

Yiddish Theater in Interwar Poland

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Danger lies in beginning with the Holocaust and reading history backwards. That method dismisses, or at least overshadows, the cultural vivaciousness and creativity of the Jews of Europe beforehand. The Yiddish Theater in interwar Poland is but one space where this vivaciousness and creativity can be explored. Its role and function and success had nothing to do with the upcoming tragic events of which it was naturally unaware but, instead, was grounded in millennia of Jewish history and the social, political and economic realities of the day.

For Ida Kaminska life in Interwar Poland was, despite economic depression, political instability and a rise in anti-Semitism, a time and place of productivity, creativity and a strong sense of Jewish community. Kaminska was part of the second generation of the professional Yiddish Theater in Poland; the daughter of Abraham Isaac Kaminsky, an actor, producer and theater owner and Esther-Rokhl Kaminska, the “mother of the Yiddish Theater.” Kaminska herself reached maturity at the same time as Yiddish Theater in Poland. It was a time when the theater had come to fully transcend its role as a mode of entertainment. In Poland between the first and second world wars, Yiddish theater developed into an essential Jewish space which transmitted and preserved Yiddish culture, provided a political arena and a relatively safe physical space for Jews. It was a haven in the midst of oppressive politics, violence and poverty. It was a space which represented and displayed all that was good and fruitful, enduring and strong in Polish

Jewry. It was a space that had long persisted and that had recently transformed itself to meet the spiritual, intellectual and emotional needs of its audience and participants.

Kaminska's autobiography recalls the Yiddish theater's "joys and sorrows, its thorns and flowers, its high and low points" (Kaminska, 1). These joys and sorrows reflect the joys and sorrows of the Jews in Poland generally. While the entertainment and escapism one expects to find in theater existed in the Yiddish Theater, so too existed a serious and liberating confrontation with the realities of Interwar Poland.

The vitality and professionalism of the Yiddish Theater, as well as its cultural content make it an important Jewish space in Interwar Poland. This paper will explore the role of Yiddish Theater in Poland. By examining the role theater played for both participants and for the audience, the plays performed, the dramatic content therein, and the theatrical spaces themselves as well as the social, political and religious climate of Poland at the time I intend to demonstrate it was a place of cultural transmission as well as a place of entertainment. By space of cultural transmission I mean a space in which markers of Jewish culture (religion, language, world-view, norms, ethics and identity, et cetera) were readily found, presented and accepted in a variety of ways.

The Yiddish Theater, like many other forms of Yiddish expression, is often seen as representative of a pre-Holocaust golden age of Jewish culture. There is validity to this observation as an examination of the Yiddish theater in Interwar Poland can indeed shed light on the lives of Yiddish speaking Jews during a highly productive period of their history. Yiddish speaking Jews in Poland were dealing with anti-Semitism and at the same time producing massive amounts of literature and other forms of expression.

Michael C. Steinlauf writes, “the creators of this theater inevitably linked their art to a national “mission”: Yiddish dramatic theater perceived itself as a moral force in the struggle for survival of Jewish society in Poland” (Steinlauf, 401). Why would theater, seemingly a realm of fantasy, illusion and escape, concern itself with a struggle for Jewish survival and against pressures from the dominant culture and political climate? In Poland the Yiddish Theater was an institution already in place and one that had been increasingly dealing with political and religious issues. Interwar Poland created a need for the Jewish community to not only use the theatrical space as one for entertainment but also to use it to express frustrations, fears and political opposition as well as hopes and cultural values.

Interwar Poland: The Social, Political and Economic Climate

Interwar Poland was home to the largest community of Jews in Europe; over three million Jews lived within the newly re-drawn borders. By the 20th century the complexity of the Jewish life in Poland was reflected in Yiddish Theater. After World War I Jewish poverty increased, as did violence against Jews, organized political anti-Semitism and general tension between Jews and Poles. This was matched by growing Jewish nationalism and socialism, both appearing in many forms. All these issues were discussed in the plays of the Yiddish Theater. Just as interwar Poland became the center of autonomous Jewish politics in the Jewish Diaspora, so it also became the center of autonomous Jewish culture, whether secular or religious...” (Mendelsohn, 63).

Celia Heller’s text, *On the Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland Between the Two World Wars*, paints a grim picture of the Jewish situation in interwar Poland. She claims Jewish resistance to oppression bore little fruit (Heller, 120). However, the Yiddish

Theater can be understood as a place not only of resistance but also of celebration of the vibrant religion, culture, traditions and family structures of Jewish life in Poland.

Ida Kaminska recalls,

During my childhood and also somewhat later, the repertoire of the Yiddish Theater was replete with the theme of Jewish persecution, and, understandably, justice triumphed in various ways...I developed a feeling of protest and a desire to discover the precise explanation [for Jewish persecution] (Kaminska, 15).

The Yiddish Theater became for Kaminska, and other Jews as well, an outlet for this feeling of protest as well as a forum to explore the nature of the Jewish position in Poland.

The political, economic and social conditions for the Jews living in interwar Poland are interconnected; the social customs and history informed politics and the economy and the political and economic climate in turn informed the social conditions. Each needs to be at least briefly examined in order to gain a complete picture of this time and place. In the interwar period, as Poland's cities were becoming more industrialized, Poland's Jews were becoming more urban and middle-class. Still, their social and economic status was far from secure. The anti-Semitism they experienced was often economic and based on old stereotypes; it was less like the racial anti-Semitism growing in Nazi Germany although it did share a nationalistic component.

The economy of a given nation can determine its mood, social climate and its openness to positive and negative influences. The interwar period saw an economic depression in Poland. Polish citizens of all ethnicities were drastically affected by the failing economy. Jewish poverty, like Polish poverty, was growing in the years prior to World War II (Heller, 72). Relevant to the economic conditions of Poland Heller points

out the gap between the imagined wealth of the Jews and their actual poverty. Jews were mainly occupied in commerce and small business and “to Poles this tended to signify Jewish economic advantages”(74). Yet, “oppressive poverty was real among large sections of Polish Jewry” (72). Much of the increasing Jewish poverty of interwar Poland was a result of an organized effort to rid Poland of the Jews who were often understood as economic and cultural parasites. Boycotts of Jewish businesses were organized as remedies for Poland’s economic troubles. The visibility and perceived foreignness of the Jews made them ready scapegoats. Ezra Mendelsohn, paints a more positive and perhaps more balanced and accurate picture. He points out that the socio-political drive for a unified Jewish nationalism resulted in some state support for Yiddish Theater and other cultural endeavors. “Along with the preservation of traditional Jewish culture went the remarkable experiment to create in Poland a secular Jewish national culture based on Yiddish which was designed to serve as one of the cornerstones of Jewish national autonomy”(Mendelshon, 63). The flourishing Yiddish Theater is an example of this and also indicates that despite hardships, the Jews saw a permanent home for themselves in Poland.

In response to the economic depression, growing nationalistic sentiment and the newly gained Polish independence, a host of political parties offered solutions to Poland’s problems and visions of Poland’s future. Two political visions represented by two different political parties had a significant affect on the social and economic lives of Polish Jews. The first party was the National Democratic Party, which represented the Polish right and the second was Polish Socialist Party which “called for Poles to admit

other ethnic groups to equality” (79).¹ Unfortunately the broad-minded federalist plans of Jozef Pilsudski and the Socialist Party were not realized as the right wing nationalist party, which promoted a Poland for ethnic Poles only, became increasingly popular. The principle of “Poland for Poles only” ignored the reality of Poland as a multiethnic state and Jews and other minorities were adversely affected by the rhetoric and its resulting actions (Heller, 81). We can clearly see that both the political and economic climate in Poland was becoming increasingly hostile to Jews. How did this effect the Jewish social status?

Political and economic instability does not bode well for citizens of any nation. When that instability is coupled with an exclusionist agenda and minority-directed hostility the situation becomes even more dangerous. As alluded to above, Jews in the interwar period were understood as a foreign element to those that espoused or accepted the right wing political and economic position. Their historic and contemporary contributions to Polish culture were not recognized. There was a rigid line of demarcation between ethnic Poles and Jews, according to Heller (59). She also cites much violence against Jews as well as legal “terrorism” which accused Jews of treason and other forms of betrayal (52). However, it is essential to see that there was in actuality some positive Jewish-Polish interaction as well as some support for Jewish culture from within the Polish authority structure. The Yiddish Theater is one space where this can be demonstrated. Because this paper is more concerned with the flourishing of Jewish Theater in interwar Poland than with the horrors of the anti-Semitism of the time, suffice it to say that anti-Semitism, economic, political and social existed in Poland in the

¹ Interestingly enough this equality should have been guaranteed by the Minorities Treaty and new Constitution of 1921 (see Heller page 78).

interwar period. It was just as often violent and unpredictable, as it was organized and systematic. What is most important for our purpose is that it was resisted and refuted in the space provided by the Yiddish Theater.

David Pinski's one act play, *Poland- 1919*, expresses the fear, frustration and hunger of the Jews at the end of the First World War. It also expresses their hope for their future and their faith in God. The short play is the story of a group of Jews hiding in a cellar from the retreating armies who are marching past and still battling each other. The Jews are sick, starving, sad and desperate. They question their God and rely on him for redemption. Throughout the play, while the Jews in the cellar ponder the reasons for their tragic fate, the sunbeam, a silent and symbolic character, offers hope. The sunbeam is the only light the Jews have in the dark cellar; it is their physical and spiritual destination. In Pinski's stage direction he writes, "a spacious, dark cellar. From somewhere in the background there steals in a sunbeam, announcing that the clear sun of daylight reigns outside..." (165).

The Poet: Outside shines the glorious sun! Vast and round and brilliant!

The Man at the Right: And its rays tell us of a land whither the Jews shall return.—it tells of full freedom, of a home of their own, of sunny independence, of a life without persecution, without scorn, without pogroms, of a life—

The Man at the Left: Without master or slave, without exploiter and exploited. The sunbeam speaks to us of a new day and a new world, with a new justice, new relations between man and man, people and people.

The Poet: Then let us saddle the sunbeam and fare forth upon its back into the sunny world. For this is a ray of hope. This is the— (Pinski, 174-75).

But instead of the sunshine and freedom they seek as they exit the cellar the Jews are greeted with a bomb and the play ends as the Poet lays dying. The play illustrates the reality of the conditions of violence and poverty the Jews faced in the interwar period and also the hopeful imagined future they saw for themselves. Religion, history, Jewish

nationalism, negative Jewish stereotypes are all presented in the play. It is not difficult to see why, if this was the content of the Yiddish Theater, and it was, it was so widely successful. In these few pages penned by Pinski, the Jewish experience in Poland was encapsulated. Other plays of the Yiddish Theater were less pessimistic while others were more pessimistic about the political, economic and social conditions in interwar Poland. Yet, all the plays attempted to present the Yiddish audience with something they could relate to, respond to and learn from. And, if they were entertained at the same time then all the better.

This period was a diverse one for Polish Jewry which, while it saw increasing restrictions of freedom and comfort, also saw an environment which fostered creativity because of or in spite of the political and social dangers. As difficult as it is to believe, the Yiddish Theater not only managed to exist in Interwar Poland, it actually thrived. Nahma Sandrow writes that the persistence of the Yiddish theater and its actors “is inexplicable—unless it was an unconscious reaction to the very oppression that should have extinguished [them]” (Sandrow, 305).

A Brief History of the Yiddish Theater

What started as the exuberant and specific *Purimspiel* (Purim Play), grew into the important, multi-formed institution of the Yiddish theater. Founded on the principle characters and Jewish essence of the Purim plays, Yiddish Theater transformed itself into an artistic form of cultural expression that addressed the issues of contemporary Jewish life as well as themes of religious, historical, social and political concern. And, it was thoroughly entertaining! The Purim plays, still enacted the world over in Jewish communities, were mobile pieces of theater presented in homes and in the streets during

the festive Purim holiday. “The earliest, and for a long time the only, professional Yiddish theatrical performers were the Yiddish clowns” which were included in the Purim plays and other celebratory activities (Sandrow, 10). Stock Yiddish characters from the Middle Ages on make up the foundation of early Yiddish theatrical roles. By the 19th century Yiddish Theater had begun to divorce itself from the Purim plays and more sophisticated plays began to appear. One of the earliest of the plays of the Yiddish Theater is Shloyme Etinger’s *Serkele*. Still, the earliest of the modern Yiddish plays were not usually performed in the traditional sense. “In middle-class Jewish parlors in Eastern Europe, reading plays aloud was a newly fashionable way to spend the evening” and this is how Etinger’s play and other were first circulated (Sandrow, 21).

The general European Enlightenment as well as the Jewish *Haskala* (Yiddish: *haskole*) influenced the emerging Yiddish Theater. Tensions between religious loyalty and innovation, social justice and nationalism, and even linguistic issues were voiced in the plays of the 19th century. There was a drive by Etinger and others to “try to make Yiddish modern and literary” (Sandrow, 30). The early successes of playwrights such as Etinger, and Yiddish authors such as Mendele Moykher Sforim, Y.L. Peretz and Sholom Aleichem as well as the popularity of Yiddish styles of musical theater such as the Broder Singers all created the basis and inspiration for much of the Yiddish theatrical presentations of the Interwar period.²

So, what role did the Yiddish Theater play for the Jews of Interwar Poland? At this point we will turn to the specifics of the theater itself and of its audience in an attempt to understand the function of the theater and the cultural space it provided. In looking at

² For a thorough treatment of the history of Yiddish Theater see Nahma Sandrow’s *Vagabond Stars: A World History of the Yiddish Theater*.

Yiddish Theater as a cultural space we will also be able to examine the lives of Jews in this specific time and place. To understand Yiddish Theater as a space for the transmission and perpetuation of Jewish culture we will be able to extrapolate some of the many aspects of Yiddish culture and examine their meanings.

Yiddish Theater as a Physical Space

Before discussing Yiddish Theater as an abstract “space” of cultural transmission, it is important to look briefly at the actual physical spaces that housed it. Like other world Theaters, the Yiddish Theater was varied in its presentation styles and in the places in which it staged its presentations. In Prague in 1910, Franz Kafka famously came in contact with the Yiddish Theater. Small troupes from Poland were touring European Jewish communities and visited Prague several times over the next few years and staged many plays. The Yiddish Theater was a “form of Jewish culture totally alien to the Westernized Jews of Prague” (Beck, ix). Kafka’s letters and diary contain some of the only descriptions of the Polish troupes that stopped in Prague (22). He described the theater and the theater experience in detail.

He notes that sets were traditional, stage props and furnishings primitive. Lighting was poor...Because props were limited the actors wore extravagant costumes and relied on sensational effects. The dialogue was delivered in heavy accents, at times to outshout the noisy audience (25).

The troupes whose performances Kafka attended usually performed at the Café Savoy which he described as small and dingy (26). The stage was very small and the actors’ movements limited and there was only room for a piano as accompaniment (26).

Bruno Schulz, in *The Street of Crocodiles*, describes a theater in Poland. His theater is a “large, badly lit, dirty hall, full of somnolent human chatter and aimless confusion” (Schulz, 86).

Sandrow writes that the theaters were often used as “a meeting place” (91). There were buildings of socializing as well as spaces of entertainment. The theaters were notoriously noisy and the audience often loudly verbalized comments directly to the actors; the theater was often an emotional place and the audience loudly displayed their emotional reactions.

Not all the theaters were the chaotic and dimly lit places Kafka and Schulz describe. The plays were also staged in more traditional theatrical spaces. Especially as the Yiddish Theater modernized and matured, the performances began to more closely resemble the atmosphere of other European Theaters. There was an attempt by the so-called Yiddish “Art Theaters” to “provide a better kind of theater than the commercial establishment and, if possible, to influence the commercial theater” (Sandrow, 205). In Moscow Stanislavky turned off the houselights to discourage the “drinking, gossiping, and inspection of each other’s gowns” during the performance (205). Changes like these influenced Yiddish Theater productions in Poland as well.

By the Interwar period the Yiddish Theater in Warsaw and Vilna was sophisticated and stable. Clubs in various cities were organized to support the Theater through membership fees and some theaters received support from the city as well. The financial support allowed some theater companies to move into or rent out larger, nicer spaces. “The Nowósci, a fancy new theater...housed primarily Yiddish theater, and is an example of the decree of economic stability and glamour that the Warsaw Yiddish theater

attained” (306). The theater, which seated two thousand and was equipped with state of the art lighting, two balconies and a buffet area, was opened in 1926 and was central to the Jewish neighborhood in Warsaw (306). In the interwar period the Yiddish Theater in Poland resembled a “full national theater” despite the political and economic turmoil of the Jews (307). Buildings such as the Nowósci and other large and comfortable theaters represented the growth and creativity of Yiddish Theater and other Jewish cultural expressions.

The Yiddish Theater in Poland was not only a space of Jewish expression it was a space of artistic expression that could be shared by non-Jews.³ Non-Jewish theater workers could build a career in the Yiddish Theater and sets were often designed by non-Jews (Sandrow, 310). “The important Polish director Leon Schiller directed Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in Yiddish” in 1939 in Warsaw (310). The reality that Jews and Poles interacted in this space counters the fantasy that they led completely separated lives with no social or cultural interaction.

From small the productions staged in small taverns and cafes to the large, upscale presentations in grand theaters, the Yiddish theatrical spaces not only reflected the status and conditions of the Jews in interwar Poland but responded to and argued against them.

The Theater: Its Artists and Audience

Who were the people who created the Yiddish Theater of Interwar Poland? Who were the actors, directors, writers, and producers? Who were the Jewish artists who nurtured themselves and Polish Jewry with such expression and meaning? Ida Kaminska’s

³ Non-Polish Jews were often active in the Polish Yiddish Theater (Sandrow, 311). The Yiddish Theater was in fact quite international with actors, companies, playwrights and others touring Europe, the US and even South America and Palestine.

autobiography, *My Life, My Theater*, is filled with the stories of passionate actors, musicians, writers and the other artists who made the Yiddish Theater come alive.

Kaminska's father, like many of the people involved in the Theater (and many in the audience as well) had only the rudimentary religious education of the heder. Kaminska describes him as having a "progressive outlook" and a "tremendous desire to study and learn languages" (Kaminska, 12). The Kaminska family spoke both Yiddish and Polish and were all musically inclined. They exchanged stability and comfort for a life spent pursuing their passion, the Yiddish Theater. At times the entire family, mother, father and children, grandchildren and in-laws, were all touring with Yiddish productions across Europe. At times the family was split between various productions and hardly saw each other. Life on the road was perilous. Often caught in dangerous political situations, or travelling in areas legally off-limits to Jews, Yiddish theater troupes risked life and liberty in order to stage their plays. Passports were difficult to obtain and often those working in the theater did not have one and so traveled illegally (Kaminska, 33).

Despite dangers the Theater thrived. The actors, as well as the audience were willing to risk safety in order to put on a show. When the First World War ended, the danger to the traveling troupes did not. Kaminska recalls a performance in Polotsk, after the end of World War I, where despite peril to all, the actors were asked to perform; "we couldn't believe our ears. In such a tumult, in such a bullet-riddled town, the population was requesting theater!...Heedless of the constant shooting, people filled the theater; even during performances we heard the echoes of shots" (52). The productions were obviously quite important to the audience. For the Yiddish Theatergoers the Theater was often the beam of sunshine Pinski described.

It was not only the productions that were important to the Yiddish-speaking theatergoers, the actors and writers were popular, often legendary figures. “A sampling of the actors who played at the Nowósci exemplifies the range of Yiddish actors of high quality in Poland in the years between the two world wars” (Sandrow, 311). Yitskhok Zandberg, Ben-Zvi Baratoff, Lydia Potoska and members of the Kaminsky family drew crowds to the theaters. Touring American stars like Molly Picon, Boris Thomashefsky, David Kessler and Clara Young also were box office draws. Sandrow writes that for the Yiddish Theatergoers “the actor was a cultural institution with an almost religious hold on their imagination” (94). The actors, and the roles they played, embodied the experiences of Polish and Eastern European Jews. Upon the stage the audience found the situations and history they dealt with daily. From the mouths of the actors came their thoughts, feelings and opinions. The audience was responsive to and appreciative of their performances. And, the audience was, in and of itself, entertainment, according to many descriptions.

It has proved difficult to find descriptions of the Yiddish Theater audience of interwar Poland. There are, however, extant descriptions of the New York audiences of the time period. What we can do, then, is extrapolate something about one audience from information on the other.

Many of the New York Yiddish Theatergoers were recent immigrants. For them the Yiddish Theater was a haven of Jewish culture, language and history. Plays set in Eastern Europe fed their nostalgia while plays set in America reflected their experiences in their adopted homeland. As in Poland, the variety of theater types, from vaudeville to art-house productions, satisfied the taste of every type of audience. And, as in Poland,

what unified the audience was not religious observance or political affiliation, but the Yiddish language.

The theater space in New York was similar to the one described by Kafka; a noisy scene created by energetic theatergoers.

They used the theater building unceremoniously, as a meeting place, just as their fathers had used the little synagogue back home to study, gossip, pray, drink schnapps, and eat black bread with butter. The theater aisles and lobbies were clubhouses...Spectators ate drumsticks from brown paper bags, cracked walnuts, and even nursed infants during the show (Sandrow, 91).

We can assume that much of this rowdy behavior was brought with the audience from the Yiddish Theater in Eastern Europe. Despite the seeming disrespect for the Theater as an institution and its performances, the audience was quite enthusiastic. “This then was the public whose tastes shaped Yiddish Theater. They wanted what people always want from theater, and they had special needs as well, derived from their special situation as Yiddish-speaking Jews” (92).

So, what were the special needs of the Yiddish Theater audience and what was it they wanted from the Yiddish Theater? At this point we can begin to construct the role the Yiddish Theater played in interwar Poland.

The Role of the Yiddish Theater in Interwar Poland

The Yiddish Theater in interwar Poland expressed the frustrations, fears, hopes, history, politics, religion and creativity of Polish Jewry. Despite increasing poverty Polish Jews attended the Yiddish Theater en masse. It is obvious that the Theater served a needed function within the community. I would suggest that the Theater provided a physical space where Jews could be entertained and escape the reality of growing anti-

Semitism and economic depression. But, more importantly I would suggest that the Yiddish Theater provided an essential cultural space. Within this cultural space Jewish language, history and experience could be told, celebrated, discussed and transmitted through theatrical works. The Yiddish Theater was not a unified whole in content or style but instead reflected the diversity of Polish Jewry; there was something for everyone.⁴ It not only created desires in the audience but it also reflected back the needs and desires that the audience already had. Poland's own Solomon Ettinger, with his play *Serkele*, created a new and legitimate form of Yiddish expression that was able to meet the needs of the changing Polish Jewish community. Other Polish Yiddish playwrights such as "Professor" Moses Hurwitz, Fishel Bimko, Mark Arnstein and Sholem Asch solidified the love of Yiddish Theater in Poland with many popular plays. The actors, too, helped propel the Theater into a viable cultural form despite the difficulties facing the Jewish community.

Michael C. Steinlauf writes, "one of the striking features of the development of modern Jewish culture in Poland was its relative isolation from the surrounding Polish culture" (Steinlauf, 301). I disagree with this statement. It is because of the impossibility of completely separating Jewish culture from Polish culture that many of the tensions depicted in the Yiddish plays existed. What affected Polish culture would also, albeit in different ways, affect Jewish culture. Polish economics, attitudes of the Church, war, technology and even Polish literature affected the Jews living within Poland's borders. The tensions created, as well as the creativity produced, by the meeting of the two cultures were reflected in the plays of the Yiddish Theater.

⁴ Of course there were some Jewish groups, such as the Hassidim that, as a rule, avoided Yiddish Theater due to religious and moral reasons.

David Lifson writes,

Omnipresent by implication in almost all Yiddish folk plays is the villainous power of the anti-Semitic host nation. It was taken for granted, like the inevitability of death or the changes of the seasons. Symbolically or actually, the dread presence did not make its appearance in the foregoing plays, even though too often it was the dramatic force that determined the course of the play (Lifson, 20).

It is true that oppression and anti-Semitism often loomed large in the plays of the Yiddish Theater. But, they were not the only aspects depicted of Jewish life in Poland. The joys of family life, the triumphs in Jewish history, and, the strength of Jewish faith were all-important factors as well. Non-Jewish plays were also part of the Yiddish Theater repertoire and any messages of anti-Semitism or link to the Jewish experience could only be made through interpretation. The Yiddish Theater functioned to meet all the needs of the Jewish community; it discussed both the high points and the low points of Jewish life in Poland. It was a creative outlet and a didactic space as well.

Michael Steinlauf asserts that in interwar Poland “Yiddish dramatic theater had come of age: Without public or private funding, operating on a shoestring budget with actors whose poverty and idealism became legendary” (Steinlauf, 401). While we have seen that the Yiddish Theater of interwar Poland did receive private financial support from the community as well as occasional government funding, it is true that the Yiddish Theater did reach maturity in this time period. The unique situation of the Jews interwar Poland cried out for and then created and perpetuated a form of expression that met all their various needs and glorified their culture.

Biblical theme plays such as Hurwitz’s *Judah the Galilean* or *Elijah the Prophet* as well as plays depicting Jewish history served to illustrate the continuity of Jewish culture

and religion despite threats of destruction. This was surely a reassuring message in interwar Poland. Plays with contemporary social themes such as political involvement, assimilation, intermarriage, and emigration to other countries such as Lateiner's *The Jewish Heart*, Zolotarevsky's *Money, Love and Shame*, and Leivick's *Rags* addressed the concerns of the Jewish community. Of course, many plays were simply entertaining. But entertainment, too, served an indispensable function in interwar Poland. And even plays which are seemingly purely entertaining, such as Anski's *The Dybbuk*, could be understood a variety of ways depending on the needs of the audience or how it was interpreted by the actors or director.

“The creators of this theater inevitably linked their art to a national ‘mission’: Yiddish dramatic theater perceived itself as a moral force in the struggle for survival of Jewish society in Poland” (Steinlauf, 401). In order to struggle for Jewish survival the Yiddish Theater had to meet the needs of its community. It did so by functioning as a unique cultural space where Jews could meet, exchange ideas, tell their history, and celebrate past, present and future accomplishments all in their *mama loshn*, Yiddish. For Nahma Sandrow, Yiddish Theater was concerned with the question “what makes life morally good and worth living” (Sandrow, GMD, 1). I agree and would suggest that the Jews of interwar Poland had many answers to this question and each answer was presented and shared on the stage of the Yiddish Theater. For some it was religion, for others politics, for others the pursuit of happiness or the pursuit of fame or fortune. All these answers were accepted and transmitted as part of the Jewish culture.

At the end of David Pinski's *Der Oytser (The Treasure)*, a chorus of dead reflect on the foibles and foolish pursuits of the living. However, they hold out hope that the living

will recognize the treasure that is life, despite its hardships and woes. The discovery of this truth will be liberating but it will not be an easy discovery to make. The audience and participants of the Yiddish Theater in interwar Poland were also in search of this treasure. The Theater itself was often the treasure map, often a representation of the treasure, often a space where the treasure was located and it was always a treasure to those seeking cultural fortune.

Another Dead Man: Life remains forever fixed. Generation after generation dies, but life remains unchanged. As it was long ago, so it was in my time, so it is still.

A Few: ...But it's leading to something. It must be leading to something.

That only the one God knows.

The living must find it out.

That will be the greatest victory.

People's greatest victory...

(Pinski, *Der Oytser*)

In discussing this topic I have been asked if I think Yiddish Theater in interwar Poland was a space of resistance or a space of celebration. I would suggest that it was a space of celebration and that part of what it celebrated was the spirit of Jewish resistance to oppression.

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