

HARBINGER AND ECHO: THE SOUNDSCAPE OF THE YIDDISH-
AMERICAN FILM MUSICAL

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A Note About Transliteration:

All titles of Yiddish films included in this dissertation are transliterated according to standard YIVO orthography. Any occasional deviation represents either major terms in Jewish life (e.g. Bar Mitzvah, Kol Nidre, *hazzan*) and are transliterated according as Hebrew words, or they are direct quotations. All translations are the author's, unless otherwise noted.

Introduction to *Harbinger and Echo: the Soundscape of the Yiddish-American Film Musical*

The formal academic study of Yiddish cinema is a relatively new field that began less than thirty years ago. Accordingly, the bulk of the scholarship that has emerged around this variously-defined body of work has been largely foundational in nature, attempting to provide a working survey of the ‘genre,’ while also establishing a sort of ‘canon’ of Yiddish film within specific periodisations. Like the relatively young discipline of Film Studies itself, Yiddish Cinema Studies aspires to define its parameters and carve out a respectable ‘niche’ for itself. The following study would not have been possible were it not for pioneering works on Yiddish cinema, such as Eric Goldman’s *Visions, Images, and Dreams: Yiddish Film Past and Present*, first published in 1982; Judith Goldberg’s *Laughter Through Tears: the Yiddish Cinema*, published in 1983; the MoMA’s groundbreaking 1991 series on Yiddish film and J. Hoberman’s masterful accompanying Yiddish film survey, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds*; and the continued preservation efforts of the National Center for Jewish Film (the NCJF), which have all established a formidable foundation upon which contemporary scholarship on Yiddish film has drawn and expanded considerably. Over the course of the past two decades in particular, work on Yiddish cinema has focused on particular directors (e.g. Noah Isenberg’s work on Edgar G. Ulmer); issues of memory and representations in particular films (such as Zehavit Stern’s work on *The Dybbuk*); and nuances of innuendo (e.g. Eve Sicular, Jeffrey Shandler, and Warren Hoffman’s work on the queer subtext of Yiddish cinema). However, one critical area that has not been

considered in any significant depth is the soundscape of this cinematic world, which, in many ways, helps to create the aura that actually defines this world and colours the actions and emotions of its inhabitants.

While previous work has acknowledged in some measure the centrality that music—and in particular, the voice—assumes in Yiddish cinema, thus far, no study of Yiddish film has devoted itself exclusively to the investigation of sound and voice as the primary agents of cultural meaning and value.¹ In particular, the burgeoning form of the musical in the 1930's finds fascinating expression within the Yiddish performing arts world, establishing itself as a primary force in popular Yiddish film. At once a quintessentially 'American' form and also a transitional form (arguably as an outgrowth of the operetta and also the minstrel show form), the Yiddish film musical fused together spectacle and narrative to re-define both popular entertainment and the way immigrant Jewish audiences understood the individual and collective in the face of the cultural conflicts which they faced daily as newcomers to the American melting pot of the early 20th century. The story of the Yiddish-American musical film is ultimately a story of cultural hybridity—on the level of language, genre, nationalism, religion, status, and memory.

Between 1931 and 1941, roughly fifteen Yiddish film musicals were produced.² Since most of these films were produced in America and used American actors and crew members, they offer an invaluable glimpse into the range of the transitioning psyches of

¹ Certain isolated articles have offered important in-roads into this field, for example, Joshua Walden's *Leaving Kazimierz: Comedy and Realism in the Yiddish Film Musical Yidl mitn Fidl* and Ronald Robboy's forthcoming formal analysis of Yiddish film music.

² In this tally, I am counting a short film.

the American Jewish immigrant population and their children.³ This body of work both educated and entertained; it reminded its audience of a geographically distant past while also establishing a distinct, new culture and fund of collective cultural knowledge.

The following study centers on the ‘sonic landscape’ of 1930’s Yiddish musical films by exploring the space between diegetic (sound which appears to emerge from the film’s ‘reality’) and non-diegetic (originating from outside the cinematic ‘reality’) film sound. The project implicitly argues for a ‘third space’ which occurs at the level of performance and reception in the cultivation of what I am terming ‘sonic realism.’ Not quite ‘invisible’ mood music and not quite direct address, the instances of music in these films forge a sense of collective nostalgia that offers the cinema house as the ‘new synagogue’ for American Jewish immigrants of this time—a place of coming together in the comfort of what is culturally familiar with others, who, like themselves, were striving to create a new, hyphenated American-Jewish identity.

Whereas most discussions of realism within contemporary film studies emphasise the visual, my project explores the different layers of memory, sense, and nostalgia embedded within the realm of the sonic, specifically within the form of the film musical. While, on the visual level, Yiddish film mostly aspires to the same kind of continuity editing standardly deployed by Hollywood (wherein cuts between shots suggest the seamless flow of narrative and create ‘invisible’ transitions), the multitude of soundscapes evident in 1930’s Yiddish musical cinema transcends the seemingly ‘continuous’ (i.e. ‘invisible’) sound design by providing stirring reminders of the past, while actively helping shape future identities. These rupturous transitions between the

³ For a discussion of the transitioning roles and representation of American-Jewish immigrants (particularly concerning gender), see Riv-Ellen Prell’s *Fighting to Become American*.

films' 'internal reality' and the 'bridge moment,' where the sound "reaches out," as it were, to the viewers, summon the audience to reflect on their own status and plight while emblematising the cultural experience of the new American Jew. These films are characterized by a dynamic tension between a heavily nostalgified past and a future that is both alluring and, at the same time, intimidating in its otherness. This tension infuses all aspects of these films, but is uniquely dramatised by specific elements of their sonic landscape. Language, dialect, and, most dramatically, music—both vocal and instrumental—play a critical role in creating an almost palpable tug-of-war between past and future which is played out in these films.

Four distinct aspects of Yiddish film musical sound occupy the core of this study:

1) its roots in and relationship with the Yiddish musical theater; 2) the role and performance of the *khazn* in these films (most of which deal either directly or indirectly with this all-important figure); 3) dialogue and dialect: the intriguing interplay between inflection and accent as the protagonists often toggle between Yiddish and English, frequently employing "Yinglishisms" that add a level of "ethnic" humor to the films; and 4) the role of nostalgia in these films' musical interludes. Taken together, these various aspects of American Yiddish film created a sound world that linked the audience back to its ethnic roots in Eastern Europe, while at the same time directing its members on the road toward their new, American-Jewish identity. The following study of this unique sound world will be divided into four chapters, as detailed below:

Chapter One: *Type-casting: the Relationship Between Early 19th Century*

American-Yiddish Theater and Film, surveys the entertainment ecosystem of New York's Lower East Side, exploring the generous overlap between a burgeoning American-

Yiddish theater culture and the emerging Yiddish-American film culture which would come to eclipse it.⁴ From its composers, to its screenwriters, to its actors and its writers, Yiddish musical film borrowed heavily from the personnel and talent of the American-Yiddish stage, offering its viewers a rare glimpse and, more significantly, a sonic archive, of the original American-Yiddish stage. The end of this chapter seeks to revisit notions of *shund* in the American-Yiddish musical films, considering not only their archival value (*viz.* as documents of the sound and style of the Yiddish stage), but their internal elements, which may problematise how we understand *shund*.⁵

Chapter Two: *Between Prayer and Vaudeville: The Khazn On-Screen*, considers the evolving role of the central figure of the *khazn*, both in light of its historical development over time and in terms of its shifting symbolic associations and functions in Jewish public life. Beginning with *The Jazz Singer*, a film that is neither quite a Yiddish film nor a musical, but carries an enduring iconic charge in the imagination of Jewish (and cinematic) “sound,” this chapter sketches out a trajectory of several later Yiddish *khazn* films, which similarly feature “fallen” cantors attempting to strike a balance between the traditional tunes of their fathers and the lure of the music of the New World. Yom Kippur, the Jewish holiday of atonement which features the greatest cantorial solos of the liturgical calendar, is central to several of these films, with the traditionally haunting melodies of this solemn day adding heavily laden layers of piety and penitence

⁴ I refer here specifically to the *American* Yiddish theater culture (popularly attributed to a young Boris Thomashefsky’s vision of Yiddish theater production in the US) and not to earlier developments in the Yiddish theater overseas, which were extensive and offer a very different feel and tone.

⁵ The notion of “low-brow” is itself a decidedly non-Jewish concept. The beauty and complexity of such films and the music they feature stems from the hybridity of forms they include. Everything from the sacred to the secular (such as prayer in synagogue scenes followed by folk singing in a local tavern), the pure to the profane, is captured on the same reel. It is especially interesting to note, however, that the films which speak most directly to the fears of encroaching assimilation through music, such as *Der vilner shtot khazn* (1940) and *Der yidisher nign* (1940), always refer to classical (secular) music as lofty and beautiful

to the already somber themes. This chapter argues for an intermediate layer of sonic experience, especially in the synagogue scenes where frame composition and lack of subtitling of the Hebrew (and Aramaic, in the case of the Kaddish) prayers draws the viewers in and re-creates the cinema theater as the new synagogue. This chapter also considers the celebrity culture that grew up around popular cantors who, with their increasing “star power,” drew large and adoring crowds to cantorial concerts of traditional music in radically new, milieus outside of the synagogues.

Chapter Three: *Dialect, Dialogue, and the Rise of Yinglish*, considers the defining role of voice as expressed through the shifting manners and patterns of American-Jewish speech. Language, as performed in these films, serves not only to demarcate the limits of perceived and recognised “inside” and “outside” groups, but the nuances of dialect and tone also help code individual characters along the spectrum of Yiddish stock characters and their expanding repertoire of American-Jewish counterparts. This chapter also considers the theatrically-stylised particularity of dialogue in these musical films as an additional layer of sonic meaning and dramatic punctuation.

Chapter Four: *Screen Memories: Nostalgic Projections and Embodiments*, situates the music of the American-Yiddish musical film within different modes of nostalgic remembrance and symbolic enactment. From songs of the *shtetl*, to melodies of parental loyalty, to lullabies of an imagined bygone era, and *niggunim* of another world, each ‘nostalgic’ enactment through music repositions both its performer and audience, reminding them of what is no longer and what, indeed, may never have been. This chapter considers the means through which these moments of conscious and

subconscious nostalgia reflect as much as project imagined past identities and values through music.

Every word in the term “American Yiddish musical film” carries multiple meanings, valences, variations, and connotations. In some cases, my classifications may even fall into rather nebulous territory: What exactly constitutes an *American* film?⁶ What does it mean for a film to be a specifically *Yiddish* film? How is the ‘musical’ form being defined in this case? While the answers to these questions may seem obvious, the complexity of defining these films is considerable and will become obvious throughout this study.

Not all of the 15 musicals I include in this study are necessarily purely “American.” For example, some—such as Joseph Green’s *Yidl mitn fidl* (1937)—were produced jointly as a U.S. and Polish release; and others—such as Henoeh Kon’s *Der freylekhe kavstonim* (1937), Green’s *Der purimshpiler* (1937), Joseph Green and Konrad Tom’s *Mamele* (1938)—were thoroughly Polish productions, featuring an almost exclusively Polish cast and crew. I have included such films in this study either because they feature major American-Jewish performers, such as Molly Picon, Miriam Kressyn, Hy Jacobson, Ruth Turkow, Leon Liebgold, Max Bozyk, or because they were produced and/or directed by notable American-Jewish figures, such as Joseph Green.⁷ These “borderline” American productions shot in Poland were important to American audiences as a nostalgic reminder of their Eastern European roots and also offer an invaluable

⁶ Such questions anticipate the rapid growth of transnational cinema in later decades.

⁷ Green elected to shoot these films in Poland to cut production costs, it is commonly argued. All of these films were distributed to American audiences as well.

glimpse into a culture (or at least a cinematic imagination of a culture) at the end of its “golden era” and on the brink of extinction.

The question of what defines “Yiddish” cinema is one that concerns earlier silent film more than it does sound films. As a pre-sound medium, silent cinema is purely visual in communicating its narrative⁸ and contains no spoken language. At the outset of his study on Yiddish cinema, Eric Goldman attempts to resolve this issue neatly by offering several criteria that identify a pre-sound film as a *Yiddish* film. Central among these criteria are the intended audience’s spoken language as well as the film’s strengthening and perpetuation of Jewish identity. While these criteria function as practical parameters, they overlook some performative and formal elements—such as a distinct brand of ironic coding, characteristic comedic modalities, and salient situational motifs—which also distinguish Yiddish cinema. Such a study is beyond the scope of the present project, but the examination of the musical as refracted through the lens of Yiddish cinema begins to point to certain performative trends which also mark a film as specifically “Yiddish.” On a more pedestrian level, the Yiddish language is spoken in each of the films herein discussed. Chapter Three demonstrates the extent to which such a “language” label (which portrays the “Yiddish” in “Yiddish film” as a monolithic entity) fails to capture the variation, nuance, and vibrant linguistic friction within this seemingly “pure” world. Yiddish in this study is understood as a site of ultimate difference and cultural transition. While not all Yiddish films produced between 1931 and 1941 were technically “musicals,” nearly all featured music in an important way. For example, music is a frequent and central presence in such films as George Roland’s

⁸ While there was sometimes live musical accompaniment and/or later-added musical sound-tracks, the only instance of heard dialogue are in Soviet *kino-deklamatsye* silent films in which live actors would speak from behind the screen (see Hoberman 3).

Avrum Ovenu (1933), *Libe un laydnshaft* (1936), and *Ikh vil zayn a border* (1937)⁹; music also figures prominently in Joseph Green's *A brivele der mamen* (1938) and Henry Lynn's *Hayntige mames* (1939). Other Yiddish films, such as Michal Waszynski's iconic *Der dibuk* and Edgar G. Ulmer's *Di klyatshe* (otherwise known as *Fishke der krummer*) (1939), feature traditional music diegetically in their respective all-important wedding scenes. For the purposes of this study, however, I am limiting my focus to films which adhere specifically to the traditional 'musical' format that includes sudden ruptures in the dramatic non-musical narrative with musical asides and sometimes choreographed numbers.

The musicals in this study embody an intriguing counterpoint to their Depression-era Hollywood counterparts, offering an alternative narrative to the "American dream" in some instances, while, in others, pushing the boundaries of the genre altogether. While the production budgets of American Yiddish musical cinema were substantially lower than Hollywood film musicals of the time, this body of work presented a remarkable range of talent, style, and tone. The music itself gestures to this range, covering a sometimes surprisingly wide swath of different musical and cultural influences and forms (see Appendix One for categorised complete, annotated list of songs for each Yiddish musical film discussed). The sub-genre of Yiddish-language musical film stands as a fundamentally transitional popular dramatic expression, acting as both an echo of a not-so-distant past and as a harbinger of a remarkable cultural journey that had just begun.

⁹ Which, one could reasonably argue, is, technically, a musical.

Chapter 1

Type-casting: the Relationship Between Early 19th Century American-Yiddish Theater and Film

Yiddish-American film is but one of many smaller niche cinemas within the larger purview of the history of world cinemas. However, the unique aspects of Yiddish-American film can be best understood in the context of general 20th century American movie-going, the life experience of new immigrants to the U.S, and the world of the Yiddish theater. This chapter will focus on the intersections between the Yiddish theater and the Yiddish musical cinema, which shared not only same audience, but often featured the same actors and composers, and whose dramatic content spoke to the common concerns and interests of their immigrant spectators. With its ample, often comical, moments of self-referentiality, Yiddish musical film abounds with such subtle nods to the Yiddish theater, whose legacy and aesthetic it preserved well beyond its golden years. Considering the extent to which h the Yiddish film musicals borrowed from the music and personnel of the Yiddish stage and its attendant culture, it is perhaps unsurprising that some of the most iconic moments within this film subgenre happen “on-stage” within the film. Indeed, many of the Yiddish film musicals absorb both the surrounding Yiddish theater culture and Hollywood musical format into formal properties with the film. Special notice will be paid to the ways in which music undergirds and enforces these connections on a symbolic and stylistic level.

When film exhibition began in the U.S., most films were projected in venues reserved for “lower class entertainment.” Vaudeville houses, amusement parks, and storefront theaters provided space for the novel medium. Screenings would often be

combined with “extra-filmic” elements such as live musical accompaniment and pre-show vaudeville acts.¹⁰ The audiences that attended such attractions throughout the silent era and the beginning of the sound era were, by-and-large, poor, working-class immigrants. Especially in New York, cinema flourished among immigrant populations, many of whom had their own local theater specifically dedicated to screening films of their original nationalities and ethnicities.¹¹ Among these poor, immigrant audiences were the masses of Eastern-European Jews, who had landed on the shores of New York, having emigrated to the U.S. to escape poverty, pogroms, and other social injustices on the other side of the Atlantic.

By 1908, almost one-fourth of the 123 movie theaters in Manhattan were located on the Lower East Side, where most of New York’s immigrant communities dwelled. At a nickel per show, moviegoers could escape the confines of a harsh reality and, through the magic of film, traverse great distances, interact emotionally with different people, and, in general, open windows into a world set apart from their crowded and poverty-stricken tenement life. Cinema also provided a common language—whose diction and syntax consisted of both image and sound—for immigrants from different nations and backgrounds. In this way, cinema broke down communication barriers and allowed for an added sense of community for a population faced daily with the challenges of adjusting to a new homeland. Thus, for the acclimating Jewish immigrant population,

¹⁰ Sometimes these screenings would precede their live-action theatrical counterparts. (Levin 2).

¹¹ For more on this topic, see Patrick Mullins’ “Mullins, Patrick. “Ethnic Cinema in the Nickelodeon Era in New York City: Commerce, Assimilation and Cultural Identity.” *Film History* (2000): 115-124. Likewise, there existed in New York a good number of so-called ethnic theaters (Chinese, French, German, Italian, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, etc), but as Yiddish theater mega-star Molly Picon observes in her autobiography, *Molly! An Autobiography*, the Yiddish theater survived well beyond these other groups’ theaters (47).

Yiddish cinema (reaching its zenith in the late 1930's) not only provided an accessible and popular form of entertainment, but also served to fill a distinct psychological need for recreation and cultural solidification that provided a reassuring link to the world that they had left behind.

While Yiddish film clearly became a very popular medium of entertainment as a kind of nostalgic cinematic record of the parent culture, it was not created *ex nihilo*. The roots of the Yiddish cinema were firmly planted in the world of the Yiddish theater, especially the Lower East Side Yiddish theater, which had arisen in the 1880's in response to similar psychological and cultural needs of a previous wave of Jewish immigrants.¹² Many of the same composers who wrote the scores for the Yiddish stage also created the music that animated the Yiddish screen with song and melody; the works of many of the Yiddish writers that had been adapted for the stage was later also adapted for the screen; and the finest of the stars of Second Avenue became the marquee attractions for the broader audiences of Yiddish-American film. Yiddish film sprang from the soil of the Yiddish theater and echoed its themes, its plots, and even its various styles.

The heyday of live Yiddish theater was reaching its peak as Yiddish cinema was emerging. With the increasing Americanisation of the immigrant community and their subsequent migration out of New York City, support for Yiddish theater in New York City began gradually to wane, as its target audiences no longer lived in easy proximity to the theaters and thus were less inclined to attend performances. Eventually, Yiddish film, which had, in many ways, developed as an outgrowth of live Yiddish theater,

¹² According to composer Joseph Rumshinsky's memoirs, the entirety of Yiddish theater in American began with a young, naïve Boris Thomashefsky sending overseas for two penniless Yiddish actors, whom he had heard were "legends" and setting up a makeshift company in NY.

became its replacement. Thus, in addition to preserving a sort of "filmed scrapbook" of the Eastern European Yiddish society, Yiddish film also came to serve as a kind of "sonic archive" of the rapidly fading Yiddish Theater. As such, the connections between Yiddish screen and the Yiddish stage are both extensive and complex.

I. Composers

On the level of personnel, the connections between the Yiddish theater and the Yiddish film industry were quite apparent. The music which animated both the Yiddish stage and screen was composed by the very same circle of celebrated Yiddish music composers. Because of the comparatively smaller output of Yiddish film productions of this period, there were only a handful of Yiddish theater composers who worked in film as well, but nearly all of the composers of scores for Yiddish film were associated with the Yiddish theater. Many of these composers had been originally trained in traditional sacred Jewish music as choir boys when they were youngsters and then later were exposed to American popular music, resulting in their creating a soundscape for the Yiddish stage and screen that resonated with the influences of both these musical worlds. Several of the most prominent of these composers eventually transcended the Yiddish media and enjoyed impressive careers in classical music and opera as well. The following section concentrates on the musical work of four of the most famous and prolific Yiddish theater composers, Joseph Rumshinsky (1881-1956), Alexander Olshanetsky (1892–1946), Sholom Secunda (1894-1974) and Abraham Ellstein (1907-1963), which has been immortalised on celluloid in films in which the music constitutes a

critical feature of the film's artistic impact.¹³ As architects of the "sound" of the American-Yiddish experience for both the Yiddish stage and the silver screen, these composers not only helped define a cultural era, but created a distinct musical sensibility.

Joseph Rumshinsky is often categorised as one of the major trailblazers of Yiddish-American music (Slobin 32).¹⁴ His influence in the Yiddish Theater was enormous, as he worked with Boris Thomashefsky and later at the Kessler Second Avenue Theater.¹⁵ Born in the politically tumultuous year of 1881 just outside of Vilna, Joseph Rumshinsky was exposed early on to a formidable range of musical influences and styles. In his memoirs, Rumshinsky reminisces about his father's various uses of song in his daily life and how his mother was a music teacher of sorts before she married his father, teaching local girls *badkhn* songs (frivolous 'jester'-type songs performed at celebrations, such as weddings) (Grillo 37-8). Intrigued by music at an early age, Rumshinsky was trained in liturgical music, but soon his musical repertoire expanded considerably beyond the synagogue walls.

In his teen years, Rumshinsky was hired as conductor for a touring German circus troupe (11; 42). He was originally supposed to travel to Odessa to serve as a *meshorer* (cantorial apprentice) to the esteemed cantor, Razumny of Odessa, but circumstance prevented him from ever arriving there. Rumshinsky worked for a number of regional theater companies, expanding the range of his musical background. The cantorial prodigy did, however, work with multiple cantors throughout his robust career, including

¹³ For example, Neil Levin describes these composers as "the big four."

¹⁴ Marc Slobin goes as far as to hail Rumshinsky as among the "pioneers" of the Yiddish Theater, whereas he refers to Secunda, Olshanetsky, and Ellstein, all working throughout the 1920's and 1950's as the "inheritors," who were more Broadway-oriented.

¹⁵ Molly Picon, his Second Avenue Theater colleague, even touted him as "the top Yiddish theater composer" (Grillo 43)

the Grodno cantor (who, despite his pious position, fully accepted Rumshinsky's involvement with the Russian theater) (40). In the city of Łódź, Rumshinsky founded what is believed to be the first well-established Jewish chorus, *Hazomir*, whose repertoire included both Hebrew nationalistic songs and Rumshinsky's Yiddish theater material (25; 42).

Rumshinsky's involvement in European Yiddish theater expanded as he worked with the legendary Esther-Rokhl Kaminska theater troupe of Poland. Once Rumshinsky moved to New York, his musical palette became even richer, with the sounds of the burgeoning American musical tradition seeping into his work. American composer Jack Gottlieb later described Rumshinsky's attempts to incorporate "Americanisms" into his Yiddish music as "paste-ons" (Gottlieb 33).

As he achieved recognition in America, Rumshinsky remained loyal to his roots in Jewish religious music, composing a number of landmark liturgical arrangements and operettas, such as the cantata *Oz yoshir* (the Biblical song of the parting of the Red Sea), his later Biblical Hebrew-language opera *Ruth*, and his still-famous cantorial-choral masterpiece, *Shma koleynu*. One of his boldest works, the operetta *Shir Hashirim*,¹⁶ Rumshinsky touted as "the first romantic Yiddish opera." Rumshinsky's entrée into film came in 1935, when *Shir hashirim* was adapted into a film by Henry Lynn, director of the 1935 film, *Bar Mitsve*. The film version of *Shir hashirim*, which is now lost, ran only for a week and was a colossal failure, and widely derided by critics (Hoberman 208). Three years later, director Ben Blake engaged Rumshinsky to score his film *shund* melodrama

¹⁶ Despite the title, the narrative is not strictly derivative of this Biblical *Song of Songs*, but deals with the theme of seduction. Song of Songs played at the ACME the week of Oct. 17, 1935 ("The Screen Calendar," *The New York Times*, Oct 13, 1935., X5)

Tsvey shvester, starring Yiddish theater sensation Jennie Goldstein.¹⁷ This iconic *shund* film fared much better than *Shir hashirim* had and served to reinforce Rumshinsky's stellar reputation—now in cinema as well as on stage and in the musical theater.

Alexander Olshanetsky, who, although ten years his junior, was commonly regarded as Rumshinsky's rival during his later time in New York and was much more extensively involved in cinema than was his older peer. Olshanetsky, like Rumshinsky was born in Europe and had extensive musical experience there before moving to the United States. He was born in Odessa, where he played violin in the Odessa Opera and Ballet Theater. He toured extensively as the choir-master of a Russian operetta troupe and also served as bandmaster during his time in the Russian army. Immigrating to New York in 1922, Olshanetsky became one of the most acclaimed Yiddish theater composers, working at the Second Avenue Theater with the likes of Moishe Oysher.

In Olshanetsky's film work as well, he worked with Oysher twice, beginning with Oysher's film debut (and director Sidney Goldin's final film)¹⁸ *Dem khazns zundl* (1937), which includes his 1932 hit, *Mayn shtetele belz*, a song of nostalgic longing that remains an enduring classic in the Yiddish-speaking world. This tune, written originally for the 1932 play *The Song of the Ghetto* and made famous by Isa Kremer, is an outstanding example of the combination of traditional Jewish modalities with elements from the ambient soundscape of popular American music which was characteristic of the musical scores of Yiddish-American film. According to American composer Jack Gottlieb, the bridge section of Olshanetsky's hit song closely resembles a section of the 1929 Harburg and Gorney torch-song "What Wouldn't I Do for that Man?" sung by Helen Morgan in

¹⁷ While the score music plays a pivotal role in amplifying the emotion of this film, it is not a musical, and thus I am not discussing it in depth here.

¹⁸ Mid-way through the filming, Goldin died. The film is co-directed by Ilya Motyleff.

two films, *Applause* and *Glorifying the American Girl* (Gottlieb

69):

Ex. 3-24b: Verse "What Wouldn't I Do for That Man?"
E. Y. Harburg (W) & Jay Gorney (M)

Life was blind to me, Now it's kind to me, Love has o - pened my eyes.
Since it came to me, Life's a game to me with the sweet - est sur - prise.

Figure 1

Ex. 3-24a: Bridge "Belz"
Jacob Jacobs (W) & Alexander Olshanetsky (M)

Ye - dn sha - bes fleg ikh loy - fn dort mit der t'khi - ne glaykh. Tsu
zi - tsn un - ter dem gri - nem bey - me - le ley' - nen bay - dem taykh.

Figure 2

Such intersections between the music of Yiddish theater and film and that of the surrounding popular culture are yet another reflection of the transitioning psyches of the American Jewish immigrant population acculturating to America.

But the musical cross-pollination was not mono-directional: Olshanetsky's *Mayn shtetele belz* was, in turn, so broadly popular that several American pop songs were modeled on it. Likewise, his famous 1934 joint effort with Yiddish singer Chaim Tauber, the Yiddish tango (also featured in *The Cantor's Son*) *Ikh hob dikh tsufil lib*¹⁹ was adapted by Don Raye as "I Love you Much too Much," listing the composer as "Alex Olshey" (70). Interestingly, Cole Porter appears to have borrowed from Olshanetsky as well in his song of the same year, *Why Should I Care?* in which three consecutive

¹⁹ Olshanetsky wrote other "Yiddish tango" material for the stage, including his 1943 "Azoy vi du bist"

measures mirror a passage from Olshanetsky's *Ikh hob dikh tsufil lib* note-for-note (187):

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is for Cole Porter's "Why Should I Care?" (1937) in G major, 4/4 time. The lyrics are: "So Why Should I Care when my sweet-heart is there? Why should I cry if the tax-es go sky high?". The bottom staff is for Alexander Olshanetsky's "Ikh hob dikh lib" in G major, 4/4 time. A dashed line connects the two staves, indicating a note-for-note comparison between the two pieces.

Figure 3

Olshanetsky also composed original music for Max Nosseck's *Der vilner shtot khazn* (1940), which, in ways which will be explored in Chapter Two, which concerns the representation of the *hazzan* in these films, musically navigates the waters between secular and sacred music. Music in this film is a central element in the *mise-en-scène*, providing an element of both emotional realism and character identity. Clearly, with his background in opera, as well as liturgical music, Olshanetsky was well-equipped to write the score for this film which was set in the world of European opera.

As the composer of the score for the film *East Side Sadie* (1929), which was the very first "Yiddish talkie," Sholom Secunda remains an easily recognizable name in Jewish music circles even to this day (Hoberman 152).²⁰ Identified as a cantorial prodigy early on in his native Oleksandriia, Secunda was among the young choral singers whom Abraham Goldfadn, widely considered the father of the modern Yiddish theater, recruited for his new operetta company (Heskes 62). Like Rumishinsky and Olshanetsky, Secunda worked in theater music, liturgical music, and also film.

Upon immigrating to the U.S. with his parents in 1908, the young Secunda sang as a chorister at a Lower East Side synagogue and studied music at Julliard, later studying

²⁰ Among his most famous pieces are *Dona Dona*, *Eli, Eli*, and *Bay mir bis du sheyn*

classical music with the great composer Ernst Bloch (202). During his military service in WWI, he arranged music for the US Navy Band. After his discharge from the military, Secunda embarked upon a prolific career composing for the Yiddish theater.

With his prestigious Julliard training, Secunda considered himself a cut above the more popular composers of the Yiddish theater. A tale that has become legend in the annals of Yiddish stage relates an incident that occurred after fellow composer Rumshinsky left his post as musical conductor at the famed National Theater of Boris Thomashefsky. At that time, Thomashefsky, wanting to experiment with the idea of having two musical directors, offered this shared position to Secunda alongside the young George Gershwin. Secunda contemptuously rejected this offer, sneering that Gershwin was musically ignorant. Secunda chose instead to associate with more “highbrow” institutions, working with such theaters as Maurice Schwartz’s esteemed Yiddish Art Theater and penning ambitious operas such as his acclaimed adaptation of Avrom Goldfadn’s operetta *Shulamis* in 1922.

Considering Secunda’s impressive musical pedigree and high self-regard, it is interesting that he amassed no fewer than a dozen composer credits for film, a quintessentially “low brow” form of popular entertainment.²¹ Even more surprising is that more than half of these titles were films produced by Joseph Seiden, who was notorious for churning out high-sentiment, low-brow *shund* classics. Despite the incongruity of someone so proud of his classical musicianship composing for such a common entertainment medium, Secunda’s extensive background in liturgical and popular Jewish music, in addition to his classical training, made him an ideal candidate to

²¹ Ironically, it was his popular work which earned Secunda his formidable, enduring fame in Jewish music circles. Simpler pieces by Secunda, such as *Bay mir bis du sheyn* and *Dona Dona*, remain popular today.

interpret the sound of his generation through film and left a lasting legacy of sound for the masses to enjoy.

Secunda's film work spanned a wide range of productions, ranging from adaptations of Sholom Aleichem novels (the Soviet-Yiddish film, *Skvoz slyozy*, 1933 and Maurice Schwartz's famous *Tevya*²² 1939), to heavily sentimental *shund* (*Motl the Operator*, 1940), to the final major Yiddish film of his era (*God, Man, and the Devil*, 1950). Secunda's work in the Yiddish musical films that he scored often reflected his cantorial background. The Yiddish musical films for which he composed music are *A Cantor on Trial* (1931), *Kol nidre* (1939), and *The Jewish Melody* (1940), each of which point to the range of musical traditions in their original audience's soundscape, which included liturgical music, Yiddish popular music, and even (in the case of *The Jewish Melody* in which the characters dabble in Italian opera music) secular classical music.

Secunda's first film musical project, the short *A Cantor on Trial*, inspired a later live-action theater version.²³ Included in the production *We Live and Laugh*, a 1936 10-scene Yiddish vaudeville revue assembled by the Federal Theatre Project, was a comical sketch entitled "Cantor's Audition," which clearly derived from *A Cantor on Trial*. In the film version, three different types of cantors audition for a High Holiday post before a synagogue committee. Each of the auditioning cantors represents a stereotypical Jewish character-type: a *galitsianer*,²⁴ a *litvak*,²⁵ and a modern, "Americanised" Jazz-singer.

Each of the prospective cantors sings a musically caricaturised version of the tradition he

²² Which, unlike the later Broadway adaptation, is actually not a musical and is considerably heavier in tone.

²³ Likewise, *Tevya* (dir. Maurice Schwartz), another film Secunda scored, later became a musical theater piece.

²⁴ a term used to designate Jews originating from the Galicia region, spanning western Ukraine to south-eastern Poland.

²⁵ A term designating a Jew originating from a region spanning North-Eastern Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus.

represents, until the search committee finally rise up out of their chairs and join the third, “modern” cantor in a rollicking jazz dance number, cavorting comically around the room. Secunda wrote the music for both the film and the play (Schechter 87). In both the film and the National Archive records of the play, both the music and the jumbled English-Yiddish dialogue not only create a humorous scene, but, on a more serious level, point to the fundamentally transitional nature of the soundscape these immigrants inhabited.

Of Secunda’s final two film projects, one is set in the world of the synagogue, while the other is set in the world of the opera, thus spanning his liturgical and classical musical interests within the milieu of popular Yiddish entertainment. The film *Kol nidre*, (which feels like a morality play, pitting the evils of assimilation against the virtues of traditionalism) features both cantorial music (with interior synagogue scenes during the holiday of Yom Kippur) and popular Yiddish folk ballads (performed by famous singers Leibele Waldman and Chaim Tauber at the local synagogue during an event organised by the Committee for German Refugees). *The Jewish Melody*, Secunda’s last Yiddish musical film composition credit, ventures into another sphere familiar to Secunda—that of the opera world, in which the Yiddish-speaking characters also perform Italian opera. In each of these films, Secunda’s music provides memorable musical interludes which also cement the cultural credibility and forge a certain emotional realism for its Jewish immigrant film audience, for whom each of these sound traditions resonated deeply. Abraham Ellstein, who was the only one of the four composers born in the United States, was, like Secunda, classically trained at Julliard. Growing up in New York, Ellstein sang in local synagogue choirs, thus acquiring liturgical background like his European born Jewish musical composer contemporaries, and he also

was a member of the Metropolitan Opera Children's Choir. As an adult, Ellstein became a formidable force on the Yiddish music scene, with his music playing on the radio, in the theater, in the synagogue, in the concert hall, and in the film theater.

Ellstein came of age in the early 1930's at a time of financial crisis. The Yiddish stage was particularly hard hit by this financial crisis, although the film industry was also eventually affected (Hoberman 158-9).²⁶ The years 1931-32 saw many of the most famous Yiddish stage actors, desperate for work, turning to other venues such as Yiddish radio, Yiddish vaudeville and even the (non-Yiddish) American musical stage to find employment. At this time, some stage productions were adapted to film, which still enjoyed some financial viability. One of these theater-to-film adaptations was *Zayn vayb's lubovnik*, starring noted Yiddish theater actor Ludwig Satz. Ellstein's first job in film was to compose the musical score for this film, which in the words of Hoberman, "never transcends its stage origins, but as tough and racy as it often is, the film compares well to the theatrical adaptations that dominated the major studios' 1930-1931 output and, like many of them...is basically a showcase for inspired clowning" (158-9).

Many of Ellstein's most popular and best-remembered musical hits were from his extensive work with the impish icon of the Yiddish stage and screen, Molly Picon. Ellstein was a frequent guest on Molly Picon's radio show on WEVD, further expanding the range of his popular presence and "audibility." Ellstein was also Picon's accompanist, touring with her throughout Europe and collaborating with her on two Yiddish musical films, *Yidl mitn fidl* (1936) and *Mamele* (1938). Arguably more than any other Yiddish film musical composer, Ellstein's musical film hits have enjoyed an

²⁶ Even the film industry began to feel impact of the nation-wide crisis (except for MGM, all the major studios lost money in 1932).

extended afterlife in countless recordings and live performances, perhaps because of their contagiously upbeat and memorable lyrics. Songs such as *Yidl mitn fidl*, *Oy mame bin ikh farlibt*, *Abi gezunt*, the *Mazl Waltz* have become classics of the standard Yiddish repertoire.

Since many of the most important Yiddish films are adaptations of Yiddish theatrical performances, their importance as a “sonic archive” of the world of Yiddish theater cannot be overstated. While the scripts of many of these Yiddish theatrical pieces survive, their fully orchestrated musical scores, remarkably, were neither recorded nor preserved (Levin 8). One can only presume that this music, which so definitively shaped the Yiddish theater-going experience and lingered in the audience’s heads well past the closing curtain, was so central that its presence and survival were simply assumed.

II. Screenwriters

While composers such as Secunda, Ellstein, Olshanetsky, and Rushimsky composed for both the Yiddish stage and Yiddish films musicals, Yiddish screenwriters were not typically Yiddish playwrights, though the Yiddish screenwriters were often figures who were somehow creatively involved in the Yiddish popular entertainment world. Material from famous Yiddish plays, written by such figures as Sheyne Rokhl Semkoff, Boris Thomashefsky, Louis Freiman, Meyer Schwartz, Dovid Pinski, Yankev Glatshayn, and Ossip Dymow, was often *adapted* into film by screenwriters who served as intermediaries between the original scenarios and their filmic interpretations. In certain cases, it was the directors themselves who adapted the material (e.g., Henry Lynn, Joseph Green, and Joseph Seiden)²⁷; in other cases, icons of the Yiddish music world were involved in the screenwriting process (e.g. as Isidor Lillian, Sholom Secunda, and Chaim Tauber).²⁸ The Yiddish theater and its rich repertoire of Yiddish literary and dramatic work established a foundation upon which these pieces could be re-fashioned into a film version, but sometimes the stories were the screenwriters' original scenarios, and it was only the style, tone, content—and of course, the music—which mirrored that of the Yiddish theater. The involvement of Yiddish theater composers and song-writers (such as Secunda and Tauber) in the screenwriting process is quite remarkable, especially when compared to their Hollywood counterparts, whose roles were confined exclusively to the musical aspects of the film. In Yiddish theater and film (including Yiddish films

²⁷ The range of screenwriters for the 1930's Yiddish film musicals was a bit more eclectic and reflected the degree to which these films' cast and crews had to be resourceful in maximizing its available talent with considerably low production costs.

²⁸ As mentioned earlier, a number of the Yiddish musical films' scenarios were derivative of earlier Yiddish plays and/or literary sources. Additionally, the help of several acclaimed Yiddish writers, such as Itzik Manger, Chaver Paver, and journalist Mendel Osherovits, was occasionally enlisted in creating a screenplay for these films.

which are *not* musicals), music was so central, both in creating dramatic tension and culturally connecting with its audience, that such an intersection of crew departments is not to be unexpected. Consequently, especially in the decades just before the dawn of the Yiddish cinema, composers and musical figures in the Yiddish theater scene enjoyed an exalted status and were accorded a great deal of respect and popular admiration, rivaling that of the performers. However, as ethnomusicologist Marc Slobin astutely notes, this “star” status of the composers was short-lived; a survey of Yiddish theater’s promotional material between the turn of the 20th century and barely two decades later reveals that the “star culture” surrounding Yiddish theater composers was ultimately eclipsed by the soaring popularity and ecstatic fandom of Yiddish actors (Slobin 174).²⁹

III. The Yiddish “Star System”

The near-idolisation of these Yiddish actors approximated the more mainstream fervor for Hollywood actors who comprised what is known as the “star system” of that era. The kernels of the star system emerged with the beginning of popular film projection. Then, as film casts began being formally credited by name, audience interest in the individual ‘stars’ swelled, but the cult of actor worship assumed full force beginning in the 1920’s and especially into the 1930’s, at the zenith of classical Hollywood. In the “star system,” a “star” actor essentially becomes the commodity of his studio, which owns the performer’s “brand” and uses it to enhance the popularity—and the resulting

²⁹ (As a means of gauging the relative “importance” and “star power” of individual artists in a production, Slobin points out whose names are more prominently featured in these materials.)

box-office profits—of its films. Because the Yiddish cinema was not exactly operating under the studio system, but rather was composed of usually short-lived fledgling production companies, the “stars” did not necessarily become the ‘trademark’ of their companies as they did in the Hollywood musical film world. However, avid “fans” existed in force in the Yiddish world as well. Even before the rise of the Yiddish film musical, the Yiddish theater world had developed its own form of celebrity worship. In Yiddish theater circles, *patriot* referred to the fans of a particular theater who would remain completely loyal to that particular company; with rivalry between fan bases occasionally becoming quite fierce (101-102). With a burgeoning “star system” culture already underway in Hollywood, the transition of movie star fandom to the Yiddish musical film audience, who were already well acclimated to the star culture of the Yiddish stage, was quite a natural one.

On film, of course, the star could be “mass-produced” and projected at any number of times and locations. Richard DeCordova argues that the star system in the film industry, in general, helped create the illusion of presence and may even represent the popular response to replacing the aura of the real object irrevocably surrendered by mechanical reproduction (as per Walter Benjamin) (DeCordova 146). In Yiddish cinema, there was the added dimension of hyper-familiarity: not only were the figures on-screen “stars” to their audience, they were usually also neighbours, and certainly familiar figures of the live Yiddish stage. There was a certain reifying mystique to seeing these iconic entertainers projected to be “larger than life.” Furthermore, the much admired actors in these films connected in a very real way to their audiences, projecting the common concerns and issues of the immigrant psyche as they addressed and dramatically engaged

with such topics as the tensions between traditionalism and modernity, between Old World and New, and economic hardship, thus legitimising deeply personal matters in a collective, cathartic setting. On the level of music and sound, there was something utterly captivating—and also symbolically charged—about the mere act of listening to these familiar voices giving life to these familiar sounds of both their present life and their imagined past. In the words of Ari Kelman, “listening is a cultural practice of affinity” (Kelman 132).

Not all the stars of Yiddish theater made the transition to Yiddish film. However, many of the greatest and most musically-talented stars of the Yiddish stage did grace the screen in the Yiddish film musicals. In some cases, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, renowned cantors would be featured in these films, often with the knowledge on the part of the producers that these men had an already established base of ardent followers. Perhaps *the* outstanding example of such a hybrid actor-cantor was Moishe Oysher, the renowned cantor and stage performer who became an illustrious star of the Yiddish screen. The fact that Oysher’s film-acting skills were not particularly strong just serves to illustrate the importance of his celebrity power and the widespread acclaim of his vocal prowess, which drew large audiences to his films despite his less-than-stellar acting ability. Indeed, each of the three Yiddish film musicals in which he starred (*The Cantor’s Son*, *The Singing Blacksmith*, and *Overture to Glory*) prominently featured Oysher’s dulcet tenor tones.³⁰

In some ways mirroring the figures he played in his first and last Yiddish film musical, Oysher came from a long line of cantors. Born in Bessarabia, upon moving to the US, he joined a troupe of itinerant actors, but shortly returned to the cantorate in

³⁰ Oysher could—and often did—also sing in his baritone range in these films.

addition to his parallel careers on the Yiddish stage, to a lesser extent, and on the radio and in the recording industry. Although Oysher achieved great stardom in the realm of Yiddish musical performance both in recordings and in live performances, he, nevertheless maintained his ties to the world of sacred Jewish music, continuing to perform as a cantor as well. Later in his career, Oysher colourfully described his intense range and schedule of professional activity to the *New Yorker* in the following manner, “I keep so busy from Friday to Sunday, by Monday, look! I’m on a stretcher. I sing in the synagogue, I sing at weddings, I sing at funerals, I sing at club dinners, I sing at benefits. For the High Holidays alone, I earn a figure in the five figures.”³¹

Another iconic figure of the Yiddish theater was the inimitable Molly Picon, (1898-1992) who, like Moishe Oysher, enjoyed stardom both on stage and screen. Picon, who was the child of Polish Jewish immigrants to the United States, started her acting career as a young child, performing in vaudeville and between reels at nickelodeons, acting in local Yiddish theater, and eventually becoming one of the Yiddish theater’s most recognisable and beloved names (Kanter 171). Whether on stage or on screen, Picon appeared specifically in musicals and was famous for her Chaplin-esque comedic performance. Together with her husband/manager, actor and writer Jacob Kalich, Picon toured the world, enthraling audiences in sometimes unlikely places, but spent the bulk of her very active career in New York City. With an already long list of Yiddish musical theater credits to her name in shows not only in the U.S., but also in Europe, South America, Asia (Picon performed in Israel) and Africa, Picon’s iconic status on the Yiddish stage also made her a box-office draw in film, where she likewise sang with gusto and acted out her famous shenanigans on the silver screen. In film, just as she had

³¹ “Free Lance” in “The Talk of the Town” *New Yorker*, January 14, 1956, 18.

on stage, Picon often played tomboy-like characters, even cross-dressing in the film version of *Yidl mitn fidl*, as she had so famously done on stage in one of her most iconic roles. Picon's spirited musical performances in film drew heavily from the Yiddish stage, using bold, gesture-intensive, physical comedy to the delight of her adoring audiences.

Picon had performed in several short films in the 1920's, but Joseph Green's *Yidl mitn fidl* (1936) was her first starring role in a Yiddish talkie. This film, which follows the adventures of a band of itinerant musicians enjoyed enormous popularity. Its musical portrayal of the life of regular folk—on the streets, in the market place, at a grand wedding, in the Yiddish theater in Warsaw, and on a boat to America—is quite remarkable, brimming with vibrant sound that conjures up very specific images of Yiddish acoustic identity.³² While the visual elements of the *mise-en-scène* capture a specific image of Polish *shtetl* life, the film's musical centerpieces (songs such as *Yidl mitn fidl*, *Shpil di fidl shpil*, and *Oy mame, bin ikh farlibt*) belong to the soundscape of Second Avenue popular Yiddish theater. The music reminds the audience of the film stars' origin (*viz.* the Yiddish theater), while also achieving a form of emotional realism far beyond what 'traditional' folk music might have accomplished by drawing from the American audience's sound world and creating an uplifting counterpoint to the otherwise heavy issues common to *shtetl* life portrayed in the film (e.g. poverty, marriage anxieties, etc) with cheerful melodies and memorable lyrics.³³

³² As Chaim Pevner notes, the 'folk' music in *Yidl mitn fidl* is not exactly traditional Klezmer music (although the music in all of the wedding scenes most certainly is), but rather draws more from the heavy sentimentality of the sounds of the American Yiddish musical theater world (Paskin 57).

³³ It should be noted that the film was released not only in the U.S. Also, so-called traditional music is featured in the film—especially in the elaborate wedding scene, but it is quite distinct from these 'musical' pieces.

In *Mamele* (1938), Picon's other Yiddish film musical collaboration with Green, music also operates at both literal and symbolic registers. The very title of the film *Mamele* was plucked from one of the most famous Jewish immigrant songs, a piece by Solomon Smulevits (Hoberman 289). Originally a Yiddish stage play by Meyer Schwartz, *Mamele* was one of Picon's favourite shows (Goldman 93).³⁴ Not only did Picon star in the film, she also wrote the lyrics to its songs. The film's three most catchy show-stopper songs, *Abi gezunt*, the *Mazl* waltz, and *Dos lebn iz a tants* (borrowed from the show *Dos meydl fun amol* in which Picon starred in 1930) all exhibit Picon's exuberant voice and performative vitality. While the film was shot in Poland and its story is set in the *shtetl*, the music lends an air of modern sophistication, amplified by Picon's free-spirited nature, earning the praise of one critic who described the film to be "as modern as though it had just come out of Hollywood"³⁵ and, like the music in *Yidl mit a fidl*, adding a level of familiarity and accessibility to the American Jewish audiences.

Despite Picon's success with Yiddish film audiences, her ambition to "mainstream" into Hollywood was not easy to achieve. Hollywood was not interested in her during the peak of her career (Paskin 53), and, despite his best efforts, her husband failed to persuade Columbia Pictures to release an English version of *Mamele* (Hoberman 289). Only later in her career was Picon invited to appear in Hollywood productions, beginning with the Frank Sinatra film *Come Blow Your Horn* (1963) (Grillo 225-6).³⁶ In these later 'mainstream' productions, however, Picon was reduced to a caricature of the

³⁴ In *der tog*, William Edlin in his article, צווישן די נייעסטע מאוויס אויף בראדווי, seems to suggest that the film version is a bit different than the play version (January 1, 1939, page 76)

³⁵ Irene Thirer, "Molly Picon's "Mamele" Pleases Continental's Fans," *New York Post* (Jan. 8, 1937)

³⁶ In her autobiography, Picon recounts another invitation to act in a Hollywood film, this time, the Anthony Quinn vehicle, *The Happening* (1967) and how her brief scene was ultimately cut from the final version.

overbearing Jewish mother (Paskin 299). Picon eventually did achieve mainstream recognition playing the role of Yente in Norman Jewison's 1971 film musical revival of the Broadway hit *Fiddler on the Roof*, which itself had been based on the 1939 Maurice Schwartz film *Tevya*, thus once again demonstrating the interconnectedness of the Yiddish stage and screen in the presentation of its body of repertoire and the versatility and adaptability of its stars.

Ludwig Satz, also a star of the Second Avenue, was Picon's only major comic rival in the Yiddish theater world. Satz, a native of Lemberg who immigrated to the U.S., made the transition from Yiddish theater to English-speaking Broadway shows, such as *Potash and Perlmutter, Detectives* (1926) and *Mad Money* (1937), earlier on.³⁷ Satz, along with other luminaries of the Yiddish stage, such as his sister-in-law Celia Adler, were recruited to perform in Maurice Schwartz's Irving Place Theatre and later the Yiddish Art Theater, whose repertoire also included material from acclaimed playwrights outside of the Yiddish-speaking world. After Abraham Cahan penned a notoriously harsh review of one of his performances, however, Satz returned to perform in more low-brow venues as a Yiddish comic figure and also in vaudeville and various other non-Jewish theatrical endeavors. Unlike Molly Picon, Satz did not become a major figure in film. His only starring role in a film was in *Zayn vayb's lubovnik* (1931), where he delivered an energized and nuanced performance, playing two separate characters, each of whom spoke and sang with a distinctly unique voice. This film, like many of the films featuring the more beloved stars of Yiddish theater, was, in many ways, designed

³⁷ It should be noted that Picon did, ultimately, appear in English-speaking Broadway. A *New York Forward* headline from Feb 2, 1940, announces, "מאלי פיקאן וועט איפטרעטען אין אן ענגלישער פיסע"; and the *New York Times* on Sunday, April 7 1940 as well as the *The Jewish Review NY*, on April 4, 1940 announced that the Yiddish star would appear in the show "Morning Star." In 1961, Picon re-appeared on Broadway in Jerry Herman's musical *Milk and Honey*.

specifically as vehicle for exhibiting Satz's tremendous versatility and talent and thus to play off of his tremendous "star power" within the intended audience.

Like Satz, Boris Thomashefsky, a star of enormous magnitude on the Yiddish stage, appeared in only one film, Henry Lynn's *Bar mitsve* (1935) (151).³⁸

Thomashefsky, who ran his own very successful theater on Second Avenue, and was popularly credited with having established Yiddish theater in America, enjoyed the kind of marquee power that would draw throngs of the Yiddish immigrant audiences into the theater. Hoberman aptly describes *Bar mitsve* as "trading on personality rather than subject matter. The attraction was Boris Thomashefsky..." (205). The film, supported by the Works Progress Administration (Goldman 176), is brimming with musical interludes and "solo performances" of various kinds, (including's Thomashefsky singing) which are barely motivated by the quintessentially *shund* story-line. Despite the film's abundant sentimentality and relatively poor technical quality (including acting more suitable for the stage and awkwardly-paced editing), *Bar mitsve* was a major box office success and was even among the first American Yiddish films to be screened in Europe as well (64). Following the success of *Bar mitsve*, Lynn cast Celia Adler, another superstar of the Yiddish stage, as his lead in his 1937 *shund* film *Vu iz mayn kind?* and enjoyed similar results based on his star's established celebrity in the Yiddish theater.

Lynn's strategy of casting leading figures of the Yiddish stage in film was not an uncommon one within Yiddish cinema—especially within the subgenre of the Yiddish film musical, where these stars musical talents could shine. As is evident from the films'

³⁸ Thomashefsky, however, was also involved creating several 'pre-Yiddish' (pre-sound) films: the iconic figure of the Yiddish stage also collaborated with Yiddish film director Sidney Goldin to co-direct three early films with Jewish content already in 1915: *The Jewish Crown*, *The Period of the Jew*, and *Hear Ye, Israel* (Hoberman 36). There was also talk of Yiddish novelist and playwright Abraham Schomer adapting Thomashefsky's great stage hit, *Der Griner Milyoner* into film, but the project never materialised.

promotional materials, the appeal of these Yiddish stage stars dwarfed nearly all other aspects of the film.



Figure 4

Sampling of Yiddish film advertisements prominently featuring their stars from the Yiddish stage, including Molly Picon in *Mamele*, Jennie Goldstein in *Tsvay shvester*, and Moishe Oysher in *Yankl der shmid*. These advertisements take considerable pride in their stars: *Mamele* ad proudly proclaims, “ale di tsaytungen bagaystert far Molly Picon in ir nayester glentsender idisher musikalisher taki: *Mamele*,” “all of the newspapers are raving about Molly Picon in her newest, magnificent, Yiddish musical talkie, *Mamale*;” the *Tsvay Shvester* advertisement emphasises the Broadway connection: “itst geshpilt—direkt fun brodway;” (From the *Forverts*, Saturday December 31, 1938, page 10)

Since, as has been noted, most of these Yiddish musical films employed the composing talents of the great Yiddish theater composers, whose songs were, in turn, performed by the stars of the Yiddish stage who were featured in these films, an invisible—but potent—bridge was created between the sound of the Yiddish theater and the sound of the Yiddish film musical, where elements, such as cast, narratives, and music, were often

used interchangeably.

IV. Self-Referentiality in Yiddish Musical Cinema

In addition to drawing personnel from the Yiddish stage, Yiddish musical films also reveled in playfully referring to specific figures, tunes, and composers of the Yiddish stage from which it drew so much of its talent and distinct musical flavor. These *entre-nous* references to the specific entertainment world of the Jewish immigrant audiences, reinforce the extent to which Yiddish dramatic arts of the period existed as one cohesive unit. The bulk of these references were music-related, as music was the primary shared thread between Yiddish theater and film.

A particularly good example of this phenomenon is found at the very outset of Goldin's last film, *Dem khazns zundl* (1937), where there is a reference to none other than actor and composer Sigmund Mogulesko, one of the pioneers of the Yiddish theater in the U.S., who began his illustrious Yiddish stage career under Abraham Goldfajn in Romanian. When Schloimele, the young protagonist runs off with a troupe of wandering Jewish actors, his mother confronts the troupe, demanding her son back. When she explains that her boy is a cantor's son, one of the actors pipes in that he too is the son of a cantor, and so was "the great Mogulesko." Later in the film, a grown Schloimele, (now known as "Sol" and played by Moishe Oysher), graces the stage at a local Yiddish club in New York. The song he is about to sing is introduced as "Olshanetsky's *Mayn shtetele belz*"!!" This latter example of the film's self-referentiality is doubled by the fact that the great Yiddish theater composer Olshanetsky also wrote the music for *Dem khazns zundl*.

Yiddish culture points back to itself again in Zygmunt Turkow's *Der freylekhe kabtsonim* (1937).³⁹ Gitele, the daughter of Naftali (played by the famous Yiddish-Polish comedian Ysrael Szumacher), falls in love with a young, handsome theater actor, against her parents' will. In one scene, her parents force her to bring an older, wealthy American suitor of ample proportions with her to watch her young beau perform in a local troupe's staging of the classic Yiddish operetta *Bar kokhba*. Right before the scene, the camera slowly pans down a *Bar kokhba* production sign, which proclaims that this is *Avram Goldfadn's Bar kokhba*.⁴⁰

Another humorous Olshanetsky reference surfaces towards the beginning of Joseph Seiden's *Mayn zundele* (1939). In this domestic musical drama set in New York and centering on the parental struggles of two Yiddish musical stars, Muni and Freda Berger, there is a scene in which Chaim Green, a colleague of the father, Muni Berger, prepares to sing with live accompaniment in the studio of a local Yiddish radio station. Right before Green approaches the microphone, the announcer excitedly announces that "the great composer-conductor Alexander Olshanetsky" will perform with his orchestra with Green singing his new song, "America."⁴¹ Another of these inter-Yiddish-performance-milieu references is prominent in an earlier scene in which Muni attempts to send a telegram to his wife, who is touring in Chicago. In this scene, Mr. Salkin, her manager, who manipulatively blocks the urgent telegram (informing Freda that her infant

³⁹ Although only a couple of the actors (such as Max Boyzk and Menasha Oppenheim) in this film ended up in America, I am not considering this film musical an American one and include it here in passing, merely as further evidence of a broader network of cultural references.

⁴⁰ Goldfadn, considered the father of modern Yiddish theater, spent most of his career in Europe (especially in Rumania), but his work was widely performed throughout both Europe and the United States.

⁴¹ Olshanetsky scored this film as well, and the sanguine content of the march-like *America* song ironically belies the escalating woes of the Berger family in the presumably *goldene medine*. "...A gan eyden far nokh yedn oyf der velt!" (a paradise for everyone in the world) Greens sings, as the orchestra throws in a quick "My Country, Tis of Thee" patriotic riff at the song's conclusion

son is ailing at home), is shown sitting in front of a wall festooned with photographs of Yiddish theater superstars Molly Picon and Ludwig Satz.

Another instance of such self-referentiality is in Edgar G. Ulmer's final Yiddish film, *Amerikaner shadkhn* (1940), where Nat, the protagonist who keeps cancelling his engagements, is joined in his chic art-deco bachelor pad by a group of his male friends for his eighth bachelor party. Nat invites one of his friends to accompany him on piano as he sings *Oy oy oy shpil*, asking him if he knows the song from a famous theater production. Familiar with the song, the friend heads to the piano, as Nat proceeds to sing. The familiarity of the music and the cultural world which it represents is what binds these characters together and presents them as 'legible' to their original audience.

Nearly all 1930's Yiddish film musicals include at least *one* passing reference to the Yiddish stage, radio, or concert world—if not a major theater scene. In addition to drawing from experiences and conditions which would be well familiar to their audiences, these films also referenced the broader American-Yiddish musical entertainment world which provided moments of respite from the often harsh living and working conditions their viewers encountered, offering a bridge—even within the films themselves—between reality and fantasy. These moments of interconnectedness between forms of Yiddish musical entertainment helped cement a sense of cultural unity and pride which added not only ethnic flavour, but helped forge and define a sensibility among Jewish-American immigrants. There are, however, several apparent exceptions to this rule: *Khazn afn probe*, *Bar mitsve*, and *Yankl der shmied* (1938). The first two are hardly exceptions, ultimately, as the comical short *Khazn afn probe* features a “jazz singer”-type cantor candidate, who clearly draws from that musical theater tradition; and while *Bar*

mitsve does not explicitly reference or portray a Yiddish musical theater scene, several of the musical numbers borrow very clearly from familiar musical idioms and performative styles of the Yiddish musical theater. Despite its Old World setting, the final exception, an Ulmer film, exhibits an interesting assimilationist impulse which translates also musically. In *Yankl der shmide*, Yankl, the eponymous singing blacksmith protagonist (played by Moishe Oysher), based on his appearance and demeanour could easily be mistaken for a robust Russian peasant. While Oysher's character does sing all of his songs in Yiddish (and some of these tunes are even popularly recognisable Yiddish folk songs, such as *A Kholem, a kholem*, and *Ot azoy neyt a shnayder*), none of these tunes are otherwise identifiably "Jewish" in character, and neither is the general narrative.⁴² The film instead focuses on Yankl's love and work life and eventual attempts at establishing a family and curbing his inner desires. Perhaps the reasons for the film's general distance from the Yiddish theater world was a combination of Ulmer's disdain for what he dismissed as "cheap *shund*" and the composer's upbringing (both musical and personal) in a high-class Russian-Jewish family, with minimal Jewish influence (Kanter 198).⁴³ To a lesser extent, Ulmer's other Yiddish film musical, *Amerikaner shadkhn*, also tends to deviate from the common sounds and images of Yiddish film musicals, by presenting thoroughly modern and highly-assimilated characters and stylisation. For *Amerikaner shadkhn*, Ulmer enlisted the help of American composer and musicologist Sam Morgenstern, a classical musician with no Yiddish theater credits to his name.

⁴² *Yankl der shmide* includes such stock figures as *shadkhnim* and rabbis, but these figures appear more incidentally in the film.

⁴³ In *Stardust Lost*, Ulmer is quoted as saying, "I'm not going to do what [Maurice] Schwartz does. I'm not going to do the cheap things which Picon does. I'm going to have my own style and I'm to do it like I see it—dignified, not dirty—not with beards where they look like madmen. The same decision which Sholem Asch made, which Chagall made."

The composer of *Yankl der shmide*, Jacob Weinberg, was likewise a classically trained European musician who continued to work in elite, high-culture circles upon moving to the U.S. in 1926, never working in Yiddish theater at all. While later in life, Weinberg developed an intellectual interest in Jewish folk music, he did not inhabit the same cultural world as most of his Yiddish film musical counterparts.

The importance of the self-referentiality in these films cannot be overestimated. By referencing familiar composers, performers, musical pieces, and literary and dramatic creations, a milieu of intimacy and shared experience was created for these immigrant audiences, whose daily reality was constantly challenged by mores and manners of a New World, to which they were striving to adjust. The movie house, thus, became not only a place of entertainment, but also a comfortable haven of social familiarity for the transitioning Jewish American immigrants.

V. Musicals about Musicals: Truth Revealed On-Stage

Like their Hollywood counterparts,⁴⁴ the Depression era Yiddish musical films included a generous sprinkling of the subgenre of the “backstage musicals.” Such plots incorporated thematic staples of the backstage musical, such as the “rags to riches” theme, the struggling young romantic couple, and of course, general obstacles to the success of a show. The stage and the green room were two sites in which actors would “find” and “reveal” themselves in these narratives, most commonly through dramatic song. One of the hallmarks of Yiddish musical films that take place specifically in the

⁴⁴ (e.g. *Footlight Parade* (1933), *Murder at the Vanities* (1934), Busby Berkeley films such as *The Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933) and *Dames* (1934)),

world of Yiddish musical entertainment is what I will term the “stage reveal,” in which characters pour out something buried in the inner chambers of their hearts before an audience. True to the musical form, the protagonist’s voice is amplified above all others,’ as her/his personal concerns are forced into the limelight.

Several examples such scenarios can be found in Joseph Green’s film musical *Der purimshpiler* (1937). The film presents a fairly simple plot in which Getsel, a pathetic young man, wanders aimlessly through the Polish countryside, looking for work. He is eventually taken in by Nukhem, a shoemaker who pities the young man and allows him to work with him. While living with the shoemaker’s family, Getsel falls in love with Nukhem’s free-spirited daughter, Esther. Esther does not reciprocate Getsel’s affections, but instead becomes amorously involved with Dick, a smooth-talking itinerant circus actor and singer. Dick is likewise infatuated with Esther, and this is nowhere more apparent than in the scene where Getsel helps Esther escape after her father tries to force an unwanted match on her. As they wander outside of town, we see Esther’s eyes suddenly light up, upon hearing a familiar voice singing. In a reverse shot, we see Dick on stage at a local cabaret, backed by a live orchestra, openly professing his affections for her in a song entitled *Mayn ester*. The two thereafter pair up, and are seen walking off into the sunset, accompanied by their ever-faithful friend Getsel.

After some time passes, Esther begins to feel the pangs of homesickness, and spontaneously sings a heartfelt song about home (*Shtetl mayn klayne* [*My Little Village*]), during which the camera pans from Getsel, whose facial expression is one of resignation and recognition of the pain of longing to Dick, who wears a cynical smirk). Dick cajoles Esther into making her heartfelt song a commodity by performing it on

stage. In the following scene, we see an ornately costumed Esther appear before the microphone at the same cabaret that we saw before, singing about her *shtetl*. Following her performance, Dick appears on stage dancing and lightens up the act by singing with Esther the upbeat, romantic duet they sang upon first stealing off to the woods together (*Ikh her a shtime ruf 'n mir*) (I hear a voice calling me). Not only does this scene ‘reveal’ the characters and their narratives for the on-screen audience, it also complicates the popular image of the Old Country as a quaint, pre-Modern monolith for the film audience in America by presenting two contrasting models of musical styles in one scene: one piece, an effusively sentimental *shtetl* song, the other, a thoroughly modern, jazzy musical song-and-dance number.

Perhaps the most dramatic and comically-charged of all “onstage reveals,” the penultimate major scene in Green’s Yiddish film musical of the previous year, *Yidl mitn fidl* (1936) offers the ultimate “reveal.” After masquerading as a boy so she could accompany her bass-playing father and perform on the road without incident, Itke-cum-Yidl (played by Molly Picon), eventually falls in love with Froyim, a young handsome fiddler, the son of a clarinetist, with whom she and her father have been performing during their travels. By the end of the film, “Yidl” can no longer bare to keep her identity as a young woman a secret, especially when Taybele, a runaway bride, begins to sing with the group and Yidl becomes concerned that Froyim is developing a romantic interest in her. When the makeshift troupe begins to disband after two Warsaw impresarios recruit Taybele and Froyim to perform in their theater, Yidl grows increasingly anxious. The film culminates with Tayebele running away from the Warsaw theater in order to reunite with her old lover Yossl, and “Yidl” filling in for her on stage at the last-minute

What results is one of the most memorable scenes in all of Yiddish musical film.

Yidl (in Taybele's abandoned dress) timidly lifting up the curtain and then rushing breathlessly onto the stage and towards the pit to tell Froym what had happened, suddenly falls into the pit, creating an unintended comic effect to the uproarious amusement of the audience. Yidl then "comes out" to the audience as a girl, revealing to them her long black hair. The audience erupts in boisterous laughter, but Yidl continues with her completely serious narrative, describing her travails as a wandering musician on the road and explaining why she disguised herself as a boy. In Yidl's "stage reveal," she is backed by the theater's live pit orchestra as she showcases two of the film's previous hits, her theme song, *Yidl mitn fidl*, as well as the song *Oy mame, bin ikh farlibt*, interspersed with her own painfully earnest commentary on her actual identity and backstory. The audience continues laughing, until Yidl literally is reduced to tears and leaves the stage, accompanied by thunderous applause. The virtuoso "drag" performance by Picon in this film was, of course, familiar to her live theater audiences from her signature cross-dressing performances on the Yiddish stage.

On-stage "reveals" in Yiddish film musicals are not limited to public, performative confessions of romantic love, however. In both *Mayn zundele* and *Der vilner shtot khazn*, fathers sing before mass audiences (on the Yiddish radio in the U.S., and on the opera stage in Warsaw, respectively), touchingly revealing their love for their sons. The eponymous song, *Mayn zundele*, is heard both at the very beginning, and towards the end of the film (like in *Yidl mitn fidl*, the final "on-stage reveal" happens not in the final scene, but in the penultimate one, book-ending the film with music of parental sentimentality). In both scenes, Muni Berger performs live in the WEVD radio studio to a

wide audience to sing about something intensely personal to him, his dear son. A film with a more tragic father-son relationship, *Der vilner shtot khazn* features the booming voice of the cantor Yoel-Dovid Strashunsky, a father (played by Moishe Oysher) who prioritises his career in the Polish opera over his son. Towards the end of the film, when Strashunsky, still performing in Warsaw, learns of his young son's death, the crestfallen cantor goes mad on stage before his live opera audience. Missing his cue, Oysher's shell-shocked character instead sings with a haunted, blank expression and in a voice choked with emotion *Unter beymer*, (Under Trees) the lullaby he sang to his son at the film's outset. Inserted in his pupil in an extreme close-up on his left eye is the image of his young son. The audience panics in confusion, and the curtain is closed on him. When he reveals himself to be a Yiddish father, Strashunsky is rejected by the Polish audience. Whereas the Warsaw Yiddish Theater audience delighted in Yidl's impulsive "on-stage reveal" performance, here, Strashunsky's spontaneity was not appreciated. The show—and his career—are over. Though the settings and outcomes of their "on-stage reveal" performances are vastly different, the enormous star power of Picon and Oysher coupled with the image of their stage presence further reinforces the film-stage connection through music: music of longing and thwarted aspiration that is characteristic of both Yiddish stage and screen.

High Culture vs. Low Culture

Both Yiddish Theater and Yiddish musical film, although firmly rooted in the world of popular entertainment, exhibited a range of tones, styles and cultural registers which spanned the artistic realms of high and low culture. While most of the Second Avenue Theater consisted of high-*schmaltz*, there were attempts within the Yiddish theater world (for example, by Maurice Schwartz and his Yiddish Art Theatre and later the ambitious Jacob Ben-Ami and his Jewish Art Theatre) to transform Yiddish drama into a high, respectable, and artistically daring art. It is perhaps no surprise then that for the film *Griner felder* (1937), a poetic dramatisation of the struggle to reconcile religious learning with cultivation of the land, Ulmer enlisted the help of Jacob Ben-Ami as his co-director. The collaboration culminated in the production of one of the most—if not *the* most—artistic and critically acclaimed, iconic Yiddish films. Based on a Peretz Hirschbein Yiddish play, in the naturalist film adaptation, music is featured more organically than in the Yiddish film musicals discussed in this study, with the protagonist Levi-Yitzkhok singing homiletic snippets in a traditional “Yeshiva” sing-songy voice as he leaves the four walls of the Yeshiva to find truth. The understated but lyrical quality of *Griner felder* truly distinguishes the film as an exemplar of artistic achievement within Yiddish cinema.⁴⁵

Even in the less artistically-daring Yiddish film productions, sporadic evidence of exposure to so-called high art exists. Whether in *Der vilner shtot khazn*, where classical music flows throughout parts of the film (e.g. Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*, Chopin’s

⁴⁵ Likewise, another Yiddish film (which is not a musical), *The Dybbuk*, (1937), a highly-stylised expressionistic piece inspired by the acclaimed Vilna Troupe’s staging of S. Anski’s play, achieved a rare level of artistic innovation and won critical acclaim well beyond Yiddish circles.

Etude in E major, op. 10 no. 3, Waltz no. 1 in E flat, Op. 18), or in *Der purimshpiler*, in a club scene, where couples waltz to Strauss' *Blue Danube Waltz*, or in *Amerikaner shadkhn*, when the wedding orchestra conductor plays Robert Schumann's *Kinderszenen, Op.15, No.7 'Traumerei'* (1838) in the wedding scene, or comically-deployed, such as in the scene in *Zayn vaybs lubovnik*, where the old, cantankerous "Weingart" (played by Ludwig Satz) insists his wife waltz with him, as he hums the tune of Iosif Ivanovici's *Waves of the Danube*, classical musical interludes do occasionally grace the scores of American Yiddish films. However, the vast majority of the Yiddish musical films resided on the 'low' end of the culture spectrum, appealing to the lowest common denominator of familiar narratives, high sentimentality, stylistic simplicity, and populist appeal. Such *shund* served the psychological function of *reassuring*—not *challenging*—its audience with familiar tropes, sounds, and emotions.

Traditional *shund*, such as the type of effusively dramatic performance evident in Henry Lynn's *Bar mitsve* was more familiar to its audience and more typical of Yiddish theatrical fare of the times than, for example, the more innovative scenarios and stylisations gracing the screen in Ulmer's productions. While J. Hoberman strongly critiques Lynn's only Yiddish musical film, he too ultimately concedes to its value as a "living remnant" of the Yiddish stage, after which it was so closely modeled and directed, "it was the popular Yiddish theater incarnate" (Hoberman 363). Likewise, more *shund*-like, popular Yiddish musical films such as *Kol nidre, Dem khazns zundl, and Mayn zundele* (and nearly anything directed by Joseph Seiden), struck a chord, not only emotionally, but, in a strange way, on a deeper level—as a permanently "live" recording of the sound world. For example, in Joseph Seiden's *Kol nidre* (1939), a simple "good

vs. evil” domestic musical drama about Jenny, a young woman choosing between two suitors from her childhood, the very format of many of the film’s musical numbers closely resembled the Yiddish theater. In one such instance, Chasye, a supporting character who provides ‘comic relief’ throughout the film, sings a humorous ballad about men (beginning at 10:02) as soon as her husband leaves the room. Chasya sings this song in what is, for film, a bizarrely ‘direct address’ position, *directly* facing the audience, alone, as she might on the stage. This mode of direct address while singing, while relatively rare even among other Yiddish musical films, is somewhat reminiscent of some of the more theatrical moments of pseudo-soliloquies in Yiddish film—what I term in Chapter Three the “narrational mode.” Borrowing heavily and obviously from Yiddish stage acting and borsht-belt vaudeville, these moments at once rupture the narrative flow of the film while also calcifying the cohesion of the film-as-spectacle. As a recurring pattern throughout the film, the sequence of drama followed by an isolated musical interlude creates a distinct rhythmic and dramatic symmetry. Later on in the film, right after Yossele, Jenny’s “good” suitor, now a rabbi, professes his love to her in his office, he turns to the camera (at 46:27) and sings of his plight, again directly addressing the audience in the manner of stage, rather than cinematic, performance.

Both in format and in sound, the Yiddish film musical offers a taste of the Yiddish theater whose presence it slowly eclipsed. Featuring its same talent and drawing from the same well of concerns and emotions as did the Yiddish theater, the Yiddish musical film also included musical elements that were derived from and connected it to the Yiddish stage. Indeed, it was ultimately their shared soundscape of language and music that bound together the worlds of Yiddish theater and film. Whether on stage, on the radio, in

live concert, or on film, it was the *voice* of the Yiddish stars and the musical soundscape which enveloped their performances that captivated Yiddish audiences. Of these formats, the Yiddish musical film is the sole “pure” remnant which retains vestiges of its original “liveness.”

The 1930’s Yiddish film musicals represent a sonic archive of a world in which the audience’s familiarity with Yiddish stage references—and its sounds—were taken for granted. The worlds of Yiddish theater and Yiddish film and its mid-20th century immigrant audience constituted, as it were, an organic cultural milieu which was both familiar and reassuring in a time of tremendous social adjustment. What the audience saw and heard on stage and screen were sights and sounds that they knew and that, consequently, resonated with them, serving to reinforce and validate their own experience. Today, with the exception of a number of song recordings of individual artists, such as Oysher (which obviously do not include a visual component), the “liveness” of the original Yiddish Theater sound would be irrevocably lost, were it not for these Yiddish musical films. The Yiddish musical film stands as the sole record that captures not only elements of the dramatic delivery of the Yiddish theater, but also its sound.

Chapter 2 *Between Prayer and Vaudeville: The Khazn On-Screen*

The Hazzan as Stock Figure

The cultural imagination of the *shtetl* is peopled by a variety of stock figures, including the rabbi, the wanderer, the merchant, the *maggid* (or storyteller), the bride, the Klezmer musician, and the young couple who must overcome external resistance to pursue and affirm their relationship (Walden 175). The use of stock figures in Yiddish drama extends far back into eastern European Jewish theatrical expression. As Nahma Sandrow explains, the genesis of such bold caricatures appears in satirical Purim plays dating back to medieval times (Sandrow 10-12).⁴⁶ The tradition of featuring such stock figures continued and developed within formal Yiddish theater, which began in the late 19th century on both sides of the ocean, and later in Yiddish cinema, beginning in the early 20th century, as well.

In Depression-era American Yiddish musical film, these stock figures, each of whom served a distinct role in creating and perpetuating both the literal and symbolic cohesion of the *shtetl* image, loosely corresponded to the character mainstays of contemporaneous Hollywood musical film. In both cases, the audience's empathetic and identifying potential with the onscreen musical narrative resided significantly in the musical's ability to produce culturally legible character archetypes who would forcefully establish the 'in' group and the 'out' group; the 'collective' and the 'individual' on whom all hopes rest. The difference, of course, is that in the Yiddish films the casts of

⁴⁶ With its deligitimisation of the villain character, there is an inherently political aspect of this satirical form; see also notes on the Purim shpil as the forerunner of musical theater in the introduction of *Jewish Instrumental Folk Music: The Collections and Writings of Moshe Beregovski*.

characters were infused with distinctly *Jewish* roles and modes of being, with the attendant set of culturally-coded hopes and desires.

Among these stock characters, there is one which predominates in its symbolism and significance. This character is that of the *hazzan*, or cantor—a figure with roots deep in European Jewish history, who becomes a liminal figure between the Old Country’s traditional religious and musical past and the newly encountered (and also imagined) culture of the American melting pot. Indeed, no figure more starkly emblematises the tension between tradition and modernity than that of the *hazzan*, or cantor. In these films, the *hazzan* often actively negotiates the spaces imagined as ‘internal’ or ‘external’ to the community. In fact, the *hazzan*’s role in the Jewish community consisted of an almost paradoxical duality: while he occupied the spiritual position of liturgical prayer leader in the synagogue, the *hazzan*’s chanting and vocal stylings—often encompassing various musical themes borrowed from sources external to traditional Jewish incantation—also were widely viewed as a form of musical entertainment by members of the Jewish community. The *hazzan*, thus, was both a ritual leader and an entertainer; a performer steeped in traditional culture, but also one capable of incorporating outside musical elements into his performance. Thus, the *hazzan* became a poignant symbol of the often conflicting cultural currents buffeting the immigrant Jewish community in North America.

The Historical and Religious Context of the Hazzan

In order to contextualise the figure of the *hazzan* in American Yiddish musical film, it is necessary to examine the historical development of the role of the *hazzan* in Jewish communal life. As early as the Second Commonwealth period (530 BCE to 70 CE), we find references (Grayzel 120) to a *Hazzan ha'Knesset*; however, despite the use of the word *hazzan* (cantor), this official seems to have been the director of services within the synagogue, rather than a cantor in the present sense of the word.⁴⁷ However, references to singing or chanting prayer leaders do exist from earliest times. In pre-rabbinic times, a musically talented *mithpallel* (or “prayer leader”) would be chosen to lead communal prayer (Heskes 47), and later, in the early Rabbinic period, the Mishnah (the definitive code of Jewish law edited by Rabbi Judah the Prince in the 3rd century CE) mentions a *shaliach tzibur*, (or “community designate”), whose function it was to stand before the community and facilitate prayer before the Almighty.⁴⁸

Until the 6th century, Jewish public prayer was led by a rotation of community volunteers who had memorised the prayers and could improvise according to the occasion (Landman 157). However, as the liturgy developed throughout the diaspora,

⁴⁷ In Assyrian, *Hazana* means the bursar. This meaning is echoed variously in the rabbinic sources, notably in the Mishnah and the Talmud Yerushalmi, where the role refers to a figure who cares for the sustenance of others in the community. The original uses of the word ‘*hazzan*’ typically did not refer to any musically-oriented role or anything modern-day Jews would associate with a cantor. Rather the *hazzan* functioned primarily as an assistant in communal tasks, such as recovering and returning Torah scrolls during services; gathering and setting out *lulavs* during the Festival of Booths; guarding possessions in a more generic sense; teaching the local youth; holding down the recipient of lashings, alerting the community of theft; and establishing the time when leavened bread would be communally burned before Passover, but he was also engaged in more festively symbolic ritual work, such as heralding in the Sabbath or new holiday with the blast of a trumpet and announcing the shofar blasts.⁴⁷ The term ‘*hazzan ha'kneset*, *hazzan* of the community (but specifically synagogue) emerges in fleeting references in the Jerusalem Talmud (but it earlier appears in the Mishnaic tract of Yoma, chapter 7), as well as descriptions of the *hazzan* as communal translator (see for example Talmud Yerushalmi, *Brachot* 7b; *Yerushalmi, Megillah*, chapter 4).

⁴⁸ The *Shaliach tzibur* is referenced multiple times in both the Mishnah and Talmud, including Berachot 5:3, Rosh Hashanah 3:8; Berachot 17, Berachot 34 Rosh Hashana 17b, Rosh Ha Shanah 35a, Talmud Yerushalmi Berachot 12b

the role of the appointed prayer leader became increasingly specialised and compartmentalised into more narrowly defined roles. Titles, such as the *shaliach tzibur* (“community designate” an honour bestowed upon a community member chosen to lead the others in prayer), *ba'al koreh* (expert reader) and *sofer* (trained ritual scribe who would help ensure and enforce accuracy and high standards in transmitting the oral liturgical traditions) were used to define the various leadership positions within the religious community (Heskes 57). By the late 5th century, other functionaries included the *tomeykhim* and *mesayim*, who served to remember and preserve the style and content of the prayers. The late 6th century saw the emergence of the *paytan hazzan* who, in addition to his responsibilities as ritual educator to coming-of-age boys in the community, composed religious devotional poetry (called “*piyutim*”), which became a staple of Jewish liturgical art (47, 57).

The designation of the *hazzan* as the functionary permanently charged with leading the prayers occurred only in the Geonic period (roughly the 6th-11th century CE), when communal prayer became more codified and nuanced. In the course of the Middle Ages, the role of the *hazzan* became increasingly defined, when the sub-categories of *ba'al tefillah* (“prayer master”) and *hazzan* were created. With these changes, the role of the *hazzan* was entrusted to a musically-gifted, trained professional (although Grayzel suggests that in many cases in the early medieval west, the *hazzan* led services on a voluntary basis) and therefore, increased in its prestige, while community members would be honoured with the voluntary role of *ba'al tefillah*. Also at this time, a *shamash*, or hired, chief synagogue attendant, took over the organisational tasks theretofore handled by the *hazzan* (Heskes 47). Not all communities, however, employed a separate

hazzan, or cantor. Often, throughout much of the Middle Ages, the rabbi doubled as the cantor. For example, in the late Middle Ages, Rabbi Jacob ben Moses Moelin (commonly known as the *Maharil*), also served as a cantor for his community. Interestingly, this same Rabbi Moelin is cited in the *Shulchan Arukh*, the 16th century authoritative code of Jewish compiled by Rabbi Joseph Karo in Israel, as strongly encouraging communities to find a cantor with a pleasing voice who also demonstrates expertise in Jewish liturgy (Karo 560:3). A cantor with these qualifications, the *Maharil* contends, will help a congregation focus spiritually.

In the 12th-16th centuries, in places such as Germany and Poland, cantors in larger synagogues embellished their cantorial performances with the accompaniment of groups of trained singers, beginning a trend which led to the widespread use of formal synagogue choirs in later periods. During this time, certain stylistic tendencies within cantorial performance evolved, such as the practice of humming and other artistic embellishments that added to the artistic aura of the *hazzanim* (Cohen 185). Despite this musical aura, as in the past, in the Middle Ages, the *hazzan*'s role continued to include providing religious instruction to the local youth, and his position depended on the will of the community, who chose their *hazzan* by majority vote (Marcus 245). By the late 18th century, the *hazzan*'s role expanded to include collecting liturgical works, both of his predecessors and of his own (Heskes 49).

At this time, while many *hazzanim* were locally-based, a new kind of *hazzan* appeared on the scene throughout Europe: these *hazzanim* were not based in a specific synagogue, but rather were itinerant *hazzanim*, who would tour from town to town, often with their own choirs, regaling and entertaining local communities with their effusive

styles and impressive vocal ranges (see for example Assaf 155; Heskes 60).⁴⁹ Thus emerged the image of the *hazzan* as not simply a liturgical functionary within the synagogue, but also as an admired performer of beloved and familiar music presented in a unique style associated with that individual *hazzan*.⁵⁰

This development of the *hazzan* as performer, led directly to the “Golden Age” of *hazzanut*, which spanned the late 19th century up until the eve of WWI, and which, perhaps unsurprisingly, intersected with the height of the Yiddish theater. Stylistically, this period, on both sides of the ocean, represented the culmination of the era of dynamic cantors heralded for their vocal, musical, and, importantly, improvisational prowess (Heskes 61). In the U.S., “show services” with great *hazzanim* performing were frequently presented, not in synagogues, but rather in theaters and social halls (63). The widespread popularity of ‘cantorial concerts’ showcasing the impressive vocal talents of local *hazzanim* was amply evidenced by the preponderance of advertisements for the events flooding the entertainment listings alongside advertisements for Yiddish theater (and less frequently films) in the local Yiddish papers, especially in New York.

⁴⁹ The phenomenon of itinerant *hazzanim* entertaining local masses, it should be noted, was established well before the Golden Age of *hazzanut*, as documented in the late 17th century diary of Glückel of Hameln (Lowenthal, 271).

⁵⁰ Arguably the greatest of all Golden Age cantors, Yossele Rosenblatt, was born the son of an itinerant *hazzan*.

קארנעני האל
 וועלט לטעט סבדום און דעם ערשטן
 ערשטער איבערזעצונג און אפטיילונג
 אבערמאנטאג, ס'ס'ה

קוסעוויצקי
 פון יעדן ווארשעווער טראנספארטירט
 און א פארטיקולער פון
 חזנות פאלקס
 ליווער און אפטייל
 סינסעס אין אונזערע
 פון קארנעני האל
 פרייז: 75, 50, 25
 און 12
 פענעווערס פאלקס
 WA 3-1653
 DI 2-7413
 J. WALLACH

און אקור ערשטע, אידישער בענין
וואו איז מיין סינגר ?
RUGBY Theatre
 Utica and Church Aves., Brooklyn

וויליאם פאועל און אנאבעלא און
The Baroness and the Butler
 און א נאלי סטעידיז שו
ROXY
 אלע טיטס—אלע טעג 7:30—7:00
 11. ס. ק. ניו יארק איבער 515—7:00 ע.ה. 1938

אריהאלטען זענען מאנאס
 אידישער סגל
 און די באשפיל
משה אויבער
 דעם חזנים ווארנער
ASCOT
 THEKA, Grand Conceptor
 and 1242 St. Beque

לעצטע וואר! עו זעהו דאס גרויסע אידישע בילד
משה אויבער
 רעם חזנים ווארנער
PEOPLE'S CINEMA, Saratoga & Livonia Aves., Brooklyn

קלינטאן שעאטע
 80 קלינטאן סט. (עוויסון רילענט)
 און ריווינגטאן
 טעלעפון ריידראם 305-7
 איצט געשפילעט
 צום ערשטען מאל אין אמעריקע—די
 גרויסע אידישע טעקע—מיט א גרויסע
 קאסיאני אייראפעאישע ארטסטען
 זון ווארשעווער קונסטלערן

פריילאכע
קבצנים
 א גרויסע ווארשעווער שו

Figure 5

The advertisement on the upper left-hand corner for world-renowned Eastern European cantor Moshe Koussevitzky's debut performance in the U.S. at Carnegie Hall appears alongside two advertisements for the Moishe Oysher cantor-themed film *Dem khazns zindl* and another Yiddish musical film, *Freyleke kavtsonim*. (From the *Forverts*, February 18, 1938, page 8.)

Indeed, cantorial art and Yiddish drama inhabited each other's world especially in early 20th century America; on New York's Lower East Side, the central office building of the Jewish Ministers Cantor Association of America (JMCA) neighbored the Hebrew

Actors' Union headquarters (located at 31 East Seventh Street).⁵¹

A number of the great western-European cantors of this period, such as Louis Lewandowski (1823-1894) and Solomon Sulzer (1804-1890), were also accomplished composers, thus further blurring the boundaries between religious and aesthetic achievement. It is also perhaps no coincidence that many renowned composers, such as Jacques Offenbach and later songwriters, such as Irving Berlin, were children of cantors. Indeed, many of the great Yiddish performers and songwriters, such as prolific Yiddish art song composers Pinchos Jassinowsky and Lazar Weiner, likewise received their initial musical training as singers in synagogue choirs which would accompany the *hazzan*. In scouting out musicians for his early operettas, famed Yiddish operettist Abraham Goldfaden enlisted the help of many such choir-trained young singers, such as later Yiddish theater sensation Boris Thomshefsky (the grandfather of famed conductor Michael Tilson Thomas), Yiddish stage triple threat (actor, composer, and singer) Sigmund Mogulesco, and acclaimed Yiddish composers Joseph Rumshinsky and Sholem Secunda, both of whom also served as choral conductors in synagogues. Traces of traditional synagogue chant were thus abundantly audible in early Yiddish theater music, especially in the works of Rumshinsky, Secunda, and also Yidel Belzer and Herman Wohl (Wohlberg 19).

Even the secular world began to take notice of the most celebrated and talented cantorial voices. Yossele Rosenblatt famously turned down an offer to perform with the Chicago opera, concerned that accepting such an invitation might compromise the

⁵¹ An interesting formal parallel between cantorial audio records and cantor scenes in motion pictures is the extent to which their incantation of liturgy originally presented as part of the natural flow of a service becomes made into isolated "numbers," with an emphasis on the performative element rather than the prayers' actual content. Jeffrey Shandler explores the implication of this developing tendency in *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America*.

sanctity of his role and status as *hazzan*.⁵² Other *hazzanim*, however, embraced the opportunity to branch out beyond the four walls of the synagogue and the confines of Jewish sacred music and to explore other performative media. One of the more fascinating melding of worlds was the cantorial foray into the world of film. Acclaimed *hazzanim* such as Leibele Waldman and Moishe Oysher were among the first of their sacred vocation to grace both the synagogue *bima* and the silver screen. As the word ‘*hazzan*’ is etymologically rooted in the Hebrew word *hazon*, or vision, the convergence of these two spheres on the silver screen—the aural and the visual—is a particularly apt one. The *hazzan* was the figure who represented the immigrant Jewish community’s collective hopes, dreams, and visions for the future while also regaling them vocally with musical strains evocative of their collective past. Indeed, Al Crosland’s 1927 film, *The Jazz Singer*, popularly known as the first feature-length film to include instances of synchronised diegetic sound, forcefully foregrounded the *hazzan*’s identity crisis at this transitional moment in American Jewish cultural history. Not quite a musical (see for example Rosenberg 13), nor a Yiddish film per se, *The Jazz Singer* is a film adaptation of Samson Raphaelson’s eponymous play, based on his original story, “Day of Atonement,” which has achieved near-mythic status in its melodramatic presentation of the *hazzan*’s cultural identity crisis and thus merits mention in a discussion of the portrayal of the *hazzan* in Yiddish musical film. Indeed, several films produced shortly thereafter—including several important Yiddish film musicals we shall consider later—followed *The Jazz Singer*’s lead in crafting sentimentally-charged films which choreographed through

⁵² But, as Jeffrey Knapp notes in “*Sacred Songs, Popular Prices*”: *Secularization in the Jazz Singer*, later in Cantor Rosenblatt’s career, he agreed to perform even at vaudeville performance, out of financial desperation.

musical performance the struggles between tradition and modernity, old world and new world, memory and innovation.

Ethnic Noise, Hegemonic Silence

One may say that Jews and the cinema were discovered simultaneously in the U.S. (Friedman 3). While many so-called ethnic films, including ethnic films variously portraying Jews, were popular at the time of its release, *The Jazz Singer*, the first big-budget feature film to incorporate synchronised sound,⁵³ introduced general audiences to the cultural imagination of the Jew via his *voice*, above all else. Starring Al Jolson, yet another cantor's son, the film implants and cements a very particular sound-memory of Jewish identity in the ears of its viewers (and listeners). (Interestingly, it was a 1916 Al Jolson concert that inspired Raphaelson to marvel, "My God. This isn't a jazz singer. This as [*sic*] a cantor!" and write the story and subsequent play.)⁵⁴

This voice of the cantor in *The Jazz Singer* is marked by its distinctive lachrymosity—in the film. Mary, Jack's (ostensibly gentile) co-actor repeatedly marvels (via intertitles) at his singing with a "tear in his voice;" Rabinowitz family friend Yudelson remarks at the end "Just like his Papa—with the cry in his voice." The entirety of Jewish musical culture is reduced, essentially, to an extended death fetish, expressed principally by the *sound* of absence. Between the unremitting solemnity of the *Kol Nidre* and the strange interlude featuring none other than Cantor Yosele Rosenblatt singing a

⁵³ But as Jonathan D. Taniel notes, a number of short films preceded *The Jazz Singer* in featuring synchronised sound, see *The Impact of the Jazz Singer on The Conversion to Sound*, 22. Also directed by Alan Crosland, *Don Juan* (1926) also incorporated synchronised sound, but unlike *The Jazz Singer*, it did not include synchronised dialogue.

⁵⁴ *Birth of the Jazz Singers, American Hebrew*, 14 Oct. 1927, p. 812, quoted in Knapp, 318.

heavy-handed Yiddish song entitled *Yortsayt* (a Yiddish word referring to the anniversary of a person's death), the Jewish voice is perpetually freighted with the onus of ancestral memory and religious obligation. Likewise, the film's score echoes the foreboding solemnity surrounding the Jewish voice; at the very outset of the *The Jazz Singer*, the scores takes a sudden darker turn when the film cuts from a montage of people milling about on the streets of the Lower East Side to a close up of Cantor Rabinowitz's hands behind his back, as he nervously charges forward, wondering where his son could be so soon before the Yom Kippur eve services.

As the cantor and his wife soon learn, their boy is, in fact, regaling the patrons of a local saloon with secular songs, thus drawing the audience into the cultural tug-of-war that is at the heart of this film. The song the young boy is singing (and the first instance of synchronised sound we hear in the film), "My Gal Sal," tells of a number of sordid figures, all of whom populate an alternative universe of secular depravity. In the context of this song, however, these figures are presented as 'givens' or 'neutrals,' without any reference to their ethnic or religious origins; "My God how the money rolls in" stands as the lyrics' sole reference to a 'higher power.' Here, in this saloon scene, we encounter the first non-Jews of the film: the assembled crowd feasting on eggs and bacon, who applaud the young boy's performance. As a performer, as a "fallen Jew," the travails of young Jakie, the protagonist of the film, assume center-stage, as do his acoustic and visual identities, which he actively negotiates throughout the film.

Notably, the only 'performative' sounds in the film emerge from the Jewish characters—either in the context of Jolson's effusive performance of secular entertainment, or in the context of Jews inhabiting the acoustics of traditional worship.

The only instances of ‘secular sound’ ever heard are brief bursts of applause (for example, applause as Jolson ascends the stage at 18:50, applause for the chorus line at 29:40, and applause erupting at 1:18:42 , following Jolson’s blackface performance of “Mother of Mine, I still Have You”). Applause in this context is the invisible, easy, automatic expression of secular bourgeois ecumenicism; judgment is conferred indiscriminately, by faceless seated masses.

While the bulk of scholarship on this film has focused either on Jolson’s blackface performance later on in the film or on the film’s historic transition to synchronised sound, I argue that there is an equally, if not more important, acoustic parallel to the visual notion of ethnic ‘othering’ manifested here in blackface performance (on the performance of blackface in *The Jazz Singer*, see Rogin 1992). Whereas Michael Rogin emphasises that the image of Jolson in blackface (obscuring his ‘Jewish’ visual identity) is ultimately a means of affirming his own putatively ‘un-otherness,’ the musical component of *The Jazz Singer* actively contradicts any full negation or concealment of his character’s Jewish identity.⁵⁵ Jolson’s stylistic versatility between genres and fluidity between musical idioms establishes his voice as a kind of *tabula rasa* and erases his difference while simultaneously accentuating his eternal otherness through his style and delivery. Through its endless alternating between the stage and the synagogue, *The Jazz Singer* reminds us that there is, indeed, a distinctly *audible* layer of ethnic coding which eludes the apparent permanence and stability of visual codes. This tension, expressed originally by Raphaelson (as the inspiration for his original story) and echoed in numerous criticisms of the film, nearly escapes precise definition. As Eric Werner, the

⁵⁵ Indeed, Rosenberg (2002: 40) makes a similar objection to Rogin’s reading of blackface in the film as a “passport to assimilation” and argues how what he terms “Jewface” accomplishes exactly these same ends. Significantly, all of Rosenberg’s examples are sound-based.

original leader of Hebrew Union College's School of Sacred Music, once conceded, to speak of "the esthetics of Jewish music" is a near impossibility (Werner 30). Indeed, the 'Jewish' production of music here is reduced (or perhaps amplified) to a sensibility—tone and style factors are paramount.

In both 'worlds'—the world of secular stage entertainment and the world of traditional religious worship—words barely even matter. In the scenes featuring Jolson's performance of show-tunes, the near-hysteria with which he delivers the performance borders on a caricature of an eager-to-please jazz singer. Especially in the strangely oedipal scene (beginning at 44:58) shortly after reuniting with his mother—the first instance of extended synchronised sound featuring both dialogue and song, in which Jackie sits by the piano and relates to his mother as though she were an audience to be won over as he regales her with light-hearted show-tunes—Jackie appears not so much a character as an embodiment. The dialogue comes to an abrupt halt when Jackie's father, Cantor Rabinowitz, enters the room and screams, "STOP!" This outburst is the last instance of non-singing, sound dialogue in the film. More than the specific meaning of the words, it is first and foremost the presentation of these figures *via* sound that creates the 'othering' effect; their audible emotions register as a cinematic curio and help viewers parse out their identities, specifically as Jews in this transitional moment in American Jewish history.

Even more striking is the way the sounds of the synagogue interior in the Yom Kippur Atonement scenes are reduced to a wash of ambient sound. As Joel Rosenberg observes, the complete lack of translation (via intertitles or otherwise) in the Day of Atonement services, engenders a certain 'documentary'-type sensation (Rosenberg 15).

In these scenes, the general audience's primary engagement with the text is indeed through raw sound, creating a distancing effect in portraying the on-screen Jewish figures as absolute 'others.' Ritual—specifically religious ritual—has always been a kind of theater, but its meaning is contingent upon a certain collective understanding of and participation in the rites. To film the services of the eve of the Day of Atonement without any understanding of the meaning laden words in the liturgy is to strip the scene of its traditional relevance and reduce the proceedings to mere affect and to the music itself. Indeed, embedded even in the non-diegetic mood music score are occasional motifs that reference the tune of the *Kol Nidre* prayer (for example, at 14:19, where the score segues into the diegetic soundscape synagogue's interior; and, even more strikingly, when this fleeting score motif is heard upon Jackie's reunion with his mother as an adult at 40:57; and again, a bit later, the theme plays when Yudelsohn appears backstage to appeal to Jackie to sing on the Day of Atonement). Likewise, Yossele Rosenblatt's emotion-drenched rendition of *Yortsayt* is presented without translation in the film. More than anything, sound here can be understood in this context as 'ethnic noise' in the face of a bemused, listening Caucasian-American, Christian-American audience, for whom music and religion can amicably coexist in a blissfully neutral, hyphen-less world.⁵⁶

The selection of the Day of Atonement as the dramatic fulcrum of the narrative is hardly accidental. The cantor's recitation of the *Kol Nidre* prayer marks the most pathos-laden moment of the Jewish liturgical calendar. *Kol Nidre* constitutes the musical pronouncement of the moment of judgment, and its centrality in a film in which religious and cultural identity is being judged at all turns is thus especially fitting. It is noteworthy

⁵⁶ I intentionally hyphenate "Caucasian-American" and "Christian-American" to underscore the very strangeness of seeing these terms ever hyphenated (and not coexisting invisibly as a default assumption of Caucasian and/or Christian Americanness)

that most of the later Yiddish dramatic musical films featuring *hazzan* characters feature some kind of Day of Atonement scene (e.g. *A Cantor on Trial* 1931, *Kol Nidre* 1939, *Mothers of Today*, 1939, and *Der vilner shtot khazn*, 1940), following in the wake of the *Jazz Singer*, a film that is book-ended by Day of Atonement service scenes and occasionally intercut mid-way by flashes of its looming specter.

The Double Cantorate of the *Jazz Singer*

This palimpsest, representing a sort of double cantorate—the cantorate of prayer and the cantorate of public entertainment—carries the central dilemma of the film, its preoccupation with cultural succession. The issue here is more than a career, more than an art form, more even than questions of whether Jack is a believer or a faithful son. We are dealing here with the realm of articulation between tradition and modernity, where the internally coherent life of a traditional culture disperses itself into the multiple and incompatible coherence—and thus, the incoherence —of a cosmopolitan society, itself the palimpsest of many cultures. (Rosenberg 27)

Much in the way D.W. Griffith popularised cross-cutting in film editing by alternating between two different scenes to create a sensation of simultaneity and dramatic tension, *The Jazz Singer* introduces this technique in the realm of sound by providing essential segues and escalating temporalities in both real time and the space of memory. Beyond the mere juxtaposition of sounds, *The Jazz Singer* also transitions back and forth from diegetic sound (the few instances synchronised sound) and non-diegetic sound (canned score music), and ‘sound identities’ of the protagonist. The most powerful moments of the film break through the fourth wall by drawing the audience into the “reality” of the cinematic action by the use of the shocking realism (by the standards of

films of the time) of synchronised sound. Other moments, all attached to the protagonist's Jewish sound memory, float into the consciousness of the conflicted protagonist (who may very well be a stand-in for a Jewish audience's own internal tensions between tradition and modernity—although this film was marketed to a much wider audience) as he internally grapples with his own conflicted identity as both the son of cantor and a rising musical theater star. The externalisation of his hidden identity struggles assumes an especially surreal contour in the scene in which Jakie, now a young man (known as “Jack Robin”), takes a detour into a Yosele Rosenblatt concert.

This scene—which was filmed using a series of reverse shots— showing Jakie, sitting transfixed, if slightly anxious, at the concert of the famed cantor, is clearly a pivotal one. The image of Cantor Rosenblatt eventually slips into the image of Jakie's father chanting in the synagogue. This scene is a literalisation of the cultural identity crisis Jakie (and no doubt, many viewing the film) faced, but with a slight modification: the ritual-free stage is still graced by a clergyman. Perhaps Jakie's ultimate sigh and nod of relief towards the end of the scene signals his own reconciliation with his two seemingly separate lives via Rosenblatt's synthesis of stage and plaintive Yiddish singing. The fade into the *Kol Nidre* scene with his father thrusts audiences into his mindset, creating a sound bridge between these two worlds he inhabits and pitting the two ‘untranslated’ scenes of raw, traditional ‘Jewish sound’ against each other. The lack of English translation of both the *Kol Nidre* scene and the *Yortsayt* performance places special emphasis on the ‘mood’ of the scenes, sacrificing contextual reference for raw affect. Once again, the specific tone achieved in these scenes—two scenes of iconically “Jewish sound”—cement the association between Jewish identity and death and

mourning in the film's portrayal of Jewish musical identity. Significantly, the *Yortsayt* concert scene shifts from an active to a passive consumption of the "Jewish music": the song assumes a gentrified status as an isolated, cathartic "act," as opposed to an organic component of a larger service within the context of Jewish communal life. Both the stage and the filmed synagogue offer audiences a post-synagogue experience, offering viewers the movie theater as the new synagogue, the new site of collective judgment and connection. Community is now experienced in the cinema theater, through the eyes of a would-be cantor, and listening is elevated to a new performative status of cultural participation. Even before this moment, the two figures of Rosenblatt and Cantor Rabinowitz were symbolically merged in the film via music into one (perhaps as 'cantor writ large'), as Crosland dubbed Yosele Rosenblatt's recorded voice for Cantor Rabinowitz's *Kol Nidre* recitation (Sapoznik 119). Just as the integration of diegetic sound signaled a new chapter in advancing a realist aesthetic in film, the partial incorporation of Jackie's externalised inner struggles in this scene reveal how cinema could project and absorb its audience's aspirations and anxieties, situating the viewer directly in the thick of these loaded scenes, without aid of translation, explanatory dialogue, or other secondary mediation. The successful establishment of this 'double cantorate' sets the stage for subsequent Yiddish film musicals which draw and colourfully comment upon the conflicting roles of the *hazzan*—and, by extension, the Jewish immigrant audiences—in the new world.

The Jazz Singer and Its Afterlives in Yiddish Musical Film

The *Jazz Singer* myth is revisited—with a more traditionally-oriented twist—over a decade later in the classic Moishe Oysher film, *Der vilner shtot khazn* (1940, dir. Max Nosseck). The final Yiddish film to be premiered on Broadway in that decade (Hoberman 315), Nosseck’s film was hailed as an “artistic triumph for the Yiddish film industry” by the *New York Herald-Tribune*, which further remarked, “one need no longer speculate about the proper place of these films in the many-corridor auditorium of the American theater. Yiddish films have arrived” (312). L. Fogelman of the Yiddish *Forverts* declared the film “one of the best Yiddish films heretofore made;”⁵⁷ William Edlin of *der Tog* applauded the film for its non-caricatured representations of aristocratic secular salon culture, its respectful treatment of its cantorial moments, and overall tone and impressive aesthetic value.⁵⁸ Respected cultural critic of the *Morgn Frayhayt*, Nathaniel Buchwald likewise saw great artistic merit in *Der vilner shtot khazn* and attributed its lack of broader success not to its cinematography and sound design (which he likened to its Hollywood counterparts), but to issues in organisation and distribution (Buchwald 26). Indeed, despite its technical prowess, *Der vilner shtot khazn* was a great financial disappointment (Goldman 119). Buchwald further describes the cultural connection *Der vilner shtot khazn* forged with its Yiddish-speaking audience by explaining, “who sings cantorial pieces warms your consciousness” (27).

The 1940 feature, starring real-life cantor and Yiddish theater sensation Moishe Oysher, was loosely based on the legend of the *Balabesl* cantor of Vilna, (as dramatically

⁵⁷ (my translation) L. Fogelman, “di naye yidishe muvi, ‘der vilner shtot-khazn’ in cameo teater,” *Forverts*, Wednesday, February 14, 1940, 4.

⁵⁸ William Edlin, “Der shtot-khazn—a film vos kan zikh glaykhn ken tsu di beste oyf broadvay,” *Der Tog*, February 16, 1940, 5.

immortalised in Mark Arnshteyn's play, *Der vilner balebesl*, which was first performed in Yiddish in 1906) who deserted his family and community to pursue fame as a singer in the outside world (Hoberman 259). While the accommodationist dénouement of *The Jazz Singer* sought to reconcile conflicting currents in Jake's life by having Jake both return to the synagogue to chant the *Kol Nidre* prayer and also resume his celebrated musical theater life, the pangs of longing and heartbreak are felt much more acutely in the 1940 filmic iteration of a *hazzan* who abandons his post to try his hand in the world of secular culture. *Der vilner shtot khazn* presents a heavily moralistic perspective on the story, culminating with a homecoming that is too late and the subsequent tragic death of the film's fallen hero. As a film produced nearly 13 years following the release of *The Jazz Singer*, its heavily traditionalist message is especially intriguing. The 13 year period which separated the production of these films was not an ordinary 13 year period: these were the years during which one third of world Jewry was annihilated in the Nazi Holocaust. At least some of the emphatic traditionalism evident in *Der vilner shtot khazn* must be viewed as a cinematic expression of anxiety over the fate of Jewish culture and religion in the face of the devastation that had so recently occurred. Between the heavy-handed moralising and Oysher's effusive performance as *Hazzan* Yoel Duvid Strashunsky, the film verges on the *Shund* melodrama, but, despite the emotional excess, its visuals and artistic direction compare favourably to the best films of its time.

Much like in *the Jazz Singer*, the *hazzan's* voice in *Der vilner shtot khazn* is marked by his "Jewish anguish." Shortly after the Polish-gentile Manyushko attempts to persuade the young *hazzan* to come to Warsaw and perform in the opera, Yoel Dovid begins to justify a decision to head to Warsaw by asserting to himself and his family,

“Even in Polish, they will hear my Jewish sorrow,” yet again casting Jewish sound specifically as a sound of longing and absence. In *Der vilner shtot khazn* a new layer of musically-coded nostalgia is presented: in addition to the sentimental charge of the *Kol Nidre* prayer, an even more intensely personal musical interlude is also incorporated into the narrative to underscore the emotional centrality of traditional Jewish family life.

Shortly after he speaks of this “Jewish sorrow,” Yoel Dovid sings *Unter beymer*, a Yiddish lullaby (and an original song written by Alexander Olshanetsky for this film) to his young son. This lullaby then reverberates in the following scene—this time as non-diegetic music absorbed into the score—when Yoel Dovid arrives at night in Warsaw, where he will be seduced by the lures of Polish secular high culture and its patrons. The lullaby reappears also at the dramatically sentimental ending, where it nearly rivals the Day of Atonement *Kol Nidre* prayer as the most symbolically-charged anthem of ethnic, religious, and familial loyalty. In this scene, a once again bearded Yoel Dovid trudges, haunted and dejected, in the rain back to Vilna after learning of the death of his ailing son, while an instrumental abbreviated rendition of the lullaby song is heard shortly before the film cuts to *Kol Nidre* in the synagogue’s interior. At this emotionally climactic moment Yoel Dovid must lift himself out the realm of interior emotions (as reflected by the ‘sound memory’ of the score) and submit himself to the communal diegetic sound world of the ongoing Day of Atonement Eve service at his home synagogue. Visibly moved by the recitation of the *Kol Nidre*, Oysher quickly erupts into the prayer himself, superseding the chant of the *hazzan* on the *bima*. The recitation of the *Kol Nidre* lasts here for just over six minutes and, as was the case in *The Jazz Singer*, is not translated into English, since, for the intended demographic of this film, no

explanation of this prayer was required and, even more significantly, it is the *sound* of this prayer, rather than the meaning of its words, that was meant to—and did—stir its audience).⁵⁹

Here, even more forcefully than in *The Jazz Singer*, the audience is folded into the assembled crowd on the Day of Atonement, as the camera weaves in and out of worshippers for a longer than usual duration. On the one hand, this scene could arguably stand as a ‘show piece’ for Oysher’s extraordinary baritone voice, but the importance of this scene is clearly much broader. This scene creates a more powerful, participatory experience for the viewer than the synagogue scenes featured in *The Jazz Singer*, both due to its comparatively longer and more complex treatment of Jewish communal worship and also the overall mise-en-scène of the worshippers, with whom the audience experiences an intimate, horizontal (face-to-face) encounter. This compositional strategy is, notably, in stark contrast to that of the synagogue scenes in *The Jazz Singer*, which favoured a more ‘vertical,’ and hence, more potentially distancing, relationship with the worshippers. The emotional realism of this scene is thus achieved both sonically and visually, as the attachment to the figures is heightened in these closing moments of the film.

The heightened realism evident in *Der vilner shtot khazn*’s *mis-en-scene* in the closing scene also renders the devastating fate of its protagonist all the more tragic. The length of the scene forces its viewers (and listeners) to immerse themselves fully and viscerally in the pathos of the moment—not as circumstantial bystanders, but as active

⁵⁹ The lack of translation in the synagogue scenes of both films engenders entirely different effects: for *The Jazz Singer*, it creates the aforementioned “documentary” or ‘othering’ effect; in *Overture to Glory*, the lack of translation heightens the immediacy of the experience for its audience, who can be assumed to be fully familiar with what they are hearing on-screen.

witnesses. Whereas *The Jazz Singer* concludes by reverting to Jack's blossoming stage life as the conciliatory coda of the narrative (i.e. Jack returns to the stage after filling in for his dying father at his home community's services for the eve of the Day of Atonement; he is ultimately not only accepted in both worlds—he is greatly beloved by both), *Der vilner shtot khazn* draws out what it depicts as the irreversibly damaging consequences of assimilation into secular culture.⁶⁰

Unlike *The Jazz Singer*, an archetypal “American dream” narrative, wherein the individual is affirmed through her/his free will, perseverance and triumph above all obstacles (young Jakie enters the world of secular culture of his own volition), *Der vilner shtot khazn* portrays its cantor-protagonist's foray into the world of secular culture as achieved only through an act of extended seduction. Within the first minutes of Nosseck's film, two figures who are clearly outsiders appear in the sanctuary of Yoel Dovid's community. These men surface amidst a series of surveying shots of the synagogue space, as Oysher enters the synagogue, his voice preceding his body onscreen. Among the more interesting shots is the shot taken from the women's section in the balcony above. Two women look on at their star *hazzan* with visible pride and admiration, and then the camera situates the viewer in their position. The camera then returns to Yoel Dovid before very abruptly and awkwardly sliding, as though to draw

⁶⁰ Interestingly, in Raphaelson's original stage treatment of *The Jazz Singer*, Jack is completely cut off from his father when he decides to marry a gentile actress. He returns to fill in for his departed father (who died of heartbreak from his son), and ultimately forgoes his promising stage career. Concerned that such an ending would not resonate with a broader audience, Vitaphone enlisted the help of screenwriter Alfred A. Cohn to modify the original narrative. With the approval of Jack Warner, Cohn replaced the original ending with one that was much more affirmative and accepting (and less invested in traditional Jewish life). As Goldman concludes, "The Warner Brothers transformed *The Jazz Singer* from a film about the complexities of the new American life, where family and peoplehood still had worth, into a film with a strongly assimilationist message." (See Eric Goldman, "The Jazz Singer," in *When Joseph Met Molly* 42-45). As a Yiddish-language film, *Overture to Glory* was targeted primarily to Jewish audiences, so perhaps the severity of the ending spoke to their underlying concerns about the continuity of Jewish life, a set of concerns Goldman suggests Yiddish cinema routinely addresses and validates.

attention to the strangeness of their presence in the synagogue, to reveal the visibly awed gentiles, whose gaze vaguely mimics the women's shortly before. Eve Sicular rightly identifies the relationship between Oysher's character and these two Polish aristocratic men as having a distinctly homoerotic undercurrent (Paskin 241; Sicular 43). The *tallis*-clad fellow male worshippers are shown likewise sneaking in a few furtive, but more solemn, glances at their cantor, as he impressively promenades down the central aisle of the sanctuary and assumes his position, eyes lifted purposefully heavenwards. After the service has concluded, the cantor is quickly approached by the two gentiles outside the synagogue.

Stanislaw Manyushko, the Polish gentile composer, compliments Yoel Dovid on his *voice*, describing it as a unique specimen and urges him to train it. Oysher bashfully responds by quoting his departed father who said that "for Jewish prayer, one needs more heart, more soul," and says he plans on transmitting this to his young son (whom he is holding before him; the camera slips down to emphasise his standing there).⁶¹ This exchange between the two gentile men and the young *hazzan* is the first of several throughout the film to suggest a stark dichotomy between the cold professionalism and technical discipline of secular Polish music and the warm, spontaneous exuberance of the Jewish cantorial art.

Upon seeing the two men speaking with his son-in-law, Yoel Dovid's father-in-law appears and summons him to return home. Manyushko encourages him to visit him in his home and hear some music, remarking that, "...a musical guest such as you would be most welcome." As Sicular points out, 'musical' can also be code for 'queer,' such as

⁶¹ This scene also helps establish Manyushko as a potential threat to Yoel Dovid's successful heterosexual reproduction. As Sicular points out, Yoel Dovid's young son's ultimate death marks the culmination of that threat of continuity which Manyushko represented.

the word “artistic” often was used (see Chauncey 54) and such an interpretation would most certainly support a reading of the exchange between these characters as one of homosexual seduction.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Yoel Dovid’s father-in-law quickly snaps that he hasn’t the time for such nonsense and steers him home. After sitting down to a holiday meal and reciting the grace-after-meals with his father-in-law, wife, son, and the local *shamash* Nuteh, Yoel Dovid promptly excuses himself. As he is about to leave, his wife wraps a scarf around him to make sure he will not become sick when he ventures outside repeating the warning of Yoel Dovid’s father-in-law in the previous scene outside the synagogue, where the old man urged Yoel Dovid to return home quickly so he would not ‘get sick outside.’ This clause, which repeats a number of times throughout the film, may perhaps be viewed as a heavy-handed metaphor for the dangers of assimilation.

The following scene reveals that Yoel Dovid has been visiting the composer Manyushko’s home regularly. Manyushko summons the young cantor to sit down in his parlor as he plays Beethoven for him on the piano. As he is playing, Manyushko leers at Yoel Dovid, who sits with his eyes closed, mesmerised. After Manyushko finishes playing the piece, Yoel Dovid remarks how he feels ‘a strangeness,’ but once Manyushko begins playing again he no longer feels a strangeness but a remarkable closeness with him—the seduction has begun. The next day, Manyushko introduces Yoel Dovid to Chopin’s music. As one of the greatest and most widely-known Polish classical composers, Frédéric Chopin is a particularly apt choice for a saga involving the struggle between traditional Jewish communal life and secular Polish high culture. During the

scene of the subsequent visit, in which Manyushko plays Chopin's Etude in E major, op. 10 no. 3 (1832), often called "La Tristesse," for Yoel Dovid, Nuteh, who has been sent out to find the young cantor, is seen peering into the window and catching a glimpse of the scene, which elicits from him a comically scornful expression. A servant then informs the men that a man has appeared who would like to see Yoel Dovid, and Nuteh then appears and summons him to return home, back to his community. Just as in the *Jazz Singer*, here also, it is in the non-Jewish world that the down-trodden Jewish hero is introduced to music as a pristine aesthetic form unrelated to the burdens of historical Jewish memory which infuses traditional Jewish music. After leisurely reclining with awe-filled eyes in Manyushko's parlor, Yoel Dovid returns to the world of communal, ethnic, and familial obligations, but the seduction of the melody he just heard lingers on, 'invading' his consciousness,' as it were, following him home, and ultimately rendering him deaf to his community and family.

In the following scene, Yoel Dovid sits by his table, with a downcast face, as his outraged father-in-law paces back and forth before him and berates him in front of his family. At 21:23, under the father-in-law's rant, we hear faint traces of the Chopin excerpt. Here, the score fills in for what the young cantor is not saying, but rather thinking.⁶² By providing a new layer of meaning through 'musical memories' woven into the non-diegetic score music, the sound design here and in several other pivotal moments of the film grants its audience special access to the inner thoughts and emotional torment of the tortured protagonist.

Predictably, Yoel Dovid returns "outside" (literally) in the following scene, in which Nuteh, the servant and Chana, his wife, escort him outside at night. Nuteh

⁶² Thanks to musicologist Ronald Robboy for alerting me to this very faintly heard moment in the score

again worries about him getting sick (“if a *hazzan* is sick on Sukkot he’ll still be sick on Purim!”). As they walk, we here strains of more ‘primitive’ harmonic minor-oriented music played on woodwind horns—perhaps intended to evoke Yoel Dovid’s internal struggle as he decides whether or not to visit Manyushko again. After Nuteh takes his leave of them, Yoel Dovid catches a snippet of Manyushko’s new opera wafting from outside of the Polish composer’s salon. Upon seeing her husband’s great excitement, Chana asks if he wants to go in and even offers to take the blame if her father finds out. Back in Manyushko’s parlour, the Polish composer plays for him an excerpt from his new opera *Halka*. When Yoel Dovid, whom Manyushko presumed to be musically illiterate, peers over the composer’s shoulder and begins to sing along with the score, Manyushko’s cannot contain his glee at seeing that the young *hazzan* had taught himself to read music. Manyushko comes to a dramatic halt, shoots up from his piano bench, and declares, “He reads. He READS!” (a moment vaguely reminiscent of Frankenstein’s dramatic pronouncement, “it’s ALIVE!” in the 1931 film adaptation of Mary Shelley’s classic horror novel). The cantor can now be ‘trained.’ The cultural transformation is under way.

Back at home, Yoel Dovid is adamantly extoling the virtues of opera music, as emotional music floods the score. He specifically speaks to the greatness of the written music itself. “This is the music that speaks to the soul of all peoples” he passionately argues, “No hatred can be written here.” At this, the elderly rabbi, who is present at Yoel Dovid’s table shakes his head and proclaims “You’re undertaking too much, Yoel Dovid. For thousands of years we’ve shouted to the world, *and the world has been deaf.*” Yoel Dovid retorts that perhaps shouting was the mistake—he wants to *sing* to them (as he

says this, score music swells importantly, if somewhat tragically, with a harmonic minor riff underneath), not shout, saying all of his *hineinis*, *yaalehs*, and *unitanehtokefs* will sing out of him (as he puts it) and they ‘will understand.’ The rabbi remains unconvinced by the young cantor’s lofty proclamations and reminds him that his greatness is rooted in his elevatedness in prayer and further cautions him at that if he goes to ‘them’ (to perform in the opera in Warsaw) he will ‘stand between two worlds’ and subsequently, ‘be nowhere.’ (Such assertions are especially ironic in light of director Max Nosseck’s later lament after the film’s release that the film did not receive the proper viewership and recognition that it deserved because it was in Yiddish.)

The combination of the dialogue between Yoel Dovid and the Rabbi and the music in this sequence can be understood as code for the confrontation between traditional Jewish culture and modern European ‘civil society’ and high culture, which, in Yoel Dovid’s mind, must preclude the possibility of barbarism (as expressed in anti-Semitism). The rabbi’s response ultimately reveals the fundamental claim of the film: despite any appearances to the contrary, the secular world and its culture is neither safe nor appropriate for Jews and its music cannot compete with the sanctity and emotional authenticity of Jewish musical prayer. In this way, the film is offering its own internal commentary on the atrocities that befell even the most worldly, highly-assimilated Jews across the ocean during the time of its production.

Late one night, even Chana, originally supportive of her husband’s outside musical pursuits, eventually confronts Yoel Dovid, asking him why he neglects to consider his family, to which the young cantor loudly declares that he is going to Warsaw and brazenly snaps, “I’m the master of my own voice!” In this context, (unlike in the

cantor narrative of *The Jazz Singer*) bold individualism is clearly presented as a trespass of communal/ familial care and responsibility. Chana implores him to keep his voice down, so as not to disturb their young son's sleep. Yoel Dovid then sings a lullaby (which sadly foreshadows what is to happen later to his son) to the boy, tucked away in the adjacent room: "don't sit by the window, an ill wind might come your way, and I don't want my little boy to get sick, I pray..." Again, the "outside" is invoked as a dangerous terrain which could result in potentially serious illness. Yoel Dovid, however, does not himself heed this caution and after singing the child to sleep, proceeds to gather his belongings to prepare for his journey to Warsaw.

A lone lamenting clarinet plays as Yoel Dovid ventures alone into the dark sanctuary to collect his *siddur* before venturing out to Warsaw. He stands wistfully on the *bima* and suddenly at 36:56 we hear the disembodied voices of the cantor's choir, with thick vibrato mimicking that of the instruments. Yoel Dovid looks both surprised and haunted. Yoel Dovid recovers his *siddur* from under the lectern atop the *bima* and accidentally drops it. At 37:46, as he lifts it to his lips, the faint murmurs of the cascading phantom cantorial choir reemerge. At around 38:40, the invisible phantom choir mixes in with the instrumental orchestral score (a collision of two emotional sound worlds), when a final layer of musical meaning—Yoel Dovid's lullaby—is added to the mix. The different layers of music in this scene act as the sonic equivalent of a flashback, instantly transporting both the protagonist and the film's audience to an emotional space elsewhere in real time. The sound design of this scene also musically demonstrates and elaborates upon the cantor's earlier statement about his audible "Jewish sorrow." The musical maelstrom serves not only to suggest the cantor's inner thoughts at that moment but also

to inform the audience of his native sonic homeland.

The complexity and foreboding of this scene makes the following scene, which takes place in a Warsaw salon filled with patrons, singers, and musicians in Manyushko's elite social circle, all the more alienating and jarring. Polish aristocrats mill about as a pianist plays Chopin's *Waltz no. 1 in E flat, Op. 18* in the background. Men and women casually socialise. Yoel Dovid arrives and is greeted with great anticipation, as the pianist sits down to rehearse with him. The scene segues with the live orchestra pit of the actual performance of the opera *Halka*, echoing what Yoel Dovid was just rehearsing in the previous scene, suggesting a nearly immediate and seamless flow from his 'training' to his performance and subsequent acclaim. Yoel Dovid appears not only costumed in traditional Polish peasant clothes, but also completely clean-shaven. The seduction continues after the show too, with Wanda, another, even younger, prodigy pupil of Manyushko, cornering him and flirting aggressively with the rising opera star. The following scene further underscores the rift, as the film understands it, between the emotional spontaneity of prayer and the measured rigidity of the classical music world. Back home, young Peretz, Yoel Dovid's son, sits by the window and is drawing out stripes on a piece of paper with another young boy. When his friend draws a sixth stripe, and Peretz explains there can be only *five* stripes, it becomes clear that he is trying to sketch out musical notation. He wants to write out "music for the birds to read," as he explains to his young friend. The other boy mocks him after Peretz tells him his father is in Warsaw, in the opera. The other boy retorts incredulously "Praying at the Warsaw Opera?" and bursts out in laughter. While this is among the few more light-hearted and comic scenes in the film, it reminds the audience again that one cannot write out music

for what comes instinctually: just as birds produce their own music independent of codified dictation, the Jews have their prayer, which, as Yoel Dovid explains at the film's start, must emanate from the heart and soul. The other boy's mocking response also contains a kernel of seriousness, as the community regards Peretz's father first and foremost as a cantor who cannot trick or transcend his destiny as such.

Meanwhile, Chana summons the boy over, as she reads from Yoel Dovid's most recent letter home. In the letter, Yoel Dovid—echoing the film's rather frequent refrain—implores his young son not to go 'outside' and catch a cold, reports that he is rehearsing in a new opera, and asks them to "please come soon." It is at this point that the film introduces Yoel's Dovid's growing pangs of longing and his dawning realisation of his "true role." At 51:24, Yoel Dovid sits before the mirror of his dressing room and sings wistfully of his hometown of Vilna (one example of a good number of "longing for home" songs featured in Yiddish musical cinema; this category will be discussed in Chapter 4). For the cantor, Vilna is not only the place of his birth (*Vilna, your name sounds so good to me, Vilna, a new sweet song. I sing the day through, when I think of you. Vilna, where my cradle once stood*), but also the site of his active Jewish pride, (*Oh! The Jerusalem of Lithuania! Filled with Jewish charm*). For a brief moment during the song, the mirror reflection of the cantor gives way to images of his family life in Vilna and then the women's view of the sanctuary (a similar effect to the memories Jack 'sees' in his dressing room mirror in *The Jazz Singer*). An invisible chorus chimes in to echo the Yiddish negative 'nayn, nayn, nayn' when Yoel Dovid sings, *With this new song, I approach you. As I cannot forget you, no no, no*. Even in his reveries, there is a surrogate cantor choir supporting his dulcet tones. As he is singing, two men enter his dressing

room and proceed to measure him for his performance costume. Perhaps this instance of ‘measuring’ constitutes yet another heavy-handed metaphor: as a displaced cantor sings with nearly ineffable longing for his hometown, the gentiles come in to measure his body (not his heart), much in the same way that the music in their world is defined by printed scores.

Even in his subsequent interactions with the coquettish Wanda, while still suggesting the flickers of amorous attachment, Yoel Dovid solemnly reminds her of that “Jewish joy has a sad soul,” and shortly turns to his (ostensibly Jewish) head tailor, seeking out a local synagogue in which he can pray. Here again, the “Jewish sound” is predicated on a lack, and the return to it represents an unfulfilled and virtually unfulfillable obligation to the inescapable fate of Jewishness as expressed through music. The film reminds us of the inescapable legacy of Jewish historical experience that lingers in the soul and yearns to be expressed through traditional Jewish sound, the sound of prayer. The tailor arranges for him to lead services at the local community, and Yoel Dovid eagerly sneaks off during rehearsal time to assume the role of cantor once again. Even when the director and his retinue begin to gossip as they wonder where their star might be, and Manyushko chimes in that Yoel Dovid is above gossip, the countess curiously remarks, “once a cantor, always a cantor.” This pronouncement runs totally contrary to Jack’s theater colleagues dramatically pronouncing that he belongs *to them* now in *The Jazz Singer*. Here, even the ‘dangerous’ outside worlds openly concedes to a cantor’s eternal primary position as precisely that—a cantor.

Yoel Dovid ultimately returns to Manyushko to announce that he is leaving. Channeling the *Jazz Singer* scene, in which Mary Dale cannot believe that Jack would

abandon them to lead services back home right on the night of their Broadway premiere, Manyushko asks, “Going away a week before the premiere?” As the composer expresses his displeasure at his star’s intention to run off at this critical moment and accuses him of ingratitude by asking if this is the thanks they receive for the warmth that they had extended to him, dramatic harmonic minor score music floods the soundscape of the film.

Meanwhile, back in Vilna, unbeknownst to Yoel Dovid, his son is bed-ridden and critically ill. In a scene marked by the mournful hushed tones of impending tragedy, Chana tries to reassure the boy that he will see his father soon and sings to him the lullaby her husband sang to him earlier. Mid-song, the boy breathes his last breath, and, shortly thereafter, Chana’s father is shown silently covering the mirrors in the house as a sign of mourning.

The heartbroken silence in the scene of the boy’s passing is abruptly broken by high energy orchestra playing underneath the stage of the new opera “Halka” in the following scene. Superimposed over this shot are the theater credits, all in Polish, for the production. These credits, which include Yoel Dovid, now referred to by his assumed Polish name, Dudysz Straszynski, make it clear to the audience that Yoel Dovid had submitted to Manyushko’s will and has remained in Warsaw to perform in the opera, despite his increasing reservations and his growing longing for his home and family.

Chana’s father, who traveled up to Warsaw specifically to share the tragic tidings with his son-in-law, finds Yoel Dovid backstage and informs him of his son’s untimely death. In an act of traditional Jewish mourning for the death of an immediate family member, Chana’s father rips Yoel Dovid’s garment. Since this garment happens to be a Polish opera costume, this act of ripping also may be viewed as a symbolic ‘rip’ at the

secular Polish bourgeois culture in which his son-in-law has enveloped himself.

Completely shell-shocked, the bereaved Yoel Dovid misses his cue onstage and stares blankly, with a haunted expression on his face. In an extreme close-up on his left eye, an image of his young son appears in his pupil. At 1:13:50, instead of singing the expected operatic aria, in a choked up voice, Yoel Dovid begins to sing the Yiddish lullaby he was wont to sing to his son. In the dramatic tradition of literally ‘performing out’ one’s identity on stage at the end of the film musical, (as we have seen at the end of *The Jazz Singer*, and will witness again later on in the concluding scene of *Yidl mitn fidl*, and to a lesser extent, in several other Yiddish musical films, as discussed in Chapter 1) this scene strips the cantor down to his emotional core and reveals to the audience something quite different than his costuming (and the opera’s written music) suggests. The crowd breaks out in confusion and shock, and the curtain is closed on him. Manyushko, Tilchinski, and Wanda rush to his side and ask what has happened to him as they escort him out. After a doctor, who is brought in to examine Yoel Dovid, pronounces him mentally ill and unable to sing ever again, Yoel Dovid is left to wander back home, against a musical backdrop of repeated, alternating, rhythmic eighth notes that menacingly echo the dramatic despair of this fallen hero.

As described earlier, the music of the final scenes of the film provides not only structural closure, but symbolic unity to the both the internal and external sound-world Yoel Dovid inhabited, returning again both to the lullaby and the *Kol Nidre* melody. Moreover, the closing scene of the sanctuary of Yoel Dovid’s home community once again envelops the film audience in a most visceral sense into the most dramatic of services, the eve of the Day of Atonement. The famed returning cantor ultimately

collapses upon reciting the *Kol Nidre*, offering such a dramatically visceral and heart-rending rendition that he can literally not continue—he dies in his prayers. “For generations and generations, we will remember that for them you sang and for us you prayed. The Vilner Balabessel,” the rabbi declares as he stands over the cantor’s fallen body. The score picks up on the *Kol Nidre* tune, but adds a minor accidental into it, as the rabbi covers Yoel Dovid’s body with a tallit. *Der vilner shtot khazn*’s overwhelming message is that assimilation is dangerous and that there exists an unbridgeable chasm between the musical world of Jewish prayer and that of secular artistic performance. The irony, of course, is that the film’s star, Moishe Oysher, routinely alternated between the synagogue and the stage in his real life.

While the overt anti-assimilation message of this film is quite apparent, there are other significant currents in this film which should not be overlooked. The film is set in Poland, not in America, and thus inhabits a world of nostalgia and a world which was—at least in the minds of its immigrant Jewish-American audiences—one of purity and simplicity, where what constituted Jewish life and Jewish community was clear. The struggle of the cantor in this film is a personal struggle: because of his musical talent he is exposed to the world of non-Jewish culture and is lead to struggle with the torment presented by the conflict between Jewish community and the surrounding culture. The struggles of Yoel Dovid in *Der vilner shtot khazn* can be viewed as a personification of the reality that confronted the transitioning Jewish immigrant community faced by the lures of the ambient culture, while still emotionally connected to the comforting world of their East European Jewish tradition. While the pitfalls of assimilation are emphasised in the film’s plot, the potency of the beauty and charm of the classical music is also clear,

allowing for the possibility of recognizing positive elements in non-Jewish culture as well. The journey upon which the immigrant Jewish population in America had embarked was one that involved navigating the currents of these conflicting cultures, and, thus, a film such as *Der vilner shtot khazn* resonated powerfully with its newly American, Jewish audiences.

Another Yiddish film musical Moishe Oysher film more closely mirroring his own life, *Dem khazns zundl*, (1937, directed by Ilya Motyleff and Sidney M. Goldin) also revisits the *Jazz Singer* legend, this time offering a more sympathetic portrayal of a young cantor torn between two worlds. The two worlds in this case are not exactly secular and Jewish culture, but rather, old world and new world, pitting the world of the cantorate (back in Belz, a small Jewish town in western Ukraine) against the world of the Yiddish stage in American. As such, the musical world of the film offers a more intimate glimpse than does that of *The Jazz Singer* or even *Der vilner shtot khazn* into the soundscape that accompanied the life of early 20th century Jews, both in the United States and Eastern Europe, while building upon the mythic “*Jazz Singer*” struggle, using the figure of the cantor to reconcile the clashing spaces and temporalities.

This film is peppered throughout with several self-reflexive humorous moments. For example, at the outset of the film, when Shloimele, the film’s protagonist, the ‘cantor’s son,’ is caught by his parents preparing for a theatrical production with an itinerant troupe of Jewish actors, Shloimele’s mother confronts the troupe, demanding that they return her son to her. When she explains that he’s a cantor’s son, one of the actors pipes up that he too is the son of a cantor, and so was “the great Moguleska,” referencing one of the greatest cantors of the Golden Age of cantorial music. Shortly

after, in the film's first instance of diegetic music, the troupe—including young Shloimele—is shown singing while traveling away on a train, signaling to the audience, both visually and aurally that our young protagonist like Jakie in *The Jazz Singer*, has cast his lot with the fate of these traveling actors. When the ultimate separation of Shloimele from his European roots occurs with the arrival of the troupe in America, the significance of the moment is emphatically underscored, as the camera, using a long-shot from the troupe's point of view on the boat, pans the skyline of New York City with nothing less than the *The Star Spangled Banner* providing the sound track.

Another ironic moment of self-reflexivity occurs when the film advances to '15 years later' (as the film informs us) and our still young, but now more "Americanised," protagonist is given his first "big chance" to be featured on the American stage. Helen, a young singer, is shown standing before her adoring manager while rehearsing *Ikh hob dikh tsu fil lib*, a song originally penned just four years earlier for the Yiddish musical comedy hit, *Der katerinshtshik* (The Organ-grinder) by Alexander Olshanetsky, who scored and wrote the music for both *Der vilner shtot khazn* and *Dem khazns zundl*.⁶³ Since Olshanetsky had composed extensively for the Yiddish stage, it is not surprising that often—especially in *Dem khazns zundl*—renditions of beloved songs from the Yiddish stage are featured in the film, as indeed is the case at the critical moment of this scene when Helen gives Shoimele (now known as 'Sol,' also in the tradition of the 'cantor's son' myth) his 'big break,' and they perform together at a nightclub. With not-so-subtle irony, Helen introduces the song they are about to sing: "Olshanetsky's *Mayn*

⁶³ In an especially comical moment, shortly after Helen finishes singing the song, her manager showers her with compliments which suggest an amorous intent on his part. As he attempts to embrace her, Moishe Oysher's booming voice is heard off-screen. As in *Overture to Glory*, Oysher's voice precedes his physical presence on-screen, perhaps hinting at his tremendous star power.

shtetele belz!” Their performance is met with wild applause, and the audience demands an encore. Helen and Sol return to the stage and launch into a spirited rendition of *Chiribim Chiribom*, another crowd favourite of the Yiddish stage, and one that, with its origins in Eastern European Hasidic *niggunim*, also ironically, invokes a distant and bygone setting. Thunderous applause ensues, along with a standing ovation. Thus, the “Jewish music” being performed here has now transitioned from being the soundscape of life being lived to becoming a sentimental, evocative vehicle of nostalgic entertainment.

The ‘struggle’ Sol faces is slightly different than the two aforementioned celluloid cantor’s sons. While he did go against his parents’ wishes and run off with a theater troupe as a boy, unlike the others, Sol does not become part of the “outside” non-Jewish culture (as Yoel Dovid had done by becoming a Polish opera star or as Jack had done by throwing himself into the world of Broadway), but rather remains rooted in the world of, albeit secular, but nevertheless distinctly Jewish, Yiddish musical performance. Thus, Sol’s break with the past is portrayed as not the dramatic tragedy of the others, but more of an understandable transition to a newer, more modern reality—a transition that would speak powerfully to the Jewish immigrant audiences in America in the 1940’s. Even as he begins “to make it” in America, Sol—in a gesture very familiar to many of the film’s audience members—faithfully mails off one quarter of his first real paycheck of \$100 to his parents with a photo and a letter wishing them a Happy New Year. His father, still dismissive of him, reads it and finally wells up with emotion.

Sol’s rootedness in Yiddish culture is demonstrated once again, when, as a guest on a radio program, he is asked by the host—a bombastic fellow of ample proportions named Rosovitch—to sing an Italian song for the listening audience. Sol refuses, saying

he wants to sing something ‘closer to his heart,’ in Yiddish. When Rosovitch patronisingly suggests that he might perhaps sing something about being a poor miserable orphan, Sol proudly declares that he is, in fact, the son of a cantor, and would prefer to perform a musical rendition taken from the Jewish liturgy. Sol’s retort positively affirms his ownership of his religious heritage and conscious connectedness to his past, the Old Country, and its ways; he is not an orphan, but rather the proud inheritor of a generations’ old tradition. He then proceeds to chant his father’s version of the well-known Jewish prayer *Av Harachamim*.

As it turns out, Sol’s insistence on performing a cantorial piece has fateful consequences. In a scene which offers a humourous—almost slapstick—insight into the workings of the early Jewish-American synagogue—we are brought into a meeting of the officers of Congregation Beis Yitskhok, who happen to be meeting to choose a new cantor for their synagogue at the very time that Sol is performing on Rosovitch’s radio program. The hilarity which ensues, as one officer suggests his brother-in-law for the position of cantor simply because he is bearded (thus giving him the correct, traditional look) and others offer various—often quite hilarious—vocal requirements which they believe are essential, is clearly meant to be taken in a humorous vein, but, nevertheless, provides interesting insight into the perceived role of the cantor as one who must straddle the world of religion (indicated by the concern for a properly bearded individual) and performance (shown by the concern about vocal quality and nuance). As the officers are reaching an impasse in their deliberations, one of them fatefully reminds the others that it is now five o’clock and time to tune into the Rosovitch Radio Hour. The film cuts back to Rosovitch, who, in another mockingly comedic moment, having forgotten both

Sol's name and the title of the song he is about to perform, stalls by simply introducing Sol as 'a most famous name,' while leaning over to have Sol refresh his memory. Sol unassumingly dons his hat (an implicit nod to Jewish tradition which would expect a covered head during prayer) and sings a haunting rendition of *Av Harachamim* with piano accompaniment. As he sings, several insert reaction shots reveal the listening audience's utter delight with Sol's performance. Upon hearing Sol's singing on the radio, the bickering members of the Congregation Beis Yitskhok cantorial search committee instantly declare, "We have a cantor!" They hasten to find Sol in Roskovitch's studio and hire him forthwith. Sol, the entertainer, will now become Sol, the *hazzan*, but unlike the tragic conflicted identity crises of the cantor figures in the other films, here the melding of the two identities is smooth—even natural. Sol shares the good news with Helen, as he happily sings a bit of *Yikkum Purkan min Shemaya* to himself, after which one of the officers of Congregation Beis Yitskhok, who is about to become Sol's professional manager, returns to Sol and, while rhapsodically comparing Sol to the likes of Caruso and Razumne, eagerly describes plans to have him tour all over America. By way of an onscreen map, train, and the names of the different cities, we see the whirlwind of destinations of the tour. The audience is led to understand that the reputation of Sol—the modern vocal entertainer performing a nostalgic, traditional repertoire—has spread across the American continent.

But Sol's roots in the past—in his *shtetle Belz*—have not been erased by his new-found fame. When he receives a letter from his parents inviting him to join them in celebrating their *goldene khasene* (50th wedding anniversary), Sol announces to a worried Helen, that he intends to travel back to the Old Country in the company of his delighted

manager. In the first instance of instantaneous song that helps narrate a character's interior state (as opposed to a stage performance or recreational singing) since the much earlier scene of young Shloimele singing a song about his extreme homesickness as his boat arrived on America's shores, Helen sings *Hard It Is From You To Part*. Helen's melancholy rendition of this song serves as a segue between that scene and a montage of shots leading up to Sol's departure on the ship. An orchestra, choir, and male singer seep into the song non-diegetically, as part of the score transitioning into the diegetic soundscape of the departure scene, with Sol taking over from the 'invisible' male singer and singing to Helen from the ledge of the ship before their parting.

After a series of locomotive shots, the same view of Belz that appeared at the film's opening re-appears (again with the word 'BELZ' appearing across the screening). Sol and his manager, moved by the sight of the town, join in an emotional rendition of Olshanetsky's Yiddish song classic *Mayn shtetele belz*. While this song had been previously featured in the film as merely an on-stage performance of a bygone cultural reality, the current iteration of the song literally reflect Sol's sentimental homecoming. The two different performances of *Mayn shtetele belz* reflected the difference between the two very disparate realities of the world Yiddish soundscape of that period: when performed on the American stage, the song is an evocation of a nostalgic past, while, when sung on the actual shores of Belz, the song represents a literal reflection of an existing reality, albeit one that was soon to be erased from the world.

And it is into this reality—one from which, unlike the cantor figures in the other films, he has never entirely separated himself—that Sol is increasingly drawn as the action ensues. Within minutes of reuniting with his elderly parents at their golden

anniversary celebration, Sol sings yet another catchy song, *Zol zayn a khasene* as part of a traditionally grandiose wedding scene typical in Yiddish film and theater, featuring multitudes of attendees participating in traditional *simkhe* (celebratory) dancing, a lively band, and Oysher's tremendous vocals. The emotional turning point of the film occurs during this scene, when at 1:04:17, Sol is reunited with Rivkele, a young woman from his childhood, as a trumpet plays a riff from *Freg nor bay di shtern*, (a love song Olshanetsky wrote specially for the film, which Oysher will later sing) and is then joined by a fuller orchestra as Sol and Rivkele longingly gaze at each other in reverse close-ups. At this moment, the audience feels that a circle is somehow closing: the musical soundscape is now real, reflecting life being lived, joy being celebrated, and our young protagonist being drawn back into this reality.

The wedding is followed by a montage of Sol and Rivkele's courtship. Finally, as the two lean in to kiss, the silence of these scenes is broken by high energy fiddling. At first, the Klezmer fiddle music appears to be part of the score, but Rivkele quickly reminds her beau that the fiddler is a local man named Makar, whom Sol is delighted to learn is still alive. This moment further emphasises the genuine *reality* of the soundscape in the *shtetl* by supplanting the score with music emanating organically from its actual environs. The *shtetl* is thus promoted in *Dem khazns zundl* as a site of authentic emotions, in contrast to America, where music remains trapped in the formulaic confines of the stage and radio—the only exceptions to this being when Shloimele sings of his longing for home while on the ship, and again when Helen sings about how she will miss Sol when he departs for the Old Country— both of these, notably, songs of longing directed toward the Old Country.

After joining Makar in song, singing *Shpiel tsigayner*, Sol then confesses that, during all his years in America, he has not succeeded in finding his ‘true self’ and that nothing could bring him greater joy than being with Rivkele and with this music. He serenades her with an impassioned rendition of *Freg nor bay di shtern*. This film culminates not in a somber Day of Atonement service as do the two other films, but rather in the joyful wedding of Sol and Rivkele. *Dem khazns zundl* is unique in its cheerful and affirmative ending for the protagonist. While here too, the young protagonist, *Dem khazns zundl* (*The Cantor’s son*), fills in for his father, this time, the father, aged, but fully healthy and beaming with pride, respectfully invites his son the bridegroom to the *bima*⁶⁴ to lead services in his stead on the day of his wedding. Sol triumphantly ascends the *bima* and leads the congregation in familiar prayers, including *Yikum Purkan Min Shemaya*, the *Shema*, and a rousing *Kedushah*. Again, the young cantor is flanked by a group of choir boys, and organ accompaniment is heard.

But, since we are, after all, dealing with Yiddish drama here, the joy cannot be without a bit of melodrama: in the middle of the men’s *tish*⁶⁵ before the wedding, as the assembled guests joyfully sing *Siman tov umazl tov*, an unexpected guest walks in—Helen, from America. She is heartbroken to see that Sol, whom she loved, is about to wed another woman. Helen speaks briefly with Sol, who explains that he has always loved Rivkele and asks for her understanding. After a brief exchange with Rivkele who walks in shortly thereafter, a dejected Helen departs in a carriage. Sol stands forlornly by the window watching her leave, as the score offers a medley of *Khosn kale mazl tov* and *Freg nor bay di shtern*, as if musically endorsing the choice that Sol has made. Sol then

⁶⁴ elevated prayer lectern

⁶⁵ literally, “table.” Refers to a gathering of the men prior to the wedding ceremony, where short talks are given, joyous songs are sung, and festive refreshments are consumed.

returns to his wedding, as the film superimposes images of both his bride Rivkele and Helen riding away in a carriage. As Zanvel (Sol's father) and his manager walk him down the aisle, a triumphant rendition of *Freg nor bay di shtern* plays once again, and thus the film concludes.

In marrying his childhood sweetheart in Belz, Sol appears to forgo his future singing career in the New World, choosing instead to return to the storied village described so lovingly in Olshanetsky's tribute song. His heart appears firmly planted in those things that, to the film's audience, represent the nostalgic past: the life of the European shtetl with its traditional soundscape emanating from music of the synagogue and Jewish ritual. The film magically erases, as it were, any suggestion or hint of hardship in Belz, portraying the *shtetl* as an idyllic oasis of family, warmth and 'authentic' Jewish folk life and religion. Given the time of the film's release (1937), this image of return to a romanticised Belz is a bit ironic and represents the impossible wish to return to the old country and the communally-oriented culture it supported, or at the very least, a nostalgic longing for what this image represented to the still struggling-to-acclimatize American Jewish immigrants.⁶⁶

The Jazz Singer, *Der vilner shtot khazn*, and *Dem khazns zundl* all have as their major character a *hazzan* who must navigate—both personally and professionally—the tides of change which swept the Jewish world at the beginning of the 20th century. These

⁶⁶ Another film which could arguably be read as another inflection of *The Jazz Singer's* eternal struggle between the obligation of familial/religious bonds and the musical vibrancy of the outside world is Joseph Seiden's *Der yidisher nign* (1940). While this film focuses its attention more on an ensemble of family, friends, and neighbours (rather than centering on a cantor alone), this film features Moishe, a young promising cantor with a passion for secular music (Italian opera, in this context). Similar to *The Jazz Singer*, Moishe demonstrates dual loyalty—to his aging cantor father, for whom he returns immediately to America to pray in his stead upon receiving a telegram asking him to do so—and to his presumably non-Jewish Italian love interest, Rosita. In an especially spectacle-heavy ending, Rosita is revealed to be Jewish, and thus the film resolves on a more felicitously traditionalist note.

three iconic *khazn* films represent a reverse arch from the usual generational trajectory among Jewish-American immigrants of traditionalist-accomodationist-assimilationist, in which each of the three films responds more than it reflects its cultural moment. Each film pushing back against the cultural currents of its time and re-orchestrating the multiplying tensions of the new Jewish-American immigrant through sound and music. These cinematic cantors provided a voice with which Yiddish film musicals were able to personify the increasingly complexity of 20th century Jewish culture—a culture of transition marked by both pain and promise.

“A khazn Gets All the tzures!” The *hazzan* as clergy, teacher, and cultural icon

There are other films, however, where the *hazzan*, rather than being the focus of the film, appears in a minor role and where the presentation of the *hazzan* lacks the dramatic weight of the films discussed above. These instances generally fall into several specific categories: films where the *hazzan* is used as a symbolic figure to make a scene more ritually ‘credible,’ adding a layer of authenticity; occasions where the figure of the *khazn* is featured for spectacle value; and, finally, scenarios where the *khazn* is used as a comical or nostalgic stock figure. In most of the following examples, the *khazn*’s appearance represents at least two of the aforementioned categories.

Waldman is billed prominently in promotional material for George Roland's Biblical 'compilation' film, *Avrum Ovenu* (1933), where he plays a cantor.⁶⁷ In George Roland's 1936 *shund* melodrama, *Libe un laydnshaft*, famed cantor Leibele Waldman appears for only a matter of minutes in the film, chanting the *El moleh rachamim* (a memorial prayer) for the bride's supposedly departed mother under the wedding canopy in the elaborate wedding scene. It is interesting to observe, however, that even when the role of the *hazzan* was small, as was Waldman's in *Libe un laydnshaft*, the prestige of having a famous *hazzan* such as Leibele Waldman appear in a film was such that Waldman's name appears quite prominently in the credits and promotional materials attached to this—and other—films in which he appears.

⁶⁷ While this film features several songs, they appear more as an additional layer of 'spectacle'—sometimes, as J. Hoberman points out, inappropriately so (as in the occasional use of Edvard Grieg's *Peer Gynt* (Hoberman 183). The music is not organically folded into the rest of the film and is instead patched together along with the visuals and thus it is not categorised here as a musical.

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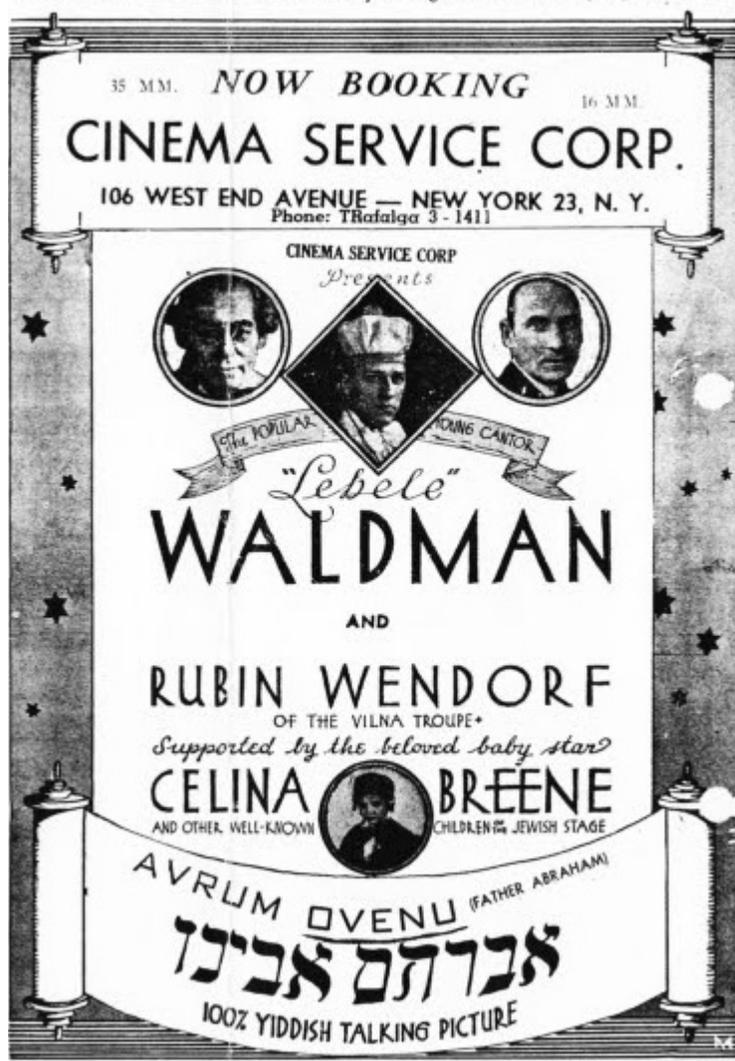


Figure 6

Leibele Waldman, “The Popular Young Cantor.” (Promotional poster for George Roland’s *Avrum Ovenu*, released in the US in 1933.)

Waldman also makes an appearance as three different cantors auditioning for a high holiday position in a short, farcical film comedy entitled *A Cantor on Trial* (1931), directed by Sydney M. Goldin. The film offers comical caricatures of three different, competing cantorial traditions and styles of the time: eastern-European, German, and finally, a modern ‘Jazz singer’ type. The ultimate triumph of the “modern” *hazzan*, who

wows the hiring committee with ragtime-like rendition of *Yismach Moshe* reflects albeit in a most comical manner, the conflicted state of American Jewish culture, again reflecting the continual struggle between the Jewish traditional past and the pull of the modern, ambient culture that surrounded the immigrants. While a *hazzan* was needed in order to carry on the sacred liturgical traditions of yore, the lure of the surrounding culture, here embodied by the facile jazz-stylings of the “Americanised” *hazzan*, ultimately prevails, thus allowing the hiring committee—to their enormous satisfaction – to bridge the chasm separating their traditional, European Jewish heritage and their newly adopted American identity. Interestingly, in this short film, the musical presentation of the prayers is entirely performative (as part of a “tryout” for a “role”), as opposed to the films discussed above, where most frequently liturgical cantorial singing was presented *in situ*—as part of an actual moment of worship. Another interesting observation that can be made regarding this short film is that by having Waldman play all three “*hazzan*” characters, the film suggests the dynamic possibility of a cantor choosing to be any (or all) of these ‘types,’ in the face of an increasing multitude of choices and musical influences in the New World.

Waldman draws upon these types once again in his singing in Joseph Seiden’s 1939 film *Kol nidre*, when he makes an almost four-minute appearance (as himself), performing a comical ballad about two competing cantors (one of Polish ancestry, and one of *litvak* [Lithuanian] ancestry) for a benefit concert. Waldman returns to the silver screen at the very opening of Seiden’s *Der groyse eytse-geyber* (1940), again appearing as himself and singing in the context of a concert (this time, backed by a pianist and singing in a radio studio). Once again, Waldman’s performance occupies an unusually

long stretch of screen time—over five consecutive minutes with minimal camera movement and editing. The very few moments the image of Waldman is interrupted during this sequence is when the film intercuts the shot of him singing with shots of mostly female listeners tuning in by their radio receivers, again positioning the movie theater audience as ‘double listeners’ (simultaneously listening, and listening to their own listening, as they are positioned with the listeners on-screen). Here, Waldman sings a rousing medley of the traditional prayer *Elohai Neshama*, interspersed with various homiletic and sentimental interjections.

Another film in which the figure of the cantor is not central, but is, nevertheless significant and is played by a famed cantor with enormous audience appeal, is the 1935 Henry Lynn film drama *Bar mitsve* featuring star of the Yiddish stage Boris Thomashefsky. In this film, fleeting, but important references to the role of the cantor mark the difference between the Old World and New. In the film, the young American suitor of the sister of the *bar mitzvah* boy tells her grandfather all about the New World. The first question the grandfather asks is how the cantors are doing. “They *daven* in vaudeville houses” the young “Yankee” casually replies. The boy continues to paint a picture of an America in which Rabbis’ wives regularly perform in cabarets. Thus the American cantor and the American Rabbi’s wife become symbols of the decline of traditional Jewish culture in a new and threatening world across the sea.

Meanwhile, the family’s local *hazzan*, khazn Yerucham, performs a much different task—he helps teach the *Bar mitsve* boy and briefly appears in the film, mostly as a buffer between the family members at a heightened moment of domestic drama. When the Bar mitsve boy’s mother Leyele, whom the family believed had perished in a

shipwreck years before, suddenly reappears, she discovers that her husband Israel (played by Thomashesfky) is courting another woman—a dishonest, scheming woman named Rosalia. Leyele’s in-laws promptly instruct cantor Yerucham to take her with him for the meantime, upon which Yerucham, in direct address to the camera, exclaims, “A khazn gets all the *tsures!*” recalling, albeit in an ironic manner, the more traditional role—harking back to very ancient times—of the *hazzan* as not only musical prayer leader, but also as community functionary.

The figure of the *hazzan* in these films represents both a societal and musical transition. The music of these films provides the soundscape of these transitions, while offering a heightened sense of emotional realism to their audiences, who likewise inhabited these sound-worlds. Both in the film characters’ natural sound world (namely, in the diegetic sound-space) and even floating above and behind them in the score—a musical space often reserved for more ‘neutrally’ generic mood music—constant reminders of certain pathos-laden ‘anthems’ of Jewish liturgy, comparatively new favourites of the Yiddish stage, and, more generally, music composed in the *ahavah rabah* mode (similar to the Phrygian mode, with an augmented second—the mode most suggestive of Klezmer music) suffuse the soundtrack. While all of the Yiddish musical films of this period incorporate music from their audience’s reality, the ‘*hazzan* films’ most viscerally absorb the newly-immigrated American Jew in a veritable *musical fantasy*, combining both their memories and lived experiences, as well as their cultural fears and aspirations, by pitting religious life and the popular entertainment of the times against each other. The music itself serves as the sole thread of continuity between

continents and different shades of Jewish identity, and the *hazzan* in these films is the conduit for that connection.

Chapter 3: *Dialect, Dialogue, and the Rise of Yinglish*

“When the Jew speaks, he gestures with his hands. One might say that he ‘mauschelt.’ His voice often breaks. The Jew almost always speaks through his nose.”
-Julius Streicher⁶⁸ in a 1938 German children’s book
(quoted in Gilman 312)

While derisive caricatures such as the one quoted above are wont to characterise the Yiddish “voice” as monolithically nasal, annoying, and gesture-laden, in reality, Yiddish speech represents a much more nuanced pastiche of regional and ethnic inflections and dialects, some simple and some that were, indeed, quite sophisticated. This broad range of regional and ethnic influences shaped and coloured the flavor of Yiddish-American immigrant artistic expression, thus creating a unique and characteristically American Yiddish soundscape. As is the case with virtually any spoken language, Yiddish is certainly not a monolith, despite its presentation as such in some contemporary popular publications on the so-called “rebirth” of Yiddish (e.g. Bluestein 1998; Klotz 2009; Rosten 2003).⁶⁹ In addition to a rich range of regional dialects, there

⁶⁸ Editor of *Der Strüemer*

⁶⁹ It is also worth noting here how more recent efforts to standardise Yiddish orthography and pronunciation for pedagogical reasons, such as YIVO has attempted, have further eviscerated regional difference among contemporary students of the Yiddish language. (Another reason for standardisation of Yiddish into a more *Litvish* Yiddish is because the original standardisers were themselves of *Litvish* heritage and believed that Yiddish should be a unified language, such as any other European national literary language.) Furthermore, as Benjamin Harshav notes, even the presumably “static” and consolidated European national languages also represent a patchwork of linguistic influences, only to be codified by geopolitical change, bureaucracy, and mass media (Harshav, 1990, 74).

Interestingly, in 1927, Prilutski advocated for a standardised Yiddish based on Theater Yiddish (which used mostly Southern Yiddish), arguing that such language would be widely accessible, as most Yiddish speakers spoke Southern Yiddish. Noyekh Prilutski, “Di yidishe bine-shprakh,” *Yidish teatr* 2: 129-44.

For criticism and further explanation of Yiddish standardisation efforts, see Solomon A. Birnbaum’s *Yiddish: A Survey and a Grammar*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979 (which proposes a standardised Yiddish based on Warsaw Yiddish) and Michael Wex’s *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language*

exists both a ‘high’ literary or salon Yiddish and also more low-brow forms, such as the Yiddish commonly found in *shund*⁷⁰ melodrama and in everyday speech, as well as a variety of hybrid forms, such as “Yinglish,” a form of central importance, especially in later Depression-Era Yiddish-American cinema. (Lewis Herman and Margueritte Shallet Herman acknowledged this natural diversity of Yiddish in their *Manual of Foreign Dialects for Radio, Stage, and Screen*, astutely observing in their final chapter which concerned the elocution of “the Yiddish dialect,” that “each section of a country has its own peculiarities of speech, inflection, and diction” (Herman 392).) In the Yiddish musical film, the additional layer of sound meaning provided by the dialect spoken by the actors adds an essential context which serves to “code” the speaking characters and thus is every bit as essential to the melding of the genre’s aesthetic as are the musical numbers and scores which populate its soundtrack.

Even in popular Yiddish film musicals of the 1930’s, which typically mimicked the standard dialect of the popular Yiddish stage (as discussed in Chapter 1), there are significant instances where varying Yiddish dialects are heard—often in order to reveal specific regional origins and cultural affiliations. In general, the stronger a character’s dialect in virtually any Yiddish film, the more likely it is that that character serves as comic relief.⁷¹ For example, in the 1937 Dzigal and Shumacher vehicle *Freylekhe kabtsonim*, a musical comedy centering on the multiplying domestic and business complications of two local buffoons who attempt to ‘get rich quick,’ the entire cast speaks a strong Polish Yiddish (otherwise known as Central (Eastern) Yiddish), rather

and Culture in All Its Moods, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 2005 for a compelling critique of this standardisation effort.

⁷⁰ Overly-sentimental domestic Yiddish film and stage melodramas; often considered a form of “low brow” entertainment.

⁷¹ While not a film musical, Max Bozyk’s in *The Dybbuk* is such an example.

than standard “stage” Yiddish. The choice of Polish Yiddish in this film reinforces the lower class identities and negative stereotypes then associated with the *galitsianer*⁷², who were popularly characterized as possessing a materialistic outlook, and reverting to cunning and overall meddlesome, behaviour.⁷³

The centrality of the actors’ *oral* screen presence is illustrated again in a scene in Joseph Green’s musical comedy of the next year, *Mamele*, in which the protagonist’s father (Maks Bozhik) sits and plays dominoes with his two ‘partners.’ As soon as his highly responsible daughter Khavtshi (Molly Picon) appears, the three men pretend that they are engaged in business. One partner with a long nose and a pointy chin is a Polish Jew; the other, a thinner man with a black mustache, is a *litvak*⁷⁴—their identities made fully apparent only through their speech. By including both a *galitsianer* and a *litvak* Jew in this scene of sloth, the film manages an all-inclusive lampooning of the broad spectrum of Yiddish speakers, while comically evoking the imagined every-day life in the bygone world of Jewish Poland.

That same year, Edgar G. Ulmer’s *Yankl der shmid*, likewise uses dialect skillfully in order to highlight and reinforce character stereotypes. In this drama set in an imagined Russian village the studious and ‘boring’ man to whom Rivke (Florence Weiss), one of Yankl’s previous love interests, is ultimately married, speaks with a *litvish* accent. In this instance, Rivke’s husband Raffuel, played by Michael Gorrin (who also played the spiritually seeking *yeshive bokhur*⁷⁵ in Ulmer’s greatest Yiddish film hit,

⁷² A term used to designate Jews originating from the Galicia region, spanning western Ukraine to south-eastern Poland.

⁷³ Rachel Manekin, trans. Barry D. Walfish, entry for “Galitsianer” in the *YIVO encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*.

⁷⁴ A term designating a Jew originating from a region spanning North-Eastern Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus.

⁷⁵ A young, *yeshiva* student

Grine felder)⁷⁶ is in a sense, *embodied* by his accent. The young man's *litvish* accent doubles as 'code' for his rigid composure, a trait stereotypically attributed to "litvaks," and this characteristic, consequently, renders him less appealing to his lustful young wife. On the other hand, the *shadkhante* (female matchmaker) in *Yankl der Shmid* speaks a very distinct Rumanian Yiddish, adding a certain mystique to her role as an older, wise figure, who unites couples together and creates important alliances.⁷⁷

Language and dialect can be used for purposes other than conveying regional stereotypes as well. In films set in the U.S. featuring characters immersed in 'show business' (such as *Zayn vaybs lubovnik*, *Mayn zundele* and, to a lesser extent, *Dem khazns zundl* and *Der groyse eytse geyber*) entertainment industry-specific phrases and anglicised colloquialisms not only pepper the dialogue, but reflect certain class ambitions and cultural identities of the speakers and reinforce their newly-minted "American" identities.

⁷⁶ It is interesting to note that in *Grine Felder* (1937), Gorrin (aka Michael Goldstein) generally speaks theater Yiddish, except for a couple of times when he accidentally reverts to *Litvish* Yiddish.

⁷⁷ The Old World 'otherness' of the *shadkhn* in these films, whether achieved through difference in dialect, general manner of speech, or performative presence as expressed through gait and general body language, is particularly striking. Another *shadkhn* in *Yankl der shmid* exists more as a comical presence, as he helplessly stutters and scurries about—yet these mannerisms also underscore his essential 'Otherness' in his role as *shadkhn*. Later, in the discussion of Ulmer's final Yiddish film, *Americaner shadchen* (1940), this role transitions—along with the Yiddish language into an increasingly popular English-Yiddish hybrid—into the "New World" by experimenting with distinctly 'modern' means of match-making.

Yinglish

Yiddish, even more than American, is a lady of easy virtue among the languages. Basically, a medieval High German, it has become so overladen with Hebrew, Russian, Polish, Lithuanian and even Hungarian words that it is unintelligible to Germans.

–H. L. Mencken, on Yiddish
(Mencken 2000)

In his investigation of American English, H. L. Mencken describes the impact of certain immigrant dialects on “American.” The iconic American critic writes rather unflatteringly of the Yiddish language, pointing with undisguised bewilderment—and perhaps even disdain—to its proclivity to adopt loan words of neighbouring languages. Interestingly, Mencken’s characterisations of Yiddish present Yinglish (the linguistic blend formed by the imposition of English words and phrases onto the Yiddish language in English-speaking milieus) as ‘natural’ form of Yiddish (viz. he posits Yinglish as a typical manifestation of how Yiddish evolves), citing several examples of typical “Yinglish” sentences.⁷⁸

Considering Yiddish’s extensive history of traveling across countries and incorporating into its expanding verbal repertoire both lexical and syntactical features of the various languages of its host countries, Mencken’s depiction of the language, despite his sometimes judgment-heavy language, is not entirely off the mark. As a result of the mass migration of Eastern-European Jews to the United States in the late 19th and early

⁷⁸ Some of the heavily anglicised Yiddish sentences Mencken offers includes, ““Die *boys* mitdie *meidlach* haben a good time,” (here, Mencken is perplexed by the fact that the Yiddish-speaking U.S. immigrants would generally refer to their sons as “boys,” whereas their daughters they would call in the more properly Yiddish plural for young girls, *meidlach* [sic]), “Rosie hat schon a *fella* ,” (another example of a loanword), and “er hat ihm *abgefaked*” (as an example of Yiddish inflections framing standard English loan-word verbs). In all of these cases, Mencken’s treatment appears mildly dismissive of Yiddish (it is also worth noting that he completely evades any discussion of the out-pouring of Yiddish literature of the time, arguing that there is simply too much for him to discuss in his study).

20th century (and even earlier), Yiddish and English did, indeed, informally combine to form a unique dialect, a new subset among the variety of preëxisting regional Yiddish dialects. Mencken's emphasis on the distinctly *oral* quality of these acquisitions and linguistic modifications attests to "Yinglish's" origin and home in both everyday life and Yiddish-American popular culture. The vernacular quality of Yinglish among Eastern-European Jewish immigrants to the U.S. was so pervasive that even Abraham Cahan, the highly educated and worldly editor of the Yiddish daily *Forverts*, insisted that such 'street Yiddish' be used in his periodical; Cahan is reputed to have tested his language with the elevator operator to ensure accessibility before publishing it in his newspaper (Epstein 224).⁷⁹

While in his study Mencken emphasises the more colloquial/low brow usages of an anglicised Yiddish (what is often derisively referred to as "Potato Yiddish"), such as the prose mirroring street Yiddish used under Cahan in the *Forverts*, the symbiotic relationship between English and Yiddish has proven to be far more than a haphazardly piecemeal vernacular and has provided ample grist for the mill of many a writer and performer's creative expression (Steinmetz 31). In American literature, writers such as Abraham Cahan, Alfred Kazin, and Henry Roth, who throughout the 20th century colourfully and creatively documented the Jewish-American immigrant experience; Saul Bellow and Phillip Roth, who in their work engaged with a later chapter in Jewish-American identity formation in the post-immigrant generation; and, more recently, Michael Chabon and Nathan Englander, trafficking in an even deeper post-modern irony,

⁷⁹ Furnish (2005) discusses a similar phenomenon on the Yiddish stage and credits non-native Yiddish speaker Jacob Gordin with establishing a more "realistic idiom" for the Yiddish stage, transforming the stage dialogue from awkwardly stilted *daytmerish* to a diction which more closely resembled its audience's speech (34).

have peppered their writing with Yiddish flourishes to add a layer of cultural realism to their characters' dialogue. In American film, directors such as Woody Allen and Mel Brooks use Yiddishisms to evoke a specific set of cultural associations. For example, in his 1975 film *Death and Love*, Allen addresses a Russian noblewoman as "Your *miskaytness*," or my "your ugliness," thus evoking the implicit Yiddishness of his contextual humour. Brooks, in his classic 1974 film *Blazing Saddles*, notoriously features a Yiddish-speaking Indian chief who says such things as, "nayn, nayn z'is mesghuge," (no, no, that is crazy) and "Host du gezeyen in dayn leben??" (have you seen anything [like this] in your life?), surprising and amusing audiences by this unlikely pairing. In fact, the use of Yinglishisms by American Jewish writers and performers (most notably comedians) who gained widespread general popularity – especially in the immediately post-immigrant generation that came of age in the 1940's and '50's -- caused certain Yinglishisms, (e.g., "meshuge," "shtick," "yenta," "khutzpe," "kvetch," *inter alia*) to penetrate into mainstream English colloquial usage fueling continuing discussion of the impact of *Ashkenazic* Jewry on popular American culture.

Such moments of hybrid Yiddish create "acts of cultural translation" in the words of Homi Bhabha, with language at once underscoring the homogeneity of a people while also pointing to their essential Otherness (Bhaba 162-4). It is precisely at these linguistic crossroads where the identity of a people rests largely on the liminality of their speech and cultural transformation takes shape.

As living records of the sound of the Yiddish-American immigrant experience, the specific voices which populated the sound tracks of the classic Yiddish-American films of the 1930's and early 40's not only have documentary value, but also reveal a

performative sensibility which informed the cultural expression of this transforming immigrant population. These films provide examples of the most pervasive element of the sonic soundscape of that the time—the speaking voice.

The Goldene Medine⁸⁰ on the Silver Screen: the Case of American-Yiddish in Film

In all of the 1930's American-Yiddish film musicals whose narrative takes place in the U.S., there are at least a few instances of English and/or Yinglish interspersed within the dialogue. There is even an example of a film featuring a Yinglish speaker which is set in Poland (I refer here to Henry Lynn's 1935 musical comedy *Bar Mitsve*; one could imagine that if Sydney Goldin's 1923 silent "Yiddish" film *East and West* were a talkie, Molly Picon's character—and likely her *alrightnik* father—would slip a generous sprinkling of Yinglishisms into their dialogue as they reunite with their Polish relatives in the Old Country as well). Especially in some of the earlier examples within this body of film, the use of English is almost exclusively limited to a single specifically "Yankee" character (and, as in the aforementioned case of the *litvak* man in *Yankl der shmid*, the language 'doubles' for suggested character traits as well). While use of anglicised Yiddish does not necessarily increase in even increments throughout the chronology of these 1930's Yiddish film musicals, the particular function and application of these Yinglishisms do subtly evolve with time.

In Sydney Goldin's *Zayn vayb's lubovnik* (1931), the film touted as the "first Yiddish film musical," the bulk of the dialogue is in Yiddish. English or anglicised

⁸⁰ The "Golden Land" (lit. country)

Yiddish is reserved primarily for simple transitional expressions,⁸¹ or what linguist Sol Steinmetz categorises as conventional and idiomatic expressions and titles which are not recognised in high American Yiddish, but are nearly ubiquitous in colloquial American Yiddish (Steinmetz 34). Examples of words in this category of American-Yiddish used frequently in *Zayn vaybs lubovnik* include, “mister,” (Mr.), “gudbay” (good-bye), “olrayt” (all right), “pliz” (please), and “shur” (sure).

While *Zayn vayb's lubovnik*, set in 1930's New York City, could be classified as a light-hearted musical comedy, its narrative, unlike several of its Hollywood Depression-Era film musical counterparts, is still firmly rooted in the economic realities of the times. Edouard Wein (“Eddie,” played by Ludwig Satz) is a young successful actor widely admired by a strongly female fan following. Whereas Eddie believes he can find a virtuous woman, his uncle (and theater manager) Oscar Stein cynically believes that all women are corrupt and deceptive. In order to determine if a virtuous woman exists, the two enter into a complicated bet, in which Eddie masquerades as an insufferable but very affluent elderly man (who assumes the alias “Herman Weingart”) to see if Goldie Blumberg, the object of the young actor's secret affections, who toils away in Oscar's factory and works backstage, will be persuaded to be “bought” by the grotesque, cantankerous older man.⁸² True to Eddie's predictions, when Oscar starts pressuring her to meet and marry “his friend,” Goldie immediately rejects the proposal, despite the fact, as he keeps reminding her, that the old man's wealth would help her out of his sweatshop. As he first broaches the matter, Oscar takes Goldie up to his office, right by the window that overlooks the throng of his striking factory workers milling about outside on

⁸¹ With certain characters speaking only in Yiddish and others speaking with more anglicisms.

⁸² A similar premise of a hapless young girl from a financially struggling family being “sold” to a rich and inappropriately older man occurs in another Sydney Goldin film, *Uncle Moses*, of the following year.

Rivington St. The dialogue Oscar uses in this scene when speaking to Goldie, with the exception of his incidental reference to his friend as “*Mr.*” Weingart, is mostly free of any anglicised Yiddish and might suggest he is trying to appeal to the young woman on a more emotional level, through their mother-tongue.

At home, Goldie’s aunt (who functions as her guardian) likewise pressures her to accept the proposal. Just as in the conversation with Oscar, Goldie’s aunt also speaks with her almost entirely in Yiddish, infusing a sense of intimacy and Old World practicality into the conversation, while also highlighting her occasional use of words in Potato Yiddish, such as “job.” Eventually, after unbearable, escalating pressure, Goldie, out of complete desperation, agrees to marry ‘Weingart.’

When Goldie and Eddie-masquerading-as-Weingart finally meet and ultimately marry, the incidence of English/Yinglish word usage increases markedly. The Weingart/Eddie characters make more frequent use of incidental words and phrases in English/Yinglish than do any of the other characters in the film, partly, perhaps as an indication of their relative success in America—Eddie being a Yiddish stage matinee idol, and the fictional Weingart being presented as a very well-heeled, albeit oafish, old gentleman. Upon first “meeting” Goldie, Weingart speaks in broken Yinglish and keeps responding, “It’s alright, *ikh hob* plenty time.” Later, when the unbearable (and comic) Weingart attempts to cajole his miserable young wife to dance with him, he says, “I want to dance. Come on. Come on,” and summarily forces Goldie into a bizarre kind of comic waltz, all the while humming the tune of Iosif Ivanovici’s *Waves of the Danube*.⁸³ As in the case of the dialogue of Sam Colton’s character in *Bar mitsve* (discussed later), the

⁸³ This song later became popularised more than a decade later by Al Jolson as “The Anniversary Song;” “Waves of Danube” was featured in at least one other 1931 film, Josef von Sternberg’s *Dishonored*.

exaggerated delivery of Weingart's Yinglish sentences make his dialogue exceptionally comical. While Yinglish was certainly the favoured mode of speech among 1930's Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the U.S., the combination of Satz's comedic delivery (in a nasal, petulant voice) and the ever-slight gradation in the volume of his Yinglishisms underscore the humour of his speech and the outlandishness of his character.

To complicate matters and test Goldie further, Oscar and Eddie arrange for Goldie, who is unaware that Eddie is, indeed, "Weingart, to "meet" Eddie. While Goldie struggles valiantly to resist temptation, eventually, overwhelmed by her adoration of the young actor, she does confess her affections in the form of a letter to Eddie. When a smugly vindicated Oscar asks Eddie to pay off the bet, the especially exasperated young man bursts out in English, "No, no leave me alone!!" Here, Eddie's sudden use of English (in a conversation otherwise in Yiddish) is striking. Perhaps the reversion to English suggests his desire to 'level' with his avaricious uncle and also convey an angry distance from him. They then agree to one "final test" and raise the amount of the bet to \$25,000. When, shortly thereafter, Goldie bursts into Eddie's dressing room and professes her love for him, this time in person, Eddie repeats, again suggesting a performed distance in English, "Please. Leave me alone. Leave me alone! Leave me a—" and is silenced by her kiss. The tryst comes to an abrupt halt, when Oscar, who has been eavesdropping, barges in and reprimands them both.

The score in the soundtrack wells up as Goldie enters into "narrational mode" at 1:08:20, responding to Oscar's accusations by explaining that she came to America alone, as an orphan seeking her fortune and was instead confronted by the harsh realities of the

sweatshop and Eddie—the unattainable object of her desire. The use of the “narrational mode” here is typical of both theater and film *shund* drama, where it is used to relay anecdotal information by foregrounding a single character who delivers a monologue-like recitation of his/her plight directly to the audience without establishing eye contact with other characters in the scene. These moments sometimes serve to fill plot gaps, but more often they are used as moments of emotional reflection on what is already known, both to the on-screen character and to the audience.⁸⁴

Finally, after pouring out her “confession,” Goldie begs Oscar not to tell Herman and proclaims her intention to try to forget Eddie. True to narrational mode, as Goldie speaks, she looks at no one staring abstractly into space/or/ at the camera, her expression laden with painful emotion. She finally tells Eddie he must leave. Her dialogue is in pure, pleading Yiddish, underscoring her acute anguish and the emotional urgency of her words; whereas Eddie uses terse, colloquial English phrases to her (interspersed with Yiddish) to create distance. Goldie’s Yiddish underscores her plight as a struggling orphaned immigrant to the U.S., while also invisibly emphasizing—despite Eddie’s pretensions otherwise—the shared cultural heritage of these two characters. Eddie responds dramatically (and comically) in Yinglish, “Yes, Yes, *ikh gey. Ikh gey fun vanim men kimt zhe keyn mol nisht tsurik. Ikh gey ka New Jersey.*” (Yes, yes, I’m going. I’m going to a place from which no one can return: I’m going to New Jersey.)⁸⁵ In this American-Yiddish sentence, the English semantic expression of “going” somewhere (in the sense of long-distance travel) is extended to the Yiddish verb *geyn*, which technically

⁸⁴ This form could possibly derive from the kind of lengthy oral excurses described by Benjamin Harshav as typical of Yiddish moral and religious speech: extended divagation, challenging assertions, heavily anecdotal, comprised of various folk and religious quotation, plays on words, etc. (see Harshav 99-100)

⁸⁵ Another instance in which the Yiddish verb *geyn* (to go; original “on foot”) is used in the anglicised “going to” sense of longer distance travel (not walking).

means to “go somewhere,” but specifically on foot. This kind of semantic modification was fairly typical for American-Yiddish of the period and became more so with time (see Steinmetz 38). Eddie wins the bet, and his uncle writes him out a check.

Meanwhile, in an emotionally-laden scene, “Weingart,” who Goldie had been led to believe was away on business at the time of her meetings with Eddie, returns home to his miserable young wife, who weepingly recounts to him Eddie’s attempts to steal her away. “Weingart” responds humorously in English, “Well that’s his business. He can’t help that (and unintelligibly trails off).” Both the language and content of “Weingart”’s responses register as bizarre, comic (to the audience, at the very least) and utterly alienating. Shortly thereafter, “Weingart” removes his mask and dramatically reveals himself to be Eddie.⁸⁶

“*Az s’iz geveyn nisht mer vi a teatr shpiel!*” (lit. “So this was not more than a theater play; this was a farce”) a flummoxed Goldie cries in Yiddish. “*Avade,*” Eddie likewise replies in Yiddish and explains that this whole convoluted arrangement was to prove that there are, indeed, many virtuous women in the world. Goldie begins to cry again, thinking he was mocking her. “Oh no, darling, don’t be that way. Sweetheart,” Eddie seeks (successfully) to reassure her in English. The film culminates with a final reprise of the two lovers singing a song sung twice before—*Sheyn iz di levone*—this time with additional verses which mirror the couple’s happy destiny together.

The sound elements of the final scenes underscore the fundamental cohesiveness of Eddie and Goldie’s culture and lived reality. For Eddie and Goldie, English and

⁸⁶ Interestingly, this scene opens with “Weingart” calling out to her behind the closed bedroom door and calling her “Gladys”—presumably the anglicised version of Goldie’s name.

Yiddish co-exist unproblematically, functioning as a shared, unspoken code—an unspoken collective destiny—much in the same way the returning song, *Sheyn iz di levone*, points to and elaborates upon the couple’s common fate. While the entire drama unfolds exclusively within the U.S., all of the characters are heard at least at some point speaking Yiddish (with the exception of the male butler who speaks only one line, but the African American maid does, indeed, speak Yiddish.) Similarly, even the English which is spoken is a consistent kind of Jewish immigrant English, modified to complement their Yiddish in very specific forms. In this film, the voice assumes an active and definitive role, both musically and conversationally, in establishing a self-contained, culturally-coded time and place. In a certain respect, the union of Eddie and Goldie and their “cohesiveness” symbolises the merging of “authentic” spontaneous, natural Yiddish culture, and the more affected and sophisticated American culture into what became—and still is, in many ways—the American Jewish social reality.

In Henry Lynn’s 1935 film *Bar mitsve*, which is set, not in America, but rather in Poland, language, hybridity, song, and accent play a slightly different role, in which the exception establishes the ‘norm.’ Despite the preponderance of English in the speech of the one “Yankee” character in the otherwise very Polish piece of classical *shund*, most of the other characters, who are Polish Jews with, one would assume, virtually no knowledge of English, nevertheless, seem somehow to understand what Sam, the young American, is saying. The extreme nature of the Yankee’s anglicised Yiddish provides ample comic ammunition, replete with humorous malapropisms, semantic and syntactic modifications, and moments of amusing culture clashes. *Bar mitsve*’s actual plotline (concerning the presumed death of an amnesiac mother and two cruel schemers

attempting to fleece Israel, the well-intentioned father, of a soon-to-be *bar mitzvah* boy) appears more of a pretext for extended song (and sometimes even dance) numbers, comedy scenes, and heavily over-acted dramatic exchanges than an actual film script. The characters in this film are all exaggerated caricatures, whether it be Feygele, Israel's bashful daughter who speaks a heavy Polish Yiddish, Sam, her bombastic but charming suitor, Cantor Yeruchim, the gullible local *hazzan*, or the utterly ruthless villains; and all of these caricatures are created largely through the use of language and accent.

Even the anglicised nickname by which Sam refers to his girlfriend is an amusing twist on American-Yiddish. Instead of modifying her name to a similar-sounding American name (as Ludwig Satz's character did by calling Goldie "Gladys" in *Zayn vaybs lubovnik*, Sam here calls Feygele "Birdie," literally translating her name into English in an endearing diminutive form. The exchange between the two young lovers—one Polish, one American, literally choreographs through music, dance, and language the transition in language and lifestyle experienced by Eastern-European Jewish recent immigrants to America. Sam's exuberant descriptions of America are interwoven with enthusiastic instructional segments, in a simultaneous effort both to educate Feygele in the ways of American culture (whether through dance or glorified description of other leisure activities which Americans supposedly enjoy daily, or, most strikingly, though language itself) and to lead her toward an embrace of this wondrously new, western reality.

At the very outset of the film (at about eight minutes in), Sam is using excessive flattery and enthusiastic encouragement to persuade Feygele to come to America with him:

Feygele: (laughing) *Vos zugst di z'mir, ikh farshtey dikh nisht* (“What are saying to me, I don’t understand you!”)⁸⁷

Sam: Let me tell you, birdie, you’re wonderful. You’re marvelous! *Di redst azay yidish (?)!* (“You speak such a Yiddish!”)

Feygele: *Azoy pokht men nisht bay aykh? Es zeynt zikh gornisht kayn yidn in Amerika! Vey’s mir!* (“That way exactly—don’t they speak by you? “Don’t they speak this way where you come from (lit. ‘by you’)?” Aren’t there any Jews in America! Woe is me!”)

Sam: Say, Birdie, don’t insult America! [8:08 in] When Hester Street finds out, *vet flien alle* pushcarts (“...when Hester Street⁸⁸ finds out, all of the pushcarts will fly!”)

In the above exchange, Sam first distinguishes between his English (first) sentence and his Yiddish (second) sentence. In his second response to Feygele, who addresses him only in Yiddish, he begins his reply in English, but ends his response in Yiddish, with some America-specific proper nouns inserted to describe a specific place (Hester Street) and common American immigrant item (pushcarts), demonstrating the multivalence of Yiddish. In the next scene between the young couple, Sam continues in this mode, using

⁸⁷ All dialogue in parenthesis is my translation.

⁸⁸ An iconic location on the Lower East Side of Manhattan known for its open markets populated mainly by Jewish immigrants

no parenthesis Yiddish interspersed with ‘new’ situation-specific English words: in their next scene just a couple minutes later:

Sam: “*her* Birdie, a queen *vest du bay mir zayn. Oyf Riverside Drive vest du bay mir voynen. Ex-Lax vest du bay mir essn. In dayn bed vel ikh dir mit blumn bapitzn.* (“Listen, Birdie—you’ll be a queen by me. You’ll live with me on Riverside Drive; you’ll eat Ex-Lax when you’re with me; I’ll baptize you with flowers in your bed”)⁸⁹

Feygele: Oy vey’s mir! (?) *er kricht shoyrn in bet arayn!* („Woe is me! He’s already crawling into my bed!”)

Sam: darling, prosperity is *just* around the corner!

Feygele: *Ikh vays nisht afile vos di redst, nur ikh shtayt mikh on az es darf nisht zayn schlecht.* (“I don’t even know what you’re talking about, but I’m guessing it couldn’t be bad.”)

Sam: How could it be *schlecht* when it’s so good? [embraces her] Birdie, sing me a little song, ya know, a *Jewish* song.

Feygele: Vos maynst du? (“What do you mean?”)

Sam: Ya know, a *yidish lidele*. (“a little Yiddish song”).

⁸⁹ This dialogue excerpt reveals Sam, the chief emissary of “American” culture in this film, to be rather ignorant of American culture himself as it indicates that he thinks that Ex-lax, which, in fact, is a chocolate-flavored laxative, is a deluxe American chocolate delicacy. He then says, “I will baptise you with roses in bed”—using a quintessentially Christian concept that he, clearly did not fully understand.

Feygele: Ah git! Ober frier vays mir ayere meshuge amerikaner *tants!* („Okay!
But first show me your crazy American dance!“)

Sam: Ok, baby, follow me!

[music strikes up in the score, Sam rips into a tap dancing frenzy]

In this second exchange, Sam inches his way back to an English-heavy Yiddish, slightly confusing his girlfriend. As a means of “evening the score” and reaching out to Feygele, Sam asks her to sing a “*yidish lidele*” to establish some common cultural ground. But at this point, Feygele is sufficiently intrigued by her beau’s inherent American “Otherness;” that she asks him to perform (literally) his “*meshuge amerikaner tants,*” (“crazy American dance”), in response to which Sam dances the most quintessentially “American” modern dance of the time: tap-dancing against a sonic backdrop of American Jazz. The Yiddish interjections in this scene serve to facilitate a transition into American popular culture and language; they facilitate moments of intimate commonality and trust, with the implicit ultimate goal of rendering their usage obsolete once Feygele is, inevitably, swept up in the alluring American culture. However, for the time being, the rather clumsy use of a heavily “Yinglishised” Yiddish by Sam serves as a bridge between the already “Americanised” young beau and his pure, Yiddish-speaking European sweetheart.

After another interlude featuring Israel and Rosalia (Feygele’s presumably widowed father and his treacherous girlfriend), the film cuts back to Sam and Feygele in a high energy song and dance number which functions both as a show-stopping

‘spectacle piece’ (as discussed in Chapter 1) and as a song whose content and performance help advance the character’s relationship and plot development:

Sam: *Ikh vil dir freygn*, my dear; *zug vilst du forn oyf tsu mir* („I want to ask you, my dear, tell me if you’ll travel out to me“)

Feygele: (answering coyly and coquettishly) *Ikh vays nit, oy yoy ikh vays nit*

(“I don’t know, I don’t know”)

Sam: *Zay nit kayn alle groyse zug; Dort es man ice cream yedn tog* („Don’t be like all the adults say; there people eat ice cream every day”)

Feygele: *Ikh vays nit, oy yoy ikh vays nit* (“I don’t know, I don’t know”)

Sam: *Ikh vil dort zayn busy mit dir, in a speak-easy mit dir, vest di dokh geyn*
(“I will be there *busy* with you, in a *speak-easy* with you, if you will indeed go”)

Feygele: *Oy vos redst di, mir es mayn kopf geloyfn...oysgekhapn dir es...kayn koykh keyn nit farshteyn* (“Goodness! What are you talking about? ??....no strength...I can’t understand”)

Sam: *Dort in New York iz a gan eydn, a leybn on zorg nur far unz beydn; In Central Park, dort in dem „tinkl“ in a vinkl mit dir nur just aleyn; In Orchard Street gey’ vil mir beyde shoppin’* (“There in New York is a paradise, a life without worry for us both; in Central Park, in the dark, in a corner with you, just alone; In Orchard Street we will both go shopping”)

Feygele: *nisht khapn!* (“Don’t grab!”)

Sam: *Alle bargains veln mir oyskhapn* (“We’ll grab all of the bargains)

Feygele: *oyskhapn!*

Sam: *Dort in New York iz a gan eydn, leybn on zorg vel mir do geyn sheyn*
(“There in New York it’s a paradise with no worries....lets go there already)

Sam: (as Feygele harmonises in the background) *Dort in New York iz a gan eydn, a leybn un zorg nur far unz beydn; In Central Park, dort in dem „tinkl“ in a vinkl mit dir nur just aleyn...*(the repeated verses continue).

At ~13:00 minutes in, following the singing, there is a tap dancing interlude. In the dancing segment, Feygele learns the moves by watching Sam, who dances first, and then imitating his steps (as he literally ‘choreographs’ Americanness). Likewise, in the repeated verses following the dancing segment, Feygele’s brief interjections between the verses reveal kernels of comprehension and even curiosity and enthusiasm:

Sam: *In Orchard Street gey’ vil mir beyde shopping* (“We’ll both go shopping”)

Feygele: Orchard?

Sam: *Alle bargains veln mir oyskhapn*

Feygele: mit dir? („With you?“)

Sam: (delighted) That’s right! (and the song continues) “..vet mir dort geyn”
(“....we’ll go there”)

Upon the conclusion of the song, Sam exclaims yet again, “Birdie, you’re marvelous!” as he embraces and kisses Feygele. Their moment of intimacy is disrupted by the amused Cantor Yeruchim who walks in and asks if “*s’iz bay aykh simkhas Toyreh?*” (“is it the holiday of Simchas Torah [a joyful holiday] by you?”) to which Sam replies that *every day* in America is a holiday. Yeruchim proceeds to tell the young man about his aunt’s business in America, first using the Yiddish word *gesheft*, and then—scratching his beard—finally producing the English word, “b-b-business” and then asks him to tell him something about America. Sam replies to the cantor, “Mr. Khazer —I mean Khazn—you sing a *khazunish shtikele, un ikh dertsayln fun America*” (“...you sing a cantorial piece, and I’ll tell you about America”). Here the boy is so thoroughly Americanised that he accidentally confuses the Yiddish word *khazer*, meaning “pig” with *khazn*, meaning Cantor. While the cantor speaks only in Yiddish (with the exception of the one American word he struggled to remember just before), Sam continues to speak in an amusing hybrid of English and Yiddish, and the cantor somehow understands him completely. The cantor, amused by Sam’s request, dutifully obliges and sings a very traditional rendition of “Yeled Sha’ashushim,” (“Beloved son”), which delights Sam, who snaps his fingers to the melody and, when the song is finished, exclaims, “Bravo! Bravo! Say, you’re *ok!*”

This holistic fantasy of mutual understanding—a mutual understanding through language, music, and performance as portrayed in this fictional depiction of the encounter of the New World (as personified by Sam) with the Old—signals the actual *lack* of understanding between self-identifying “New World” English/Yinglish-speaking Jews and their Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking brethren. In 1935 (the year of the film), when such a return to the Old Country was becoming less possible, the linguistic

differences and broader cultural gaps were growing increasingly formidable. Such sweet and nostalgic encounters between the fully Yiddish world of Eastern Europe and the newly emerging American Jewish reality, as unlikely as they were even at the time of this film, were soon to become a complete impossibility, rendering the fictional moment captured by this encounter all the more poignant.

The soundscape of this scene—including both the use of the languages, the modes of musical expression, and even the finger snapping, which is typically associated with American jazz and popular music and not with cantorial solos, again underscores the essential cultural rift between Old World and New, while, nevertheless allowing for the possibility of the merger of these worlds through the eventual uniting of the young couple. As in the case with other Yiddish musical films featuring a young pair of lovers, in which the successful union of the couple marks a triumph over a variety of linguistic, socio-economic, and/or religious barriers (e.g. *Zayn vaybs lubovnik*; *Dem khazns zundl*; *Der purimshpiler*; *Yankl der shmide*; *Kol nidre*; and *Der yidisher nign*), the young couple in *Bar mitsve* offer an optimistic outlook of accessible and smooth acculturation to each other (and in turn, to imagined American culture) which would resonate very positively with the film's Jewish American immigrant audiences for whom such transition was a central and vital goal.

Sam now sets out to fulfill his portion of the “cultural exchange” by describing an interesting aspect of American “culture”: “hold-ups.”⁹⁰ The confused cantor requests more elucidation of this strange sociological phenomenon and finally postulates that this

⁹⁰ This explanation is later elaborated in action by the young American saving his father-in-laws-to-be's life by threatening the unscrupulous Rosalia and her cold-hearted accomplice at gunpoint at the film's finale (perhaps further suggesting the image of the new American Jews as a strong, heroic type, in contrast to the down-trodden image of his East European counterpart.

must be quite a profitable endeavour! Sam then launches into a most curious description of American Jewish life, in which he equates cantors with jazz singers and pronounces Mae West to be the most pious *rebbetsin* (literally, “Rabbi’s wife,” but here in a more general sense of “pious woman”) in America. Thus we have a not-so-subtle commentary on the effects of Americanisation: for Sam and his ilk, religion itself has been supplanted by popular culture—and the synagogue has been supplanted by the theater and cinema as the shared cultural arena.

In the final major dialogue-intensive scene featuring Sam, his assimilation to American culture reveals him to be rather ignorant in the most basic Jewish terminology:⁹¹ After a particularly serious scene between Israel, Feygele’s father, and his elderly parents, Sam and Feygele pop out of the door and Sam excitedly says,

“now we ask your papa and then we get *khasene*” (“married”)

Feygele *Er vet (epes?) dir say nisht farshteyn* (“He won’t understand you”)

to which Sam responds:

“Alright, then I’ll do it myself”

Israel walks in.

“Listen!” Sam starts—

⁹¹ Sam’s mode of assimilation runs as an intriguing counterpoint to the model of enlightened Jew that Boris Thomashefsky’s character (Israel) encourages his son to be. After singing one of the main songs of the film, *Erlekh zayn*, to his young son Yudele, Israel then springs up and proudly reminds his family that for generations, they have been virtuous Jews—not necessarily the “types who have beards and *payes*,” but that it is possible to be “an aristocrat” and still remain an honest Jew. He instructs his son to study world literature and learn as many languages as he can handle, but not to forget his own language and be a good citizen of the land he inhabits.

Feygele: “*Neyn, nisht Nissen, zayn nomen iz Yisroel*“ Having misheard the English word „Listen“ as the Yiddish name „Nissen“: “No, [his name] isn’t Nissen, it’s Yisroel.“

Sam: „Well, I like her and she likes me, and you be a regular fellow and give us the *Kaporeh*” (intending to ask for a blessing (*brocheh*) but using an incorrect Yiddish term that refers to a ritual act of atonement done by swinging a live chicken above the penitent’s head)

Israel: (bewildered) “Shlug kayn *kapores*—(„I’m not swinging *kaporehs*“)⁹²

Sam, „No, I mean, ah, you give us *bourekas*.” Again, trying for the word “*brocheh*”, but this time coming up with *bourekas*—a filled pastry.

Israel (laughing) “*Ikh handl nit kayn bourekas*” („I don’t sell bourekas“)

Sam (resolutely) “I mean, you give us the whatchamacallit, the *brocheh* and we make the *kinoyim* (he means *tinoyim*, or pre-nuptial contract) and then I’ll wire my papa and mama and they’ll come from America.”

Israel: “*Ah! ‘zo farshtanen.*” („Ah! Understood!“)

Feygele: “*vos maynst di?*” („What do you mean?“)

“America,” Israel pronounces deliberately.

⁹² A Jewish New Year’s atonement ritual involving the swinging of a live chicken.

Sam: “In the meantime, you order a jazz band, and we’ll put up the canopy, and the cha-cha-I got it—the khazn will give us the hurryupmcdatious (?)⁹³ and I’ll break the glass, and the band will play *khosn kale mazl tov*”

Israel responds by saying he doesn’t comprehend his words, but understands his basic meanings and wishes them his deepest heart blessings. Towards the end of the film, shortly after the family reunites with Leyele, Israel’s long-lost wife and Feygele and Yudele’s mother, there is a strange, but comical revelation, when Leyele, unlike any of the other Polish characters, demonstrates to Sam that she can speak perfect English, much to his surprise and delight. Sam ecstatically runs back to tell his fiancée how excited he is to have “an American *shviger*.”(mother-in-law).

The above scenes span several music worlds—the world of cantorial music, the world of the musical, and the world of American Jazz—to reveal the vibrant cultural crossroads at which these changes and exchanges occurred. As a film made for an American audience, it is most curious how the “Yankee” character is portrayed not as the protagonist, but as the comical, Jewishly-ignorant, smooth-talking ‘other’ whose presence both ‘educates’ and seduces his European counterparts in the ways of presumed “American-ness,” both through song and speech. And yet, despite Sam’s apparent “otherness,” he ultimately *is* the typical Jewish-American immigrant. While Sam believes himself to be a fully integrated “American,” he is still firmly rooted in the Old World:⁹⁴ he pursues a young woman from the Old World, he requests the Cantor sing a cantorial piece, he wants a *hazzan* at his wedding (and not a vaudeville singer), he seeks

⁹³ A butchered form of the official wedding formula, “*haray aht m’kudeshess*.” (“behold you are sanctified unto to me...”)

⁹⁴ Interestingly, the film never explains exactly how/why Sam is visiting Poland.

out a *brokhe* (blessing) from his prospective father-in-law. Indeed, Sam is the very embodiment of the American Jewish immigrant generation, who regard themselves as “real” Americans (at least vis-à-vis the Old World), but, nevertheless, still have one foot (linguistically, musically, and religiously) planted in the old ways and the Old World. The persistent emphasis on the repeated misunderstandings caused by the language gap which separates Sam from the East European Jews, while portrayed in a light-hearted and often frankly comical manner, nevertheless underline the already substantial – and continually growing—cultural divide separating the American Jewish immigrants from their East European counterparts. While the geographical, linguistic and cultural differences are acknowledged, however, a nostalgic sense of connectedness, nevertheless persists. In part lingering sentimentality, in part functional, Sam’s active and persistent affiliation with the Old World of his young lover—symbolized in large measure by his fumbling attempts to communicate in a heavily anglicised, broken Yiddish as well as, to a lesser extent, his enthusiasm for traditional Jewish music—offers an accessible and compelling linguistic and musical bridge both for Feygele and the audiences watching them perform their cultural transformation.⁹⁵

Another film where language is key to designating cultural definitions and affinities is Sydney M. Goldin’s⁹⁶ *Dem khazns zundl* (1937), which features a mix of Old World characters who speak only Yiddish and American characters who speak an anglicised Yiddish. In terms of its linguistic patterns, *Dem khazns zundl* resembles more closely the language used in *Zayn vaybs lubovnik*, insofar as the core of its dialogue

⁹⁵ The aspect of youth is likewise important, as these young characters are specifically transitional figures—a generation in flux. It is noteworthy that not until Joseph Seiden’s *Der yidisher nign* do both the adult and young adult characters speak English with a totally non-Yiddish accent.

⁹⁶ Sydney Goldin is not credited here because he died during the production of this film.

remains in Yiddish, with numerous (sometimes superfluous) very brief English or anglicised interjections and idiomatic terms.⁹⁷ Interestingly, despite its later release date, *Dem khazns zundl* has less English or even anglicised Yiddish than either *Zayn vaybs lubovnik* or *Bar mitsve* the two Yiddish film musicals which preceded it.⁹⁸

The only characters in *Dem khazns zundl* who speak more than a single isolated English word in a sentence are the cloyingly unctuous radio host, H. Rosovitch (played by Isidore Cashier), who clearly, by being a radio host of a Yiddish program in America, is a character that spans the bridge between the immigrant community and the American milieu, and his English-speaking receptionist. The scene in which the most English is heard in the film is when Shloimele (now known by the more anglicised name “Sol”) arrives at the radio station for his appointment with Rosovitch. Shortly before he enters the radio station’s lobby, we see a receptionist speaking into a receiver in English, “Station WERN, who’s calling please? Just a moment, I’ll connect you.” Sol then appears behind her and introduces himself in Yiddish. She replies, again completely in English, “Oh, Mr. Reichman, he’s expecting you, go right in.” This use of English when responding to “outside” callers—here in a phone call, but, in other instances (for example in, *Der lebediker yosem* [1939] and *Amerikaner shadkhn* [1940], discussed below, in response to an unknown knocker at the door— underlines the consciousness of an “outside world” which must be addressed in English rather than in the more comfortable and familiar Yiddish or Yiddish-American vernacular of the immigrant community.

(This would also explain why the receptionist—who is, by virtue of her job, a “link” with

⁹⁷ Some examples include the word “sensatsye,” and “floorvasher.” Later in the film, in describing the up-and-coming Sol, the club manager tells Rosovitch he will be a “sensation.”

⁹⁸ It should be noted here that even the American *alrightnik* featured in the film *Freylekhe kabtsonim*, which appeared in 1937, speaks Yiddish only. Perhaps because this film was made and set in Poland and targeted at a more specifically Polish audience.

the outside world—speaks in English.) A similar phenomenon takes place in *Der yidisher nign*, when Moshe’s despicable and highly assimilated, wealthy father-in-law-to-be speaks the overwhelming majority of the English and anglicised Yiddish, distinguishing him linguistically from the more humble and *heymish*⁹⁹ cantor’s family, who speak mostly in ‘pure’ Yiddish. Likewise, Jack, the deceptive, smooth-talking young man courting (and ultimately marrying) Jenny in *Kol nidre*, speaks with a disproportionate amount of anglicised Yiddish compared to the other (more virtuous) characters, who speak a more pristine Yiddish. Also in *Der groyse eytse geyber*, Dovid, (who ‘sells’ his advice on his radio show) and other rather disingenuous characters with whom he associates are, likewise, the most frequent speakers of anglicised Yiddish.

Produced only two years later than *Dem khazns zundl*, Joseph Seiden’s *Der lebediker yosem* (aka *Mayn zundele*) (1939), is a film whose language amply illustrates the shifting of the “linguistic home” from the Yiddish of the immigrant parents’ generation, where only occasional interjections of highly Yiddishised American English would be heard, to the mixed Yiddish/English—and ultimately predominantly English with occasional Yiddish interjections—of their children. It is interesting to note that the volume of anglicised speech increases significantly throughout the film’s progression. Perhaps most telling of all is the difference between the very beginning and the penultimate scene of the film, both of which take place at the radio station with Muni Berger (Gustav Berger), acclaimed singer and new father, at the studio microphone, singing live. At the beginning of the film, in 1929, Muni is introduced by the radio announcer in Yiddish, while at the end of the film, in 1939, Muni’s triumphant return to radio, ten years later, is heralded strictly in English. This change is historically consistent

⁹⁹ Homey/folksy; used in Yiddish to describe something as simple and comfortably familiar.

with both the American Yiddish print and broadcast media's transition to a more heavily anglicised Yiddish (and sometimes to English alone) especially later during WWII and beyond.¹⁰⁰

The plot of this film centers on the Berger family's domestic travails. Upon the birth of their first child, Benny, Muni demands that his wife Freda abandon her professionally-related travels as an actress and devote herself to the family. When Freda nonetheless travels with her theater company and Benny develops a sickness, Muni decides to leave for California without telling his wife. The rest of the film depicts both parents' struggle in the face of this separation (with Muni devolving into alcoholism, and Freda being utterly heart-broken) and culminates in their triumphant reunion at the very end. Language here plays a defining role in charting generational change between Benny and his parents' generation.

The character who speaks the most consistent English and Yinglish in this film is Benny, who grows up thinking he has no mother. The English of the older characters (Benny's parents, grandmother, aunt, and uncle, etc) is limited mostly to simple salutations and—as in instances we have noted previously—to instances where a response must be made to “the outside” (viz. telephone calls, answering the door, etc), while Benny, the representative of the younger generation, appears to be equally comfortable in the Yiddish of his immigrant parents and in the new language and culture of his American milieu.

¹⁰⁰ For more on the history of niche-specific radio stations and their fate, see Nathan Godfried, “Struggling over Politics and Culture: Organized Labor and Radio Station WEVD during the 1930s,” in *Labor History*, issue 4, 2001; Henry Sapoznik, *A Brief Introduction to Jewish American Radio*; Nathan Godfried's *WCFL: Chicago's Voice of Labor: 1926-1978* and Robert McChesney, “Labor and the Marketplace of Ideas: *WCFL* and the Battle for Labor Radio Broadcasting, 1927–1934.”

The first scene in which Benny speaks is a cultural/linguistic “baptism by fire,” as it were, with Benny being literally assaulted by both his surrounding culture and language. Benny sings “*gute menschn, koyf a paper*” as he stands on a corner trying to sell newspapers. A wider shot reveals a substantial crowd which has gathered around him. He also sings of his (presumed) orphan status, which apparently causes the assembled crowd to begin buying his papers. Nearby, a group of other paperboys, holding copies of the *Forverts*, conspire against him, muttering, “Oh gee, Benny *nemt alle* (“is taking all of the”) customers,” after which one of the other three boys pipes in that they should break his bones, and a second, shouting, “Hold it Jonny,” and accosts Benny, who is whistling with satisfaction.

In response to his attacker’s shouted “Hey you! How many times did I tell you not to peddle in our territory?” Benny retorts, “Show me your license!” to which the attacker replies, “Here’s my license!” and proceeds to pounce upon the hapless boy. The attack ends when one of the boys, espying an approaching policeman, shouts, “David! The cops!” and the boys rush off.

These boys, like their parents, speak a hybridised American-English, but the hybrid they speak is markedly distinct from that of their parents’ generation. While their parents also revert to English loan words, the incidence of loan words here in the dialogue is comparatively much higher and the English phrases spoken in these scenes are more complex and developed. Later in the film, we see Benny once again seeking to eke out a living for his family, this time as a messenger boy. In this instance, he has a brief exchange with a fellow messenger boy, just outside the stage door he is about enter (to relay a message to the star of the show, whom he does not realise is his own mother).

Yet again, the boys' language is heavy in English loan words, such as "star," "show," "tip" and "jealous." Their exchange ends, as Benny darts off into the building, and the other boy jestingly calls out to him in English, "Hey Benny, don't fool around with the chorus girls!" In this final statement, both American language and culture clearly dominate.

When Freda and a pre-adolescent Benny finally reunite after years of estrangement, Benny remains skeptical, reserved, and defensive of his father with whom he has lived as roommates all of these years. The distancing effect is amplified by the proportionally high use of English, especially after Freda presents her long-lost son with a fiddle. The boy is ecstatic upon receiving the gift, and Freda asks him if he would like a car. Benny responds that he would like a bicycle. "Do you like a bicycle!" Freda repeats, in a slightly-broken English. Her son then responds mostly in English with a few transitional phrases in Yiddish (the reverse of earlier American-Yiddish example, in which Yiddish is the base): "Gee I'm crazy about a bicycle with real lights and a French horn that goes *ta ta ta ta!*" It should be noted here that generally within *Der lebediker yosem* the incidence of more 'straight' Yiddish is not necessarily commensurate to the degree of intimacy,. Rather, the significance and relevance of the Yiddish speech in this film is usually situationally dependent. In this sense, dialogue serves an almost 'documentary' function, capturing the specific uses and functions of American-Yiddish during this decisive chapter in American-Jewish history. Perhaps yet again, the "reunion" theme which also appears at the end of *Zayn vaybs lubovnik*, harkens back to the notion of an 'accommodationalist' model of assimilation into American culture—this time, as a happy reconciliation between generations and their respective soundscapes

(Yiddish, English, Yinglish, the sound of the Yiddish stage, and the sound of the Yiddish radio).

In Edgar G. Ulmer's fourth and final Yiddish film, *Amerikaner shadkhn* (1940), the degree to which Yiddish and/or English is used is a consistent indicator of emotion and depth of relationship between the speaking characters, as well as a marker of status and cultural identity. As J. Hoberman notes, *Amerikaner shadkhn* was the only one of Ulmer's Yiddish films in which he was also involved in the screenwriting, which he did in conjunction with his second wife, Shirley Ulmer, and his cousin, Gustav Heimo (Hoberman 321). The screenplay of *Amerikaner shakhn* is infused with a distinctly *American*, but transnationally *modern* sensibility. Of all of the films in this study, the characters of *Amerikaner shadkhn* use the most English and anglicised Yiddish.

After calling off eight engagements, well-heeled bachelor Nat Silver (played by Leo Fuchs, star of the Yiddish stage on the Lower East Side and commonly known as the "Yiddish Fred Astaire") decides, paradoxically, to embark on a career as a *shadkn*, or matchmaker, thus emulating his Uncle Shya, who, though never marrying himself, had opted, nevertheless, to devote his life to helping others find wedded bliss. Nat, who opens his own match-making business in the Bronx, is portrayed throughout as a markedly timid and defeated man, raising serious questions about his sexuality, (thus pitting him against his Hollywood counterparts). Nevertheless, this musical comedy does culminate in his successful marriage—to one of his clients.

Three of the major musical numbers in the film comprise of Nat quite literally reflecting on his plight: *Oy oy oy shpil, Ikh bin shoyn a bocher lange yorn* and *Trink, brider, trink*. Interestingly, despite the preponderance of English in *Amerikaner shadkhn*,

all of these songs, these moments of acute interiority and introspection, are exclusively in Yiddish. This is a pattern echoed elsewhere in the film: for the most part, Yiddish is the language of choice for emotionally ‘honest’ moments between intimate friends and family, whereas English is reserved for more casual and/or affected presentations of self.¹⁰¹ For example, when Morris, Nat’s faithful butler, first appears in the film in front of Nat’s friends in the capacity as butler, he speaks only in a highly-affected phony British accent, with peculiarly elongated vowels. Later, in scenes in which Morris feels less threatened and more comfortable and close with others, such as Nat’s maid whom he calls “Toots” and with Nat himself, Morris speaks regular Yiddish (with sparing use of a few anglicised incidentals). Relatedly, only Nat’s mother refers to his sister Elvie by her Yiddish name Chavele; only Morris calls Nat by his Yiddish name, Chayim-Nosson; and Nat refers to Morris by his Yiddish name, Moishe¹⁰²—with the use of the Yiddish name in all these instances creating an aura of familiar warmth and intimacy, as would the use of an endearing nickname in other settings.

Relatedly, instances in the film of what I above term the “narrational mode,” which also are revealing moments of interiority, occur in Yiddish as well. When Nat first establishes his match-making business, there is a scene in his new office in which Morris recounts Nat’s decision to tell his family that he moved to Europe, change his name, and

¹⁰¹ Miriam Strube even argues that the English speakers in the film stand as “comic or even ridiculous figures,” just as the Old World *shadkhonim* in raincoats and derby hats mocked by Elvie as “cowboys with the hats” comically cling to obsolete mannerisms and lifestyle. (Herzogenrath 101). This pattern repeatedly surfaces elsewhere in Yiddish musical cinema. One comical parody of this phenomenon takes place in *Der groyse eytse geyber* when two of the characters sitting together in a drawn carriage speak of intimate matters in Yiddish. Barney is concerned the driver may understand them, but Sarah reassures him he will not. Minutes later, the drivers turns around and interjects his opinion—in Yiddish.

¹⁰² There are a couple of other variations of the last example, in which Morris is referred to as “Moishe Pipik”: first with Elvie semi-mockingly addressing the butler as such, and later, when Morris self-importantly introduces himself to the bandleader in the wedding scene. Phillip Roth reflects on the possible actual meaning of “Moishe Pipik,” a commonly used mocking name in *Operation Shylock*, by connecting the greatest of leaders to the most comically mundane part of the body: “The goyim had Paul Bunyan and we had Moishe Pipik.”

actually establish a match-making business in America. What is interesting about Morris' delivery here is, not only is it dramatic, it also quite stiff and follows the didactic model of narration discussed above, again with the narrator not establishing eye contact. Instead of *showing* us the narrative developments, we are very specifically *told* here, with Morris filling in plot gaps (for the audience). In the flashback of Uncle Shya, the beaded matchmaker also enters into narrational mode, extoling the virtues of the *shadkhn* who unites people—again, delivered in a didactic manner with moralistic overtones.

Despite Nat's extremely heavy use of English and anglicised Yiddish, we see him revert to pure Yiddish in a particularly emotionally revealing encounter with his sister Elvie. As mentioned, Nat, despairing after repeated failed engagements, had opened a match-making business. However, in his shame about remaining an old bachelor, he had hidden his new enterprise from his family, telling them, instead, that he was traveling to Europe. In this scene, Elvie—seeking the help of a matchmaker to “solve” the problem of her hopelessly still unmarried brother—suddenly appears at Nat's business establishment, not realising that the match-maker was, indeed, her brother. Before Elvie entered his office, Nat had the lights lowered, so his sister would be less likely to recognise him. The arrangement creates an intriguing effect of establishing Nat as a disembodied voice, speaking in a very genteel English, amidst the darkness, only to reveal himself *through* his voice, at this point, reverting to the more intimate and emotionally laden Yiddish.

Elvie, Nat's sister whose English, replete with American-English slang phrases and brimming with a reservoir of her own colourful anglicised imagery, is perhaps the most dominant and flavourful of all, is another character that moves between the two

languages with a certain easy casualness, that, nevertheless, may exhibit a certain subtle pattern. When Nat first tells his mother and Elvie of his most recently broken engagement, Elvie first spews out several flippant English phrases. At about 24:25, there is an amusing sound joke inserted in the film, when Nat finally begins narrating the dissolution of his engagement, and just as he mentions the doorbell, we hear a buzzer (or something ringing), and—just *then*, the phone rings. (We know this concretely only because the mother waves her hand to the sister and tells her to pick up the telephone, but Elvie has no interest in picking up the phone, since she wants to hear the rest of the story). In this scene, there is a very interesting linguistic interplay between the mother's relatively standard traditional Yiddish and Elvie's very confident English, replete with colloquialisms and sharp twists of language "Oh, don't keep me in suspense," Elvie sarcastically says in English, for example. She occasionally uses Yiddish, but throws in English words, such as "story," and huffs, "oh gee!" when the mother finally insists that she pick up the phone.

"Yes...it's me. Rosie? How do you do. *Makh es gikh*. Quick! Quick! *Ikh hob in mitn*," ("I'm in the middle—") Elvie says upon lifting the receiver. Rosie, a comically enthusiastic woman then starts to emote glowingly about her husband and proceeds to update Elvie on her pregnancy, using the English word "condition." Elvie doesn't have patience for this and expresses her annoyance mostly in English, "Look here, Rosie, who cares about your suffering and your sport. Cut it short—I've got to—say hold your horses, *gevalt* ("Wow!") ... (to herself) *ze nugit*... oh gee...look here Rosie, what do I know about expectant mothers, *ikh bin keyn mol nisht ken kompeturn* ("I was never pregnant") *hob keyn mol nisht gepringelt* . Rosie, in a semi-hysterical state, replies that

she's eaten pickles and radishes (both foods mentioned in English), and follows up, also in English, "I'm afraid it will hurt the *baby!*" "So call a doctor!" Elvie replies, "Call a professor, call the United States Marines! Goodbye!" and with that, Elvie slams down the receiver. Immediately, upon returning to her brother and mother's conversation, Elvie switches her language to mostly Yiddish, with only a couple of anglicised throw-ins, such as "alright," thus demarcating the linguistic space between the intrusive, "outside" conversation and the more intimate (and interesting to her) familial interaction.

This use of English as a distancing performance may be quite telling on a more subtle, emotional level also. Both Morris and Elvie use their English to separate themselves, as it were, from those who threaten them: Morris from Nat's normative friends, who casually brandish insensitive verbal quips and look askance at the butler, and Elvie from her pregnant friend, who is comfortably heterosexual and dutifully reproducing, unlike her ski-suit wearing, slick-talking friend Elvie.¹⁰³ Although their use of English appears to have similar goals, the specific inflections used by these two characters distinguish their speech, as Elvie speaks in a confidently "American" English and Morris speaks in a clearly caricaturised form of English.

The use of these variant manifestations of the English language is not only a tool used to characterise the individual speakers, but also serves as a broad brushstroke method to comment on social class and character, often employing humor which borders on screwball comedy. For example, while Nat and Morris's effete, highly affected "upper class" manner of speech constitutes an attempt to position themselves as members of "high society," such efforts transform them into the objects of ridicule, as such affluent

¹⁰³ Eve Sicular explained how Elvie's behaviour and speech may also suggest her own implicit homosexuality in Sicular 1994.

types were habitually the object of humour and scorn throughout the Great Depression.¹⁰⁴ Not only do these men strive to embody a certain class identity, but also, with their language, Nat and Morris attempt to embody the ever-elusive quality of being “real” Americans. Thus, their assumed mannerisms and speech patterns position these characters as comic figures—individuals who struggle to project a particular image, and, in doing so, become a parody of that perceived ideal.¹⁰⁵

The speech patterns which Nat and Morris employ in their quest to project high social class and elegance have other implications as well, in that the same mannerisms associated with this style of speech were also stereotypically associated with homosexuality. In *Amerikaner shadkhn*, the degree to which these figures embody assimilation is also commensurate with their implicit portrayal as effeminate or queer (Lugowski 65). Indeed, one of the recurring motifs in this film is its lead character’s so-called “musicality”—a term which subtly conveyed a gently coded *double-entendre*.

On a quite literal level, Nat is the most “musical” of the film’s characters, singing four out of the six songs in the film (and arguably five, as Nat’s Uncle Shya, also played by Leo Fuchs, sings one of these songs, with Nat being portrayed as a ‘younger version’ of the bachelor uncle). Each of the four songs Nat sings suggest a certain detached and/or resigned melancholy: first, at his bachelor party, he sings *Oy oy oy shpil*, a satirical song about the horrors of marriage; at one point, the perennial bachelor bemoans his fate

¹⁰⁴ David Lugowski, “‘Pintele Queer’” in Sean Griffin ed. *Hetero: Queering Representations of Straightness* (Albany: State University of New York Press) 2009, 64. Hoberman suggests the two Yiddish musicals released during the spring of 1940, *Amerikaner shadkhn* and Joseph Seiden’s *Der Yidisher Nign*, were both created as escapist fantasies in response to the unsettling war-time tensions in Europe. He likens these films to the Italian “white telephone” films, which similarly revolve around figures of affluence and ignore all surrounding class struggle and political crisis. (Hoberman, 316-17)

¹⁰⁵ In this light, the stereotypically aloof persona adopted by Sy Ableman, a supporting character in the Coen brothers’ *A Serious Man* (2009) could represent a later-day version of this phenomenon, also used to comical effect.

in song, singing *Ikh bin shoy'n a bocher lange yorn* (“I have been a bachelor for many years already”); Nat later decides to drown his miseries in alcohol with his butler-cum-business confidant Morris in the duet *Trink, bruder, trink* (“Drink, Brother, Drink”); and finally at the restaurant, at a moment when, in a standard Hollywood musical, the male protagonist would dazzle the female love interest with an affirmatively romantic song, Nat instead sings an almost dirge-like rendition of *Kh'bin oyf dir nisht in kas* (“I am not cross with you”).

On a subtle level, this “musicality” of Nat’s seems to imply something other than the fact that he has a good ear and a pleasant voice. According to historian George Chauncey, the term “artistic” was often used in the 20th century as a kind of code word for “queer (Chauncey 54).”¹⁰⁶ Throughout the film, subtle indications of this “other” aspect of Nat’s musicality abound, beginning even at the very outset of the film, where Nat’s ‘musicality’ is displayed as he sings the song, *Oy oy oy shpil* before his all-male coterie at his most recent bachelor party. This song reemerges and is absorbed as a score refrain at multiple times later in the film, perhaps as a dual reminder of its ‘message’ and of Nat’s inherently ‘musical’ identity. In another suggestive instance, after Nat serenades his client Judith by singing along with the in-house band at a restaurant with a melancholy rendition of *Kh'bin oyf dir nisht in kaas*, Judith observes that the matchmaker must be quite disappointed with life, adding the observation that he is “musical.”¹⁰⁷ Even more revealing is Nat’s response, wherein he attributes his

¹⁰⁶ It is noteworthy that the film *Amerikaner shadkhn* contains the first usage in popular media of the pivotally defining cultural term *feygele* (the Yiddish equivalent of “fairy” to describe a character as queer). Although the word *feygele* is technically used in the movie in reference to the caged bird in Nat’s apartment, it clearly embodies the rather obvious *double entendre* as well.

¹⁰⁷ Interestingly, later in the film, Tziepe, Morris’ love interest of ample proportions, also appears to hint at Nat’s “otherness” as a dandy, when she refers to him as “that *fancy shadkhn*.”

“musicality” to his genetic fate—he inherited it from his Uncle Shya; the defeated male protagonist who was never married—and then quickly shifts the subject by promising to find a suitably high quality young man for Judith to marry. Earlier in the film, when Nat’s mother first tells her despondent son about his terminally bachelor uncle, the brief flashback of Uncle Shya is anchored in music as well: standing before a successful match at their wedding, Nat’s Uncle Shya sings a *nign* in celebration of the *simkhe*, as we see the shadows of the others dancing flicker against the walls.¹⁰⁸

Eve Sicular has pointed out a very interesting parallel between the perception of homosexuality and that of Americanization, since both may be viewed as threats to societal continuity: homosexuality threatening the biological continuity implicit in heterosexual society, and Americanization, with its consequent assimilation, challenging the continuation of traditional Jewish community (Sicular 1994). It should be noted, however, that, irrespective of any imbedded sociological messages, significant as they might have been, the overall effect of the highly-affected accents and manners of speech and musical performance of the characters on screen was to provide a source of uproarious laughter and entertainment for a Yiddish-speaking immigrant audience, struggling to eke out a living in the New World and searching for culturally and linguistically accessible comic relief.¹⁰⁹

Some of the language-related humour also draws attention to the characters’ sometimes tentative relationship with the creative fusion of languages in which they

¹⁰⁸ It is interesting to note here parenthetically the contrast between Shya’s singing, which is rooted in the bygone folk-world of pre-war Europe—and thus he sings a simple *nign*, a wordless melody—and his nephew’s musical repertoire, which encompasses distinctly American influences, most notably, jazz and the American musical theater tradition, and focuses not on traditional and shared cultural and religious heritage, but on himself.

¹⁰⁹ Ultimately however, the underlying fact of the characters’ difference is most likely the unconscious ‘source’ of this humour element.

converse.¹¹⁰ When the local *shadkhnim* come to protest Nat's new business, they parade before his office in circles, wearing body-length picket signs written in a comical mix of English and Yiddish. Morris proudly describes Nat's match-making business as the most innovative development in "*shadkhnology*," as he also keeps stumbling over the title emblazoned on Nat's office door ("human relations counselor"), by calling him a "human relishes counselor."¹¹¹ In the first scene with Morris, when the attendees of Nat's bachelor party derisively mock the hapless butler's appearance, calling him Nat's "man Friday;" one of the guests asks what they mean by "man Friday," and another sarcastically quips, "a *man Friday* iz an erev shabes"...(lit., "a 'man Friday' is a Sabbath eve"), thus drawing from both their collective cultural and linguistic knowledge.

At the film's core is a parody which simultaneously embraces and effaces Yiddish-American culture. By embracing the lived/spoken reality of its viewers, while at the same time addressing their deep-seated, self-conscious ethnic anxieties through excess and embellishment, the dialogue of *Amerikaner shadkhn* in a sense enacts a model that simultaneously mirrors and educates. Put in another way, the film provides a satirical roadmap of how *not* to be if one wishes *not* to be perceived as a caricature. As Judith Butler has explained, "to enter into parody is to enter into a relationship of both desire and ambivalence" (Butler 35). Such is most certainly the case in the comical portrayal of Jewish-American immigrant culture, in which even (and especially) the "most acculturated" are the easy objects of ridicule; the audience laughs both *with* and *at* this sound memory of Jewish-American identity, all the while identifying with the

¹¹⁰ These instances, as Neil G. Jacobs notes, raise interesting questions about the extent to which such "borrowing" or "code switching" is indeed (or becomes) native (as opposed to foreign). Jacobs resolves that in the case of anglicised Yiddish, many of the original loan words transitioned into "integrated/nativised" word, while others loanwords remained "foreign." (Jacobs 272-273).

¹¹¹ Morris' first reaction to the title is, "*Vos hays relishes—s'iz azoy vi pickles un gesourte tomatoes??*"

cultural anxieties of its characters.

In most cases throughout the film, language exists in a dynamic state of hybridity. As in the case in multiple other Yiddish-language films of the time, certain speech patterns specifically call attention to the polyglot nature of the speech world that the characters inhabit. In instances of what I term “double translation,” characters will superfluously translate a word for special emphasis. For example, in *Amerikaner shadkhn*, when finally left alone (save a single caged bird) after Nat’s bachelor party in the salon, Morris speaks to himself in Yinglish about Nat’s “wise guy” friends, “*Ober* the main thing *vos ikh* bothers *iz ot dos a hoyz*,” (“...but the main thing which bothers me is this house—”) as he further remarks that there are only bachelors, “Nat, *ikh*...un *afile dos feygele iz oych a bachelor!*” (“Nat, I...and even the bird is a bachelor too!”) Upon approaching the canary in its cage and speaking to it as one might speak to an infant, Morris leans in and asks it whether it is a male or female. Specifically, he asks if its “*an er oder a zi; a zokher oder a nkeyve?*” (“a “he” or a “she” [using the Yiddish words *er* and *zi* that derive from the German]... “a male or a female?” [using the Yiddish words *zocher* and *nkeyve*, which derive from the Hebrew) switching between the languages on which Yiddish draws most heavily—both of which are technically within the spectrum of Yiddish—for emphasis.

Later, when fellow *shadkhn* Simon P. Shwalbenrok and Chaim, his comically stuttering assistant, insist to Nat the new *shadkhn* that he needs him on commission, Simon declares he wants five percent: “*bloyz finif protzent—five—khomeysh!*” thus spanning three languages (Yiddish, English, and Hebrew) in about two seconds and heightening dramatic emphasis. Even in this heated moment, such an utterance bespeaks

an underlying shared fund of cultural and linguistic knowledge, thus forging an invisible (but distinctly audible) personal connection. Such is the fundamentally positive and cohesive social reality John Belton identifies in analyzing what he perceives as the inherent optimism of Edgar G. Ulmer's four Yiddish films (in contrast to his other, much darker and hopeless films of loneliness, displacement, and despair) (Belton 36).

This free-flowing, melded cultural/linguistic reality is illustrated repeatedly in the film, even in incidental utterances, when we see characters' utterances effortlessly moving from English to Yiddish and back again without missing a beat. At the very end of the film, when Nat informs Morris that he and Simon will take over the business now that he is married, Morris exclaims, "...nur iz az geven a kholem—*it's a dream...it's a DREAM!*." Here, at a major turning point in both his personal and professional life, Morris expresses both his bewilderment and excitement upon hearing such good news by conveying his emotions in two languages for emphasis.

Likewise, when Nat invites Judith to his apartment, she begins to hint at her affections for him by telling him he has "*a sakh kheyne—charm.*" Clearly, Nat would know what "*a sakh kheyne*" meant, but, in a way, this moment seems to refer back to one of the earlier scenes, in which Nat glumly reflects on his long tenure as a bachelor and tries to account for what went amiss with each cancelled engagement. Then, speaking mostly in Yiddish before his friends at the bachelor party, Nat's use of English is striking when he suggests that he lacks a certain "spunk" or "nerve" (both words spoken exclusively in English without the addition of a Yiddish equivalent.)¹¹²

¹¹² In a later scene, a dejected Morris reports back to Nat that Tziepe told him he lacks "oomph" (also in English). Interestingly, in all of these instances, English is used almost onomatopoeically for describing

Such words as “spunk” and “nerve” inhabit a category of English words which do not exactly find parallels in Yiddish.¹¹³ In many instances of English and anglicised Yiddish throughout the film, the characters are speaking of specific things and phenomena which do not have fully adequate Yiddish counterparts. “Policy,” “exercise,” “skiing,” “bachelor,” “movie star,” “bonus,” “wise guys,” “sophisticated,” “best man,” and “honeymoon” all appear as English words and terms which convey an alternative universe to the cultural landscape which provided the backdrop for their ancestors’ folk reality on the other side of the Atlantic.¹¹⁴ The use of these terms also reflects how language serves to both embody and also engender certain new attitudes and modes of emotions, while underlining the chasm that separates the new, American scene from the Old World that is in the process of being replaced.

In the film, *Amerikaner shadkhan*, the voice emerges as the determining force in the increasingly complicated relationship between tradition and modernity. What the film may lack in terms of visuals (J. Hoberman has criticised the film for being the least visually inventive of Ulmer’s films, likening it to a Seiden production), (Hoberman, 317) it richly compensates on the level of sound and dialogue, bridging together musical impulses for both nostalgia and innovation, and offering an impressively stylised array of Yinglish expressions and phrasings. Some Yiddish film critics have even argued that there is nothing particularly “Jewish” about the film, except for Yiddish dialogue.¹¹⁵

male sexual appeal, as though to suggest that these Yiddish-American males feel the need to realise their masculinity specifically through American-English (and, by extension, through its attendant culture).

¹¹³ One could argue “chutzpah” would be an acceptable translation for “nerve,” but in this context, Nat is referring to a different kind of nerve—more audacity and “guts.”

¹¹⁴ It should also be noted, as U. Weinreich explains, that another reason for the existence and dominance of particular loanwords is merely the infrequency of that certain words in the original language (Weinreich 56).

¹¹⁵ Judith Goldberg argues that the Yiddish language is the only indication of any real “Jewishness” in the film. Several other writers on Yiddish film have criticised this assessment (see Goldberg 1982); Betty Yetta Forman also

Especially on the level of sound, music, and dialogue, this film is a veritable orchestration of ambivalence, reminding its viewers of the evolving and sometimes tense and contradictory nature of Jewish-urban living in the U.S. The figure of Nat Silver perfectly emblematises this strained relationship, as he and several others in the film so desperately strive to be American that their efforts underscore their fundamental difference. Nat may not sport a derby hat and a raincoat such as those that the “traditional” *shadkohnim* in the film don, but his very conscious performance of high-society “American” speech and mannerism help demarcate the boundaries of perceived authenticity on both sides.

Language, in this context, is a lingering reminder of the ephemerality of these spaces, internal contradictions, and the boundaries of cultural understanding. While Yiddish might arguably serve to unify the film’s characters, the subtle adjustments to the language also point to the changes in attitudes and shifting dreams of its speakers. Yiddish acts as an invisible but ubiquitous character in the saga, pointing to the tension of its eternal “in-between-ness,” and to its perpetual reinventing of itself amidst the shifting constellation of the Jewish-American sound-world. In the words of Joshua Fishman,

Just as Jews themselves stand accused in the eyes of many outsiders of simultaneous but opposite derelictions (capitalism *and* communism, clannishness *and* assimilation, materialism *and* vapid intellectualism) so Yiddish stands

assumes this position in “From the *American Shadchen* [sic] to *Annie Hall*: The Life and Legacy of Yiddish Film in America,” *National Jewish Monthly*, November 1977, 4-13.); Miriam Strube compellingly points to the genesis of the Jewish urban neurotic (the kind of character which populates the universe of Woody Allen films), Vincent Brook further asserts that “the film’s subtext is only ‘too Jewish,’ dealing with an issue of increasing significance to American Jews: the threat to Jewish survival posed not by pogroms or concentration camps but by assimilation and acculturation.” (Herzogenrath, 95-6; 81) Likewise, Noah Isenberg draws attention to the theme of assimilation as a distinctly “Jewish” characteristic evident in the film (11-12). The very concern of identity on the edge and the distinct performance of self here are themes multiply echoed by other 1930’s Yiddish-American musical films in different voices.

accused—within (?) the Jewish fold itself—of being a tool of the irreligious *and* of the ultraorthodox, of fostering ghettoization *and* rootless cosmopolitanism, of reflecting quintessential and inescapable Jewishness *and* of representing little more than a hedonistic differentiation from the way of gentiles, of being dead or dying, *and* of being a ubiquitous threat to higher values (Fishman 5).

Finally, it is important to note the evocative function which the very *sound* of Yiddish and Yinglishised language played in these American-Yiddish film musicals upon their original release in local theaters. Because many American immigrants' children were already swept up in the tide of rapid Americanisation (and were speaking increasingly more English than their parents, and, consequently becoming increasingly less fluent in Yiddish), these films, even at the time of their initial release, included English subtitles, which, in a sense, already relegated the Yiddish dialogue to the status of mere soundscape. Or, it is also possible that this gesture (based on functional need, for basic, widespread comprehension) did not *relegate*, but rather *elevated* the language to the sphere of signification, wherein it is the very *act* of signification, the fact of its performance (and not the literal usage) that accords language enduring cultural currency (as per Shandler 2008). At the moment Yiddish becomes a wash of ethnically-coded sound, the act of listening takes on a new valence of cultural affiliation through the mere act of 'recognising.' It is indeed the power of this 'recognising' function into which the dialogue of the Yiddish-American film tapped, expanding it) into not only an aesthetic but also a significant marker of identity. In this sense, American-Yiddish cinema was especially prescient as to the cultural fate of the soundscape of the Yiddish language, whose presence and performance would become increasingly performative in nature in the years and decades to come.

Chapter 4: *Screen Memories: Nostalgic Projections and Embodiments*

“Nostalgia Jewishness is a lullaby for old white men gumming soaked white bread”

— Yankev Glatshayn

Nostalgia is inherently contextual, and, as such, always resides at the ‘crossroads,’ at key points of cultural transition. Predicated on a network of attributions and systems of imagined ‘inside’ experience, nostalgia revels in an assumed, particularised collective history of worlds which may never have existed as remembered and, thus exists as a highly aestheticised affirmation of an unspeakable absence. What distinguishes nostalgia from memory is the unrelenting naivety in its unquestioning acceptance (and embrace) of perceived origins. Whereas memory suggests the conscious awareness that it is, indeed, subjective and located in the past (and thus, a witness’ account is a credible source but not definitive evidence in court),¹¹⁶ nostalgia is (as per the original medical understanding of the term, in a sense) a condition with broader implications. Nostalgia fortifies people with a sense of secure, collective identity, firmly anchored in the stable grounds of an un-ironic sentimentality. The relationship between the nostalgic subject and object is one that is, consequently, free of any risk. One of the other salient consequences of this tacit ‘nostalgic covenant’ is the distinctly exclusive nature of perceived authenticity: who is important in this equation is who “was there”—there is no

¹¹⁶ A witness’ account is seriously considered as potential support, but a witness can also be impeached on cross-examination.

room for expansion or novelty. The past itself is of nominal consequence to nostalgia, which stylistically orchestrates the act of its enactment through the eternal interplay of signs. This “past which is never present,” as Derrida explains, rests upon “thinking memory” (*Gedächtnis*) (Derrida 65).¹¹⁷

In order to safeguard these cherished nostalgic visions, it is crucial that the means through which they are imagined are not exposed; otherwise, the chimera of wholeness collapses and rouses the nostalgic subject from her/his reveries—hence the ‘total spectacle’ of sound film works especially well to this end. In essence, what is absent from the sport of nostalgia is a critical, structural analysis, such as one would find in a work of ethnography or historiography. Indeed, cinema proved itself an especially apt medium for the projection and amplification of nostalgic reveries. The prospect of a preserved “total,” enveloping spectacle, replete with visuals and sound that were both larger than life, offered transitioning Jewish American immigrants in the first half of the 20th century the impossible reality of living out their unspoken fantasies of home and homeland in a collective context. Especially in the context of its historical moment of radical transitions—religious, national, socio-economic, and otherwise—the Yiddish film musical drew from a rich repertoire of both lived and imagined cultural experience to create a new collective through the act of listening. Whether through *shtetl* songs (which are veritable tributes to ancestral ties); ballads of parental attachment to their children, love for one’s mother; lullabies; or tunes evocative of an ethnically/religiously bygone era—the meaning and social value of the

¹¹⁷ It should be noted that Derrida’s rendering of “the past which is never present” departs significantly from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s original model of this in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, ultimately arguing for a model of rupture between consciousness and perception

songs which define the Yiddish musical cinema are entirely contingent upon the active presence of these new Yiddish-American listeners, who long for some semblance of continuity. The cinema house thus supplanted the old market square, the ritual bathhouse, the synagogue, and other sites previously accorded singular status of collectivity and belonging in the imagination of Eastern European ethnic cohesion.

When Swiss physician Johannes Hofer coined the term “nostalgia” in 1866, he used it to describe what he considered a medical ailment marked by an abnormally strong and painful longing to return to one’s home (Hofer 376-391). Nostalgia continued to be considered a medical condition until the late 19th century, when geopolitical and cultural upheavals overtook Europe, causing massive displacement of large populations and a subsequently dramatic increase in people who, now displaced, longed to return to the familiar societies from which they had been uprooted. Consequently, nostalgia went from being considered a medical/psychological aberration to being regarded as a relatively normal reaction to societal displacement.

Among the populations who suffered most mightily from the upheavals in 19th century European society were the Jews of Eastern Europe, many of whom lived in communities which dated back to the 10th century but were now experiencing massive changes as many of their members departed due to persecution, deprivations and political unrest. While these Eastern European Jews had always been considered outsiders—both by themselves and by their “host” countries—as they migrated westward, they found themselves in a new circumstance: once again aliens in a country “owned” by others, but now without the sustaining embrace of their close knit and insulated communities in Eastern Europe. As opposed to a displaced Frenchman who

would long for France, or a displaced Pole, who longed for Poland, a displaced East European Jew did not long for Poland or Lithuania or Belarus, but rather for the *shtetl*—for the community of Yiddish speakers with whom s/he had shared a language and culture in relative isolation from the actual country and its people who had surrounded them. Jewish “nostalgia” was, thus, more akin to one’s longing for the familiar embrace of family than for the national institutions and structure of a particular geo-political entity. One of the chief elements that provided this embrace was the Yiddish language itself, whose familiar cadences sang of the warmth of the *shtetl* home, now relegated to nostalgic memory. The Yiddish language, thus, became an instrument of transition, comforting the uprooted masses forced to cope with dramatic and wrenching changes in the reality of their existence.

As a constantly evolving language of a specifically diasporic people, Yiddish simultaneously creates and remembers its heritage as well as its “home.” It is specifically the absence of a stable base or center which animates the Yiddish cultural imagination. It is thus the idea—the very *possibility* of belonging which defines this world of hopes, dreams, and memories which is given distinct voice in the Yiddish musical film. Whereas visual artistic forms, such as monuments and emblems, testify to the pride and stability of national cultures, the essence of Yiddish culture resides in an eternally invisible form—the voice—which travels and transmutes. While the Yiddish language may not have offered a specific word for *homesickness*, Yiddish music presents a wellspring of different nostalgic yearnings.¹¹⁸ With the advent of synchronised film sound, not only did Yiddish cinema become *Yiddish* cinema (viz., the films now included the actual *sound* of Yiddish being spoken, rather than simply

¹¹⁸ The Yiddish word בענקשאפט (longing) is the closest approximation to such a concept.

presenting dramatic, but silent, visual portrayals of life lived in a culturally Yiddish milieu), it began to realise its distinctly Jewish performative identity, most notably through voice and music. Even more so than musical radio and stage dramas, the Yiddish musical film flooded the original viewers' ears with a cacophony of familiar sounds: voices, tunes—both modern and traditional—and ambient sounds of the street, the marketplace, the synagogue, the *shtetl*, and the home.

In Joseph Seiden's 1940 film *Der yidisher nign*, there is a brief scene in which the range and imagined mood of these sounds is perhaps captured best. A *shund*¹¹⁹ comedy, this Yiddish musical film concerns the complicated fate of the daughter of an affluent New York synagogue president and the son of the financially struggling but devout synagogue cantor, who, as was customary in those days, were promised to each other by their parents at a young age. However, as fate would have it, as young adults, both the wealthy Samuel P. Borosofky's daughter Freda and Cantor Dovid's son Moishe (played by Yiddish radio star Chaim Tauber) fall in love with someone else.

While off in Italy studying classical Italian opera (funded by his father-in-law-to-be), Moishe bonds with his Italian music teacher's presumably non-Jewish daughter Rosita, occasioning a scene that captures the power of sound in conveying the emotional power of cultural nostalgia. After singing of the raptures of love in a duet together on a balcony in Venice, Moishe ominously explains to Rosita that he hears "other sounds," portending the possibility of problems ahead in their relationship. Violins play sorrowfully in the score as Moishe lists these "other sounds":

¹¹⁹ A twee, excessively emotional, often pedantic "low-brow" drama; David Roskies aptly describes the "shund aesthetic" as combining nostalgia for the shtetl with pragmatic acceptance of America" (Roskies 115)

the sounds of the Yiddish ghetto, his father's *khazunische niggunim*,¹²⁰ the sad *Eicha Nign*¹²¹ of diaspora, and a *Yiddishe simkhe lid* (celebration song) filled with sadness and tears. Moishe concludes by observing that now he inhabits a world of "happiness and love," creating a very specific opposition between the mournful, diasporic Jewish sound world and the sound world of joy and inclusion, which the Italian music academy at which he is presently studying represents to him.

Later in the film, after his father falls critically ill, Moishe receives a panicked telegram from his parents, urging him to return home immediately. Moishe complies, but *Ikh vel dikh nit fargessn* ("I Will Not Forget You"), the bittersweet love song he sings to Rosita before departing, still lingers in his head. As he picks out the individual notes of the song on his family's piano, his uncle (played by Jacob Zanger) asks him if he cares to come hear "the Jewish Melody" (referring to holiday services) and hands him a ritual skullcap, or *yarmulke*. Moishe then sings an unabashedly sentimental song literally entitled *Der yidisher nign*, (*The Yiddish Melody*) which describes the plight of the diaspora Jew who wanders in darkness for endless years. The sole consolation, Moishe sings, is the song (*zayn ayntsige nekhme iz nokh dos lid*), when the Jew sings with feeling the old *nign* in synagogue (*dokh ven er kimt in shil dem alten sheyner nign zingt der yid mit a gefil*). The song is then absorbed into the non-diegetic score as the film transitions to a shot of Moishe's parents (crestfallen because their son Moishe's wealthy, widower father-in-law-to-be is trying to sabotage the family so he can marry their young daughter) preparing for the holiday, underscoring the collective weight of what this song symbolises: song here is posited as the defining element in any kind of

¹²⁰ Cantorial wordless devotional melodies

¹²¹ Referring to the mournful traditional tune of the Book of Lamentations, recited annually on the traditional Jewish fast day *Tisha b'Av*, commemorating the destruction of the Davidic Temple in Jerusalem.

solidifying identity or collective emotion. The “Yidisher nign”—the Jewish melody—which emphasises the centrality of music as a sustaining spiritual force in Jewish diasporic wandering, represents the affirmation of a tantalising absence. This song is especially emblematic of a very particular expression of nostalgia manifested variously throughout the body of Yiddish musical films—it points to a world in which musical familiarity fortifies its performers and listeners with a kind of invisible but unbreakable, resilience in the face of difference, adversity, and dramatic cultural ruptures.

The nostalgia evoked by this music is not a nostalgia of place, but rather of space. Whereas place refers to the location where something occurred, space marks the boundaries of performance (or lack thereof). Jewish space is irrevocably marked by ritual and cosmological memory. In many cases in Yiddish musical film, such performance unfolds at certain privileged “spaces” of Yiddish traditional culture: the synagogue, the marketplace, the street, the home, or more broadly the *shtetl*. Nostalgia, always referring to a suspended temporality, in this case represents the displacement of space onto place (projections of ritual/performativity onto an empty, imagined place). The nostalgic impulse is necessarily the impulse of excess; it is more occupied with a conjuring up of an identifiable culturally cohesive mood and affect (situated in space) than in replicating actual events (located in place)—hence the Yiddish musical film’s penchant for excess and hyperbole in visual, narrative, and musical terms. For example, *Der yidisher nign* culminates in a ‘explosion of weddings’—these events lose their singularity and refer more to the phenomenon than the moment; the identical exterior shots of the outside of brownstones in *Der yidisher nign* likewise gestures to the power of repetitive sensation. Similarly, the endless parade of montages of facades of local homes

in the *shtetls* that populate *Yidl mitn fidl* (each time, accompanied by a new iteration of the theme melody, “Yidl mitn fidl”) and the endless stream of tour destinations which flash (as text on a map) across the screen in *Dem khazns zundl*, as well as the the barrage of marquees that shower the screen hailing Freda’s performance of *Muter libe* in *Mayn zundele* all help achieve a rhythmic sensation of lived experience rather than serving any specific documentary function. In this regard too, film, the ultimate media product of mechanical reproduction which requires an absolute suspension of belief, is a most fitting medium for the projection of nostalgia, which must infinitely replicate itself. As Paul Willemen explains cinephilia itself is most akin to a notion of serial “collecting” (Willemen 232). Furthermore, this music is often characterised by a transcendental levity: a levity which, despite its sometimes preposterous dimensions, must take itself absolutely seriously in order to be a true nostalgic artifact.

The terms of Nostalgia

To make something an object of nostalgia is to render something that had been formidable to a previous generation quaint or novel. For those Jews who left the Old Country for the chance of a better life in America, the sites of their birth existed thenceforth as a suddenly distant memory, freighted with a range of complex emotions. However, for the children of these immigrants, their parents’ erstwhile “homelands” became the subject of lore in music, or sometimes the object of comedy and, even

occasionally, of ridicule.¹²² As time went on, even for the first generation, “memory” gave way to nostalgia and produced a new set of cultural responses indicating this shift in identity.

But the actual form of the nostalgic fantasy is necessarily both affirmative¹²³ and fantastic (i.e. it is not *imagined* as exclusive, despite it being so). All of the affirmative aspects of the nostalgic vision are, as it were, ‘frozen’ in time, rendering these people, ideas, places, and scenarios ultimately passive and functionally irrelevant to the present-day (which, invariably, is neither as ‘good’ nor as ‘authentic’). In Sidney M. Goldin and Ilya Motyleff’s *Dem khazns zundl* (1937), when Sol lovingly recalls in song his hometown Belz, he describes nothing but positive memories and images; in Henry Lynn’s *Bar mitsve* (1935), Feygele, the bar mitzvah boy’s sister, sings a song about the absolute perfection of mothers, as she recalls their presumably departed mother.¹²⁴ Thus, the object of the nostalgia in these scenes—as in countless similar ones in other Yiddish films—is cast in a cleansing halo of idealised memory removed from any possible taint of realistic evaluation.

Nostalgia consists of several key attributes, the lines of which—like the concept itself—are easily blurred and reside eternally in liminal spaces. While the principle images or sounds of nostalgia are fundamentally “positive,” these nostalgic imaginings are always evoked in a bittersweet register. Relatedly, the nostalgic state implies a

¹²²¹²²¹²² To the extent that “ethnic comedians” who lampooned the older generation’s cultural and linguistic challenges were popular among second generation immigrants—see Josh Kun’s discussion of the controversy surrounding “dialect comedians” (Kun 68)

¹²³ The aspect of nostalgia’s accessibility is complicit with its resistance to critical reflection. As Theodor Adorno explains in describing the numbing effect of mass-produced media culture, “The viewer is supposed to be as incapable of looking suffering in the eye as he is of exercising thought.” (Adorno 2008, 69)

¹²⁴ Motyleff took over as director when Goldin died during while they were still in production.

glorification of an idealised past over the present. Nostalgia represents the attempt to forge a sense of continuity where it is otherwise lacking and to construct a more cohesive sense of self and identity in the face of perceived cultural and political threat—or, in the words of sociologist Fred Davis, nostalgia is “the means for holding onto and reaffirming identities which had been badly bruised by the turmoil of the times” (Davis 107).

Nostalgia aids in fostering and perpetuating a sense of continuity and personal worth (39; 41). The scene from Joseph Seiden’s *Der yidisher nign*, discussed above, is a classic example of this use of nostalgia: Moishe’s uncle uses the familiar melodies of traditional Jewish music as a means of embracing the melancholy Moishe—and, at the same time, the film’s audience—with the sounds of communal warmth and validation.

The very notion of “the past” becomes rather elusive through the nostalgic lens. At what point do previous events and sensations lose their own reality as they become subject to the nostalgic impulse? As a theater-goer asks in Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space*, “When’s a corpse a historical corpse?” (Brook 25). How far back must the “past” extend before it is culturally understood as *the past*? As Davis explains, nostalgia rests not so much on how long ago events or conditions are buried in the past, but rather how stridently they clash with the present (Davis 12). A striking example of the nostalgia engendered, not by the length of time past, but rather by the sudden and wrenching separation from everything that was familiar and comfortable, is found in the 1937 film *Dem khazns zundl*. Toward the beginning of this film, young Shloimele, who has run off to America with an itinerant troupe of young Yiddish actors whom he met when they were passing through his *shtetl*, already sings of the pangs of homesickness as their boat approaches the shores of New York. Clearly, having just arrived on the shores of the

New World, it is not time which has caused his longing for home, but rather the strange unfamiliarity of the new and foreign reality which he now faces. As such, nostalgia, which valorises the past and deprecates the present, points to a fundamentally conservative outlook on life.

Many Western European Enlightenment thinkers, such as Kant, firmly rejected a backwards-facing approach to history, insisting on the individual's agency to free her/himself of the shackles of the past, which would include such nostalgic impulses. Likewise, other proponents of a "forward-thinking" notion of historical progress, such as Hegel and Marx, regard the past as inferior to the present (and certainly to the future). Or as Marx boldly asserted, "Let the dead bury their dead" (Tucker 597). (But as Horkheimer and Adorno in more modern times powerfully illustrate in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, there is a decidedly *nostalgic* impulse to the mythologising impulses of Enlightenment "progress" narratives which seek to objectify nature.) While Romanticism responded to these new world-historical approaches with a renewed interest in man's place in nature, the past, and the art of sensation, the cultural artifacts of this movement approached the notion of nostalgia under the guise of a more universalistic (as opposed to 'tribal') embrace—in actuality, these expressions were primarily Western European in nature. Theirs was an aesthetic of placed-ness and ownership, as opposed to the nostalgic of Jews of Eastern European descent, for whom uprootedness was a fact of existence. A movement brimming with nostalgic charge in the Yiddish-speaking world, *hassidism* similarly relayed between the seemingly conflicting currents of universalism and particularism. Perhaps more than any other Jewish sub-group before or after it, *hassidism* is most deeply invested in cultivating not only a specific *aesthetic*, but a lived *rhythm*,

which is part folk culture, part imagined authenticity of religious transmission. Indeed, Hassidic *niggunim*, or typically wordless, lingering songs of spiritual devotion, quickly became widespread hallmarks of the “Jewish folk sound.”

Not only are creative expressions of nostalgia regarded as dangerously conservative, retrograde artifacts, they are widely regarded as the opposite of “high art,” which pushes conventional boundaries and offers innovation. Clearly then, the nostalgic impulse which pervades Yiddish musical film marks it as a genre emphatically set apart from such notions of forward-thinking or progressive “high art.”¹²⁵

Even within the conservative genre of films characterised by the use of “audible nostalgia,” Yiddish musical film stands apart. In western film music, certain relatively simple, familiar tropes popularly convey a wistful sense of nostalgic feeling. As Davis observes, “the long legato line in a minor key, slow tempi, *rubato* repetition of cadence, and a wavering pulsation of melody, which in vocal music reaches toward a lullaby-like swaying” are all common features of such nostalgia-inducing mood music in film (Davis 83). In addition to including nearly all of these properties, the body of Yiddish musical cinema also includes its own distinct musical forms of nostalgia in its scores.

In addition to the formal musical elements commonly found in so-called nostalgic film music in western cinema, the Yiddish film musical draws upon elements internal and distinct to the Yiddish sound world to evoke a collective sense of belonging and nostalgic continuity. In the following section, I will consider the Yiddish musical film’s nostalgic music categories: the *shtetl* song; a variety of domestically-oriented family music,

¹²⁵ There are a few potential exceptions to this rule, including Ulmer’s artistically ambitious musical *Yankl der shmide* (1938), which nevertheless suffers from certain characteristic shortcomings of this genre, including elements of *shund* and sensationalism.

including lullabies and songs about mothers; and songs related to traditional Jewish worship and religion, such as *niggunim* and liturgical “show pieces.”

The Music of Nostalgia

Music presents a generic event, a “connotative complex,” which then becomes particularized in the experience of the individual listener. Music does not, for example, present the concept or image of death itself. Rather it connotes that rich realm of experience in which death and darkness, night and cold, winter and sleep and silence are all combined and consolidated into a single connotative complex. (Meyer 265)

While the nostalgia of Yiddish film musicals is a nostalgia of space and not one of place in the conventional sense, the romanticised sounds of the *shtetl* folk-world figure prominently within the repertoire of the Yiddish musical film, and Yiddish folk music more generally. These *shtetl* songs were sung specifically outside the sites that the songs describe and responded to the severe clash experienced by immigrants between the culture of their birthplace and the culture that they currently inhabited. These songs must be viewed less as a description of the actual living conditions in the Old World than as a reflection to the wrenching identity crisis being experienced by their singers now situated in a new and unfamiliar world; their composers partake in an act of “taking the attitude of the other” (in the words of Mead), becoming acutely attuned to the collective self-conscious desire to communicate in the most visceral of ways with their fellow new Jewish-Americans (Mead 171-2). In the words of Svetlana Boym, “when we are home,

we don't need to talk about it" (Boym 251).

In *Dem khazns zundl*, (1937) the same nostalgic songs can assume different emotional and cultural valences depending on context. Towards the beginning of the film, Sol, a native of Belz, sings the famous Olshanetsky tune *Mayn shtetele belz* as part of his debut on the American stage alongside his friend Helen at a nightclub. The two also sing a classic Yiddish romantic ballad, *Ich hob dikh tsufil lib* as part of that same act. For the audience, this music is presumably an entertaining novelty, but for Sol's character, the Belz song means much more. While the performance and its impact on the audience is clearly central to Sol here, on a deeper, personal level, *Mayn shtetele belz* evokes for him an idealised, sweet memory of his home across the sea and of the warmth and familiarity that have been left behind.

Sol sings both songs again, later in the film when he returns to Belz for his parents' *goldene khasene* (50th wedding anniversary party). Whereas the glorified themes of the *shtetl* and genuine love were an on-stage performance commodity in the New World, back home—according to the return fantasy of this 1937 film—these subjects are living phenomena existing within an organic, “authentic” context. Back “home,” Sol's music is not a performance, but rather, it emanates spontaneously from him, as he reunites with his childhood love and is welcomed with great fanfare by his home community.

In a film that released the same year as Sidney M. Goldin and Ilya Motyleff's *Dem khazns zundl*, Joseph Green's *Der Purimshpieler*, another *shtetl* song is performed twice, but this time the song-as-performance is the second incarnation of the song, which is first sung as a spontaneous expression of love for the home which is being left behind.

In this film, Esther, the protagonist's female love interest, spontaneously sings of her home *shtetl* as she runs away with Dick, her lover from the circus and Getsel, her loyal friend who has insisted on accompanying her. Shortly thereafter, Dick transforms this once-genuine performance of longing into a stage revue by having Esther sing that same song, *Shtetle mayn shtetle*, on stage with him at a local theater club.

In both instances of *shtetl* songs featured in *Dem khazns zundl* and in *Der purimshpiler*, the film audience's role is transformed according to the nature of the song's performance. In the cases of spontaneity, such as when Sol returns to his hometown Belz and expresses his feelings and attachment to the town in song, or when Esther tearfully expresses her longing for home to Dick and Getsel, the moment is private, and the audience members become, as it were, voyeurs in witnessing an intensely personal expression of private nostalgia. In the instances of "staged" *shtetl* song performances, the film audience (like the on-screen audience in both cases) partakes in a ritual of consuming mass, commodified "packaged" nostalgia. While in both films instrumental accompaniment backs the songs (a live orchestra supports Sol and Esther, respectively) in the on-stage examples, in the private, spontaneously reflective instances, the non-diegetic film score offers 'invisible' instrumental accompaniment which amplifies and heighten the emotional urgency of the song and its singer, while also emphasising the interiority of the moment. This distinction is also underscored by the editing in the *shtetl* song scenes in these two films. Whereas the scenes performed on-stage include many long-shots typical of that era for capturing the full body of a performer on stage, the personal moments cut much closer, especially to the face of the singer.

In Joseph Seiden's *Kol nidre* (1939), in a scene literally 'recording' (i.e.

straightforward real-time shots of the proceedings with no editing ellipses for convenience or style) the local synagogue's Refugee Committee's benefit lecture and concert, the camera is even more static in capturing its on-stage performance of nostalgia songs. Especially noteworthy here is how the voice—whether through direct delivery or through narrative song—by all accounts trumps the visual in conveying a sense of collective nostalgia. The scene of the Refugee Committee meeting begins with an earnest and passionate presentation by the young Rabbi Yossl (Joseph) Goldstein, who, in an attempt to inspire the younger generation to embrace their heritage, offers up a survey of Jewish history from the patriarch Abraham through the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai complete with the accompaniment of unintentionally amusing intercut visual re-enactments of the various scenes.

Following the rabbi's lecture, the chairman of the committee, acting as the master of ceremonies, proudly introduces Cantor Leibele Waldman, whom he calls the world's most famous cantor. Although the song that Cantor Waldman sings—*Der khazn un der shamesh* (The Cantor and the Sexton)—is not exactly a *shtetl* song, it harkens back to the familiar trope of regional rivalries between Polish Jews and *litvaks*, Jews originating in Lithuania, thus, in its own way, evoking nostalgic memories of the origins of many in its intended audience. In a certain way, the song, *Der khazn un der shamesh*, actually follows the plot line of the comedy short in which Cantor Waldman played, *Khazn afn probe* (1931), as the comical song describes two cantors, one from Poland and one from Lithuania, competing for the same High Holiday cantorial position. Though Waldman does not expressly mention America, it is clear from the context that the song's narrative must take place in America, the ultimate site of cultural crossroads where such an

interaction between a Jew from Poland and a Jew from Lithuania might possibly occur. The ‘joke’ of the song is that, in the end, neither of the two ‘regionally coded’ contenders is chosen (as was the case in *Khazn afn probe*)—rather, the search committee selects their sexton, whose regional background is not mentioned. In this scenario, the regionally-coded “Old World” figures are presented as simultaneously nostalgic and comedic figures—a pairing perhaps more common in Yiddish entertainment than in other ethnicities’ lore. While both cantors in the song proudly reflect upon their Polish and *Litvish* heritage respectively, in the New World, these marks of distinction serve only as quaint labels and stereotypes and not as credentials, and, indeed, in the end, prove useless in getting the hoped for job.

The next staged performance at the benefit concert portrayed in this film is by radio star Chaim Tauber (as Chaim Tauber), who offers yet another twist on *shtetl* nostalgia with the song he sings, a melody entitled *Der shnayders tokhter*. The song describes the tragic fate of a poor Jewish tailor and his beautiful daughter who fall victim to anti-Semitic local villagers. Like the intercut “reenactment” montage that accompanied Rabbi Goldstein’s lecture, shots of Tauber singing are interspersed with superfluous, literal, melodramatic narrative enactments of what he describes in his song. The song wistfully describes a village in the Ukraine, set among the hills of the Nests River, and the lyrics end with the singer declaring that he is from the Ukraine, and that, therefore, it is difficult for him to sing joyously. The nostalgic expression in this song differs greatly from the more idealised nostalgia of *Mayn shtetele belz* and the tribute song to Vilna which Moishe Oysher sings in *Der vilner shtot khazn*, being, perhaps, more akin to Davis’ category of Second Order or Reflexive Nostalgia, a more “conscious”

nostalgia, in which aspects of hardship and/or imperfection are also acknowledged (Davis 21).

In *Der groyse eytse-geber*, Tauber sings another song nostalgically reflecting on a hometown in the Ukraine, this time about his native Mohyliv-Podilskyi (near the boarder of Bessarabia). While *Mayn shtetl mohyliv* is in Yiddish, Tauber mixes in a good number of Russian words to capture his longing for a place that is geographically distant but emotional immediate to him. This is a *shtetl* tribute song which is unequivocal in its positive relationship to its imagined, warm, idyllic homeland.

In the *shtetl* song of Max Nosseck' *Der vilner shtot khazn* (1940) cantor-cum-opera star Yoel Dovid sits alone in his dressing room in Warsaw and expresses his longing for his hometown in song.¹²⁶ As he sings, a flood of images of his beloved Vilna appear on the mirror before him. Although the song Yoel Dovid sings falls into the *shtetl* song category of nostalgic music in Yiddish musical cinema, images that appear in this mirror montage relate mostly to two other related popular themes in nostalgic songs of 1930's Yiddish musical film: songs of family and songs of home. In this scene, the melancholy Yoel Dovid envisions images of his family and images of his home synagogue's sanctuary, while singing of Vilna as "the Jerusalem of Lithuania," and declaring that he can never forget his hometown (implicitly evoking the famous passage in Psalms 137:5, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem..."). An invisible chorus embedded in the non-diegetic film score adds additional emphasis to Yoel Dovid's statement, responding,

¹²⁶ The exceedingly nostalgic, sentimental, and "unrevolutionary" nature of this film was observed by a *New York Times* critic who lamented the fact that the Cameo Theater (at which *Der vilner shtot khazn* premiered), switched over from showing mainly Soviet films to screening *Der vilner shtot khazn*: "Overture to Glory, starring Moishe Oysher—is about as remote from the fiery Red tub-thumpers of old as an antiquated tear-jerker, such as this one, is from a modern social drama. Apparently the management figured the oldest broom available would sweep the cleanest." (Feb 12, 1940; pg 19, under "The Screen")

“*nayn, nayn, nayn*” (no, no, no).¹²⁷ An idiosyncratic reading of this peculiar “chorus response” would be that these disembodied voices serve as a sort of Greek choir, and that their response of “no” negates Yoel Dovid’s negative statement, forewarning the audience (and possibly the singer himself) of his impending downfall due to straying from the Jewish path and leaving his hometown and family.

Yoel Dovid also sings another type of nostalgia-infused song, the lullaby *Unter beymer*. This song is sung thrice in the film and is also absorbed into the score at various key points of heightened emotion in the narrative.¹²⁸ While *Unter beymer* is technically a direct address song (and hence firmly planted in the present), its contextual performance in this film carries significant nostalgic overtones. Like most lullabies, the comfort of home is emphasised in a reflective, somewhat wistful manner. The simple lullaby, which warns the child not to sit by the window because a bad wind might come his way and he could fall ill, foreshadows what is actually to happen—Yoel Dovid’s boy eventually does succumb to a terrible ailment. The potentially deleterious effects of being seduced by the “outside”—both literally and figuratively—which is a recurring theme in this film is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.¹²⁹ This haunting lullaby is sung later in the fill

¹²⁷ The other time we hear a “phantom choir” is at 38:40 when Yoel Dovid surveys the empty unlit synagogue, as he prepares to depart for Warsaw. In both of these cases, these invisible voices appear to express a sense of unspoken potential guilt.

¹²⁸ Main songs which are first performed as sung pieces and later reemerge as mood music (variously inflected, but usually in a more somber tone) at later points in the same film is a relatively common feature in Yiddish musical films of this era. Some other examples of major film musical songs which enjoy afterlives as instrumental score music within their films are *Yidl mitn fidl* (in *Yidl mitn fidl*), *Felder un velder* (fields and forests) in *Der purimshpiler*, *Abi gesunt* and *The Mazl Waltz* (in *Mamele*), *My Son* (in *Mayn zundele*), *Oy oy oy shpil* (in *Amerikaner shadkhn*),

¹²⁹ For example, when the composer Manyushko and the conductor Tilchinski first approach Yoel Dovid after hearing him lead services at his synagogue, Yoel Dovid’s father-in-law already perceives a threat and urges him to hurry, insisting he will become sick if he stays “outside”—there is already a literalised, palpable threat of ‘outsiders’ and difference; in one earlier scene, after his family concludes with reciting Grace After Meals, as Yoel Dovid rises from his chair and excuses himself, his wife Chana wraps a scarf around him in a gesture of familial concern, saying she is doing such so he will not become sick; after his father-in-law reprimands Yoel Dovid for learning secular music with Manyushko, Chana and Nuteh escort

by the child's mother, Chana, as she sits by the bed of her dying child, and yet again – in a voice choked with raw emotion—by the crestfallen Yoel Dovid, as he experiences a complete mental breakdown while on-stage in Warsaw after learning of his son's death. Finally the tune of this lullaby is played by a single oboe, echoed by a lone clarinet at the conclusion of this film, transforming what was originally a lullaby into a mournful dirge-like accompaniment to Yoel Dovid's tragic return home. The lullaby, which at its core is a nostalgic and comforting form, evoking the love of family and home life, has here been transformed into a haunting reminder of what has been irrevocably lost.

There are two different lullabies in Joseph Seiden's *Mayn zundele* (1939), each in a brief scene with the infant Benny. In the first lullaby scene, Benny's grandmother leans over his cradle and sings *Shluf ze, shluf ze, mayn feygele* (sleep, sleep, my little bird) as Benny's parents fight over whether or not Freda (Benny's mother) should travel on tour with her theater company. The simple scene of the grandmother singing this typical lullaby offers a nostalgic contrast to the thoroughly modern American debate over working mothers. Shortly before departing to tour with her theater company, Freda also sings a lullaby to Benny, *Shluf, mayn kind* (sleep, my child), which includes in its lyrics a promise that she will never forget him. The lullaby signifies the traditional, idealised image of motherhood in both of these cases and evokes traditional images of Jewish familial continuity and further suggests a resistance to social change. This scene is bookended by the film's final scene, in which Freda, finally reunited with her husband and son, gleefully announces that she is leaving her work in the theater in order to

him outside and Nuteh again worries about him getting sick ("if a *hazzan* is sick on Sukkot he'll still be sick on Purim!"), further suggesting that such a seduction (viz. the influence of "outside" music) has long-term effects. In all of these case, the "outside" could easily be read as a metaphor for the "outside" world of secular music (and culture, more generally).

commit herself to her 'new job': as mother to her two "*tayere boyz*" (dear boys), and a brief instrumental riff of the title song *Sonny* plays.

The song *Sonny*, which is featured prominently in the film, while not a lullaby, is, nevertheless, a kind of emotional equivalent of one, evoking the same emotional attachments and love of family. Muni sings the highly sentimental ballad live on the radio at the beginning and at the end of the film thus underlining the powerful bond of love between the father and child. When the song is heard again in the film, it emerges instrumentally at dramatic turning points, signaling the Berger family's ultimate re-union and the solidification of familial bonds: once as Benny trudges dejectedly up the stairs to his mother's home, and again when Freda plays a few notes of the beginning of the song on the piano shortly before she is to reunite with her family, suggesting her re-alignment with her husband, whose hit song this was. Thus, the song *Sonny* (or *Mayn zundele* in Yiddish)¹³⁰ represents a nostalgic, romanticized ideal of familial unity which is realised through the magic of cinematic fiction at the end of this film, when Freda privileges her status as a mother over all else (a luxury most Jewish-American immigrants of this time could not afford).

The nostalgia-laden image of motherhood is more explicitly invoked in Freda's signature theater performance, *Mutter libe* (mother love), ironically during the years of her family's estrangement from her. The song, presented as a stage performance rather than an expression of reality, nevertheless, does double duty as a vehicle that expresses Freda's internal anguish as a mother cut off from her beloved son. When Freda performs her hit show's title song at a senior living home, performance and reality are again

¹³⁰ *Mayn zundele* or *Sonny*, originally performed in the play *Di tsvey hertser*, was printed in a songsheet published by Metro in 1935. The lyrics are by Chaim Towber, music by Sholom Secunda.

intertwined when her blind, trembling mother-in-law (who happens to be a resident there now), the voice of tradition in their family, recognises Freda's voice and jolts up, declaring that all this singing of "*Mutter libe*" is a lie, since Freda, having abandoned her home and child, does not know what a mother's love truly is.

One interesting aspect of this scene is the backdrop. Behind Freda onstage are two giant flags draped vertically: the American flag and the predecessor to what would become the Israeli flag, the Flag of Zion (first designed in 1898). Two additional smaller U.S. flags adorn the lower part of the stage, one to stage right and one draped across the foot of the stage. This nationalistic pairing, like Freda's rising star in the theater, clashes radically with the aging mother-in-law's Yiddish Old World identity and also provides silent, symbolic testimony to the powerful dual identity intrinsic to this immigrant population.

Other forms of highly sentimental, nostalgic "mother songs" are songs sung in tribute to mothers. This category is especially popular in Yiddish folk music and appears variously in several non-musical Yiddish films of the era as well. As in the case of *Mutter libe*, above, the maternal bond is musically expressed specifically in the context of painful absence, and the yearning for such love becomes a matter of nostalgia. A good example of this phenomenon can be heard in Henry Lynn's *Bar Mitsve*, in which the bar mitzvah boy's mother is presumed dead (until the surprise ending). The film's bar mitzvah banquet scene, which—with its many miniature vocal performances, including those of Rosalia, Israel's young and deceptive new wife; Yudele's sister Feygele; and his grandparents—functions in the film more as a revue than a family celebration, offers one such example of the "mother tribute" song. Amidst all of the celebration, both

Feygele and Yudele recall with affection their presumed departed mother; Feygele sings *Oy a mame*, a sentimental song about the greatness of a mother's love, and then, after his speech, Yudele chants the *Kaddish* (traditional mourning prayer) for his mother. While Feygele's singing is technically a "performance," it is clear that the content of her song is firmly rooted in her genuine longing for her mother.¹³¹

Shund films, which are nearly always domestic dramas, contain the most nostalgic songs about familial bonds. These films, in addition to presenting songs that express love and longing for the warmth of family, like those discussed above, also occasionally contain songs that express dismay over its dissolution. In *Kol nidre*, for example, there is one song, *Darf mir hobn kinder* (must we have children), in which Sarah, the aging family matriarch, laments how children grow up and leave their parents after the parents have selflessly sacrificed the best years of their lives raising them. Another song, *Vi roykh* (like smoke), sung by Sarah's daughter Jenny after her husband Jack deserts her, speaks also about dashed dreams of familial love and stability. These songs, while nostalgic in the sense that they deal with family and familial bonds, are, however, markedly different than those previously discussed in that their nostalgia is marked by bitterness at traditional bonds that have been weakened or lost entirely.

Finally, religion and the traditional culture surrounding religious practice factor significantly in the body of nostalgic Yiddish musical film songs. These songs include liturgical pieces, liturgical selections modified for concert settings, more spiritually-oriented devotional pieces (*niggunim*, etc), and religiously-inspired group folk melodies

¹³¹ While technically not a "mother tribute" song, one of this film's song scenes that bears mentioning is the duet of the song *Mamenyu* between the "ghost" of Yudele (achieved through rather flimsy superimposed photography) and that of his mother, earlier in the film. In *Mamenyu*, Leah (Yudele's mother), implores the boy to stay a good Jew.

(including *badkhones*, performed impromptu by a jester at traditional weddings) which draw heavily upon religious imagery, virtues, and aspirations. The boundary between these categories is often a blurry one, with the heavy borrowing of both stylisation and content between types of traditional Yiddish song.

Although not a musical, the Yiddish film *Uncle Moses* (dir. Sidney M. Goldin, 1932), in which Moses, an exploitative American sweatshop owner is brought down by a union and an unhappy marriage, ends with the defeated man reduced to tears and asking to hear the *nign* of his hometown. After falling from the heights of American “success,” Moses longs to be comforted by the familiar sound of his old *shtetl nign*.

Niggunim are fairly ubiquitous in 1930’s Yiddish musical films; however not all are necessarily “nostalgic” in their individual contexts. For example, the scene of the wealthy prospective father-in-law singing a *nign* during the *Purim sudah* (holiday feast) in the film *Der purimshpiler*, the scenes of men huddled together singing *niggunim* in the film *Mamele*, or the men singing a cheery *nign* following the birth of Yankl’s son in *Yankl der shmied* technically do not constitute any form of nostalgic longing.¹³² However, these films offer heavily nostalgic vignettes of imagined or real Old World *shtetl* life to their primarily modernised and/or Americanised film audiences, who still carry a romanticised nostalgia for the manners and traditions of “Old Country” in their heart of hearts. Furthermore, films shot “on-location” in Poland, such as *Mamele* and *Der purimshpiler* capture a glimpse—and, most importantly, offer a sound bite of a world on the brink of destruction. While the films’ producers may not have been aware of the impending atrocities of the Holocaust, there was a general awareness that Jewish

¹³² Earlier, Yankl also sings a song (*Leybedike alle*—which technically could be considered a *nign*) as a duet with Rivkele, one of his love interests. Unlike the latter instance of the men singing the *nign*, Yankl and Rivkele’s duet is sung more as a showpiece for the others around them.

culture was in transition, paving the way for a ripe nostalgic aesthetic. Similarly, even “shtetl films” shot on U.S. soil, such as *Yankl der shmide*, attempted to evoke a sense of a bygone era, both visually and musically. Thus, while the performance of the *niggunim* may not represent a nostalgic impulse within the film itself, the act of listening to such *niggunim* on the silver screen constituted a mass exercise in nostalgic remembrance.

In some cases, of course, the *nign*, even within the film, musically marks the scene as belonging to a “bygone era.” For example, in *Amerikaner shadkhn*, when Nat imagines his Uncle Shya acting as successful *shadkhn*¹³³ back in Europe, the bearded figure of Old World continuity leads the couple he has united and their families in a rousing *nign*. This “imagined” scene is, notably, the only instance of distinctly traditional *Jewish* music in this entire (very modern) film which aspires to the former part of the film’s title in both its visual and musical aesthetic. The scene of Nat’s Uncle Shya celebrating and singing a *nign* with his successful match thus isolates the music—and, along with it, the scene being enacted—as a relic of the quaint past.

Liturgical elements, as discussed in the chapter on the cantorial presence in 1930’s Yiddish film musicals, also appear frequently in these films, often with a similar nostalgic valence for the films’ audiences. Not only do the moments of traditional prayer heighten a sense of cultural realism for these films’ audiences (who would, presumably, be familiar with standard Jewish prayers, or at least the general ‘sound’ of them), but the sound of prayer (and especially the cantorial “voice”) serves an emotional function as well, providing familiar sounds and a sense of cultural continuity in the face of radical

¹³³ matchmaker

social change.¹³⁴

In certain cases, Yiddish films include the performance of very sacred liturgical music, not in a context of worship, but rather simply as a nostalgic musical novelty entirely devoid of any religious meaning. For example, in *Bar mitsve*, when the local cantor asks Sam, the young visitor from America, to tell him about America, Sam bargains with him and promises to tell him about America on the condition that he sing a “*khazonish*” piece.¹³⁵ The cantor obliges and sings *Yeled sha’ashuim* (from Jeremiah 31:20) for the delighted boy, who eagerly (and inappropriately) snaps his fingers along with the melody. In *Dem khazns zundl*, Moishe Oysher sings the classic liturgical piece *Av harakhamim* (“Father of Mercy”) for a radio audience, purely for entertainment value, as was a common practice among cantors of that time. Similarly, at the beginning of the film *Der groyse eytse-geber*, Cantor Leibele Waldman performs a nostalgia-heavy *Elohai neshome* (“My Lord, the soul you have given me....”) medley (interspersed with sentimental narrative patches about going to synagogue and praying with awesome gratitude to God) which spans over five consecutive minutes of the film (a comparatively long duration for a single performance in a narrative film) and culminates in a spectacular falsetto with even more vocal pyrotechnics than his beginning vocal flourishes.

Other times—especially in the films which are set around the time of the Jewish High Holidays and feature cantors—liturgical music is performed in the traditional context at religious services, cantorial auditions, and/or rehearsals. Such incidences include the Yiddish film musicals *Khazn afn probe* (which revolves around cantorial

¹³⁴As Goldfadn learned when first writing his operettas, general audiences/listeners demand the familiar. Instead of aiming for purely “high art,” Goldfadn began to incorporate a patchwork of different song forms/traditions to adjust accordingly for popular consumption, frequently using the Phrygian mode (commonly found in traditional Jewish liturgical music). (Slobin 104)

¹³⁵ a selection of synagogue music

auditions), *Kol nidre* (which features a Yom Kippur service), *Der vilner shtot khazn* (which likewise features a Yom Kippur service), *Der yidisher nign* (which includes a High Holiday rehearsal scene with choir boys practicing *k'vakaras roeh edro* (“like a shepherd who tends his sheep...” and a brief moment when Groinem, Moses’ uncle, demonstrates his singing ability to his family by singing *Avinu malkeinu*), or the non-musical Yiddish film *Hayntige mames* (Mothers of Today) (1939) (at the end of which a repentant wayward son returns to his cantorial post on the eve of the Day of Atonement). Each of these films transforms the cinematheque into the “new synagogue,” conducting a mass service of social acculturation through music and spectacle. The presence of the iconic and familiar eases the transition to the radically new by providing a musical backdrop of the eternally remembered.

Beyond the drama and glory of High Holiday cantorial performance, there are numerous instances of other formal and informal instances of traditional Jewish liturgical music in these films, which, again, are not necessarily nostalgic in the context of the film itself, but may very well register as such in the ears of the film audience. In Zygmunt Turkow’s *Der freylekhe kabtsonim* (The Jolly Paupers) a group of inmates chant the tradition *Rosh khodesh* (beginning of the new month) prayer; in *Mamele*, Schlesinger, the male love interest in the film, accompanies himself on piano as he softly sings a setting of *Shir hashirim* (the Biblical *Song of Songs*);¹³⁶ in *Dem khazns zundl*, Sol sings the prayer *Yikum purkan min shemaya* (“May redemption arise from Heaven”) to himself in a moment of joy and later recites the classic prayer *Shema Yisroel* (“Hear O Israel”) shortly before his wedding in Belz; in *Der vilner shtot khazn*, at the height of his longing for

¹³⁶ The Polish Yiddish film (but not film musical) *Der Dybbuk* (1937) also includes a setting of *Shir hashirim*, opening with a cluster of Yeshiva boys singing the iconic love text.

home (and for Judaism) Yoel Dovid leads the daily *Minkhe* (afternoon) prayer at a local synagogue in Warsaw; in *Der yidisher nign*, the cantor Dovid informally leads his family in a rousing rendition of *Yibaneh hamikdash* (May the Temple be rebuilt)¹³⁷; and in the wedding scene of the Yiddish film (but not film musical) *Libe un laydnshaft* (1936), Cantor Leibeke Waldman recites the traditional *Av ha'rakhamim* ("Merciful Father") prayer under the *khupe* (wedding canopy), in honour of the bride's mother who is presumed dead.

The Jewish religion is specifically contingent upon the presence and continuation of community; a group of less than ten Jewish worshippers does not constitute a complete quorum for prayer. Similarly, the act of Jewish/Yiddish *listening* requires the same kind of cohesive bonding and unity in affect and numbers to constitute meaningful, culturally legible (or audible) nostalgic remembrance. At such a time of dramatic social and political upheaval, the acclimating Jewish immigrants to America could seek emotional, spiritual, and psychological refuge in the familiar sounds of the Yiddish film musical. Indeed, the collective ritual of film-viewing displaced the film's narrative and content from the literal to the symbolic sphere. As per Jeffrey Shandler's concept of "post-vernacular Yiddish," the Yiddish film musical audiences engaged with the spectacle before them in a range of ways, all of which are symbolically loaded; the very *act* of listening constitutes a relevant cultural encounter.

Whether through songs about an imagined or real home in the Old World, songs about the idealised Yiddish family or lamenting the lack thereof, or songs of religious

¹³⁷ Though the song lyrics are excerpted from traditional prayer, in this context, the song function more as a *nign*. This early scene in the film immediately follows the scene in apartment of Dovid's son's wealthy and unbearably crass father-in-law to be, Samuel P. Borosofsky singing to himself a wordless song in a major key. Thus, one of the first cues to the two men's radical social and class difference can be heard through song.

devotion, the Yiddish musical film offers a very specific array of nostalgic sounds which allow its listeners multiple entry points to interpret and construct personalised and collective cultural meaning. These films offered a snippet of the sound pastiche that represents the original audience's lived and imagined lives (following Goldfadn's model—see footnote 124). Much in the same way literary theorist Georg Lukács describes the advent of the novel as a fragmentary form and the product of the loss of a “transcendental home” in the face of an ever-globalising modernity, the medium of film stands as a most fitting medium to project the fragmentary aspirations, memories, and fantasies of the Jewish immigrants to America. While today many of these films are difficult to access, it is their songs which have carried on to future generations, with always-evolving nostalgic overtones.

Conclusion

The Yiddish musical, with its nostalgic echoes of the glories of the Yiddish theater, the sacred melodies of ancient Jewish liturgy, and the familiar tones of the Yiddish language, all set in the exciting, new medium of modern film, presented its original Jewish-American immigrant audiences with an unprecedented space for communal reflection and cultural transformation. The movie theater, where these Jews in transition gathered to experience an island of comfort and familiarity in the midst of a new and challenging reality, became, in many ways, the focal point of their communal lives. Much in the way Jews for generations had gathered en masse in their synagogues to partake in the reassuring ritual of communal prayer, the Yiddish film musical provided these Jews with a new forum for collective expression which also privileged music and the voice in formulating its self-image and articulating its aspirations. As a mass-produced spectacle, the Yiddish musical cultivated a new sense of shared Jewish-American identity while also, at times, questioning that identity.

The interplay between the American-Yiddish stage and the American-Yiddish silver screen in the 1930's reveals a complex ecosystem of carefully cultivated affect and a distinct aesthetic often marked by *shund* drama and extravagant spectacle. The abundance of shared personnel and specific moments of self-referentiality (with its implicit nods to Yiddish theater) in Yiddish musical cinema achieved a distinctly cohesive sub-culture in the Yiddish-speaking American immigrant world. Not only was there an overlap of familiar voices and tunes, but the specific manner of delivery and musical modes mirrored each other. While Yiddish cinema was derivative of Yiddish

stage, its ultimate destiny was to stand as the celluloid ghost of its predecessor, as a sonic archive.

Perhaps the most intriguing effect of the Yiddish musical film (which is hardly a monolith) was its penchant for the positive. Even in portraying the harshest of realities (the two Molly Picon Yiddish film musicals come to mind) the resolutely sanguine tone of the Yiddish musical film stands as an alternative reality to the harsh lives of its contemporary audience.¹³⁸ While drawing from familiar struggles and predicaments, such as adverse working conditions, poverty, and the lures of assimilation, these films—through both familiar songs and songs that would *become* familiar—typically cast the plight of the common Jewish-American immigrant in a reassuringly positive aura. While such a uniformly affirmative tone is a hallmark of the conventional Hollywood musical as well, what distinguishes the Yiddish film musical from its Hollywood counterparts is the characteristically Jewish, melancholic tone that echoes its audience's rich fund of shared cultural, ethnic, and religious knowledge: even the most light-hearted show-stopper in a Yiddish musical is tinged with the hint of bittersweet reminiscing and the lingering pangs of irrevocable absence.

Indeed, even the most seemingly lighthearted moments in these films are punctuated with musical reminders of eternal displacement and longing. One vital expression of that musical longing is the figure of the *hazzan*, whose importance nearly eclipses that of the rabbi in this new era of mass communal entertainment. In addition to the cantorial performances which are often the artistic centerpieces of these films, the figure of the cantor himself becomes a focal point. The cantor was a figure who, as a

¹³⁸ The only Yiddish musical films in this study which do not favourably resolve are *Der purimshpiler* and *Der vilner shtot khazn*, both of which are haunted by a distinctly Old World-specific aura.

serious, musical performer as well as a sacred liturgical functionary, bridged the worlds of culture and religion. The transitioning Jewish American immigrant witnessed the personification of the struggle between secular and traditional culture in the cantor, for whom the lure of the glamorous world of secular musical performance competed with the obligation to use his voice as an instrument of the sacred, ancient Jewish tradition. Clearly this struggle resonated with these immigrants as they strove to navigate the paths of becoming acculturated to their new, western surroundings.

Just as the actors who graced the Yiddish musical screen ultimately supplanted their live counterparts on the Yiddish stage, the filmed cantor came to assume a more amplified, ubiquitous presence than in-person synagogue cantors.¹³⁹ As such, especially in scenes featuring cantors leading prayer, the act of film-going constituted a new, hyper-real worship experience for this transforming community. This movie theater worship, however, was not of God, as it had been in the synagogue of yore, but rather, of recognition and imagined memory.

Even in a non-liturgical context, voice and language itself help to conjure up specific images of continuity and belonging (or lack thereof) in the Yiddish musical film. In addition to the conventional means of establishing “in” and “out” groups in musicals (e.g. who sings and for how long, etc.), voice and dialect in Yiddish musical film serve to “other” and “code” their speakers for an audience well-familiar with these subtleties in language. The transition to a more anglicised language also peppered the immigrants’ musical soundscape with potentially humorous combinations, new idioms, and another means of distinguishing between a purer, more intimate Yiddish and a more English-

¹³⁹ While cantors continued to lead synagogue services during—and beyond—this era of film musicals, the rise of the ‘concert *hazzan*’ spiked in the U.S. during this period and well into the following several decades.

heavy Yiddish, intended for the “outside.”

As discussed in the final chapter, all of these forms of Jewish-American sound memory and American-Jewish listening culminated in the cohesion of a “new minyan” of Jewish ethnic presence—the presence of absence affirmed by constant vocal and musical reminders in the enveloping darkness of the cinematheque. Just as the very same songs performed twice within the same film may assume varying degrees of nostalgic inflection depending on their context, these Yiddish film musical themselves can—and do—experience intriguing afterlives as the imagined cryogenically-frozen, preserved “affect” and “cultural reality” of a bygone time and place. Not only the songs within a given film musical represent varying degrees of nostalgia, but the very film itself is subject to new understandings of nostalgia upon subsequent viewings—especially now, decades beyond its original release.

As a form, the musical film typically represents a site of privilege and glamour, with its usually sensationalised narration of drama and its romanticised depiction of reality. In the Yiddish musical film, however, the notion of a pure, undisturbed ‘wholeness’ that characterises the glamorous Hollywood musical, is supplanted by a surfeit of sound that serves to dismantle this notion of undisturbed ‘wholeness.’ In the Yiddish musical film, the sounds are sounds of transition, melding of musical styles and fusing of languages while also implicitly gesturing to that which can never fully be. It is these sounds—both musical and linguistic—that capture the constant push-and-pull between cultures that characterises the immigrant experience at its core. While the echoes of the synagogue’s haunting melodies and the cadences of the pure, Eastern European Yiddish dialect provide a link to the past and its rich and reassuring traditions,

the catchy, ragtime and show tune-infused compositions of contemporary Jewish composers and musicians performed by the newly emerging Jewish-American matinee idols and the sounds of now familiar, heavily anglicised American Yiddish vernacular constitute a celluloid harbinger of a future whose richness and complexity could not have been imagined in the glory days of Yiddish American film.

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Appendix 1: Song Index

List of Yiddish Film Musicals with list of songs

- **“Showpiece”** (a song inserted within the film musical which does not serve to advance or elaborate upon the sweep of the narrative)
 - **“Song of interior/exterior narrative reflection”** (a song that unfolds organically from the narrative reality of the film and whose lyrics inform/advance the plot)
 - **“Recreational singing”** (‘natural’ singing, as in the case of a character singing for fun in a scene, not necessarily with particular connection to the plot)
 - **“Liturgical pieces”**
 - **“Liturgical pieces performed outside of the context of the synagogue or formal worship”**
 - **“Ambient music”** (e.g. instrumental numbers at a wedding or musicians playing)
1. **Khazan afn probe**¹⁴⁰ (short, 1931)
Sholom Secunda scored both the film and the later staged performance of this short
Yismach Moshe (trad., performed by Cantor Leibele Waldman)
 2. **Zayn vaybs lubovnik / Zein Weib's Liebenik** (1931)
Abraham Ellstein wrote the original score for the stage version of this, which was later adapted into this film
Jazzy piano music at rehearsal (twice)
*Ikh has alle frauen*¹⁴¹ (Eddie sings at rehearsal)
Piano music at rehearsal (heard off-screen with Goldie listening though the door)
a zeyer vil yorn (at 22:08, Eddie sings this to himself while applying make-up to make himself look older)
zi vet zayn a nayn (a costumed Eddie sings tauntingly in front of his uncle)
Oh how we danced on the night we were wed (not sung, but hummed out by “Weingart” as he forces Goldie into a strange waltz with him)
Makh mir beyze Goldie bursts out into this song when confronting “Weingart” (41:14) (Goldie and “Weingart” sing this responsively)
*Oy, giteh vaybeleh*¹⁴² (Goldie and “Weingart” sing this responsively)

¹⁴⁰ For musical content, see (a later) collection “Khazonim oyf Probeh” put out by Secunda (page 363 of Heskes)

¹⁴¹ Ros. No. 19796; Copr. No. E. unpub.. 44149; Aug. 28, 1931. Mus: Ludwig Satz; Lyr.: Ludwig Satz.; Prop: Ludwig Satz (from Heskes)

Sheyn iz di levone (three instances of this song: first, Eddie serenades Goldie with the song; second, Goldie sings part of it at the piano alone; third the couple sing it in unison, with additional verses with contain the couple's destiny. It thus transforms from merely a 'show piece' to a piece that actually reflects the narrative)

z'hot mayn harts a lib gesingin a getlekh sheyne melodie (Eddie sings this a capella, first imitating an organ which is losing its tone)

3. **Bar mitsve** (1935)

Musical Director: Jack Stillman

*Gey ikh mir shpatsirn*¹⁴³ (sung by Rosalia)

Ikh Veys Nit (sung by Feygele the bar mitzvah boy's sister)

In New York iz a gan Eydn (sung by Sam Colton; also a song-and-dance number)

Yeled Sha'ashushim (trad.)

Yemalel

Erlekh zayn (Thomashefsky sings this)

Mamenyu (duet between Yudele and an imagined ghost of his mother)

*Ikh gey aroys oyfn gonikl*¹⁴⁴ (sung by Rosalia)

*Oy a Mameh*¹⁴⁵ (sung by Feygele)

The song the grandparents sing about a grandson's bar mitzvah

Kaddish (led by Yudele at the conclusion of his bar mitzvah speech)

4. **Yidl mitn fidl** (1936)

Music by Abraham Ellstein; lyrics by I. Manger¹⁴⁶

at ~2:38, Molly Picon fiddles amidst the milling crowd in the open market (the score leads into to her diegetic solo.

3:37: when the creepy man asks her to dance and offer two zlotys, "Yidl" grabs his by the hands and sings a very short wordless, upbeat tune

at ~8:31, the Yidl and Arye sing *Yidl mitn Fidl* as they travel by wagon; this song reemerges (5 times more: once when they are joined by the runaway bride

Taybele; then Taybele sings it at 1:04:34; at 1:09:37 the tune is absorbed into the score as Isaac explains to Arye his reasons for staying in Warsaw; *Yidl sings it on*

¹⁴² Ros. No. 20376; Copr. No. E. unpub. 44148; Aug. 28, 1931. Mus: Ludwig Satz; Lyr.: Ludwig Satz.; Prop: Ludwig Satz (from Heskés)

¹⁴³ Ros. No. 16377; Copr. No. E431144; Aug. 30, 1918; Mus.: Folk Melody; Lyr.: folk poetry; Arr.: Henry Lefkowitz; Prop./pub.: Jos. P. Katz Co. "A courtship story in song." (Heskés)

¹⁴⁴ Unlikely, but may be "Ikh gey aroys" from Heskés' collection (pg. 211, #1392)

¹⁴⁵ *Might* be: Ros: no. 7017; Copr. No. E613623; May 1, 1925; Mus: Joseph M. Rumshinsky; Lyr.: Boris Rosenthal; Prop.: Joseph Rumshinsky and Boris Rosenthal. (unpublished)

¹⁴⁶ The Overture to the film is listed as Ros. No. 21473; Copr. No. E. unpub. 128960; July 24, 1936; Mus: Ellstein; Lyr: none; Prop: Ellstein

stage at the end with full orchestral accompaniment at the end ~1:18:33; at 1:26:53, Yidl discovers Froyim playing in ship band when he plays *Yidl mitn Fidl*—it becomes the means by which she identifies not only her past identity, but her love in the New World)

At ~10:20, Froyim and Isaac play

At ~11:32, upon seeing the other pair of musicians, Yidl and her father find their own courtyard to play in.

At 13:52-14:00; 14:03-14:18: the two pairs of musicians play in a cacophonous unison, each playing their original song until they realise it's pointless

At 14:20, Yidl plays a violin solo (neighbours begin opening their windows again, a mother and infant listen on), at 14:56, Froyim joins in and harmonises with her.

At 15:30, the two fathers join in on their respective instruments (clarinet and bass). Neighbours now even begin to throw down money

At 20:22, *Yidl sings Shpiel di Fidl, Shpiel*

Shicker, chevre, shicker (Yidl sings as she drinks in the tavern with the others)

*Oy Mame, bin ikh farliebt*¹⁴⁷ (Yidl sings at 38:57 when Froyim exits the frame); (she sings

this again at 1:20:14, on stage at the end)

Mazel Tov! Mazel Tov!: Music at the wedding (40:43) the guests sing

The musicians play at the *bedekn* as the *badkhn* performs

48:35: the musicians play joyous music at the *khuppah*

49:00, a clarinet-intensive piece as the bride is accompanied to the *khuppah* and she circles around Zalmen seven times.

49:45 the musicians lead the couple and the wedding guests inside to the banquet, playing upbeat, march-like Klezmer music.

51:47 music plays as the grandmother dances

The theater's orchestra pit warms up...

At 1:26:08, the ship band plays the *wistful song* we heard just before as couple dance

5. *Der freylekhe kavstonim* (1937)

Original music by Henoah Kon

Film opens with a group of men singing a folk song (instrumental music right after)

sing along with me / my heart's aflame (young man singing in crowded room)

as long as I have love, I need no dowry (same young man is boating with young woman and serenades her)

Rosh Chodesh blessings (on inmate forces the others to sing this)

¹⁴⁷ Ros no. 19035; Copr. No. E pub. 91864; Jan. 30, 1941; Mus.: Abe/Abraham Ellstein; Lyr: Ellstein; Prop./pub.: J and J Kammen Co.

It was love at first sight (suitor appears on-stage in top hat and tails and sings this)

I ran away off into the large world, away from my father and mother (in same scene as above, Gitele timidly appears on stage with this more monologue-like—as opposed to melodic—interlude)

6. **Dem khazns zundl** (1937)

Music by Alexander Olshanetsky

Song sang by Yiddish acting troupe

Shloimele's short song about homesickness

*Ich hub dich tzufil Lieb*¹⁴⁸ (twice: first as showpiece, second as Song of interior/exterior reflection)

Mayn shtetele belz (twice: first as showpiece, second as Song of interior/exterior reflection)

Chiribim, Chiribom

Av Harachamim (trad., performed by Oysher)

Avinu Malkeinu (trad., performed by manager)

Yikkum Purkan min Shemaya (twice in the film) (trad., performed by Oysher)

Hard it is from you to part (performed by Florence Weiss)

Zol Zayn a Khasene

Hopkele (instrumental rendition by band in wedding scene)

Shpil Tsigayner

Freg nor bay di shtern

Shema Yisroel

Siman tov u' mazl tov

7. **Der purimshpiller** (1937)

Felder un Velder (sung twice: first, by Esther with a chorus of other apple-picking youth at the beginning at 3:45; she sings it again at 1:17:39; the score is also absorbed into the score twice, in a dirge-like manner toward the end, when Getsel wanders again)

Klopke Klopke (sung by Nukhem's workers at 16:49)

Ikh kholem fun mayn bashert (20:58) Esther speaks some of this out more as a monologue

Kholem, kholem (here Esther actually sings and fantasizes about having a boyfriend)

Circus music

¹⁴⁸ Ros. No. 24437; Copr. No. E pub. 44550; Oct. 22, 1934; Mus: Alexander Olshanetsky; Lyr: Chaim Tauber; Prop/Pub: Henry Lefkowitz; Metro Music Co. and Kessler's Second Avenue Theater. (Originally from "the Organ Grinder")

Dick whistles a tune (40:23)

Ikh her a shtime (at 40:41, Dick sings this upbeat show-type song to Esther; he sings it again as part of his show performance later with Esther)

sound of the circus procession

Zorekh sings a snippet of the shoemaker's song idealising the “simple life” (52:38)

Esther sings at 58:10 is the same as the first song *the wealthy potential father-in-law sings a nign* at 59:11

the sound of trumpets blare, as the Purim players make their grand entrance. All in masks, a Klezmer band plays

Mayn Esther (1:09:41) Dick sings this in the cabaret

Club band plays as couples waltz on the dance floor

piano playing Johann Strauss' *Blue Danube Waltz*

Shtetl, mayn klayne shtetle Esther sings first as a spontaneous song of genuine longing, and then as a commodified spectacle piece as part of Dick's club act

8. **Mamele** (1938)

Music by Abraham Ellstein

Abi gesunt (Molly Picon sings twice: once at length, the second time, towards the end, a short riff; the song is echoed thrice as an instrumental interlude in the score)

generic hassidic-sounding niggun (sung by a crowd of men huddled together)

Mazl Waltz (Molly Picon sings this once; it plays thrice as an instrumental interlude in the score)

Trink Trink Trink (Max Katz sings to Berta and she responds; they dance)

Song worker sings (~42:30 in)

Off-screen sukkes nign

dos Lebn iz a tantz (surreal duet between Molly Picon and the departed grandmother in the photos)

Shir Hashirim (Schlesinger sings this as he accompanies himself on piano)

9. **Yankl der shmid** (1938)

Original music by Jacob Weinberg

Unter grine borg (Yankl sings to a crowd of admiring young women in a tavern)

A kholem, a kholem (just a short clip of this; Yankl sings this to Rivkele)

at ~26:30 in, Yankl leans against the wall and sings

A kholem, a kholem (Yankl sings this again, this time to try to seduce Fraydele)

I sew and sew for someone else (the female tailors sing this in unison)

Leybedik alle (yum bidittle dibidittle dibittle...) Yankl and Rivkele sing this together

Klap der hammer eyns (back at the smith, Yankl sings this song of work pride)

Ot azoy neyt a schnayder (Yankl sings this, with the women in the tailor shop responding in unison)

12 o'clock at night...misfortune befell me... (Yankl sings at about 41:00 minutes in)

Continuation of above song (he sings to Tamara)

In the smithy by the fire, stands a blacksmith working alone (Yankl sings a song literally describing what he is doing, as he works)

Ot azoy, trinkt a gleyzl tey (as Yankl prepares a glass of tea for Tamara)

l'chaim/cheery nign (Yankl with a group of men after the birth of his son)

Yankl sings a tune he says he'll sing at his son's bris to Rivkele in the smithy

Yankl drunkenly sings and dances again in the smithy, in front of his father

10. **Kol nidre** (1939)

Original Music by Sholom Secunda

a young woman in the background plays a single chord at the piano in this drinking scene

Ikh bin a yinge sportman (4:53) (Jack sings before his college pals)

Chasye sings loudly in a soprano voice as she putters around the house

Chasye sings operatically again, much to her husband's annoyance

Chasye sings about men (10:39-13:23)

Sheyn vi di levone iz du 16:02-18:47 (with instrumental backing in the score) Jack sings a romantic ballad to Jenny as they sit on the bench

Cantor Leibele Waldman sings a light song at the benefit concert (33:02-36:38) a song about two cantors—one from *Polish* ancestry, and one of *litvish* ancestry

di shnayders tekhter (37:26) Chaim Tauber sings with a piano accompanist on-stage

Chasye sings a few very loud, very high operatic riffs in Joseph's office

I am in Love (46:27) Joseph sings right after Jenny leaves his office

Like Smoke (58:00-1:01:27) Jenny sings ruefully after Jack deserts her

darf m'hobn kinder (1:02:40) Sarah sings weeping

Kol Nidre (1:09:27- 1:15:12) first heard O.S. (from the outside of the shul), then in the shul, then O.S. again (at 1:30, while the credits are still running, the orchestral sound score plays a charged version of *Kol Nidre*; a more jumpy instrumental version of *Kol Nidre* plays in the score right after the film concludes at 1:22:09)

11. **Der leybedike yosem / Mayn zundele** (1939)

Original music by Aleksandr Olshanetsky (uncredited)

My Sonny (5 different iterations: first, in the opening scene, with Muni singing live and backed by Olshanetsky's orchestra at the WEVD studio; second time, the song is absorbed into the soundtrack as Benny trudges dejectedly up the stairs to his mother's home; the third time Freda plays a few notes of the beginning of the song on the piano; and finally, to book-end the film, Muni returns triumphantly back to the radio after a 10 year absence to perform the song again; and then a coda: Muni plays a gentle version of "My Son" at the piano, as Freda reads a book and Benny browses the book shelf in the very final scene of the film)

Shtel zi for a finster keller..." hai di dai ya diddle dum (Singer Chaim Green, wearing traditional peasant garb with a live band (hammered dulcimer, violin, and accordion) behind him, performs this at the Roumanian bar)

Shluf ze, shluf ze, mayn feyegele (Muni's mothers sings this lullaby to Benny when he's an infant in his cradle)

Wordless tune at 10:18 (Leibke starts singing this to himself after tasting the cake Malke made him)

a lu lu lu... "Shluf, Mayn Kind...ikh vel keyn mol nisht vargesn dir" Freda sings this to the infant Benny in his cradle before setting off for her theater tour
gute menschn, koyf a paper Benny sings this song, trying to elicit pity from his potential customers, as he sings about his plight as an orphan. Interestingly, it sounds dubbed.

America Chaim Green sings this song live and backed by Olshanetsky's orchestra at the radio studio. The song is quite march/anthem-like, and the content is extremely ironic, given its placement in the film (it paints America in a very idealised light)

Instrumental Klezmer song at 48:30 (at Roumanian bar again, they return to this song after Muni finishes up the song below and we hear it off-screen)

Ay Froyn! At 49:26, a drunken Muni sings a misogynistic song at the Roumanian bar

Mutter libe (At 55:41, Freda performs this song from her hit show with just piano accompaniment before an audience of elder house residents)

12. **Der groyse eytse geber** (1940)

Original Music by Manny Fleishman, Fishel Kanapoff, and Chaim Tauber

Elohai neshome medley (at 2:03, Cantor Leibele Waldman performs live in the radio station, backed by a pianist)

Oy vey, tate zeys du, s'iz m'gut 21:46 Fishl sings along with a street accordionist and is joined by Dovid and Barney—each sings about his scheme

A mol s'iz geven a prinzeesn (34:26) Dovid begins singing but falters and stops twice

Oy mame, mayn shtetle Chaim Tauber (appearing as Chaim Tauber) sings with a piano accompanist (35:44)

Sarah's uncle sings a wordless song to himself as he mans the counter of his stand (49:32)

Sarah sings to herself as she leaves her apartment building and runs into her uncle (55:08)

M'trosket a khasene (1:03:52) Fishl breaks up the two couples fight and sings (with piano accompaniment in the score)

13. **Amerikaner shadkhen** (1940)

Musical score composed and conducted by Sam Morgenstern; lyrics by William Mercur

Oy oy oy, shpil (first sung by Nat at his bachelor party at the beginning; also absorbed as a score refrain at multiple times later in the film)

her mich oys, di feygele

bim, bom, bim, bom...yach, chiribim bom, bim bom (Reb Shya sings in celebration of his successful match's wedding)

Ikh bin shoyn a bocher lange yorn... (at 51:38, Nat sings this, bemoaning his fate)

Trink, bruder, trink (Nat and Morris)

Jazzy big band music at restaurant

bin oyf dir nisht in kas (Nat serenades Judith)

Violin playing of Dr. Kanarek /music in the background at wedding scene: he plays Kinderszenen, Op.15, No.7 "Traumerei" (1838)

The wedding song (Mendelssohn) (plays twice: first in Nat's nightmare, then at Nat's wedding; in both cases, we are to assume it is inserted into the score as only signification of what is being thought about or happening)

14. **Der vilner Shtot khazn** (1940)

Original music by Aleksandr Olshanetsky

A series of prayers leading up to the Chazarat ha'Shatz

Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata

Chopin's Etude in E major, op. 10 no. 3

Excerpt from Manyushko's opera *Halka*

Unter beymer (sung thrice: twice by Oysher—first time as lullaby and second time as nervous breakdown/haunting dirge and once by Chana)

Chopin's Waltz no. 1 in E flat, Op. 18

Vilna Song

Chopin's Nocturne no. 8 op. 27 no. 2 in d flat major

Ashrei...Avinu Malkeinu

Kol Nidrei

**in the opening credits, the special High Holiday kaddish tune play in the background*

15. **Der yidisher nign** (1940)

Original Music by Sholom Secunda

Samuel happily sings a wordless song to himself as he picks up the phone receiver to make a call (2:08)

Yibaneh ha'mikdash (3:17) Cantor Dovid sings with his family at home (again at 6:13)

Avinu Malkeinu (5:44) Groinem pulls out a pitch fork and sings before his relatives

k'vakarat Roeh Edro (11:44) Groinem conducts several young men in a YK rehearsal

Mir zugt azoy; mir redt aza (14:10) first real „musical“ number here, feat. Esther and Mendel, incl. dancing

A libe shtibele far tsvey (18:00)

Libe! (20:43) Moishe sings to Rosita on a balcony in Italy (they sing this again, but with Marbini comping them on piano, at 32:08)

behind a piano, Marbini conducts two young female singers in vocal exercises (28:39)

Ikh vel dikh nit fargessn (34:14) Moishe and Rosita sing this responsively; Moishe plunks out single notes of this tune on the piano later at 44:24 and again at 50:12 back in NY

The Jewish Melody (50:44) “der Yidisher Nign” Moishe sings this

Esther'l vet a kale, and I wish you luck (1:00:42) Mendel sings mockingly to Esther on her wedding day

Esther'l, Esther'l (1:02:17) Mendel sings, (accompanied by score instrumentals), Esther responds by singing “*Mendele, Mendele...*”

Froyn, oy froyn! (1:09:16) Martin and Morris (Moishe) sing this

Oy mamenu (with musical accompaniment in the score) (1:13:46) Esther sings pleadingly to her mother

Groinem sits at the table in their home and sings some kind of nign (1:19:49)

Khasene oyf der east side (1:22:09) Groinem sings this song with Grenedel

Appendix 2: Glossary

<i>Alrightnik</i>	A American-Yiddish parvenu characterised by his lack of traditional knowledge and penchant for ostentatious behaviour
<i>Badkhn</i>	A traditional jester who performed at weddings and other celebrations
<i>Bar mitzvah</i>	A Jewish traditional coming of age ceremony (often party) for a boy upon reaching his 13 th birthday
<i>Bima</i>	Elevated prayer lectern
<i>Brokhe</i>	A blessing
<i>Daven</i>	To pray
<i>Galitsianer</i>	Refers to someone whose personal and/or ancestral origins are from Galicia and its surrounding areas; this term is used often in conjunction with several associated negative stereotypes, such as tasteless materialism and lack of traditional Jewish knowledge.
<i>Goldene khasene</i>	Fiftieth wedding anniversary
<i>Hasidim (sing. Hasid)</i>	Pious Jews known for their religious fervor organised according to sects based on inspirational religious leaders (<i>rebbe</i> figures) from specific small towns
<i>Heymish</i>	Homey, folksy, comfortably familiar
<i>Kaddish</i>	Traditional mourning prayer
<i>Khazn</i>	A cantor
<i>Litvak</i>	Refers to someone whose personal and/or ancestral origins are from the area spanning North-Eastern Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus; the classical stereotype of the <i>Litvak</i> is someone rigid who values traditional Jewish learning and observance above all else.
<i>Nign</i>	A wordless devotional tune, often sung by <i>Hasidim</i> , but also functions as a more general Yiddish folk melody
<i>Payes</i>	Sidelocks traditionally worn by Jewish men
<i>Rebbetsin</i>	Rabbi's wife
<i>Shadkhn</i>	Traditional matchmaker
<i>Shamash</i>	Sexton; the person generally responsible for overseeing the synagogue on a daily basis

<i>Shtetl</i>	Small village or town
<i>Shund</i>	Whether in a film, stage play, or radio drama, <i>shund</i> usually assumes the form of a family melodrama, characterised by excessive affect and a low-brow sensibility, “trash”
<i>Shviger</i>	Mother-in-law
<i>Siddur</i>	Jewish prayer book
<i>Simkhe</i>	Joyous occasion
<i>Tallis</i>	Traditional Jewish prayer shawl
<i>Tsures</i>	Troubles, aggravation
<i>Yeshive bokhur</i>	A young man who studies in a Yeshiva (a place of traditional Jewish learning)
<i>Yinglish</i>	A combination of English and Yiddish in one’s speech, nearly always colloquial in nature.