



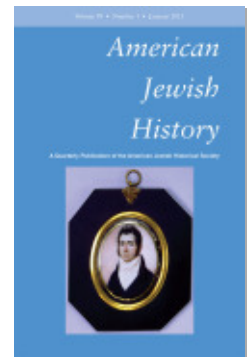
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Going East: The Impact of American Yiddish Plays and Players on the Yiddish Stage in Czarist Russia, 1890–1914

NINA WARNKE*

The trajectory of Yiddish theater in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tends to be regarded as a one-way street from Eastern Europe to the New World. Indeed, the expansion of the world map of Yiddish theater closely resembles the migration patterns of East European Jews. Spurred by pogroms, increased antisemitic repression, and worsening economic conditions, millions of East European Jews sought better lives in the United States between the 1880s and 1920s. The 1883 Czarist ban on performances in Yiddish provided many actors and playwrights with an extra incentive to join the mass migration. By the 1890s, New York was not only the world center of Jewish immigration but also of Yiddish theatrical activity. From an immigrant perspective, Yiddish theater in Europe served primarily as a provider for the community's voracious appetite for new talent. Yet, New York was not only a powerful magnet for ambitious actors and playwrights. It became the fountainhead that fed Yiddish theaters worldwide. As theater historian B. Gorin remarked, "[around the turn of the century] the New York repertoire became the only spiritual food for all other Yiddish theaters in the world."¹ From a European perspective, America became the principal supplier of and trendsetter for a commercially viable repertoire.

Yiddish actors moved back and forth in an intricate zigzag between Romania, the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, Western Europe, the United States, and South America, taking along scripts either tucked into their luggage or confined to their memory. Until the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, however, cities in the Russian Pale of Settlement and Polish provinces were generally not part of this circuit. Two factors seem to have played a decisive role for keeping Russia out of the loop for so long: the difficult circumstances for Yiddish theater under the ban that made visits from America unattractive; and the restrictions for foreign Jews to enter Russia. Despite the limited direct

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1. B. Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, 2 vols. (New York, 1929), 2: 190. All translations from Yiddish are my own.

personal contact, American Yiddish plays began to appear in the 1890s because of the pressing need for new repertoire that could not be satisfied locally. Thanks to the general political liberalization in 1905, both Yiddish theater and publishing began to flourish, resulting in an increased need for new plays and the publication of dozens of texts, many of which originated in the United States. The American influence on Yiddish theater in Czarist Russia culminated in the five to six years before the outbreak of World War I, when a considerable network of actors developed between the two countries, and American plays dominated the Russian Yiddish theater. This repertoire and some of its performers brought a crucial infusion into the relatively stagnant theatrical scene in the Russian Empire (and the rest of Europe) to the great delight of commercially oriented theater directors and the dismay of Yiddish intellectuals, whose attempts to raise the level of the Yiddish stage and to create a place for their own or their colleagues' works were constantly thwarted by the popularity of American operettas and melodramas.

This article explores the changing dynamics of transatlantic theatrical interaction between Yiddish theater in the United States and Imperial Russia before World War I, and examines the mechanics of transmission and distribution of repertoire from the New World to the Old. While the theater's international nature is generally acknowledged, the phenomenon of New York as the supply center of Yiddish plays for the East European market has not been explored systematically, nor have its implications been assessed.² Monographs of Yiddish theater have tended to focus on a particular location, personality, or troupe. The relatively abundant works on the New York theater have presented it exclusively as an expression of immigrant culture, made by and for the local population. Yet the framing of the New York Yiddish theater as a local cultural institution obscures its wider impact and the importance of transatlantic contacts for the development of the Yiddish theater in both America and Eastern Europe. No other cultural product of the Jewish immigrant community spread as early, as effectively, and as lastingly as its theater repertoire. It was in the realm of popular theater that this young and burgeoning Jewish community could quickly take the lead because of the extremely favorable conditions for its development in New York on the one hand, and its precarious situation in Russia and

2. The only extensive exploration of transatlantic connections is an article by Marta Meducka, "Repertuar teatru żydowskiego w Ameryce na przełomie XIX i XX w. i jego wpływ na kształtowanie się repertuaru teatru żydowskiego w Polsce," in Anna Kuligowska-Korzeniewska and Małgorzata Leyko (eds.), *Teatr żydowski w Polsce: materiały z międzynarodowej konferencji naukowej Warszawa, 18–21 października 1993 roku* (Łódź, 1998), 383–97. It provides a general overview of the impact of the American Yiddish repertoire on the Polish Yiddish stage until World War II.

difficult conditions in the rest of Europe on the other. Accordingly, the history of most Yiddish theater communities outside New York has to be written with the latter's developments and influence in mind.

By examining the various forms of transmission of the American repertoire to the Russian Yiddish theater scene and its impact there, this study also contributes to a renewed assessment of the theatrical situation in Imperial Russia. The existence of an active Yiddish theater there after the ban of 1883 has been virtually squeezed out of historical consciousness by the much more vibrant American scene on the one hand, and the artistic innovations of Yiddish theater troupes in post-World-War-I Poland and the Soviet Union on the other. If they acknowledged the existence of Yiddish theater in Czarist Russia at all, most contemporary intellectuals and subsequent scholars regarded it as inartistic, derivative, and therefore unworthy of their attention. The New York based critic and theater chronicler B. Gorin set the direction for future research in the West by devoting almost an entire volume of his 1918 two-volume study of Yiddish theater to conditions in America between 1883 and 1917, while he summarized the situation in Russia during the same period in just eight pages.³ Not surprisingly, then, the one extensive, even if slanted, investigation of this period in Russia was published in the Soviet Union.⁴ Only the Warsaw Yiddish theater has attracted considerable scholarly interest, partly because of the involvement of such writers as Isaac Leyb Peretz, Mark Arnstein, Noyekh Prilutski, and A. Mukdoyni (Alexander Kappel) in creating a literary theater after 1905.⁵ English-language scholarship has taken a new direction with two recent articles, in which Barbara Henry and John D. Klier each make a strong case that helps dispel the myth that there was little Yiddish theater in Russia to speak of between 1883 and 1917.⁶

3. See Gorin, *Geshikhte*, 2: 190–97.

4. Nokhem Oyslender (Nahum Auslaender), *Yidisher teater 1887–1917* (Moscow, 1940). In recent years, E. Binevich has done extensive bibliographic research on the reception of Yiddish theater in the Russian press, available online from the Jewish Heritage Society at <http://www.jewish-heritage.org>.

5. See, for example, Isaac Turkow-Grudberg, *Yidish teater in poyln* (Warsaw, 1951) and his *Di mame Ester-Rokhl* (Warsaw, 1953), and Michael C. Steinlauf, "Fear of Purim: Y. L. Peretz and the Canonization of Yiddish Theater," *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 44–65. An important introduction to sources on Polish Yiddish theater is Steinlauf, "Sources to the History of Jewish Theatre," *GAL-ED on the History of the Jews in Poland* XV–XVI (Tel Aviv, 1997). Recent Polish studies include Szczepan Gąssowski (ed.), *Państwowy Teatr Żydowski im. Ester Rachel Kamińskiej* (Warsaw, 1995), and are collected in Kuligowska-Korzeniewska and Leyko (eds.), *Teatr żydowski w Polsce* and in *Pamiętnik teatralny* 41 (Warsaw, 1992).

6. See John D. Klier, "'Exit, Pursued by a Bear': Russian Administrators and the Ban on Yiddish Theatre in Imperial Russia," and Barbara Henry, "Jewish Plays on the Russian Stage, St Petersburg, 1905–1917," in Joel Berkowitz (ed.), *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches* (Oxford, 2003), 159–74 and 61–75, respectively.

My own research with over 2,500 surviving Yiddish play manuscripts that were sent to the Czarist censor between 1896 and 1917 underscores that there was a lively theatrical scene in the Russian Empire, even if hampered and harassed by Russian authorities and dismissed by the Yiddish literary and intellectual establishment.⁷ My database of these censorship copies helps trace the influence of the American Yiddish repertoire by detailing which plays (and authors) entered the repertoire in Russia and Poland, and when they first appeared there. Further evidence of this transatlantic interaction can be found in memoirs and letters, as well as in reviews, travelogues, and feature articles published in both the New York and Warsaw Yiddish press. Entries for actors in the *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* supplement this information, although tours abroad and their implications are generally only mentioned in passing.

Yiddish Theater in Russia before 1905

As a modern, secular institution, Yiddish theater had its beginnings in Romania, where Avrom Goldfaden produced his first plays in 1876. During the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–1878, the Yiddish theater found a particularly captive audience in Romania, thanks to the many Russian Jewish military suppliers who had moved there for the duration of the war. With the return of this audience to the Russian Pale of Settlement, several troupes followed, wandering through the small towns of Ukraine or settling in Odessa. Until the Czarist ban of Yiddish performances in August 1883, Odessa remained a lively center for Yiddish theater, with Goldfaden, Nokhem Meir Shaykevitsh (‘Shomer’), and Yoysef-Yehude Lerner, among others, writing and producing plays. Many of the plays written during those formative years were published, apparently in a conscious effort to build a permanent theatrical tradition and create an accessible repertoire. The ban, however, greatly weakened these activities, as one by one playwrights moved to New York, and as those who remained in Russia eventually stopped writing for the stage. Joseph Lateiner left for New York shortly after the ban in 1883, and Hurwitz followed in late 1886. Both Goldfaden and Shomer continued to write and publish their plays in Russia, particularly during the periods when they were still able to work in the theater: Goldfaden headed a company in Warsaw between 1885 and 1887, but subsequently left for his brief,

7. For a description of the collection of these censorship copies, see Warnke, “The Jewish Drama Collection at the St. Petersburg State Theatrical Library,” *Yiddish Theatre Forum* Vol. 2:1, 12 March 2003. In <http://www2.trincoll.edu/~mendele/tmrarc.htm>.

ill-fated visit to America.⁸ Shomer was director of a troupe as late as 1889, when he received an invitation to New York. With all major writers who had taken an active role in the theater gone or resigned, very little new repertoire was created in Russia between the late 1880s and 1905.

Although many Yiddish actors also left Russia in the 1880s for Romania, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Western Europe, or the United States, others such as Avrom-Alter Fishzon and Abba Kompaneyets continued to wander with their troupes. However, in order to circumvent the ban on Yiddish theater they had to present themselves as “German” troupes, and submit a German translation of their plays to the censor. With this censorship copy in hand, directors sought permission from local authorities to perform the approved plays. It was the task of the local police to ensure that these productions followed the exact text of the approved censorship copy, be it a production by a Russian, Polish, or German troupe—a task some authorities took more seriously than others. There is evidence that Jewish troupes performed in Yiddish wherever and whenever they could, but they were constantly at the mercy of the authorities who, more often than not, turned against them. Despite the obvious hardships that Yiddish actors endured, particularly between the late 1880s and late 1890s, new talent emerged and new troupes sprang up. In the early 1890s, for example, Avrom-Yitskhok Kaminski, the husband of the later famous Esther-Rokhl Kaminska, organized his own company. These troupes continued to perform primarily the old published repertoire, consisting of such popular plays as Goldfaden’s *Shulamis*, *Shmendrik*, and *Bar Kokhba*, Shomer’s *Di kokete damen* (*The Coquettish Ladies*) and *Der treyfniaik* (*The Heretic*), and Lerner’s translation of Karl Gutzkow’s *Uriel Acosta*.

Already in the 1890s, however, the first texts from the American Yiddish repertoire began to trickle into the censor’s office. The earliest extant copy of an American play in the St. Petersburg State Theatrical Library was submitted to the censor in January 1896.⁹ Around the turn of the century, the situation for Jewish theater improved somewhat, and several troupes were able to perform in larger cities throughout the Pale. The need for new texts became more urgent than ever. Being able to play

8. The continuing desire to make the repertoire available to the public is clearly evident in Goldfaden’s efforts during his Warsaw years, when he published at least seven of his plays, some of which had been published previously.

9. Of course, this is by no means an indication that it was the first American play, since the earliest surviving submissions from the censorship archives date from 1895. However, I have not been able to find any mention of an American play prior to 1895 in memoirs or secondary sources.

before a more sophisticated audience and to stay in one place for extended periods required a larger repertoire and new attractions. With no new plays being written within Russia to fill this demand, the submissions of American imports began to increase.

Yiddish Theater in New York

While Yiddish theater in Russia suffered suppression and stagnation, New York developed into the world center of Yiddish theatrical activity. Within less than a decade since the first Yiddish performance in 1883, the community of some 130,000 immigrants boasted three theater companies, which staged a few dozen new plays a season and featured a staggering array of stars competing for the audience's applause. Yiddish theater could thrive on New York's Lower East Side not only because of the many actors and writers it attracted but because of the ready-made infrastructure. Theater buildings along the Bowery, the former entertainment district, were easily available, and the neighboring popular entertainment venues that presented anything from melodrama to burlesque served as models for Jewish immigrant entrepreneurs. With the explosion of cheap entertainment in American cities during the late nineteenth century, all classes could regularly go out in the evenings, and immigrants eagerly followed suit.¹⁰

The two dominant writers of the 1880s and 1890s, Hurwitz and Lateiner, served local troupes as in-house dramatists and churned out plays at a rapid pace. Their repertoire consisted primarily of historical operettas and contemporary melodramas that focused on heightened emotion, spectacle, and song, rather than verisimilitude or literary style. Because the Yiddish theater was so quickly developing into a major cultural institution for the immigrant community, many tried their luck with playwriting. Actors like Rudolph Marks and Sigmund Feinman, for example, contributed plays that enjoyed popularity not only in New York but that would become major hits in Russia. And increasingly, Yiddish writers and journalists such as Jacob Gordin, Leon Kobrin, Zalmen Libin, and Moyshe Katz wrote dramas hoping to supplement their meager incomes and to give the theater a more literary face. Foremost among them was Gordin, who arrived in 1891, and whom intellectuals soon touted as the "reformer of Yiddish theater" for introducing the notion of realism and socially critical domestic dramas to the Yiddish stage. By the early 1900s, Gordin had become a cultural

10. See David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York, 1993), 4.

hero, with such plays as *Mirele Efros*, *Got, mentsh un tayvl* (*God, Man, and Devil*), *Khasye di yesoyme* (*Khasye the Orphan*), and *Kreytser sonata* (*Kreutzer Sonata*). These dramas contributed to turning New York actors like Jacob P. Adler, David Kessler, Bertha Kalish, Keni Liptzin, and Morris Moshkovitch into stars, and would later help launch the careers of several ambitious actors in Russia, including Kaminska's.

In order to compete successfully, the burgeoning Yiddish theater required a steady stream of new actors to fill the expanding companies and to provide new attractions at the beginning of each season. Therefore, scouting for talent in Eastern Europe became an important task during the early years of Yiddish theater in New York. Lemberg in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (today Lviv, Ukraine) was the primary target, followed by London and Bucharest, because those cities, unlike the ones in the Russian Empire or Paris and Berlin, with their minor Yiddish theaters, had relatively stable Yiddish companies. Talent scouting began as early as the mid-eighties and continued for decades. Already in 1886, manager Josef Mandelkern went to London, where he engaged the already famous comedian Sigmund Mogulesco. Soon after their arrival in New York, he sent Mogulesco back to his native Romania to bring over a troupe, which included Kessler and Leon Blank.¹¹ Three years later, Mandelkern visited Gimpl's theater in Lemberg and engaged the troupe's female star, Berta Tantsman, and her husband. In 1892, as Jacob P. Adler was trying to establish himself in New York as the new actor-manager of the Union Theater, he, too, visited Lemberg. When he opened his theater in August, he was able to advertise a dozen newly arrived actors from Gimpl's troupe. Two major coups followed in 1895 and 1896: after years of unsuccessful wooing, Gimpl's star, Regina Prager, finally came to New York, and manager Josef Edelstein succeeded in bringing Berta Kalish (previously in Lemberg) from Bucharest.¹² In the summer of 1902, theater director Hurwitz went to Romania to engage an entire troupe for his Windsor Theater, probably to attract the Romanian Jewish immigrants who had been coming to New York in

11. See "Di erinerungen vos Mogulesco hot diktirt farn Forverts af zayn toytn-bet," *Forverts*, February 17, 1914, and Kessler's memoirs in Joseph C. Landis (ed.), *Memoirs of the Yiddish Stage* (Flushing, NY, 1984), 41–42. Mogulesco returned to Romania for guest performances in 1898 and 1907, but it is unclear if he brought actors back from those trips.

12. Until recently, historians of Yiddish theater have tended to overlook the significance of Gimpl's theater except as a source of stars for the New York market. However, Gimpl and his son were able to maintain the only stable theater in the region for half a century, despite these continuous raids. In his monumental *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, Zalmen Zylbercweig devotes only half a column to Gimpl's twenty-seven-year career as theater director. Zalmen Zylbercweig (ed.), *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, 6 vols. (New York, Warsaw, and Mexico City, 1931–69), 1: 479. Cited hereafter as *Leksikon*. In his more

large numbers since the late 1890s. Several of the major stars, including Adler, Mogulesco, and Kalish went to western and southeastern Europe for guest performances during the 1890s and 1900s, from which some of them brought back actors, as well. Years of such guest performances and recruiting kept the ties between southeastern Europe and America strong. Cities in the Russian Empire, on the other hand, were not part of this circuit until the end of the first decade of the twentieth century.

During the decade before World War I, scouting ceased to be as necessary as in earlier years, and in fact began to meet with resistance. Many immigrants with acting experience or ambitions were arriving in America on their own accord and were clamoring to perform in New York. In 1900, the Hebrew Actors Union was founded, not only to regulate wages, but, more importantly, to control competition by limiting actors' access to the New York Yiddish stage. The union's New York chapter turned down many actors who had to content themselves with careers outside the city or in Yiddish music halls. Although managers always sought new attractions and continued to recruit from time to time, actors jealously guarded their territory. In 1909, for example, managers invited Kaminska for guest performances, but not to stay permanently. A few years later during his tour of Russia, Boris Thomashefsky brought Esther Neroslavskaya and her husband, the popular composer and conductor Peretz Sandler, to perform at his National Theater. Yet she cut short her stay because the Musicians Union would not permit Sandler to conduct more than one production.¹³

Going Back for Good

Not every actor who made the trip to the United States or was invited to join an American Yiddish company decided to stay. Several of those who returned to Europe permanently or semi-permanently were to launch significant careers in Russia. They included Yankev Spivakovski, Mark Meyerson, Sem Adler, and Julius Adler.¹⁴ Because their careers centered in Russia, very little is known about their American sojourns.

extensive description of Gimpl, Yonas Turkov provides a lengthy, if incomplete, list of artists who "passed through" his theater. See Yonas Turkov, *Farloshene shtern*, 2 vols. (Buenos Aires, 1953), 1: 238–39. Michael Aylward, on the other hand, points to the extraordinary number of Yiddish theater recordings made in Lemberg by members of Gimpl's troupe. See Aylward, "Early Recordings of Jewish Music in Poland," *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 16 (2003): 65–66.

13. *Leksikon*, 2: 1431, 1447.

14. Sem Adler and Julius Adler were not related to each other, nor were they related to Jacob P. Adler of New York.

The first to come to the United States and to return to Russia was Spivakovski. He had already been a key figure in the Yiddish theater in Odessa before the ban. After it, he toured in Germany, and then worked with Goldfaden in Warsaw. When that venture failed in 1887, he accompanied the playwright to the United States. It appears that, like Goldfaden, he could not find a permanent engagement in America, and returned to Russia the same year.¹⁵ Subsequently, Spivakovski became one of the most respected Yiddish theater directors in Russia, often working together with Fishzon or Sem Adler. In fact, it was Spivakovski and Sem Adler whom Sholem Aleichem approached in 1905, when he tried unsuccessfully to create the "Yiddish Literary Art Theater."

It is unclear what impact his American trip had on Spivakovski, how it influenced his further career, or if he took any plays back to Russia. The only indication that he may have maintained contact with colleagues across the ocean is the manuscript of Lateiner's 1889 play, *Di eyropeyer in amerike oder Mishke un Moshke* (*The Europeans in America or Mishke and Moshke*), written two years after his brief visit to the United States, which Spivakovski submitted to the censor in January 1896.

In 1895, Jacob P. Adler invited Mark Meyerson, his friend and fellow-actor from the pre-ban days in Odessa, to join his New York company. Meyerson, however, who had acted in provincial Russian companies since the ban, was not impressed with the Yiddish theater in New York, despite its lavish stage sets and costumes. He believed in a natural acting style, and was appalled that the actors were "tearing down the scenery," or in other words, overacting and trying to "outdo each other by yelling louder."¹⁶ Although he quickly became popular with immigrant audiences, Meyerson went back to Russia in 1898, where he joined the Russian stage because of the limited possibilities for the Yiddish theater. He returned to acting in Yiddish only in 1905 when he became a member of Sem Adler's troupe, and he was quickly recognized as one of the most effective dramatic actors on the Russian Yiddish stage. Apparently, Meyerson did not actively contribute to bringing repertoire from the United States, but he built much of his early reputation on Gordin's plays, which flooded the Russian Yiddish scene after 1905.

15. There are three different versions about Spivakovski's fate in the United States. According to Jacob P. Adler, neither he nor Spivakovski nor Goldfaden could find employment in New York, and all three returned to Europe. Kessler described Spivakovski as active in the strike against Goldfaden in which the actors ousted the writer from the theater he had been invited to direct. According to Boris Thomashefsky, Spivakovski was briefly a co-director with him in Baltimore and Boston and quickly won the audience's acclaim. See *Leksikon*, 2: 1532.

16. *Ibid.*, 1303.

Sem Adler's attitude toward the American Yiddish theater was much more positive than Meyerson's, and, upon his return from abroad, he tried to make the most of his American experience. Adler, who began his acting career wandering with a Yiddish troupe in Galicia, arrived in New York in 1888, where he helped organize the first Yiddish actors' union, which quickly fell apart. He appears to have spent several years in the United States, and then toured in North and South America, England, Turkey, and Austria. In 1899, he returned to Russia and joined the Spivakovski-Fishzon troupe in Odessa.¹⁷ Several memoirs and other sources credit him with bringing American plays to Russia, indicating its significance in this repertoire-starved environment. However, memories diverge as to which texts he brought and when. Among the scripts that he did introduce to Russia were Feinman's *Dos lebn in nyu york* (*Life in New York*, submitted to the censor in 1901), Lateiner's *Mamon der geltgot* (*Mammon the God of Money*), and Hurwitz's *Shloyme Gorgl* (submitted in 1903). After touring the Galician provinces in 1903 and 1904, he again returned to Russia with several new plays, such as *Hertsele meykhes* (*Hertsele the Aristocrat*), which the Lemberg-based Moyshe Rikhter had written in 1899. After its initial failure there, Rikhter took the play to America, where he spent about a year and where it met with great success. Probably because of its popularity in New York, *Hertsele* ran for two years in Lemberg after Rikhter's return. In Russia, it was submitted to the censor twenty-eight times between 1904 and 1908, indicating that it had become a staple in the repertoire there.

Sem Adler did not only bring the latest American historical operettas and melodramas; for years after his return to Russia, he advertised his "Americanness" by calling his troupe the "firm of Sem Adler from America." It is unclear what motivated him to call attention to his American experience. Was he hoping to fool the audience—at least initially—into believing that he was that other Adler from America, the great Jacob P. Adler? After all, similar false advertising was common practice on tours within the United States. Or did he try to tap into a fascination with America, where many of the audience's relatives and

17. Information about Sem Adler is scarce and somewhat contradictory. According to *Leksikon*, 1: 30, he returned to Russia in 1900. A production review published in Odessa in 1899, however, includes Adler in the cast. Russian researcher E. Binevich claims that Adler spent six years in the Yiddish theater in New York and then traveled for five years with an "English" troupe, implying that it was an English-language troupe. However, the places Binevich lists (South America, Turkey, Austria, etc.) were typical destinations for touring Yiddish actors. See E. Binevich, "Evreiskii teatr v Rossii 1896–1904," at <http://www.jewish-heritage.org>.

neighbors were living, thus promising them a glimpse of the *goldene medine* (golden land)? Or did Adler try to make a statement about his practices as a company director that would distinguish him from most Yiddish directors in Russia at the time?

Whatever his motivations, Adler, according to the *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, introduced significant changes, ranging from company policies and rehearsal procedures to stage practices. He demanded a rigid rehearsal style, strict stage discipline, and proper conduct on stage and in public. This former actors' union organizer was also the first in Russia to change the payment method for actors from *markn*—a certain pre-arranged percentage of the profits, which was regularly abused by the managers—to wages, a move that the Hebrew Actors Union in New York made in 1900, as well. Thanks to his careful attention to all aspects of production, his elaborate sets, and appropriate costumes, critics repeatedly credited him with lifting the prestige of Yiddish theater. His troupe toured all over the Pale, and for a long time was the only one that had access to cities outside the Pale, like St. Petersburg and Kiev.¹⁸

His ability to make these innovations points both to his wide-ranging experience abroad and, no less importantly, to an improvement of the situation in Russia—at least for some troupes and in some places. In the late 1890s, after years of wandering from shtetl to shtetl to avoid the stern eyes and ears of the police in large urban centers, it became easier for Yiddish troupes (albeit officially identified as German) to receive permission for performances in major cities. In Odessa, for example, troupes were able to perform with some regularity beginning in 1898. Lavish productions like Adler's could not have been mounted by starving shtetl troupes: they required capital, access to a theater building instead of a barn, and an urban environment with a large enough audience to ensure a run of several weeks.

Julius Adler (Artshikher) was the last major performer to spend an extensive period in America before the contact between Yiddish actors from the two continents became more intensive and regular. A professional actor and conductor since 1891, Adler had been wandering with Kaminski's and Fishzon's troupes, and headed his own company before leaving for America in 1904. He spent three years in Philadelphia, where he had relatives, and where he worked as actor, choirmaster, and conductor at Mike Thomashefsky's theater. In 1909, he returned to Philadelphia for another season. He, too, has been credited with bringing new works back to Russia, among them dramas by Gordin, Libin,

18. *Leksikon*, 1: 30–31.

Kobrin, and Isidor Zolotarevsky.¹⁹ But while the contributions of these actors to the available pool of plays were of great significance, and although others would continue to import texts from America, the Russian Yiddish theater needed other venues to satisfy its increasing need for new repertoire.

Accessibility and Distribution of the American Repertoire

Before 1900, few American Yiddish plays crossed the ocean back to Eastern Europe. Probably the most significant impediment was the lack of printed texts. Not a single full-length play was published in America before 1897, despite the enormous output during the previous decade. Arrangements between writers and actors may have been largely responsible: in-house dramatists (Hurwitz, Lateiner, and later Gordin) wrote most works for exclusive use by the troupe with which they were affiliated. Manuscripts could also be sold to stars and actor-managers, again limiting the performance rights to the owner of the script. The first three plays published in New York as separate booklets were from Gordin's pen, and appeared in 1897 and 1898.²⁰ He had written all three pieces for the actress Keni Liptzin; and her husband, newspaper editor Michael Mintz, was responsible for at least one of these publications. Although several of Gordin's subsequent dramas were published around the time of their premieres, this was not the case with the full-length plays of most of his competitors. Shomer's American repertoire never appeared in the United States, although he could have printed his works in his own publishing house. And Hurwitz's and Lateiner's plays did not fare any better: their earliest publications—after almost two decades of playwriting in New York—appeared in Galicia in 1903. Most of Kobrin's or Libin's dramas were not published in the United States until the 1910s, and then mostly as "collected works." Mass-market editions of Yiddish plays like the ones that became standard in Eastern Europe in the first decade of the twentieth century rarely appeared in the United States in those years. Yet, despite the lack of printed texts, quite a few of these plays became part of the repertoire in Eastern Europe.

19. According to *Leksikon*, Julius Adler was the first to bring Gordin's repertoire from America, except for two plays that had arrived earlier. See *Leksikon*, 1: 12. However, by the time he returned to Russia in 1907, a large number of Gordin's plays had already been submitted to the censor, and as early as 1905, one Warsaw publisher offered seven of his plays. Adler did probably add two new plays by Gordin to the repertoire in 1907.

20. One-act and even full-length plays appeared occasionally in newspapers, journals, or other publications. For example, Jacob Ter published his full-length play, *Amerikaner arbeter* (*American Worker*), in his own journal, *Natur un lebn*, in 1898.

Without published texts, however, the distribution of plays was cumbersome, haphazard, and had to rely on unofficial channels and often unscrupulous methods. As noted before, many play scripts traveled in the luggage of wandering actors. In addition, after 1900, company directors Fishzon, Sem Adler, and Dovid-Moyshe Sabsay obtained American plays through their contacts with the Yiddish theater in Galicia. But there is also evidence that, at the same time, a somewhat more structured supplier network emerged, one probably fed and fostered by prompters and copyists who, like directors, had easy access to complete texts. In New York, Joseph Gropper, an enterprising Yiddish actor, owned a costume shop and collected plays and music, which he lent to theater personnel. He was probably the first to recognize the need for repertoire in Eastern Europe and to make it his business to sell plays.²¹ In 1905, one Warsaw prompter advertised in the Yiddish press that he sold readymade *tsenzurkes* (censorship copies).²² Theater critic A. Mukdoyni recalled such “brokers” of plays in Warsaw who “always had something American” to sell. Often though, according to his recollections, these were badly copied texts, with many spelling errors (particularly in the English words) or loosely connected fragments of works, which theater directors would have to turn into full plays.²³

The lack of authoritative, printed texts for the early American imports did not discourage directors; on the contrary, they eagerly took advantage of it. After all, they were used to making alterations, inasmuch as they had to translate all scripts into German and adapt them in order to pass censorship. Because the audience would have known neither their provenance nor their contents, directors felt free to do with the manuscripts as they liked, and usually added their own names as authors, or, if it seemed advantageous, those of others. If Yiddish intellectuals and writers chose to pay attention to the theater at all, they usually lamented this lack of respect for author and text. In their minds, American plays contributed to the low state of the theater, not only by virtue of their general lack of artistic quality but because they encouraged a cavalier attitude toward any literary product.

One such example is Lateiner's 1895 comedy *Di farblondzhet neshome* (*The Lost Soul*), which Fishzon obtained in 1903 and which he submitted to the censor as his own under the title *Sara Scheindel aus*

21. See *Leksikon*, 1: 527–28. In fact, Gropper's collection of plays is today part of the Sholem Perlmutter Collection at YIVO. See also Khayim Ehrenreich, *Figurn un profiln af der yidisher bine* (Tel Aviv, 1976), 211–16.

22. *Leksikon*, 6: 5098.

23. A. Mukdoyni, “Zikhroynes fun a yidishn teater kritiker,” in Jacob Shatzky (ed.), *Arkhiiv far der geshikhhte fun yidishn teater* (Vilna and New York, 1930), 387.

Jupez [sic] (*Sara Scheindel from Yehupets*).²⁴ This title, with its obvious reference to a character and imaginary town from Sholom Aleichem's works, caught the latter's attention. Incensed, Sholom Aleichem wrote an open letter to the paper *Der fraynd*, in which he complained about the sad state of Yiddish theater in general and Fishzon's practices in particular. According to him, Fishzon had changed the title of this American import to "*Sore (Sheyne) Sheyndl fun Mazepevke un Menakhem Mendl fun Yehupets . . .* by Sholom Aleichem, translated by Fishzon."²⁵ It is unclear if this was how Fishzon actually advertised the play to the general public or if Sholom Aleichem added his own yarn to it, for the censorship copy's title differs somewhat and makes no mention of Sholom Aleichem as author. However, even the *tsenzurke*'s title does indicate that Fishzon tried to exploit the audience's familiarity with Sholom Aleichem's character to promote the play.

The spread of the *Sore Sheyndl* plays among Yiddish troupes demonstrates a typical pattern: if a piece promised success, other companies soon followed suit, an indication that they were able to gain access to the text within a reasonably short time. And *Sore Sheyndl* quickly proved popular; of a total of thirty-one extant submissions to the censor between 1903 and 1908, five were within one year and fourteen within two years of Fishzon's original submission. Allowing for minor variations, the manuscript was generally entitled *Sara Scheindel aus Jehupetz*, as Fishzon had named it, or alternatively, *Die Nachtwandlerin* (*The Sleepwalker*), or a combination thereof. Only rarely did the *tsenzurke* writers credit Lateiner as author, and they never used his original title, *Di farblondzhete neshome*. Like many other such imports, it enjoyed great success under its new identity in Eastern Europe, and when the play was published in Warsaw in 1905, it bore the title *Sore Sheyndl*. By that time, a full decade after its premiere, the New York audience had probably long forgotten it, since the majority of productions usually remained only briefly in the active repertoire. This delay between the American premiere and its East European success is typical particularly for plays from the late 1880s and 1890s because of the limited and random distribution of texts until around 1905.

24. See manuscript by Fishzon, *Sara Scheindel aus Jupez*, St. Petersburg State Theatrical Library, Jewish Play Collection of the Czarist Censor's Collection, #982. All play titles cited from censorship copies are rendered as they appear on the title page, i.e. in German.

25. Sholom Aleichem's letter was originally published in *Der fraynd*, December 2 (15), 1903. Quoted from Khatskl Nadel and Mark Leyptsiker, "Sholem Aleykhem un der yidisher teater," *Sovetische literatur* 8 (1940): 109.

Accessibility of play texts, including those from the United States, greatly improved around the revolution of 1905 as a direct result of the country's general liberalization. A vibrant Yiddish cultural scene and public discourse quickly emerged, particularly in centers like Warsaw. The political climate allowed for the establishment of three Yiddish theaters there, despite the fact that the ban had not been officially revoked.²⁶ The Yiddish theater also benefited from the sudden proliferation of the Yiddish press. Several printing presses published a profusion of plays, making them for the first time easily available to companies and a mass audience. Already in 1905, Warsaw bookstore owner and publisher I. Lidski, who had occasionally reprinted the old repertoire, offered fifty-five different play titles, seventeen of which were from New York. The overwhelming majority consisted of plays that had been published over the previous twenty-five years in Russia, Galicia, and New York, including Goldfaden's and Shomer's repertoires. It is significant, however, that the list also included titles from the United States that had not been printed previously, among them such hits as Lateiner's *Khinke Pinke oder Gavril der maler* (*Khinke Pinke or Gabriel the Painter*) and *Mishke un Moshke*, Avrom-Mikhl Sharkanski's *Kol nidre*, Gordin's *Dvoyrele meykheses* (*Dvoyrele the Aristocrat*) and *Di gebrider Lurye* (*The Brothers Luria*), and Hurwitz's *Ben hador* (*Son of the Age*). Besides Lidski, three other publishers soon competed for a market share in Warsaw and environs. The publishing houses *Varshever idisher teatr* (Warsaw Yiddish Theater), owned by theater director Kompaneyets, and *Di yudishe bihne* (The Yiddish Stage) emerged, and the publisher Yavne added the play-series *Yudishe teater bibliotek* (*Yiddish Theater Library*) to its catalogue. Jewish publishers in Poland continued to print Yiddish plays from New York—usually without the knowledge of the authors—many of which had not been and would never be published in the United States. This practice gave companies easy access to the texts, and further encouraged the proliferation of American plays in the repertoire of Yiddish companies in Russia. Because of these publications, several plays reached a much wider audience in Eastern Europe than they had on the other side of the Atlantic.

The Nature of the Repertoire, 1896–1909

The majority of the American repertoire that entered the Russian scene between 1896 and 1906 consisted of historical operettas, such as

26. Klier, "Exit, Pursued by a Bear," 171–72, discusses the confusion around the presumed lifting of the ban.

Lateiner's hits, *Khurbn yerusholayim* (*The Destruction of Jerusalem*), *Di shlekhte froy oder ishe roe* (*The Evil Woman*), and his melodramas, *Shloyme Gorgl*, *Dovids fidele* (*David's Violin*), and *Khinke-Pinke*. Topping the list in number of submissions were his *Sore Sheyndl* and *Khurbn yerusholayim*. While plays by other American writers such as Hurwitz, Sharkanski, Feinman, and Gordin achieved considerable popularity during these years, in terms of quantity Lateiner's repertoire reigned supreme and could be challenged only by Goldfaden's. Among the more frequently submitted imports during these years were also several melodramas that offered audiences fictional representations of Jewish immigrant life in America, with such telling titles as *Di eyropeyer in amerike* by Lateiner, and *Khayim in amerike* (*Haim in America*) by Marks, both of which center on the machinations of criminals, explore the clashes between naïve greenhorns and Americanizing *allrightniks*, and reunite family members torn apart through emigration or desertion.²⁷ Feinman's two plays, *Khane di finisherin* (*Hannah the Finisher*) and *Dos lebn in nyu york*, are both domestic melodramas about love and intrigue, but despite the geographic specificity of their titles, they could be set in any big city.²⁸ Although *Sore Sheyndl* takes place in Eastern Europe, the well-to-do, noble, and rational American immigrant, Jack, who visits his hometown after many years abroad, is a key figure. He is quickly able to manipulate the greedy and narrow-minded *shtetl* folk, and paves the way to happiness for two young couples. Among them is his daughter whom he had thought dead.

As both Lateiner's and Goldfaden's stars waned in 1906, Jacob Gordin started to corner the market. His 1892 drama, *Der yidisher kenig Lir* (*The Jewish King Lear*), had appeared in 1902, and *Got, mentsh un tayvl* (1900) followed in 1904. During the next year, the censor reviewed four more of his titles (*Di gebrider Lurye*, *Khasye di yesoyme*, *Mirele Efros*, and *Di vilde printsesin* (*The Wild Princess*) for the first time. This sudden profusion of new submissions was no coincidence: they were all published by Lidski in 1905. Between 1906 and 1908, at the height of Yiddish theatrical activity in Russia, the censor received over 150

27. Both *Khayim in amerike* (inspired by Augustus Thomas's 1889 hit, *The Burglar*) and *Mishke un Moshke* (original title: *Di grinhorn*s) were first performed in 1889 in New York. *Mishke un Moshke* seems to have come to Russia in 1896 and was published by Lidski in 1905, while the earliest extant censorship copy of *Khayim* dates from 1903. The play is listed in Kompaneyets's catalogue, which is printed in the back of his 1908 edition of Zalmen Libin's *Gebrokhene bertser*.

28. Both *Dos lebn in nyu york* and *Khane* had their premieres in 1899 in New York. The former was first submitted in Russia in 1900, while the earliest copy for *Khane* seems to have been submitted by 1902. Both titles appear in Kompaneyets's catalogue in 1908.

submissions of eighteen separate titles by Gordin; in 1908, his peak year, almost a quarter of all submissions were plays by him. No other playwright was represented as often among the submissions in those years as he. Topping the list were his *Khasye di yesoyne* and *Di gebrider Lurye*. Known as the reformer of Yiddish theater, Gordin quickly became as popular in Russia as he had been in New York only a few years previously. Actors loved his plays because they contained highly dramatic roles that proved to be more complex than those of the earlier melodramas, and because, as in the United States, they were vehicles for fame and recognition by the critics. His socially critical dramas fit the revolutionary spirit better than did Lateiner's or Goldfaden's sentimental plays. Nonetheless, most of his texts could pass the censor after some necessary adaptations, while other, politically more "subversive," dramas that both Russian and Yiddish troupes frequently submitted during these years, such as Semen Iushkevich's plays *Korol' (King)* and *Golod (Hunger)*, Ossip Dymov's *Slushai Izrail' (Hear Oh Israel)*, and Gerhart Hauptmann's *Die Weber (The Weavers)*, were banned from the stage. However, by the time of his death in 1909, Gordin's repertoire had been played through, and, with nothing new coming from his pen, troupes looked for new material by up-and-coming authors. It was exactly at this juncture that more extensive personal contact between the two countries developed, although it was caused neither by Gordin's death nor by this repertoire crisis.

The Russian-American Encounter: Era of Guest Performances, 1908–1914

Until 1909, well over one-third of the plays reviewed by the censors were of American origin, and, besides Goldfaden, Lateiner and Gordin were the two most popular playwrights. Though significant, this "American" presence was still largely limited to texts. Between 1908 and the outbreak of World War I, it increased considerably as Yiddish actors from the United States and Russia toured each other's countries and carried with them the latest American repertoire.²⁹

Several factors helped precipitate this era of intensive contact between theater personalities in Russia and America. Around 1908–1909, New York's Jewish immigrants and theater entrepreneurs finally became

29. Although Mukdoyni is correct in noting the intensifying influence of the American repertoire around 1910, he seems unaware of its earlier impact, probably because he encountered the Yiddish theater only in 1909, when he returned to Warsaw after years abroad. For his description of the "American period," see Mukdoyni, "Zikhroynes," 386–97.

aware of a viable Yiddish theater in Russia, particularly in Polish cities. It had escaped them that, within a few months of the 1905 revolution, Warsaw had become a center of Yiddish theater, with three permanent troupes attracting such directors as Spivakovski, Sem Adler, and Kaminski, along with actors of the caliber of Kaminska, Meyerson, and Yankev Libert. In Lodz, the recently constructed Teatr Wielki (Big Theater) regularly housed Jewish traveling companies, beginning in 1905. Two years later, it became the permanent home of a Yiddish troupe under the direction of Yitskhok Zandberg.³⁰ The immediate cause for this somewhat belated awareness of a viable and stable Yiddish theater on the other side of the ocean and of artists with star status was Kaminska's enormous success with Russian critics in St. Petersburg in the spring of 1908. Half a year later, the New York Yiddish press began to publish articles about the "revival of Yiddish theater in Russia," much of which centered on Kaminska. In the spring of 1909, Kaminska celebrated her fifteenth stage anniversary in St. Petersburg to much critical acclaim. These events turned the respected actress into a star for Russian Jewish audiences and into a potentially hot commodity for the American Yiddish theatrical market. To no surprise, then, in the summer 1909 the managers of two New York Yiddish theaters engaged in a veritable race to invite her for guest performances. Thomashefsky's manager triumphed, and returned not only with Kaminska but also with Misha Fishzon and his wife, Vera Zaslavska, who both worked in Kaminska's troupe. For Kaminska, who faced the repertoire crisis after Gordin's death, the invitation came at an opportune time, because in America she could play her old star roles.

Already a year earlier, Zandberg, the business-savvy director of the Lodz theater, had begun to do the same in reverse, inviting guest performers from abroad to cover the slow summer months. He appears to have recruited in London at first, but later he negotiated directly with actors in New York. Sigmund and Dina Feinman, who had recently relocated from New York to London, were his first guests. Since their attempt to establish themselves in London proved difficult, they welcomed the opportunity to secure an income over the summer. Zandberg also invited London-based actors like Josef Sherman, as well as such New York actors as Moshkovitsh, Clara Young, Thomashefsky, and Kessler.

The closer contact between the two continents brought a new wave of American plays to the Yiddish theater in Russia. Russian actors guest-

30. Małgorzata Leyko, "Das jüdische Theater in Lodz: Stadt dreier Nationen," in Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer (ed.), *Theatralia Judaica* (Tübingen, 1992), 218–27, and Leyko, "Teatr Icchoka Zandberga w Łodzi," in *Teatr żydowski w Polsce*, 106–12.

performing in New York took the latest American hits back with them, and American guests brought their own repertoire, which local troupes quickly copied. Meanwhile, brokers continued to peddle American plays, as well. While Kaminska was still touring in the United States, Fishzon and Zaslavska returned to Warsaw with several texts, among them the latest New York Yiddish hit, Moyshe and Anshl Shor's *A mentsh zol men zayn* (*Be a Person*). With its contemporary setting, the play made Yiddish theater history, inasmuch as it marked the rise of the modern and the end of the long reign of the historical operetta. *A mentsh zol men zayn* was so popular in Warsaw—according to critic Mukdoyni because of its light music and Coney Island bathing suit scene—that the other two Warsaw theaters staged it too, and it ran at least 150 times.³¹

An even greater hit followed on its heels. Thomashefsky's melodrama, *Dos pintele yid* (*The Essential Spark of Jewishness*), which had run for an entire season in New York, was to capture all of Russia during the 1910–1911 season.³² Theater directors rejoiced over having found this latest gold mine, while critics lambasted it for its twisted and unrealistic plot.³³ *Pintele*, critics on both continents agreed, did much to destroy literary theater. But troupes did not want to cut short such a lucrative production and give other plays a chance, and when in the following seasons they tried to replicate the success, they looked to America for similar melodramas or operettas. A flood of plays appeared, by Libin, Zolotarevsky, Shor, and others, the majority of which were operettas set in America.³⁴ In a letter from June 1912 addressed to New York dramatist Gershon Zeykin, Kaminska explained that, except for Libin's *Gots shtrof* (*God's Punishment*), she did not perform any of the dramas she had purchased during her stay in New York, because dramas had little success with the public. Instead, her troupe staged one of Thomashefsky's operettas. Although she lamented the fact that she had few opportunities to perform, since she did not appear in operettas, she closed the letter with "Maybe you have good operettas?"³⁵ The predominance and appeal of American operettas on the Warsaw Yiddish stage

31. Mukdoyni, quoted in *Leksikon*, 4: 2910.

32. The script was published in Warsaw in 1911.

33. *Dos pintele yid* is about an antisemitic father who tries to have his illegitimate son by a Jewish mother killed. The child survives and as an adult finds and confronts his father who, now contrite, donates a million rubles to a *shul*.

34. For a detailed discussion of the repertoire in 1912, see A. Mukdoyni, "Der repertuar funem yidishn teater in rusland far dem yor taraab [1912]," in Shmuel Niger (ed.), *Der pinkes: yorbukh far der gesbikhthe fun der yidisher literatur un shprakh, far folklor, kritik un bibliografye* (Vilna, 1913), 265–72.

35. Jacob Shatzky, "Tsvey briv fun E. R. Kaminski," *Arkhiiv*, 464.

can also be gleaned from the recordings made there. As Michael Aylward notes, in comparison to Yiddish recordings made in Lemberg, “Goldfaden was not nearly as apparent, and far more recordings [were made] of works by composers from the American Yiddish stage.”³⁶ For men like Mukdoyni, Prilutski, and Peretz, who were trying to create a Yiddish literary stage in Warsaw, the *Pintele* years were devastating, because they felt that the play’s success reversed the progress they had made. According to Mukdoyni, “the period of *Dos pintele yid* was the darkest one in Yiddish theater. Every evening for an entire year almost all Yiddish troupes in Poland and Russia made nothing but wild grimaces. . . .”³⁷ For many theater directors and actors, on the other hand, the certainty of a long run and regular income offered a welcome respite from usual conditions.

Reflecting the changes within the New York Yiddish repertoire, the content and the style of many of the new imports differed markedly from previous plays. Unlike much of Lateiner’s and Gordin’s repertoire, most of these new imports were set among immigrants, and the music by Rumshinsky and other young composers attracted the audience with its modern, American tone. Spectators no longer merely saw a play that happened to be written in America; more and more, they were transported into a fictional American world where characters called Harry, Joe, or Sally said words like “newer mein” (never mind), “scharap” (shut up), “allreid” (all right), “kitchen,” and “monke bisnis (monkey business).” In fact, several plays were even translations of recent Broadway productions. Yiddish theater entrepreneurs and audiences in both America and Europe wanted to partake of the international theatrical culture in which such translations and adaptations were common practice. For example, when New York star-manager Malvina Lobel performed in Poland, she brought two translations of recent Broadway plays, one of which was itself an adaptation of a French play.³⁸ Warsaw-based Neroslavskaya staged Franz Lehar’s *Eva* and Jean Gilbert’s *Die keusche Susanne* (as *Di tsniesdike Shoshane*) in Yiddish, and Clara Young was proud to perform the Yiddish translation of Gilbert’s *Puppchen* (*Little Doll*) in Warsaw while the Polish operetta troupe was still rehearsing it.³⁹

36. Aylward, “Early Recordings,” 66.

37. Mukdoyni, “Zikhroynes,” 396.

38. Among Lobel’s 1912 repertoire was the recent Broadway hit *Everywoman*, published in a Yiddish translation by Henry Gastwirth in 1911, and Alexandre Bisson’s *La Femme X*, which as *Madame X* had a successful run on Broadway in 1910. See *Leksikon*, 2: 957.

39. *Puppchen* (composer: Jean Gilbert [Max Winterfeld]; libretto: Jean Kren and Kurt Kraatz) had premiered at the Thalia Theater in Berlin in December 1912. Gilbert’s 1910 operetta, *Die keusche Susanne*, won him wide acclaim in Europe.

The expanding contact between the two countries also increased the awareness of the popularity of the American Yiddish repertoire in Russia, and appears to have encouraged some authors in New York to try to regulate availability and to profit for the first time from their overseas successes. Lateiner, whose plays had been performed all over Europe for decades, signed a contract with the Warsaw-based Mikhail Chernov (Moyshe Fratkin), who was guest performing in New York in 1911. Chernov was to act as Lateiner's Russian agent for translations, publications, and productions of all his works, and to collect royalties, which were to be shared equally by the two parties. For his part, Lateiner agreed to send Chernov all his new plays upon completion.⁴⁰ Although other such contracts have not yet been found, it is safe to assume that writers like Zolotarevsky, Libin, Shor, and Thomashefsky, whose plays were particularly popular in those years, would have tried to make similar arrangements.

Guest Performers and the Visa Problem

Between 1908 and 1914, several actors from New York and London went on summer tours to Poland and the Pale of Settlement. They were attracted by the new and relative stability of the Yiddish theater particularly in Poland, the potentially lucrative market, and the desire to return as stars to their families and their original audiences. Among them were the Feinmans, Clara and Boaz Young, Sherman, Thomashefsky, Moshkovitsh, Kessler, Lobel, Berl Bernshteyn, Yankev Hokhshteyn, Elias Rotshteyn, and Yankev Zilbert. The difficult conditions of Yiddish theater before 1905 and, more importantly, the problems in obtaining visas for Russia were largely responsible for the late date at which these actors began to visit Russia—particularly compared to similar trips to Austro-Hungary and Romania.

Although quite a few actors guest-toured in Russia during the six years before World War I, secrecy surrounded the question as to how they entered the country, which did not issue entrance visas to foreign Jews. As Mukdoyni explained in his memoirs, American Jewish actors had to present a false certificate of baptism to the Russian consul in New York in order to receive a visa for Russia. As the number of visits by foreign Yiddish actors attest, obtaining such a document, or perhaps simply offering the consul a bribe instead, was not an insurmountable hurdle, although the stigma attached to it probably deterred some

40. The contract between the two parties is in the Sholem Perlmutter Theater Archives, YIVO.

potential visitors. According to Mukdoyni, even in theatrical circles this practice raised suspicions, and actors were careful not to discuss it in public, for fear that the Jewish audience would consider the visitors actual converts and shun them.⁴¹ Both the guest performers and the local managers who had invested considerable sums to engage them had an obvious interest in keeping the question of documentation a secret in order not to threaten their potential success. In fact, as early as 1909, as visits from abroad were just beginning, the theatrical community in Lodz became painfully aware of the potential dangers for Jews who entered the country as Christians, when Sigmund Feinman, who had just begun his summer engagement in Lodz, died suddenly of a heart attack. Because of his papers, it took considerable effort to arrange for a Jewish burial there.⁴²

Published recollections by actors about their tours to Russia often include scenes at the border. To be sure, crossing the border was an emotional event for those who returned to their country of origin after years or decades abroad. But these descriptions also always discussed questions of identity and legality with regard to the visa. In an article written upon his return from Russia, Moshkovitsh, who visited Russia at the same time as Feinman, was the first to mention that he entered the country “legally, with a passport signed by the Russian consul,”⁴³ which, if Mukdoyni is correct, implies that he entered the country as a Christian. In his articles about his experiences in Russia in 1913, Thomashefsky talked at great length about his border crossing, but avoided any explicit mention of the necessary documentation.⁴⁴ But Thomashefsky’s never-mentioned unease with assuming a Christian identity was close to the surface and clear to those who knew of the visa requirements. In fact, he seems to have described this episode in order to quell any doubts among readers who may have questioned his loyalty as a Jew. With his son Harry presumably reading Reverend Peters’s *Justice to the Jew* and his own thoughts focused on the Russian persecution of

41. Mukdoyni, “Zikhroynes,” 388. The issue still irked him at the time he wrote his memoirs (in 1929), and he asked those actors who had gone to Russia before World War I to put their “shame” aside and tell the “truth” about the visa issue. Ibid., 389. For a discussion of Russian policy toward American Jews and the American Jewish Committee’s reaction, see V. V. Engel’, “Amerikanskii pasport i russko-evreiskii vopros v kontse XIX-nachale XX veka,” *Amerikanskii ezhegodnik* (1991): 104–20.

42. *Leksikon*, 4: 2555.

43. “Moshkovitshes ayndrike vegn dem yidishn teater in rusland,” *Forverts*, August 22, 1909.

44. Boris Thomashefsky, “Tomashevski fort fun london nokh rusland,” *Forverts*, September 28, 1913, and “Tomashevski in rusland,” *Forverts*, October 5, 1913.

Jews, the two crossed the border by train.⁴⁵ Thomashefsky described his fear of being recognized as “Reb Borekh Arn ben Reb Pinkhes of Zlatopolye,” that is, as the Russian shtetl Jew that he originally was. He presumably imagined the possibility of having been denounced by an overly zealous theater fan who wanted to get rid of him, and of being sent to Siberia by Russians eager to make him pay for not having been subjected to pogroms, expulsions, and the army for the past thirty-two years, having lived instead in a free country where he “did not have to convert.” His American passport, as we learn much later in the narrative, identified him as Barnado Tomaso, and must have included a fictional birthplace. The border guards, he allegedly believed, mistook him for a non-Jewish professor or musician—not because of the entry in his passport but, he declared, because of his top hat and cape.⁴⁶

In his memoirs published in 1950, Boaz Young skirted the issue, as well. When during their guest performances in London in 1911 his wife Clara received an invitation to Lodz, he decided not to accompany her for a variety of reasons, one of which he described as “problems with [his] American passport.”⁴⁷ After his own tour through Romania, Galicia, and the Bukovina, the couple planned to reunite in the German border town of Thorn (today, Toruń, Poland), some one hundred miles from Warsaw where his family still lived. Being that close, his urge to see his family for the first time in twenty-four years became so strong that it apparently overrode all concerns. But Young only noted that the Russian consul did not suspect him of being Jewish and gave him a visa.⁴⁸ Once, however, Young addressed the problem openly. In an article published in the New York Yiddish daily *Di varhayt* in February 1914, Young, who was writing from Europe, warned his American colleagues about tightened government regulations and the increased vigilance of the local Yiddish press. While earlier one needed to show a certificate of baptism only to the consul, who would enter the stated religion in one’s passport, the new rules required that the certificate be brought along as proof for presentation at the border and to the police. The Yiddish press in Warsaw was aware of the situation and, he claimed, might expose the visitors.⁴⁹ In fact, there was apparently a scandal surrounding one of

45. Thomashefsky referred to a book by the Presbyterian clergyman Madison Clinton Peters, who promoted justice for Jews and blacks through various publications and lectures. *Justice for the Jew* was first published in 1899 and issued in a revised edition in 1908 and 1910.

46. “Tomashevski in rusland.”

47. Young, *Mayn lebn in teater* (New York, 1950), 203.

48. *Ibid.*, 209.

49. Young, “Der fershtopter kval fun yidishe [*sic*] kunst,” *Varhayt*, February 14, 1914.

Sherman's visits.⁵⁰ This warning did not deter Lobel or Rotshteyn from touring Russia during the summer of 1914, but it is, of course, unclear what effect this situation would have had on guest performances in the long run, inasmuch as the outbreak of World War I in August 1914 put an end to such visits for the duration of the hostilities.

Guest Performers and their Reception

Among the earliest performers to visit Russia was the outstanding actor Morris Moshkovitsh, who spent the summer of 1909 in Warsaw and several Russian cities to perform his celebrated roles in Gordin's plays. Advertisements praised him as "the great American guest, the best Yiddish actor in America, the greatest star of the New York Yiddish theaters." One ad pointed out that Gordin had written the role of Uriel Mazik in *Got, mentsh un tayvl* especially for him, and that Yiddish actors in New York had competed to determine who was the best performer of the role. "Actors, audience, and the entire press," the ad went on, "recognized [Moshkovitsh] as the best."⁵¹ Moshkovitsh was probably not well known to Warsaw audiences, and needed such an introduction to entice them to attend his performances. But how he was pitched can tell us much about how the local theater manager gauged popular sentiments: the ads made much of his personal relationship with the popular hero Gordin, who, after all, had been the most staged dramatist during the previous three years, and who had died only weeks before. Yet not only Gordin had acknowledged his talents; presumably the entire New York immigrant community had endorsed him. New York, then, was functioning as authoritative cultural arbiter and trendsetter.

Moshkovitsh returned in 1911 on the heels of the *Pintele* season. Among others, Prilutski was full of enthusiastic praise for both his acting and directing talents, and sincerely wished that Moshkovitsh would stay permanently in Warsaw to enrich the Yiddish stage. In his mind, Moshkovitsh had qualities that even the most talented actors on the Warsaw Yiddish stage lacked: he spoke a beautiful, cultured Yiddish instead of dialect; he controlled his voice and movements completely and used them effectively to create a character; and he planned his role down to the smallest detail, which demonstrated both thought and intuition. In

50. Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Yankev Gordin* (Tel Aviv, 1964), 309. Unfortunately, Zylbercweig gives no more details about this episode.

51. Noyekh Prilutski, "Der zumersezoon 1909," *Unzer leben* 37 (1910); reprinted in Prilutski, *Yidish teater, 1905–1912*, 2 vols. (Bialystok, 1921), 1: 54.

short, he was able to create a thoroughly convincing character, and, as a director, he was able to elicit wonderfully complex performances from his cast. Even his choice to do *Got, mentsh, un tayvl*, which Prilutski considered an old workhorse, did not detract from his praise.⁵² Such unequivocal admiration by critics was rare at the time. Mukdoyni, who seconded Prilutski's evaluation of Moshkovitsh, considered him a world-class artist, and declared that he brought some comfort to the critics who, under the influence of *Dos pintele yid*, had given up hope for the survival of a serious Yiddish stage. To him, Moshkovitsh proved that there were still actors in America who had not been crippled by *Dos pintele yid*.⁵³

But not all visitors from New York fared so well. In fact, while the second-tier (though first-rate) actors Moshkovitsh and Clara Young received accolades abroad, the great New York stars, Thomashefsky and Kessler, got a chilly reception from both the audiences and the critics when they came to Warsaw and Lodz in the summer of 1913. Prilutski called the aging Kessler—who was advertised as “the greatest American Yiddish actor”—“a gast fun yener velt” (“a guest from the world of the dead,” a reference to the title of a popular old Lateiner melodrama).⁵⁴ Although he could appreciate Kessler's dramatic strength in certain roles, Prilutski found his acting neither subtle nor varied. While the inarticulate Kessler seemed like an old-fashioned star from previous decades, Thomashefsky brought a certain contemporary American finesse both on and off the stage. But for the critics at least, his name had a negative connotation: he was, after all, the author of *Dos pintele yid*. They commented positively on his impressive physical appearance and expressive face, which was unusual on the Yiddish stage in Russia. However, the critics were less taken with his acting and truly appalled by his choice of plays, which consisted, among others, of two hits by Kobrin, whom they considered to be a second- or third-rate author.⁵⁵ Thomashefsky was taken aback, since New York critics acknowledged Kobrin as one of the “better” writers who followed in the vein of Gordin. Critics also commented that he was not able to create the kind of ensemble acting with the troupe that they had so admired with Moshkovitsh. After his return to New York, Thomashefsky, who did not take his defeat lightly, published a series of articles in which he described the “backwardness”

52. Prilutski, “Moris Moskovitsh,” in *Yidish teater*, 2: 29–37.

53. Mukdoyni, “Zikhroynes,” 396.

54. Prilutski, “Dovid Kesler,” *Yidish teater*, 2: 47. See also Mukdoyni, “Zikhroynes,” 419–20.

55. See Prilutski, “Boris Tomashevski,” *Yidish teater*, 2: 38–46, and Mukdoyni, “Zikhroynes,” 417–18.

of Russia. He blamed his failure on the local actors, because they did not learn their roles properly or attend rehearsals diligently.⁵⁶ His articles prompted angry responses from Boaz Young and Zandberg, the two directors who had invited the star. Young felt that Thomashefsky played even more melodramatically in Poland than he did in New York, clearly misjudging the taste of an audience wishing to see a more subtle style.⁵⁷

But the Jewish audiences and critics in Russia were ready for and open to good and entertaining contemporary American performances—and when Clara Young arrived in 1911, it was love at first sight on both sides.

Young, American, and Successful

No other guest performer was as successful as Clara Young. Indeed, she became the most beloved Yiddish actress in Poland and Russia during the 1910s. Not only the Yiddish-speaking operetta audience adored her, so did Poles and Russians. Even stern critics of light entertainment lay at her feet. The Galician-born Young made her professional debut in 1903 in a New York Yiddish music hall. After playing minor roles in a legitimate theater for a while, her career took off in 1909, when her husband, actor Boaz Young, became a partner with Kessler at the Thalia Theater and she was able to appear in several significant dramatic roles. Both Youngs had star ambitions, and as early as 1910 Boaz made plans to break away from Kessler and build his own theater in Harlem. That same year, while Kessler was on tour in Chicago, he adapted and staged H. Mayzel's *Zayn vaybs man* (*His Wife's Husband*). The production, which featured Clara in her first leading role as a soubrette, was a great success.

In the summer of 1911, the Youngs took *Zayn vaybs man* to England, where Clara was invited to Lodz and Warsaw. Encouraged by her success there, the couple returned to Warsaw the following summer, where she performed Anshl Shor and Rumshinski's *Di meydl fun der vest* (*The Girl from the West*), fittingly renamed *Di amerikanerin* (*The American*).⁵⁸ It was a well-chosen vehicle. Shor was known for his hit, *A mentsh zol men zayn*, and the title itself advertised what Young promised as an actress: a

56. Thomashefsky's travel impressions appeared in the *Forverts* in weekly installments between September 21, 1913, and December 28, 1913. For his descriptions of the theaters and actors in Lodz and Warsaw, see October 12, 1913, and November 9, 1913.

57. Boaz Young, "Favros Mr. Tomashevski iz broyges af di [sic] rusishe kritik," *Varhayt*, December 8, 1913.

58. Although the title is reminiscent of Belasco's great 1905 hit, *The Girl of the Golden West*, its content has no relation to it.

spirit and skill that her European colleagues could not match. This “American” actress was able to take the audience by storm. According to Boaz’s memoirs, “Masses of Poles came to see *Di amerikanerin*; Warsaw assimilators were not embarrassed to come to the Yiddish theater . . . young Hasidim would sneak into the theater . . . [and] Jewish literati saw in Clara Young’s performances a revival of the Yiddish language.”⁵⁹ In Warsaw, where operetta was the entertainment of choice, the music also had its impact: “Rumshinsky’s music to *Di amerikanerin* was so successful that not only Jews but also Poles sang it. It could be heard in all cabarets.”⁶⁰

Even the Yiddish intellectuals and literati in Warsaw were smitten with Clara—no small feat for a soubrette performing American Yiddish operettas, particularly at a time when American entertainment flooded the European market much to the chagrin of these intellectuals, whose hopes for serious dramatic theater were thwarted by the commercial success of the operettas. But critics like Mukdoyni, Prilutski, Dovid Frishman, and Peretz appreciated her elegance, language, and nuanced acting, and they were also clearly attracted by her beauty. Her appeal lay in her feminine charm, mixed with a hint of eroticism, which, carefully guarded, never turned into overt or coarse sexuality. According to Mukdoyni, who was certainly no friend of light entertainment, Young had class, style, dignity, charm, and, unlike her female colleagues in Europe, he asserted, a good voice.

In the fall of 1912, the Youngs returned to the United States, but, spurred probably by his wife’s new stardom, Boaz gave up his partnership in the new flagship of Yiddish theater in New York, the recently-built Second Avenue Theater, and the two returned to Poland. Their professional future in Warsaw looked much brighter than in the tightly controlled and competitive New York market. In Warsaw, Boaz rented the Kaminski Theater and was able to make Clara the undisputed star, which he could not have done so easily in New York. Among others, they produced Nokhem Rakov’s and Rumshinski’s *Khantshe in amerike* (*Khantshe in America*) and Gilbert’s new German operetta *Puppchen* (*Puptshik* in Yiddish), which Boaz had purchased in Berlin on the way to Warsaw. At the time, Gilbert was very popular in Europe, and during the 1912–1913 season three of his operettas were staged in Yiddish translations in Warsaw, drawing audiences who would usually attend Polish operetta performances. The Youngs had considerable financial success, and in 1914 Boaz was planning to build a Yiddish theater in Warsaw

59. Young, *Mayn lebn*, 215.

60. *Ibid.*, 214.

with his own money and then to establish a corporation that would create a theater chain all over Poland and Russia. However, World War I put an end to these plans. Yet even the war did not entice them to return to New York, and they spent most of the war years in Odessa, from where Clara went on guest tours to such cities as Petrograd, Yekaterinoslav, and Moscow, where she continued her remarkable career. Once again, critics hostile to her repertoire would nonetheless write ecstatic reviews of her performances.⁶¹ Clara Young combined an apparently irresistible charisma with stellar performances and popular tunes. Although not all of her repertoire was set in America, she clearly capitalized on being an American and impersonating American characters on stage. In the minds of critics like Mukdoyni, her performances and plays represented both the best and the worst that America offered. In his memoirs, he summed up the ambivalent feelings Russian Jewish intellectuals had about the influx of American plays and players onto their soil on the eve of the war: "The American repertoire—be it the good or bad one—and the American actors—be they the good or bad ones—made us realize that the Yiddish theater is really in America and that here in Poland and Russia the Yiddish theater lives off the fallen crumbs that it collects under the rich American table."⁶²

Mukdoyni was certainly correct in realizing that the center of Yiddish theatrical production was in New York, and that Poland was turning into its cultural colony. This theatrical expansion eastward, which had begun slowly in the 1890s because of the great need in Eastern Europe to fill the vacuum of repertoire, turned into a conscious American export item during the 1910s. At that time, the immigrant community in New York as a whole, and the Yiddish theater in particular, had matured, and they were confident enough of their power and unique status to begin to actively seek acknowledgement, accolades, and financial gain beyond the local and regional spheres. The war would only briefly interrupt this emerging trend. What Clara Young was one of the first to discover, actors such as Molly Picon and Ludwig Satz would realize during the interwar period: Poland offered not only a lucrative market for American Yiddish actors, but also an environment where up-and-coming performers could more easily achieve a career breakthrough than in New York. In the early years of immigration, Eastern Europe had served as a

61. See Henry, "Jewish Plays on the Russian Stage," 72–73. The Youngs remained in Soviet Russia until 1921, and after a three-year break lived there again until 1929. In the early 1930s, Clara returned alone to the Soviet Union, became a Soviet citizen, and spent the rest of her life there. She died in Moscow in 1952.

62. Mukdoyni, "Zikhroynes," 397.

necessary recruitment pool to feed the American Yiddish theater with new stage talent; shortly before World War I, it began to provide new audiences and marketing possibilities for the creative energies that had gathered in New York.