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Wandering Stars

On DECEMBER 28, 1895, when the Lumière brothers rented a basement room in a Paris café to exhibit their new "*cinématographe*" to the public, there were some eleven million Jews in the world. Nearly half lived in tsarist Russia, in the Pale of Settlement, and there a Jewish movie audience first announced itself during the summer of 1898—two years after the *cinématographe* was introduced in Odessa—when Francis Doublier, a teenaged employee of the Lumières, toured the cities of the southern Pale with a program of short documentary "*actualités*."

Doublier arrived at the height of the Dreyfus affair, shortly after Emile Zola's second conviction and the sensational suicide of confessed forger Major Hubert-Joseph Henry had further stimulated an already intense interest among Russian Jews. Not surprisingly, the Jews of Kishinev wondered about the absence of Dreyfus material in Doublier's presentation. The young showman didn't have to be asked twice. By the time he reached Zhitomir, his program included an extra attraction. Anticipating the montage experiments of Lev Kuleshov, Doublier assembled a new movie, splicing together four shots—a French military parade, a Paris street scene with an imposing building, a Finnish tugboat meeting a barge, and a panorama of the Nile delta. These, he informed spectators, presented Dreyfus before his arrest, the

Palais de Justice where Dreyfus was court-martialed, the boat that took him to Devil's Island, and finally Devil's Island itself.

"Thus some unsuspecting French soldier became the screen's first recorded Jew," Patricia Erens writes in her study of Jews in American movies. Thus too, a Jewish audience demanded and received recognition. "The customers shed tears," Doublier would later recall, and the willingness with which his audiences believed they were witnessing the events of 1894—a year before the *cinématographe* was even invented!—should tell us something about the importance of representation in the mass media and the significance of shared fantasy in communal life. The Jewish audience was starved for images of itself. It was as Sholom Aleichem wrote of one impresario in his 1913 novel *Blondzhende Shtern* (Wandering Stars), a compressed, satirical history of the Yiddish stage: "Whatever he chose to give them, they would lick their fingers and come back for more."[1]

The first Russian movie houses appeared around 1904. In the heavily Jewish city of Dvinsk, according to one Yiddish memoirist, the "new wonder" was unveiled at a hall with the imposing name of Grand Electro: "How my heart palpitated as I entered this strange emporium for the first time . . . and what a melange could be seen there—murderers, weddings, markets, horses, cattle." Admission was twice that for the local Yiddish theater. Introduced in the cities, the movies proliferated throughout the Pale. In March 1911, a correspondent for *Cine-Phono* observed that "soon in Volhynia you won't be able to find a single more or less decent-sized *shtetl* with a population of five to seven thousand where, during the evenings, there will not flicker the alluring lights of illusion."

As in America, many of Russia's early movie exhibitors and distributors were Jews. Still, Sam Silverstein—who, between 1909 and 1914, operated the Illusion movie theater on the main street of Balta, a railroad junction in the southern Ukraine—maintains that Jewish subject matter would have been considered subversive. (This was scarcely unique: in addition to banning movies dealing with the French Revolution and Mary Stuart, tsarist censorship forbade orchestral accompaniment and filmed farces, at least in the Ukraine.) Nevertheless, some Jewish material did circulate. *L'khaym* (To Life), a bucolic tragedy of *shtetl* life, played by a non-Jewish cast despite its Hebrew title, was released in early 1911 by Pathé Frères's Moscow studio, and proved a considerable hit.

Directed by Kai Hansen from Alexander Arkatov's scenario, *L'khaym* leavened a conventional story of an unhappy marriage with a few authentic details (a *shabes* meal and a traditional Jewish wedding). *Cine-Phono* reported the attention this four-reel "picture of unprecedented content" received in one Belorussian city:

> The whole of Mogilev has become interested in this cinematographic pearl and considers it necessary to see it. Everyone, old and young, flocked towards the beckoning lights of the Charm electric theater. . . . All were captivated by this original picture. [*L'khaym*] was screened for seven days with exceptionally colossal success and generated great takings.

L'khaym's popularity was not confined to the Russian Pale. The film played throughout Western Europe, reaching New York in May 1911.

The bucolic *shtetl*: Pathé Frères's popular *L'khaym*, (Russia, 1911), reported in the Russian trade press as "a picture of unprecedented content"; frame enlargement.

The same year, which also saw Smolensky's *A Brivele der Mamen*, Ya'acov Davidon, Tel Aviv's pioneer exhibitor, toured the Pale with a documentary on life in the Yishev (the Jewish settlement in Palestine): "Tears of happiness gleamed in the eyes of Jewish audiences, thirsty for redemption." Such travelogues were eagerly received. Another long-touring sensation—distributed in 1913 by the Odessa firm Mizrakhi, whose Zionist orientation is implicit in its name (Hebrew for "east")—was an *actualité* contrasting Jewish life in Palestine with that in Russia, Western Europe, and America.

For a time, the Pale provided an avid audience for French-made Biblical films. Silverstein recalled that his greatest financial success was a movie based on the story of Abraham and Isaac. "People came from all over and every grandson brought his grandfather." In mid-1911, Gaumont distributed a film that anticipated Cecil B. De Mille's *Ten Commandments* in drawing from the Book of Exodus; its advertisements seem written to attract a Jewish audience, promising such "majestic scenes" as "the first Jewish Passover, the slaying of the Egyptian first-born, [and] the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt." Parallels to the tsarist empire could scarcely have been ignored. Soon after, Biblical adaptations were banned.

In Warsaw, which had supplanted Odessa as the

European center of Yiddish culture (and would now rival the Ukrainian city as a film producer), the first Jewish movies were part of a general revival of the Yiddish stage. In 1905, Tsar Nicholas II rescinded his father's twenty-two-year ban on Yiddish performances. (While Yiddish theater had been thriving in the immigrant neighborhoods of London and New York, those itinerant actors who remained in the Pale often posed as German companies, using the artificial, German-inflected Yiddish known as *Daytshmerish* and bribing local officials to let them perform in inns or barns.) Soon, the Polish impresario Avrom Yitskhok Kaminsky introduced European audiences to an innovation they had missed, the plays of Jacob Gordin.

***Kheyder* scene from Sfinks's *Meir Ezofewicz* (Poland, 1911), the story of an idealistic young Jew who revolts against clerical constraints to join the struggle for Polish freedom; frame enlargement.**

Bridling the obstreperous American-Yiddish stage with a measure of artistic aspiration, Gordin employed Russian-style naturalism and borrowed European themes, reworking *King Lear*, *A Doll's House*, and *Faust* as Yiddish family dramas. Kaminsky had similar universalist ambitions. In 1907, together with his wife Esther-Rokhl Kaminska and the young playwright-director Mark Arnshteyn, he organized the Literarishe Trupe (Literary Troupe) which toured the Pale—and even St. Petersburg—with Yiddish versions of Shakespeare and Gorky. (At the same time, the playwright Peretz Hirschbein and the actor Jacob Ben-Ami headed another self-consciously literary, and equally influential, theater in Odessa.)

Yiddish performances were again outlawed in 1910, and if the ban appears to have been ignored in the larger cities, it may have stimulated promoters to present Yiddish productions by other means. By 1911, it was possible to speak of a Polish movie industry. Following the vogue for filmed theater established a few years earlier by Paris-based Film d'Art, Kooperatywa Artystow made a series of films with Warsaw's Teatr Rosmaitosci. Simultaneously, the Siła firm, owned by Warsaw exhibitor Mordka Towbin, hired Arnshteyn to direct a film version of the Kaminsky staging of New York writer Zalmen Libin's naturalistic melodrama *Der Vilder Foter* (The Savage Father).

Towbin, a Russian Jew who operated a cinema on Warsaw's grand boulevard Marszalkowska Street, had already produced what may have been the first feature-length Polish movie—a series of scenes of Polish life in the then-German city of Poznan. Siła's initial efforts were likely primitive *actualités* and *Der Vilder Foter* was scarcely more elaborate: photographer Stanisław Sebel, who would be the most impor-

tant Polish cinematographer of the silent period, simply set up his camera in Kaminsky's theater and documented a run-through of the play.

However crude, *Der Vilder Foter* was evidently a success. Herman Sieracki, the leading actor, was soon approached by Pathé Frères with an offer to direct other Jewish films. Sieracki turned the offer down, later telling the historian David Matis that he had refused not only on his own behalf but on that of the entire company, who had stated their preference for performing before a live audience. The audience, nevertheless, was ready for movies. Aleksander Hertz—the Jewish producer who left Pathé in 1910 to found Poland's first indigenous production company, Sfinks—adapted Eliza Orzeszkowa's 1878 novel *Meir Ezofewicz*, in which an idealistic young Jew revolts against clerical constraints to join the struggle for Polish freedom. Two months later, in December 1911, Kooperatywa Artystow released their own "Jewish" film *Sad Bozy* (God's Orchard), a version of Stanisław Wyspiański's play *Sedziów* (The Judges).[2]

Meanwhile, Arnshteyn directed two more Jewish movies for Sfa, including a version of Jacob Gordin's *Di Shtifmuter* (The Stepmother). The following year in Vilna, Arnshteyn filmed *Khasye di Yesoyme* (Khasye the Orphan), a Gordin play that had already served as the basis for a movie made in Dvinsk with Naum Lipovsky's Yiddish theater. Arnshteyn shot his *Khasye* mornings during the course of the play's run at the Vilna Circus Theater and, according to actor Israel Arko, insisted on the cast speaking their lines as though to an audience. There was, however, one purely cinematic touch. After *Khasye* closed in Vilna, the troupe left for Odessa, where they filmed a spectacular ending: in the play, Gordin's tragic heroine took poison; in Arnshteyn's movie, she ended her life by walking slowly into the Black Sea.

Yiddish cinema would gain much in terms of technical proficiency from the widespread presence of Jews at all levels of the film industry (both in Europe and the United States). Still, it was less the cousin of world cinema than the child of the Yiddish stage. The first Yiddish movies recorded the Yiddish theater; well over half the Yiddish films released during the 1930s were also adaptations, while most of the remainder employed the stars, writers, and conventions of the Yiddish stage.

In Europe, the Yiddish stage had been the province of the young and the modern. Traditional Jews kept away, and also prohibited their children from attending. Thus, the theater was attended mainly by students and the new Jewish proletariat, including young women who had left their villages to work in the cities. In America, the audience was more universal. There, the Yiddish stage was not just entertainment but an antidote for homesickness and a source of collective identity. The Yiddish theater was the mass culture of the Lower East Side, its audience half congregation, half extended family. In brazen competition with religious orthodoxy, theaters were packed on Friday evenings and Saturday afternoons.

It is indicative of Jacob Gordin's preeminence that of the two dozen Yiddish plays filmed in various cities of the Russian Empire between 1911 and 1916, half were either taken from his oeuvre or, as in the case of *Der Vilder Foter*, falsely attributed to him. (At the same time, in Prague, Franz Kafka was fascinated by the Gordin plays he saw performed, absorbing their themes—as well as the extravagant

gestures of the Yiddish performers—into his own work.)

Gordin, the author of over seventy plays, epitomized Yiddish theater during the period of its greatest popularity. A generation of performers made their reputations as actors in parts he wrote for them. Jacob P. Adler, who in 1892 overwhelmed the Lower East Side as the "Jewish King Lear," extolled Gordin as his "messiah"; it was mainly for her interpretation of Gordin heroines that Esther-Rokhl Kaminska became known in Poland as the "Jewish Duse" and, after her legendary Mirele Efros, the "mother of Yiddish theater." Nevertheless, like more than one Yiddish artist, Gordin had to learn the language with which he addressed the Jewish masses.

The son of a wealthy merchant, the playwright was born in the Ukrainian town of Ubigovrod, and was at least as Russian as he was Jewish. He came of age during the period of political agitation that followed Alexander II's emancipation of the serfs in 1866, and, initially active in the Ukrainian independence movement, founded his own Tolstoyan "brotherhood"—a cult that superimposed Jewish and Christian beliefs. This synthesis fell victim to the anti-Jewish violence that followed Alexander's assassination. (Like many Gentile radicals, Gordin blamed Jews for the pogroms, believing anti-Semitism a justified response to Jewish insularity.) For three years, Gordin lived as a farmer but, harvesting no disciples and harassed by the tsarist police, left for America in 1891 with his wife and eight children.

Since Yiddish theater had been banned in Russia, Gordin discovered it in New York. Not surprisingly, he hated what he saw: "Everything," he maintained, "was far from real Jewish life. All was vulgar, immoderate, false, and coarse. I wrote my first play the way a pious man, a scribe, copies out of a Torah scroll." Actually, Gordin worshipped at the temple of European culture—still, he had arrived at a propitious moment. By the century's end, a number of kindred spirits had made their way to the Lower East Side and there formed an intellectual vanguard. Yiddish was not their preferred language, nor *Yidishkayt* their primary concern. However, more pious Jews were less apt to immigrate to America, and, in the absence of traditional authority, these Russified radicals became the ghetto's teachers. Gordin's theater was an extension of the night schools and lectures to which immigrant workers flocked. His "naturalistic" dramas eclipsed the unpretentious, fanciful operettas written by the pioneer Avrom Goldfadn, establishing a new solemn tone for the Yiddish stage—and, hence, for the Yiddish screen.[3]

Gordin brought the world into the Jewish family, and vice versa. *Der Yidisher Kenig Lir* (The Jewish King Lear) and *Mirele Efros*, both filmed in America during the 1930s, were the first plays to explore the gap between traditional parents and modern children that was to preoccupy the later Yiddish stage and even the American-Jewish theater. At his best, Gordin was able to transform his source material into authentic Jewish passion plays, crafting culture myths with the weight and authority of stone tablets. But this heaviness had its price. Although Goldfadn was rediscovered by the Yiddish avant-garde of the 1920s, the Yiddish cinema never quite reestablished contact with its musical roots, even after the development of sound. *Yidl mitn Fidl*, made in Poland in 1936, is a happy exception. In America, particularly, Yiddish filmmakers continued to rework Gordin's now shopworn legacy of star-oriented, domestic melodramas. Siła's recordings of Gordin plays set the