yiddish theater as an expression of Yiddish culture, it is too important a part of historic Jewishness to disappear into nostalgic oblivion.

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