Oy vey, Mama!
Family, Gender and the Mediation of Cultural Identity in Yiddish Cinema

By
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A thesis submitted to
The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
In partial fulfillment of
The requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Film Studies
Carleton University
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Oy vey, Mama!
Family, Gender and the Mediation of Cultural Identity
in Yiddish Cinema

Submitted by Genevieve Willis, B.A., Honours (Carleton)
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ABSTRACT

The Yiddish Cinema was a short-lived phenomenon that flourished, briefly, primarily in the major Jewish centres of the U.S. and Poland, during the 1930s. As a case study in national cinema it offers some challenges, due to its short duration, and due to the peculiar organization of the Ashkenazi Jewish 'nation' at that time, as a stateless, diasporic entity, spanning several countries and continents. This thesis examines how the Yiddish Cinema attempts to mediate the cultural transition that faced the Ashkenazi Jewish community during the early 20th century due to widespread emigration, urbanization and secularization, with particular attention being paid to the Jewish immigrant community in New York City. The representations of familial structure and family roles in several Yiddish films are examined to determine how they reflect or respond to the social forces of cultural transition.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

This thesis will examine the idea of nation and the ideology of nationalism in order to contextualize an examination of the Yiddish speaking Diaspora as nation. This will be used, in Chapter 2, to inform a discussion of Yiddish cinema as a national cinema. In addition, a brief overview of the Yiddish-speaking community during the period of rapid transition during the early 20th Century will be performed. Particular emphasis will be placed on the sociological makeup of immigrant communities in the U.S. The American Jewish community represents the most well-documented example of the processes of cultural adaptation for Yiddish-speaking Jews during the period of rapid modernization in the early 20th century. Through the existing literature, the social pressures being placed on traditional cultural values and ways of life through emigration, secularization and other processes of modernization at this time, will be examined.

This work will deal with Yiddish cinema in this context, dividing it into groups of films based on varying representations of the family and their attempts to mediate the problems and conflicts facing the Yiddish-speaking 'nation' in the modern world. However, without recourse to first-hand testimony, the actual function and meaning of these films for their original audiences can never truly be known. In addition, as there was a high degree of overlap between the films and the existing Yiddish theatre, most critical examinations of the products of Yiddish culture focused on the theatrical source works, relegating the Yiddish cinema to a minor extension of these pieces. It was not until the mid-1980s, with the works of Judith Goldberg and Eric Goldman, and J.

Hoberman¹, in the early 1990s, that the Yiddish screen began to be examined as a significant critical body in its own right. By this time it would have been difficult to obtain accurate first-person accounts of the films' reception in the U.S., especially when one considers that it was primarily the older, foreign-born members of the community that formed the bulk of the original audiences. As my examination of the material posits a parallel between social trends in the U.S. and their manifestation on film, in light of these limitations, I will be required to draw hypothetical conclusions about the audience and their reception of the films, based on the available literature and the films themselves.

In the past, ideas of nation, nation-state, and national identity often have been used as largely unquestioned totalizing concepts in discussions of national cultural production and expression. More recently, in the face of the contemporary tendencies of global capitalism and communications technologies, and the subsequent disintegration of the modernist national ideal, the idea of what constitutes the nation has become the site of much critical and theoretical attention. The following will examine various theoretical perspectives on the formation of national identity and nationalist ideologies as they relate to ideas of culture and cultural expression, with specific reference to ideas of national cinema. This will be used to inform a case study of the pre-Israeli Ashkenazi Jewish Diaspora as a nation without a nation-state, and the pre-WWII Yiddish cinema, as a national cultural product of this diasporic formation.

For a discussion of Yiddish cinema under these terms of analysis, it is first necessary to examine the global Yiddish-speaking Diaspora as a constituted nation. This I will attempt to accomplish by drawing on various theories of nationhood, with

¹ J.N. Goldberg, Laughter Through Tears: The Yiddish Cinema (London and Toronto, 1983), E.A. Goldman, Visions, Images and Dreams: Yiddish Film Past and Present (Ann Arbor, 1983), J. Hoberman, Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds (Philadelphia, 1995).

particular attention to those theories arising out of the post-colonial context. Although dealing with a period in history several decades after the formation of a Jewish state, the post-colonial writings of Arjun Appadurai or Homi K. Bhabha, approach ideas of nationality outside of the geographical boundaries of the nation-state, which are relevant from both a pre- or post-national perspective. Subsequently, Yiddish cinema will need to be examined, not simply in terms of those films unequivocally rooted in a Yiddish-nationalist cultural discourse, but in terms of the function of those and other films in the context of the practices of exhibition and reception within the communities designated as part of the diasporic nation. To use Bhabha's terms, this approach will embrace both the "pedagogical" and "performative" aspects of Yiddish cinema as part of a national culture, in order to try to understand how it functioned within and alongside other cultural practices.

WHAT IS A NATION?

Defining what constitutes the term 'nation' is a difficult and ambiguous task. Although the factors that determine the formation of specific national identities vary greatly, they are all essentially drawn from the fundamental concept of the nation as a unifying ideology. Liah Greenfeld describes national identity as,

an identity which derives from membership in a 'people', the fundamental characteristic of which is that it is defined as a 'nation'. Every member of the 'people' thus interpreted partakes in its superior, elite quality, and it is in consequence that a stratified national population is perceived as essentially homogeneous.²

² Liah Greenfeld, "Types of European Nationalism," in J. Hutchison and A.D. Smith (eds.), Nationalism (Oxford and New York, 1994), 165.

A national identity is therefore associated with a community's sense of shared uniqueness and the perceived qualities: social, political, cultural, ethnic, which contribute to it. These qualities acquire greater significance in the formation of specific nationalisms, and come to stand in for totalizing definitions of national identity at the expense of marginal and non-standard attributes.

Greenfeld traces the evolution of the term 'nation,' from a European historical context, through the changes it underwent before it obtained its current set of connotations. In its original sense it referred to an elite group, but subsequently became associated with the population of a specific country. Greenfeld first locates this shift as occurring in England during the sixteenth century.³ The term then became associated with the particular political, territorial and ethnic characteristics of the population and country, and so then became synonymous with the idea of a 'sovereign' people. As the term was adopted in European countries outside of the English context through to the 18th century, the particular geographic, political and ethnic qualities of each nation became what distinguished them from one another, and so the term nation took on the associations of a 'unique' sovereign people.⁴

In the adoption of the national model in other countries, the society importing the idea often focused on the source of the importation, and in the formation of their own model, reacted against the original. Greenfeld identifies this aspect of the formation of national identities as *ressentiment*. She derived this term from Nietzsche's original definition, as, "a psychological state resulting from suppressed feelings of envy and

³ Ibid., 167.

⁴ Ibid.

hatred and the impossibility of satisfying these feelings.”⁵ In the process of national identity formation, the process of *ressentiment* results in the over-valuation of those indigenous traditions and elements which are hostile to the source of the imported model, resulting in a definition of nation formed on the basis of what the other nation, or the previous configuration of the emergent nation, was not. According to Greenfeld, this resulted in the “particularistic pride and xenophobia” which characterizes many discourses of national identity.

Jewish communities, perhaps because of their long-standing status as a minority culture within the nations of the diaspora, have traditionally been, if not nationalistically xenophobic, then at least insular and fiercely endogamous. A primary tenet of the imprecation of Jewish continuity has always revolved around the necessity of marrying within the culture, hence the emergence of such derogatory terms as “*shikse*” to refer to non-Jewish women. With the emergence of diverse Jewish immigrant communities in the U.S., as will be discussed later in this chapter, this particularistic pride often served, at least initially, to make a distinction between Jewish groups of different nationalities, further distinguishing those groups with a strong commitment to Yiddish culture as a definable “national” entity. In addition, Greenfeld’s theory of *ressentiment* will prove useful later on, in the context of discussions of national cinema.

Greenfeld’s process of *ressentiment* refers primarily to the formation of the ‘modern’ nation in Europe during the 18th and 19th Centuries, out of other pre-existing political and ideological formations. Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm identify some of the other factors which served to unify groups before the emergence of the modern nation, specifically with regards to language. Anderson discusses the role of

⁵ Ibid., 169.

print-capitalism in the standardization of linguistic communities in Europe during the 16th and 17th Centuries, and Hobsbawm traces the importance of language in the formation of modern national identities. For a discussion of the formation of a national identity with regards to the Yiddish-speaking Jewish Diaspora, these theories, which approach nationalism from a linguistic base, will prove helpful in distinguishing ideas of cultural nationalism from specifically religious ideas of Jewish nationalism and statehood.

Anderson argues that the possibility of imagining the nation arose in Western Europe, in part, with the emergence of the printed word, and the subsequent erosion of the idea of script-language as offering privileged access to ontological truth. With the 'democratization' and 'secularization' of the printed word, there came a concurrent loss of faith in the organization of societies around a high centre, such as a monarch, or religious figurehead, and in Anderson's words, a loss of faith in the idea that cosmology and history were identical. This gave rise to the search for a new way of linking fraternity, power, and time, and, for Anderson, print-capitalism filled the void, allowing groups of people to think of themselves and relate to others in new ways.⁶ With print-capitalism, various similar vernacular dialects, for the sake of capitalist efficiency, were assembled within the limits of markedly fewer print languages. This created unified fields of exchange and communication at a level below Latin, and above the various spoken vernaculars. As a result, people became aware of others in their linguistic group as members of an exclusive group, giving rise to a national consciousness based upon a shared linguistic identity. By giving a fixity to languages, print also solidified the barriers between linguistic groups, and built up the idea of cultural antiquity, which is

⁶ B. Anderson, "Imagined Communities," in J. Hutchison and A.D. Smith (eds.), Nationalism (Oxford and New York, 1994), 89.

central to founding ideas of nation. The spoken dialects closest to the various print languages eventually became the languages of power and administration within the political entities they encompassed, replacing a stratified system which often had the ruling body using a language other than that spoken by the masses, and giving a further unifying, centralized legitimacy to that language.

Hobsbawm takes up the argument from there.⁷ He describes linguistic and cultural nationalism as late arrivals on the scene, figuring to any great extent only in the 19th Century, with ideas of ethnicity and language being the decisive factors for nationalist movements and ideologies from between 1880 to 1914. In some situations, such in the case of Germany and Italy, language can be the sole unifying criteria for nationhood, and so carries a much greater ideological burden in considerations of national identity. The difference in discussions of nationhood during the time period mentioned by Hobsbawm, is that it is no longer a question of pre-existing social and political bodies creating for themselves a new identity as 'nation', as took place during the 17th and 18th Centuries in Europe, but rather it is the case of particular bodies of people within other nations, or political formations, declaring the right to a sovereign nation-state based upon determining factors of shared culture, ethnicity or language. It is particularly during this time that ethnicity, language and nation became virtually synonymous. Emerging theories of genetics also gave ideas of nation and ethnicity a biological aspect which had not existed before, giving rise to particular xenophobic practices, such as anti-Semitism, which were based on racial factors rather than religion or culture.

⁷ E. Hobsbawm, "The Rise of Ethno-Linguistic Nationalisms," in J. Hutchison and A.D. Smith (eds.), Nationalism (Oxford and New York, 1994), pp. 177-184.

Hobsbawm identifies the period of prolific nationalism, 1880-1914, as emerging as a result of several important factors,

the resistance of traditional groups threatened by the onrush of modernity, the novel and quite non-traditional classes and strata now rapidly growing in the urbanizing societies of developed countries, and the unprecedented migrations which distributed a multiple diaspora of peoples across the globe.⁸

Under such circumstances it became easier for groups of people to identify with others as being members of a unique group, separate and distinct from other groups, unified by factors of language and ethnicity. When combined with the rise in popular democracy during this period, popular interests were increasingly being voiced as national interests.

Various aspects need to be considered in a discussion of the pre-Israeli Ashkenazi Jewish Diaspora as a constituted nation. Only when definitions of nation came to be consistent with ideas of shared religion, language and ethnicity as opposed to territory and sovereignty, could the Jews be considered under nationalist terms. The role of language in the constitution of a national identity for Ashkenazi Jews is one way in which this took place. Ashkenazi Jews emerged as a distinct group in central Europe during the first millennium C.E., and were characterized by their distinctive religious rites, and through their use of Yiddish. As a language, Yiddish is considered a dialect of German, having developed in German-speaking areas of Europe, but as the population migrated to new areas, it adapted aspects of other, primarily Eastern European, languages, as well as Hebrew and Aramaic, for its vocabulary, idioms, and aspects of its grammar. Other Jewish dialects existed, corresponding to other Jewish diasporic groups, such as the Mediterranean-based, Ladino-speaking, Sephardim, but Yiddish, before the resurrection of Hebrew as a spoken language, was the dominant Jewish dialect, spoken by upwards of

⁸ Hobsbawm, 183.

80-90% of the Jewish Diaspora. Its hybridity and adaptability arose from its evolution as a functional language, rooted in the necessities of trade and the secular world, and used to facilitate communication between groups from various different primary language communities.⁹

The printed word, from Anderson's theoretical perspective, gave a fixity to languages during the 16th and 17th Centuries, and so encouraged the solidification of certain linguistic groups as pseudo-national formations. Yiddish, as a dialect of German, might have been subsumed by a standardized printed German, within German linguistic areas, except for the guarantee of mutual incomprehensibility created by the use of Hebrew script in the printed form of Yiddish. In this way Yiddish was able to maintain its distinctiveness, in print, even within areas where it had to compete with the dominant linguistic influence of standardized German. Social factors, of course, also helped to maintain the distinctiveness of Yiddish, particularly with the segregation of Jewish communities from their linguistic neighbours due to restrictions on land-ownership, as well as the ghettoization of Jews into certain professions, thereby limiting the available range of social and linguistic interaction with non-Yiddish speakers.

Print-capitalism also provided for a degree of standardization of the Yiddish language, and so made it a forum for continued cultural exchange between the disparate Yiddish-speaking communities across Europe from the 18th Century onward. Because of the various other linguistic influences that surrounded these communities and the relative 'openness' of Yiddish as a language, each broad geographic community developed their own dialectal peculiarities of vocabulary and pronunciation. However, the availability of printed Yiddish-language materials, in the form of religious writings and secular

⁹ B. Harshav, The Meaning of Yiddish (Berkeley and L.A., 1990).

“women’s books”, created a more-or-less standard linguistic base that, despite minor regional variations, ensured continued mutual comprehensibility between dialectal communities, and provided a means of creating a unified cultural community. Concerted efforts to create a single, standardized Yiddish did not take place until the end of the 19th Century, with the unprecedented boom in Yiddish literature that emerged at this time.¹⁰

For a consideration of pre-Israeli Ashkenazi Jewish national identity, consideration must also be given to the idea of nationality without territorial sovereignty. Arjun Appadurai, in his discussions of post-national identity is dealing primarily with a contemporary post-colonial situation, but much of it can be applied to the situation of the Ashkenazi Jews, who existed as a diasporic nation for centuries prior to the formation of the state of Israel. The most important idea that he raises for this discussion is the concept of ‘localities’, the community identification with the local, which can work in opposition to larger, national affiliations. Appadurai characterizes localities as, “life-worlds constituted by relatively stable associations, relatively known and shared histories, and collectively traversed and legible spaces and places.”¹¹ These local subjectivities are characterized by stronger and more pressing attachments of daily space, place and community, than can be afforded by a national discourse of identity. According to Appadurai,

it is the nature of local life to develop partly by contrast to other localities by producing its own contexts of alterity (spatial, social, and technical), contexts that may not meet the needs for spatial and social standardization prerequisite for the modern subject-citizen.¹²

¹⁰ Harshav, 80.

¹¹ A. Appadurai, “Sovereignty Without Territoriality,” in P. Yaeger (ed.), *The Geography of Identity* (Ann Arbor, 1996), 42.

¹² Ibid., 43.

For Appadurai, the kinds of movement and circulation of people and information that characterize the mid-to late 20th Century, offers a further challenge to the authority of a national discourse, in that it creates '*translocalities*', localities which belong to a particular nation-state, but that are also tied to other communities and nationalities through the constant circulation of people and information.¹³ Ties between localities could therefore develop in opposition to national affiliations. For diasporic nations without a central nation-state, such as the pre-Israeli Ashkenazi Jews, the idea of '*translocalities*' becomes important in considerations of a national identity. In a sense, the affiliation between diasporic localities, created through the perpetual flow of immigration, and, particularly for the Ashkenazi Jews of the early 20th century, of secular cultural products, such as Yiddish-language publications, literature, theatre and film, partially supplants the affiliation to the specific nation-state within which the local community is geographically situated, creating instead a *translocal* national identity unconnected to territorial sovereignty.

Appadurai theorizes this as a result of a disjuncture between the concept of nation as a geographic site of loyalty, as in "national soil" and the idea of territory as the site for sovereignty in the form of state control of civil society.¹⁴ This emerges in contrast to the modernist conceptions of nation discussed earlier, which posit the nation as an "ethno-territorial" entity, defined by the homogeneity of its culture and population, and claiming the right to sovereignty and self-determination based on the perceived union of ethno-cultural and geographic uniqueness. Instead, '*transnational*' formations replace the nation-state as the site of 'national' loyalties and identities, based on culture, language,

¹³ Ibid., 44.

¹⁴ Ibid., 47.

religion or ethnicity. He further suggests the emergence of what he calls "post-national cartographies" in which, in his words,

counterhistories and counteridentities are used to organize maps of allegiance and affiliation that are built around historical labour flows, emergent racial solidarities, and counternational cartographies ... (These) frequently involve transecting maps of allegiance and a politics of nonexclusive, territorial copresence.¹⁵

Perhaps the most interesting, and relevant example proposed by Appadurai to illustrate this, is the case of diasporic Sikhs and their 'imagined' homeland of Khalistan,

Sikhs who imagine Khalistan are using spatial discourses and practices to construct a new, postnational cartography in which ethnos and demos are unevenly spread across the world and the map of nationalities cross-cuts existing national boundaries and intersects with other translocal formations. This topos of Sikh "national" identity is in fact a topos of "community"..., which contests many national maps (including those of India, Pakistan, England, and Canada) and contains one model of a post-Westphalian cartography.¹⁶

Although in the case of the Ashkenazi Jews, issues of national identity were eventually partially resolved through the creation of the geographically-fixed nation-state of Israel, prior to that, the state of the Jewish 'imagined community' was very much like that described by Appadurai with reference to Khalistan. Initial discussions of Jewish national sovereignty during the 19th and early 20th Centuries involved the suggested creation of a series of autonomous regions, in which Jews would be granted privileged minority status and limited rights to self-determination, within the boundaries, and still under the territorial jurisdiction of pre-existing nation-states within Europe and even North America.¹⁷ The historian Simon Dubnow (1860-1942) suggested that the Jewish

¹⁵ Ibid., 51.

¹⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹⁷ S. Ettinger, "Jews as a Minority in East and Central European Countries," H.H. Ben-Sasson (ed.), A History of the Jewish People (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 949-953.

community-based model of nationhood was in fact superior and preferable to conventional models of territorial nationhood. As S. Ettinger relates,

he regarded the cultural-spiritual nation as a more advanced stage of national development than the territorial-national people. The Jews, in his opinion, had reached this advanced stage in group development and should base their spiritual and cultural activity on the organizational framework of the community.¹⁸

This idea of a '*transnational*' collectivity of semi-autonomous localities prefigures Appadurai's conception of the 'post-national' nation (perhaps, in the light of historical developments, it could be viewed as a 'pre-national' nation) by almost a century, yet appears surprisingly similar.

THE PERFORMANCE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

Drawing from Appadurai's conception of the stateless 'post-national' nation as our model, we can then begin to consider how national identities function and are maintained, both at the level of a national discourse, and at the personal and community levels. Homi K. Bhabha addresses this issue through his discussion of the performative and pedagogical aspects of cultural identity.¹⁹ Bhabha discusses the 'people' as the site of a double narrative movement within discourses of national identity, in that they are both the subjects and objects of the processes of cultural signification,

The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 950.

¹⁹ H. K. Bhabha, "Dissemination", in *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994), 145.

²⁰ Ibid.

National identity is imposed upon the people as the objects of a pedagogical project in the construction of a national discourse, but in order to be maintained, they must also perform their identity at every level of their daily lives. The repeated performance of these daily acts in turn makes them into part of the signs of a national culture. There is also a temporality involved in this process, in that the authority of the pedagogical nationalist discourse is rooted in the alleged historical origins of the nation, attributed to somewhere in the mythological past, whereas the performative dimension of identity is continually made present, in order to demonstrate the ability of the nation to function as a living culture. It is within this split, this continuing process of negotiation between the pedagogical and the performative, that Bhabha identifies the active site of the process of 'writing the nation'.

This idea is of particular interest in a discussion of nations without a nation-state, such as the Sikhs in Appadurai's discussion, or, for our purposes, the pre-Israeli Jewish Diaspora. Without a nation-state, and the political and cultural institutions that invariably accompany it, the nation will lack the infrastructure and the territorial sovereignty that facilitate the construction and maintenance of a nationalist cultural pedagogy. The hegemonising function of nationalist ideologies can only be efficiently achieved within the hermetic boundaries of territorial statehood through the exercising of political control over the social and cultural practices of its people. The interplay between the pedagogical and the performative is managed by the state to ensure a certain level of conformity at the performative level, with regards to language, religion, political participation and cultural expression. As David Morley and Kevin Robins describe it, "it is a matter of the relative power of different groups to define national identity, and their

abilities to mobilize their definitions through their control of cultural institutions."²¹

They align this with Hobsbawm and Ranger's idea of the 'invention of tradition' in the construction and maintenance of a national cultural pedagogy,

Tradition is not a matter of a fixed or given set of beliefs or practices which are handed down or accepted passively. Rather...tradition is very much a matter of present-day politics, and of the way in which powerful institutions function to select particular values from the past, and to mobilize them in contemporary practices.²²

In the case of a nation without a central state or governing body to control the national pedagogy, the location of cultural identity becomes more heavily invested in its performative aspects. Hence, the overvaluation of cultural identity markers, such as language, food, music, religious practices, familial configurations etc.-- those things commonly referred to as 'customs' - in the communities of diasporic nations.

The concept of the overvaluation of the performative is crucial to an understanding of the difference between an Ashkenazi 'national' identity and the pan-Jewish nationalism that is latterly identified with Zionism and the formation of the state of Israel. In the case of the first, religion almost takes a secondary role to the complex of cultural identity markers that serve, internally, to unify the Ashkenazi Jews as a distinctive group, and externally, to set them apart from other groups, Jewish or otherwise. Consequently those features, such as language, social organization, or educational practices, that might be used by a non-Jewish population to identify a group as being "Jewish", have in fact less to do with religion than they do with the performative cultural 'habits' of that group. Hence the frequent separation of different Jewish immigrant groups when settling in a new location. For example, in New York during the

²¹ D. Morley and K. Robins, Spaces of Identity (London and New York, 1995), 47.

²² Ibid.

early 1930s, Beth S. Wenger describes the stratified residential arrangements within the Jewish community in the city,

Jewish districts reflected the gradations of economic status within the Jewish community as well as the various political ideals, cultural allegiances and religious preferences of New York Jews. Certain sections of the city emerged as hubs of communism, others as centers of Orthodoxy or Zionism, still others as the homes of the established Jewish elite or the new middle class... New York Jews constructed neighborhoods that gave concrete expression to the economic stratification and internal diversity of the community.²³

The importance of Appadurai's translocal formations becomes significant here. The diasporic communities, without a centralized national referent, must look to one another in order to reinforce their sense of national identity. As the communities may be scattered between a number of vastly different pre-existing nation-states, with their own languages and cultural practices, the minority diasporic communities would need to identify with one another through their shared cultural practices-- the way in which they all perform the same culture. For example, a Jew in Hungary and a Jew in Latvia in the 19th Century might have shared very little in terms of the land and the wider communities in which they lived, but they shared a common cultural base, not only in terms of shared religion, but through the daily aspects of cultural existence. The 'national' boundary that serves both to distinguish these communities from the cultures that surround them, and to unify them as a collective 'nation', is not a physical, or even political boundary, but a social one, based on the cultural markers that differentiate them, through the common practices of their daily existence, from their neighbours.

Rather than the 'vertical', top-down organisation of people within a nation-state configuration, these trans-local communities are instead organized in what could be

²³ B. S. Wenger, New York Jews and the Great Depression (Syracuse, 1999), 83.

termed a 'horizontal' structure. Morley and Robins describe this in relation to modern technologies of communication, which create communities that are linked electronically, rather than geographically. The boundaries created are the boundaries of the territory of transmission, which will often bear little relationship to geographical or political boundaries.²⁴ Although not expressly related to the same contemporary phenomenon, technologically mediated and mobile forms of cultural expression, such as mass-produced printed material, touring theatrical groups, or even a '*transnational*' cinema, such as in the Yiddish example, could be viewed in these terms, as a way of using modern technologies of communication, and, to a certain extent, transportation, to link communities, 'localities', across geographical and political boundaries, in a 'horizontal' arrangement of relative cultural simultaneity.

Appadurai's concept of '*translocalities*' is a concept that can also be applied to the case of the thematic and iconic preoccupations of the Yiddish cinema. In their nostalgic fixation on a place and historic period that lay within the available memories of a large portion of their audience, the films created a common 'mythological' referent. This serves to reduce the complexities and conflicts within the '*transnational*' nation to the narrowed scope of a shared cultural focal point. The placement of films within all-Jewish environments also serves to negate the varied outside influences at work on the scattered communities. In addition, by focusing on the smallest, and most 'local' unit of Yiddish culture, the family, the films create a level of identification that translates across many of the broader cultural variances inherent in a diasporic nation. As will be examined further in the subsequent chapters, the films, by concentrating on what the members of the nation all shared: the secular, familial and domestic habits, what Bhabha

²⁴ Morley and Robins, 61.

terms the 'performative' acts of culture, they effectively create an imagined 'translocal' nation.

YIDDISH CULTURE

The early twentieth century saw a brief flowering of an international Yiddish culture. Yiddish, as the spoken vernacular of a large population of European Jews, began to emerge during the early Middle Ages. The invention of the printing press in the 16th century began to make printed Yiddish more widely available, although, because of the status of Hebrew, and, to a lesser extent, Aramaic, as the 'sacred languages', Yiddish was initially reserved for secular works. The associations of Yiddish with the profane and the mundane, lent it an air of disrepute for many centuries. In the 18th and 19th centuries, as a body of Yiddish literature began to emerge, people began to defend Yiddish as a valid and respectable international language, capable of the same means of cultural expression as any of the 'great' European languages, and as a Jewish language, it was living and malleable, whereas Hebrew was not.

During the great Jewish language debates of the mid-19th century, the Yiddish language's primary detractors were the *Maskilim*, a movement of assimilated Jews who advocated a wholesale abandonment of Jewish traits and traditions in favour of acceptance and scientific enlightenment within other European cultures. For them, Yiddish represented the backward ways of the *shtetl* and the strictures of religious tradition. They advocated total assimilation into the dominant culture, including the adoption of the dominant language, whether German, Russian or Polish. However, the pogroms of the early 1880s, for the Eastern European Jewish intellectuals, had an

opposite effect, as many refused to continue to identify with a culture that would perpetrate such atrocities on their people. During this period, Jewish writers who had thus far mostly written in German or Russian began to write in Yiddish, as an act of solidarity with their oppressed co-religionists, and out of the perceived need to unify the Jewish people by reaching out to the proletariat, who mostly spoke and read Yiddish.

The other side of the argument was represented by the Hebraists, who wanted to foster a strong and independent Jewish culture, and so felt that Yiddish was too imbedded in the numerous other nationalities from which it drew its vocabulary and syntax, too tainted by the Diaspora, to be truly Jewish. They advocated the resurrection of Hebrew as a living language of a fully integrated Jewish nation. The Zionist movement was one of the strongest supporters of a resurrected Hebrew, as is evidenced by the eventual adoption of Hebrew as the national language of the State of Israel. However, many also supported the institutionalization of Yiddish as the official language of the Jewish nation, until the destruction of much of Europe's Yiddish-speaking population during WWII tipped the balance towards Hebrew. But, during the late-19th and early 20th centuries, Yiddish was indeed emerging as the vehicle for a rich and active international Jewish culture.

This holds true for the Yiddish speaking populations in North America as well. The thriving Jewish immigrant communities in the U.S., following the population boom at the turn of the century, gave rise to a number of acclaimed Yiddish authors and playwrights. Immigrants themselves, writers such as Abraham Cahan and Sholom Asch articulated the unique dilemmas and experiences of Jews adjusting to life in the New World. Many of the more popular works of the Yiddish stage, some of which were also

adapted for film, came out of the American Jewish experience. Unfettered, as it was, by the strictures of Old World religious orthodoxy, the secular Jewish culture of the United States was an ideal venue for the proliferation of a secular literature.

The Yiddish language and culture debates of 19th century Europe did not end with the transition to America. Instead, we can see the pull between the fostering of an indigenous, American Yiddish culture, as was emerging in larger cities such as New York and Chicago, and the desire to abandon the traits of the Old World in order to assimilate into the American mainstream. A newly emerging American Zionism was also asserting itself, that condemned both the assimilating tendencies of American Jews, and the clinging to Eastern European languages and practices that characterized more Orthodox groups.²⁵ As will be discussed below, these debates took shape, initially, between established, predominantly German, Jewish immigrant groups and the newer Eastern European arrivals, and later, as a generational debate between immigrant parents and their American-born children.

STRUCTURE OF THE COMMUNITY

Some of the most prominent themes in the Yiddish cinema are the problems faced by families emigrating to the New World, and the issues they faced with regards to the processes of cultural adaptation. In order to offer some context for these issues, I will examine the social conditions and the overall structure of the largest American Jewish immigrant community of the early 20th century, New York City. New York is an especially apt example as well, considering that the bulk of the American Yiddish films were set, and even filmed in the city's Jewish neighbourhoods, and featured actors made

²⁵ I. Howe, World of Our Fathers (New York and London, 1976), 206.

famous in the Yiddish theatres of 2nd Avenue. I hope to represent both the diversity and the commonalities of the community, in order to understand how the Yiddish cinema might have appealed to such a varied audience. As well, I intend to examine how the American Yiddish culture itself aided the community in its eventual adaptation to American society.

Gerald Sorin, in Tradition Transformed, characterizes the Yiddish culture that emerged in major American cities in the early years of the 20th Century, as a “transitional culture,”

Fashioned out of Old World tradition and New World experience, the immigrant culture of the Lower East Side of New York, the West Side of Chicago, South Philadelphia, and other Jewish neighborhoods helped ease the pain of accommodation for a people whose recent experience combined several kinds of dramatic change.²⁶

Viewed in this light, the significance of a Yiddish-language culture in the U.S. relies less on ideas that it represented a vestigial attachment to Old World ways of life, but that it played an active role in the processes of acculturation and Americanization for Jewish immigrants. In trying to explain the role of Yiddish film within this transitional immigrant culture, we can try to explain its function within the community without necessarily viewing it purely in terms of a collective nostalgia for a disappearing way of life, or as a bizarre aberration in American film history, but as an active agent in the process of cultural transition for its audience, that would, by necessity, eventually make itself redundant.

²⁶ G. Sorin, Tradition Transformed (Baltimore and London, 1997), 61.

EMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT

Mass immigration of Jews to the United States began in earnest in the 1880s. The increasing economic and political oppression of Jews in Romania from the late 19th century onwards, led over 75,000 Romanian Jews, a third of the country's Jewish population, to emigrate to the U.S. before the First World War.²⁷ Following the violence in Russia in 1881, 13,000 Jews emigrated to the U.S. In 1887, the number had almost doubled to 23,000. All told, approximately 33% of Eastern European Jews left their homes between 1881 and 1920, over 2 million of them choosing to emigrate to the U.S.²⁸ The United States was experiencing an unprecedented expansion of its industrial economy during this period, and, at least until it radically curtailed its immigration quotas in the early 1920s, relied on immigrants to fill the need for labourers in the new economy.

Jews were unique among immigrant groups during this period in that, by and large, they migrated as a people, with the intention of making it a one-way journey. Less than 10% of those who left for the U.S. ever returned to the country of their birth. Andrew Heinze compares immigration and settlement patterns of the Jewish to those of another large immigrant group during the early 20th century, the Italians. Between 1899 and 1910 approximately 2 million Italians emigrated to the U.S. However, in contrast to the Eastern European Jews, who tended to emigrate as families with the intention of settling, roughly three quarters of the Italians were young, single men, whose primary intentions in the U.S. were to earn wages in order to raise the standard of living of their families back home. During the period of 1897 to 1911, more than half of the Italian

²⁷ Howe, 33.

²⁸ Sorin, pp. 43-48.

immigrants arriving during this period eventually returned home, whereas for the Jews, the repatriation numbers for the same period were far lower, at about 7%.²⁹

There was a sense at the time that the Jewish people were starting a new life for themselves. Emigrating Jews felt part of an important mass movement. No other immigrant group possessed the same sense of shared 'national' consciousness, despite their different countries and regions of origin. As Sorin states, "Most non-Jewish immigrants came from independent nations in which they had been citizens, or at least unsegregated subjects."³⁰ Jews, on the other hand were consistently marginalized from the dominant national cultures of the countries which they left. "America," with its promise of abundance and opportunity for all, was seen by the emigrants as escape from the marginalization and oppression which they experienced at home.

Their desire to make America their permanent home was reflected in their desire to "become Americans," to adopt and adapt to the culture and practices associated with the American way of life. Heinze describes a popular stereotype that arose out of the Jewish immigrant community in relation to the process of cultural adaptation, that of the "allrightnik." The "allrightnik," as Heinze describes, "stood for the successful Jewish immigrant who adopted American habits, particularly habits of consumption, so thoroughly as to blend into the group of cosmopolitan Jews who had attained a high degree of cultural assimilation."³¹ This kind of characterization reflected the Jewish immigrant community's tendency to view themselves and their potential social roles in relation to their degree of integration into American society, rather than perpetuating the roles established in the Old Country. Every Jewish immigrant, though he/she may start

²⁹ A.R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance* (New York, 1990), 41.

³⁰ Sorin, 47.

³¹ Heinze, 42.

out as a “greenhorn,” had the potential to reinvent themselves in new ways by adapting to the demands of American society. Hence the peddler and the scholar suddenly had the same opportunities for success or failure in the New World, depending, in part, on their willingness, or ability to adapt.

The conflicts so established between a strong group identity, and the desire for assimilation, between the demands of religious tradition and a secular lifestyle, between loyalties to the Old World and to the New, and between foreign-born parents and American-born children, would become the defining conflicts in the search for identity in the Jewish immigrant communities during the first decades of the twentieth century.

THE MELTING POT

Initially, some of the strongest proponents for Jewish assimilation in the U.S., following the mass immigrations of Eastern European Jews, were the established community of German Jews who had come to that country earlier in the 19th century. As a smaller, well-established group, they enjoyed a relative degree of success and acceptance in the greater community. Their fears were that the newcomers, arriving as they were in such large numbers, would draw negative attention to themselves with their “foreign” language and customs, arousing anti-Semitic attitudes in the general public which might then negatively affect the reputation and social position of the established Jews as well. Israel Zangwill’s popular 1908 play, “The Melting Pot” was indicative of the attitudes of the German Jewish community. As Sorin relates, the German Jews responded to the play’s ideology, which was, roughly stated, “The sooner the immigrants

from Eastern Europe gave up their cultural distinctiveness and 'melted' into the homogenized mass, the sooner Anti-Semitism would also melt."³²

Some community leaders initially even called for restrictions on Jewish immigration so as not to 'overwhelm' the country with their less sophisticated brethren. Among the reasons for the uneasiness of the established American Jewish community, was the concern they had that American Jewish charitable organizations would be overwhelmed by immigrants requiring their financial assistance. There was some resentment that the better-established Jewish communities in Western Europe were not accepting their fair burden, as the American community still felt uncertain about their own security in their new country, having been settled for a relatively short time.³³ In time, however, their confrontational attitudes softened, and the German Jews attempted instead to take a leadership role in the new Jewish community, in order to influence the shape of the community as a whole. In New York, they established a number of charitable organizations to assist the newcomers, such as the Educational Alliance, United Hebrew Charities, the Clara de Hirsch Home for Girls, and the National Council of Jewish Women. Settlement houses were one of the types of support offered to the poorer immigrants. They were designed to help provide the poor with the social and cultural means to help themselves. The Henry Street Settlement House in New York's Lower East Side, one of the most successful settlement houses, was established and run by Lillian Wald, a German Jewish nurse. The workers in the houses were meant to be both role models and forces of Americanization to the new immigrants. In the pursuit of assimilation, however, the settlement houses provided an important contribution,

³² Sorin, 70.

³³ Howe, 31.

according to Sorin, their greatest contribution “lay in (their) insisting that immigrants maintain the viable traditions of the Old Country. Workers assured immigrants that it was not necessary to reject their pasts entirely to become American.”³⁴

In terms of the further reaching attempts by the German Jews to shape and influence the new community, such as a short-lived attempt to establish a Jewish communal self-government in New York’s Lower East Side to control the area’s crime, the imposition of order from above was less successful. The tensions between the two groups remained for some time, particularly in relation to the Eastern European Jews’ attachment to Yiddish and to Yiddish culture. Many resented the patronizing attitudes of the wealthy German Jews, and responded by forming a greater attachment to the smaller, more informal communal organizations established by the immigrants themselves, “the family, the *shul*, and the *landsmanshaft*, the club, and the mutual aid society, the café, the union, and even many workplaces were arenas of genuine interaction and psychological sustenance.”³⁵ The *landsmanshaftn* in particular were a type of organization common to Eastern European Jews. The groups were made up of people from the same region of origin in the Old Country, and they maintained a link to their *shtetln*, or hometowns, in order to provide assistance to them during times of crisis. Originally, they were established as religious congregations organized by place of origin or occupation, but by the early 1900s they had become mostly secular, functioning primarily as social clubs and mutual aid societies. This persistence of allegiance towards the hostile regions they had fled seems strange, but as Howe relates, “The *landsmanschaft*...was their ambiguous testimony to a past they knew to be wretched yet often felt to be sweet...Coming

³⁴ Sorin, 73.

³⁵ Ibid., 78.

together, they formed modest little organizations that kept alive memories and helped them fit into the new world.”³⁶

Another venue for the formation of communal identity in the New World was the Yiddish language press. The period of 1880 to the 1920s saw an unprecedented boom in the number of Yiddish language newspapers and publications available in the U.S., far more than had ever been available in Europe before emigration. Papers such as *Forverts*, and *Der Tog*, offered their readers information on world events, community happenings, as well as advice on how to adjust to life in America. *Forverts*, or “The Forward”, a socialist paper established in the 1890s by Abraham Cahan, was unabashed in its attempts to instruct newcomers in the ways of their new country. As Sorin relates, “The paper consistently emphasized the acquisition or development of ‘desirable’ qualities and manners, ‘taught’ American history and geography, and made untiring efforts to explain American ways.”³⁷ It also notably featured a section called *A Bintel Brief*, in which the editors responded to letters sent in by their readers about the problems they were having adapting to the New World. The advice they gave to immigrants did not encourage them into a wholesale abandonment of their religious beliefs and practices, but they were instructed to “make the needs of everyday life in America primary.”³⁸ In a seeming acknowledgement of its own position within a ‘transitional’ culture, such encouragement also included the need to learn to read and speak English. In fact, a survey of readers of the Yiddish press, taken in New York City in 1914, indicated that almost two-thirds of

³⁶ Howe, 184.

³⁷ Sorin, 85.

³⁸ Ibid.

them also regularly read English language newspapers, suggesting that their dedication to the Yiddish press was borne out of desire, rather than simply out of necessity.³⁹

Seen in this context, the Yiddish language in the United States, and in New York in particular, began to serve not simply as a vehicle for the articulation of a cultural identity, but as a vehicle, in fact, for the negotiation of a new Jewish-American identity. The size of the Jewish immigrant community, as well as the concurrent group levels of acculturation, and the tendency towards strong communal affiliations, created the conditions at that time for a viable local Yiddish language culture. The Yiddish-speaking immigrants were thus given the luxury of being able to adapt to a new way of life within the context of a familiar language. As the statistics for readers of the Yiddish press suggests, many immigrants learned to speak and read English quickly in order to function within the larger community, but they were still able to operate at the local level, relate socially, and give voice to their problems and anxieties in the context of their first language, mitigating the alienating effects of total cultural immersion.

Andrew Heinze suggests that for many Jewish immigrants, mastery of the English language was an unrealistic short-term goal, so they looked to other venues and methods for adaptation and integration into American culture. For Heinze, this meant the adoption of American habits of consumption. Jewish immigrants readily adapted to the material abundance of the New World after the scarcity and deprivation of their lives in Eastern Europe. Suddenly, those items that had been luxuries in the Old World, were freely available to them in the U.S. So, although their cultural mastery may still have been imperfect, by buying the right clothes, food and furnishings, they could at least look and act like Americans. These tendencies of consumption also extended to cultural and

³⁹ Heinze, 43.

leisure activities. Many Jewish immigrants looked upon leisure activities and the yearly vacation as quintessentially American. Cultural activities such as the theatre and the movies gradually shifted from occasional special events to regular weekly activities, and became an integral part of the life of the community.⁴⁰

FAMILY AND MARRIAGE

Among the American customs to which the immigrants eagerly adapted, was the idea of marriage based on romantic love, especially to young girls from families with little means, who might have faced a financially expedient arranged marriage in the Old Country. Once arrived in the U.S., these girls were presented with images of idealized romance, from among other venues, the American cinema. As Prell relates, “for these Jews, little else competed with love and marriage as the quintessential experience of becoming a ‘real’ American.”⁴¹ However, although the Hollywood movies of ‘teens and twenties repeatedly offered interethnic marriage as the solution for acculturating new immigrants and submerging their differences into the American ‘melting pot’, Jews, more than any other immigrant group, were largely endogamous. From 1908 to 1912, only 0.5% of first generation Jewish immigrants intermarried, and among their American-born offspring, the rate was not much higher, at 3.5%.⁴² However, of the second generation, Jews from different nations did intermarry, the reason being, by Prell’s reckoning, “by 1912, the second generation had established Jewishness as a common ‘*transnational*’ identity that cut across Central and Eastern European identities in 20th Century United

⁴⁰ Ibid., 117.

⁴¹ R. Prell, Fighting to Become Americans (Boston, 1999), 66.

⁴² Ibid., 68.

States.”⁴³ By thus unifying disparate national groups under the common bond of “Jewishness”, marriage served instead to solidify communal bonds and identities, rather than dissolve them.

As the Jewish community in New York became increasingly native-born by the 1930s, many of the communal structures and organizations created to support the needs of new immigrants began to dissipate. As more of the newcomers began to achieve increased material success, they moved in droves out of the slum-like conditions of the Lower East Side into the working- and middle-class suburbs of Brooklyn and the Bronx. By 1925, only 15% of the city’s Jews still lived in the Lower East Side, and those that remained were some of the poorest in the city, with only Brooklyn’s Williamsburg community approaching the same level of poverty.⁴⁴ However, even as they moved to new communities, they still tended to settle together, creating new Jewish neighbourhoods, now scattered across the city. These, in turn began to reflect the internal divisions of the community, as Wenger notes, “Jewish districts reflected the gradations of economic status within the Jewish community as well as the various political ideals, cultural allegiances, and religious preferences of New York Jews.”⁴⁵ She goes on to quote a writer from the *Forward*, who explains, “There are Ghettos for foreign born Jews and Ghettos for native born Jews. Ghettos for poor Jews and Ghettos for middle class and for rich Jews, for Russian Jews and for German Jews.”⁴⁶

During the 1930s, the Lower East Side remained a unifying site of intense nostalgia for those who managed to leave it. As Wenger remarks,

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Wenger, 83.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

...The East Side emerged as a nostalgic center for New York Jews, a living reminder of an idealized immigrant world as well as a mirror of the past that reflected the extent of Jewish progress. Religious schools took their young, American-born Jewish students on field trips to the East Side to catch a glimpse of a fading Jewish culture.⁴⁷

It continued to function as a Jewish neighbourhood and still housed many Jewish institutions and businesses, including the many theatres in the famous Second Avenue Yiddish Theatre district, as well as other cultural venues, but only the poorest continued to live there.

In the construction of the narratives of American Jewish immigrant success, the Lower East Side functioned as an effective symbolic locale in which to establish the iconography of a rags-to-riches tale. In the American narrative, the Old Country functions as only a vague source of oppression and misery, the instigator of the great journey, a prologue. Hollywood films of the early 1900s, such as Biograph's *The Lily of the Tenements* (1911), *A Child of the Ghetto* (1910) or *Romance of a Jewess* (1908) use the Lower East Side immigrant ghetto as the setting for numerous 'melting-pot' melodramas, in which the 'ethnic' hero or heroine (usually the latter) is invariably rescued from the misery of their conditions by marrying outside of his or her faith. Indeed, for *Romance of a Jewess*, the Biograph catalogue asserts that, "Several of the scenes are decidedly interesting in the fact that they were actually taken in the thickly settled Hebrew quarters of New York City."⁴⁸ The imagery of the ghetto serves a powerful common referent for immigrants of many nationalities who passed at one point or another through the East Side.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁸ Museum of Modern Art, Film Study Center, Biograph Catalogue, Bulletin No. 181, released October 23, 1908.

The imagery of the Old Country *shtetl* is less available simply because it began to pass into obscurity at around the same time as cinema was becoming the most active and prolific medium of memory. Attempts to dramatize *shtetl* life on film, such as the Soviet-made film *Skvoz Slezy* (*Through Tears*, Grigori Gricher Cherikover, U.S.S.R., 1928) or *Grine Felder* (*Green Fields*, Edgar G. Ulmer and Jacob Ben-Ami, U.S., 1937) were created at a time in which even those Jews remaining in Europe were increasingly moving to larger cities, abandoning forever their rural existence. However, this only added to the intense feelings of nostalgia associated with the Old World. Since an active Yiddish culture also existed in Europe before the mass emigrations, and right up until the Second World War, one should also take into account how the cultural products of the Old World were used by the American immigrants in the formation of their own identities. Many works of the Yiddish theatre, such as the teary mother-centred play, *Mirele Efros*, were immensely popular on both sides of the Atlantic. Poland, in particular, was a major centre for Yiddish theatre, and later, a number of Yiddish language films were produced there as well. If, indeed, the American Yiddish culture served as a means of negotiating the process of acculturation, in what context were the European works received? Was it simply nostalgia, or novelty, or did the same concerns remain relevant to the Jewish nation as a whole, regardless of transplantation and migration?

For the Jewish immigrant community in New York during the 1930s, it is important to take into account the high level of cultural integration the community had achieved by this time. With the drastic curtailment of immigration in the early 1920s, it

would have been only a small percentage of the Jewish population who continued to speak, read and understand only Yiddish. Most would have been able to attend and understand English language movies as well, so then, beyond being merely novel, the Yiddish films must have fulfilled some other kind of need for the community. What I intend to suggest is that the films provided a forum for the examination of the culture's traditions and values, in order to determine which remained valuable and relevant in the context of a modern, urban, and to a large extent, American existence. The films, perhaps, functioned not so much as tools of acculturation, but rather meditations on the different forms that a Jewish culture could take, in order to continue to exist and thrive in the context of a new secular modernity. That the films largely take place in an all-Jewish environment, dealing with problems within the community itself, it would seem that the focus was not on how to relate to the larger non-Jewish cultural communities, but rather on how to create an ideal balance between the opposing forces of tradition and modernity within the newly emerging modern secular Jewish community. The relationship to questions of national cinema and identity will be examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2: Theories of National Cinema

With a consideration of the Yiddish-speaking Diaspora as a kind of '*transnational*' nation thus established, I will now evaluate theories of national cultural dissemination and national cinema, in order to consider how the Yiddish cinema can be examined under those terms. To begin with, the relationship between the pedagogical and performative, as Homi K. Bhabha theorized, proves useful in a consideration of the function of specific cultural products and practices, such as film, within the processes of the construction and maintenance of national identity. The idea that discourses of identity need to be continually performed in order to be maintained, suggests that certain ideas, practices and ideologies will achieve a greater prominence in a society's cultural products and practices if they emerge out of the pedagogical discourse of nationalism, and, in turn, that those ideas, practices and ideologies most often performed within the cultural sphere, through their performance, become representative of the national consciousness. As J. Martin-Barbero argues in his discussion of the role of communications media in Latin America countries,

Technologies allowed people a 'space of identification'; not just an evocation of a common memory, but rather 'the experience of encounter and of solidarity'. Thus, the nation is to be understood not simply as an abstraction, but as a lived experience made possible by broadcasting technologies, whose achievement was the 'transmutation of the political idea of the nation into lived experience, into sentiment and into the quotidian.'⁴⁹

In the case of Latin America, the technologies served a hegemonising function, in order to solidify disparate cultural groups into the vertical organization of a coherent nation-state, effectively thrusting the pedagogical into the realm of the performative. In terms of

⁴⁹ J. Martin-Barbero as quoted in Morley and Robins, 67.

discussions of national cinema, both vertical (top-down, pedagogical) and horizontal (simultaneous, performative) approaches towards theorizing the function of cultural products on a national level can prove valuable. Each approach bears a resemblance to opposing critical perspectives on the subject, as exemplified in Andrew Higson's article, in his illustration of the differences between text-based and exhibition-based critical approaches to national cinema.⁵⁰

According to Higson's argument, on the one hand, the text-based, which is similar also to his criticism-led approach, seeks to create a national cinema through the analysis of the body of films produced in that nation, in order to determine, and so valorize, those films which most authentically engage with the national discourse. Higson describes the possible questions such a 'pedagogical' investigation might entail,

What are the films about? Do they share a common style or world view? What sort of projections of the national character do they offer? To what extent are they engaged in 'exploring, questioning and constructing a notion of nationhood in the films themselves and in the consciousness of the viewer'?⁵¹

In other words, the films which most accurately reflect the nationalist pedagogy are critically canonized as emblematic of an 'authentic' national cinema. As Higson describes it, "very often the concept of national cinema is used prescriptively rather than descriptively, citing what ought to be the national cinema, rather than describing the actual cinematic experience of popular audiences."⁵² On the other hand, Higson offers an alternative model for the critical construction of a national cinema, through an "exhibition-led, or consumption-based" approach. In this approach, one would examine what the members of the purported nation are actually watching, in order to determine

⁵⁰ A. Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen* 30:4, (Autumn, 1989) pp. 36-37.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 37.

how these cultural performances function within the active, 'performative' processes of identity-construction. Whereas the first approach deals with film in the context of national or nationalist ideologies and institutions, the second acknowledges the primacy of the social, and the active process of interaction between text and spectator. From this perspective, a national cultural identity could be construed through an analysis of patterns of consumption, whereby the group itself is created through the shared experience of the cultural products that they consume. For example, a naturalized second or third generation Jewish-American spectator might find more to identify with in the products of mainstream American culture, rather than in the Yiddish theatre and films of the more recent immigrant groups, placing him/her outside of the context of a Yiddish national cinematic culture.

This brings up the dilemma inherent in approaching a national cinema, and indeed a national culture, whose historical time has now passed. The patterns of consumption of the members of the nation and the entire context of the films' reception can no longer be accurately determined. If it is assumed that the meaning of a film is only constructed by its audience, as a strictly consumption-based analysis of a national cinema implies, then there would be no point in attempting any kind of socio-historical approach to the study of national cinema. Higson's text-based approach, on the other hand, places the availability of meaning within the films themselves. One can then attempt to decipher the meaning within a film text based on what is known about the social context and national pedagogy. While not ideal, it is certainly the best preliminary approach to a short-lived and relatively obscure national cinematic body as is represented by the Yiddish cinema, at least until such time as a detailed and accurate examination of patterns

of consumption and reception for the Yiddish cinema's audience can be performed, if, indeed, it can.

Higson views the two approaches as perpetually at odds, with the pedagogical perspective constantly seeking to control the performative, through a "hegemonising, mythologizing process, involving both the production and assignation of a particular set of meanings, and the attempt to contain, or prevent the potential proliferation of other meanings."⁵³ In the interests of particularistic notions of a national cinema, the performative aspect of a national cinematic culture, for those nations outside of the U.S., is almost always dominated by foreign films as a result of Hollywood's global domination of the industry. Minority film cultures within American boundaries, such as is represented by Yiddish cinema, are, of course, also heavily influenced by Hollywood's output. The performative aspect is therefore constantly undermining the pedagogical nationalist ideology, preventing its completion in terms of creating a coherent national cinematic identity.

The Yiddish cinema example is by nature difficult to categorize, as its audience is inextricably imbedded within other national cinematic cultures. It is impossible to identify a coherent national audience for whom Yiddish cinema makes up the entirety of their cinematic experience. In this respect, it is similar to the way in which many other national cinemas operate alongside, or even in a subordinate position to imports from other countries, often from the U.S. However, the popularity of the Yiddish films, however short-lived, reveals that they catered to an audience need that was not being fulfilled, at that time, by the dominant cinema. Nahma Sandrow, in her discussion of Yiddish theatre in New York during the same period speaks of the joy of recognition that

⁵³ Ibid.

audiences felt in seeing their lives and experiences being re-enacted on the stage.⁵⁴ Indeed, both the popular plays and the films of the time were interested primarily in representations of ordinary people, families and communities, facing the same types of challenges that the members of the audience, or their parents, or friends might have faced in their struggles to adjust to a new way of life, something that they would have seldom seen on Hollywood's screens.

In a discussion of national cinema, it is often tempting to offer such a description, based on a comparison with other film cultures, usually, as Higson points out, in reaction to the norms of Hollywood cinema, which is the major competitor in most national film markets. This evokes Liah Greenfeld's idea of *ressentiment*, and limits a critical analysis to the context of the oppositional cinema. However, this perspective, with respect to the formation of oppositional national identities can prove useful in terms of a discussion of Yiddish films and how they relate, with regards to theme and content, to Hollywood films of the same period. Hollywood, during the 1930s, after featuring Jewish themes and characters to a greater extent in the 'ghetto melodramas' and 'ethnic comedies' of the 'teens and 'twenties, experienced a wholesale retreat from Jewish subjects or characters in major films, even in minor roles.⁵⁵ It was during this period, as images of the Jew, positive and negative, disappeared from the screen, that the phenomenon of Yiddish cinema found its audience. As Hollywood's Jew was consistently being assimilated, or, to use Patricia Erens' term, "de-Semiticized" through the bland reduction of Jewish characters to all-American Joes, often played by non-Jewish actors, such as John Barrymore in the 1933 film, *Counsellor at Law* (William Wyler, U.S.). They were often

⁵⁴ N. Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars* (Syracuse, 1996), 129

⁵⁵ P. Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington, 1984), 136.

left with only their Jewish names and professions to identify them. Those Jews who still retained ties to their culture, language, religion and community might have found reassurance in the opposing images of themselves presented by the independent Yiddish productions. In this way, the Yiddish film culture could be viewed as a reactionary cinema that emerged as an oppositional response to the dominant American film culture, but in this case, from the inside. Its main distinctiveness was its linguistic and cultural specificity.

We could perhaps also compare the Yiddish cinema within the American dominated cultural marketplace to Hobsbawm's model of the emergence of linguistic nationalisms in the case of the Yiddish language. Yiddish, linguistically, is very similar to German, but it was guaranteed mutual incomprehensibility because of its distinctive written form, and hybridization with other languages, such as Hebrew, Russian, Polish, etc., so that it could not be totally subsumed within the German language. In the same way, Yiddish films may look very much like Hollywood films, stylistically and structurally, and even sometimes in terms of setting. Indeed some of the filmmakers, such as Edgar G. Ulmer also worked in the mainstream American film industry. But the films inevitably retain their distinctiveness, and their audience, because of their linguistic, stylistic and cultural uniqueness. They were able to adapt those aspects of Hollywood cinema that were most culturally relevant, in terms of style and generic conventions, to their own uses, without being dissolved into the American cinematic melting pot. To the extent that the American-made Yiddish films are still very much a part of a greater American cinema, can be seen in their urban American locales and sensibilities. The films still celebrate what can be seen as traditional American values, with their faith in

the values of family, hard work, capitalism and democracy. Where the films differ from their Hollywood counterparts is in how they envision these values being in complete harmony with the traditions and cultural practices of their Jewish cultural backgrounds. In the Yiddish cinema a man can go from rags to riches, become a lawyer, a singing superstar or a wealthy and respected factory owner without ever leaving the Lower East Side or, apparently, learning a word of English. Whereas Hollywood's Jews were moving out of the ghettos, anglicizing their names, and marrying out of the faith in droves, Yiddish cinema saw a place in which Jews could partake of all of the benefits that the American way of life had to offer while still living and acting like Jews.

While not dismissing the influence of external forces on the formation of a national cinematic practice, in terms of critical analysis, an internal examination of the films from a text-based perspective can prove useful in determining their salient characteristics. In the examination of a body of films in terms of their relevance to the cultural identity of a particular nation, Higson offers a series of criteria for a text-based analysis, in order to determine how the films fit into the nation's nationalist pedagogy,

The areas that need to be examined here are, first, the content or subject matter of a particular body of films-- that which is represented (and particularly the construction of 'the national character'), the dominant narrative discourses and dramatic themes, and the narrative traditions and other source material on which they draw (and particularly the degree to which they draw on what has been constructed as the national heritage, literary, theatrical or otherwise)-- in other words, the ways in which cinema inserts itself alongside other cultural practices, and the ways in which it draws on the existing cultural histories and cultural traditions of the producing nation, reformulating them in cinematic terms, appropriating them to build up its own generic conventions.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Higson, 43.

Beyond the themes, narrative content and source material, Higson also suggests questions of style and structure be examined as well,

There is the question of the sensibility, or structure of feeling, or world-view expressed in those films. And...there is the area of the style of those films, their formal systems of representation (the forms of narration and motivation which they employ, their construction of space and staging of action, the ways in which they structure narrative and time, the modes of performance which they employ and the types of visual pleasure, spectacle and display with which they engage), and their modes of address and construction of subjectivity (and particularly the degree to which they engage in the construction of fantasy and the regulation of audience knowledge).⁵⁷

This approach can be used to support a prescriptive, critical approach to national cinema, by determining which films fit the pre-determined nationalist criteria for the purpose of canon formation. A text-based approach can also be used for descriptive purposes, in an analysis of the body of films that make up the national film culture, in order to determine, from a performative perspective, what actually appeals to a popular national audience, and how those films function within the culture.

The role of film as a cultural product, in the articulation and construction of ideas of national identity, is one area in which a text-based analysis can be useful. In an age in which cultural technologies are so prominent, as Morley and Robins state, "the 'memory banks' of our times are in some part built out of the materials supplied by the film and television industries."⁵⁸ As identity is so intimately tied up with memory, the ability of film to preserve, express or create cultural memories is important. In terms of national identity, memory is often used in order to evoke nostalgic notions of a nation's mythical origins, particularly when that nation is facing a crisis of identity, as is represented by the post-modern/post-national predicament of globalization, and the crisis of identity posed

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Morley and Robins, 90.

by migration and displacement. As Jean Baudrillard has observed, "when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin...and authenticity."⁵⁹ With this nostalgia as a function of the experience of displacement, as Michael Rustin further describes, "there is an increasingly felt need for 'some expressive relationship to the past' and for attachment to particular territorial locations as 'nodes of association and continuity, bounding cultures and communities.'"⁶⁰ A national cinema might feature, as one of its salient thematic elements, a preoccupation with a particular location in time and space, which the nation or community associates with a nostalgic, originary myth of identity, in order to use the symbolism of the nation to "re-enchant a disenchanted everyday life."⁶¹

Beaudrillard and Rustin's characterizations of the function of nostalgia are relevant to the mythologizing project of Yiddish cinema. Though not necessarily applicable to the entire body of work, there is a subset, to be examined in more detail in the following chapter, that deals exclusively with an idealized Eastern European locale, during a period between the mid 19th and early 20th centuries. The nostalgia-infused past in these films is given the appearance of being mostly untroubled by deprivation and the prejudices and hostilities of other national and religious groups. There appears to be a desire to imbue the past, and the relatively recent past at that, with the characteristics of a stable, coherent, culturally prolific and idealized mythology of origin in order to "re-enchant" a present day that was characterized by its cultural permeability and uncertainty in the light of massive social transition.

⁵⁹ J. Baudrillard, as quoted in Morley and Robins, 91.

⁶⁰ M. Rustin, as quoted in *ibid.*, 87.

⁶¹ Wright, as quoted in *ibid.*, 91.

In terms of a minority film culture, such as the Yiddish film culture, which is necessarily embedded within various other film industries and practices, it can also be interesting for us to approach it from the performative perspective. As a relatively short-lived, and not very prolific national cinema, the Yiddish cinema does not give us the luxury of being able to decide which films more or less authentically reflect the 'national consciousness'. It can perhaps be better characterized as a 'functional' film culture, or a short-lived phenomenon at a transitional point in a national culture, designed to fulfil a social/cultural need at a particular time and place. For this reason, it might be more useful to approach the films at a performative level, and determine how they operated in terms of the construction of a functional nationalist pedagogy through the daily interactions between text and audience at the point of exhibition. Higson addresses this perspective in his discussion, and suggests looking at,

How these (sociologically specific) audiences *use* these films in particular exhibition circumstances; that is to say, we need to take into account not only the historically constituted reading practices and modes of spectatorship and subjectivity...but also the experience of cinema(s) in a more general cultural sense.⁶²

This approach would involve a shift away from the conventional means of conceptualizing national cinema,

It involves a shift in emphasis away from the analysis of film texts as vehicles for the articulation of nationalist sentiment and the interpolation of the implied national spectator, to an analysis of how actual audiences construct their cultural identity in relation to the various products of the national and international film...industries and the conditions under which this is achieved.⁶³

Unfortunately, Higson's ambitions for a true and accurate accounting of a nation's cinematic habits is near impossible when dealing with an historical audience, as in the

⁶² Higson, 45.

⁶³ Ibid.

case of the Yiddish cinema. Without the benefit of the presence of the actual members of the national community of the time, it becomes necessary to resort to the "implied national spectator" as he/she can be interpolated from the film texts and other historical material. This is not necessarily a fatal detriment, as the theories of nation and national identity discussed in the previous chapter, and below, can help to illuminate the larger processes at work between the audiences and the community's cultural products.

As J. Hoberman characterizes it, the Yiddish cinema, "was not just a national cinema without a nation-state, but a national cinema that, with every presentation, created its own ephemeral nation-state."⁶⁴ This suggests the idea that the films were less a cultural product, than the means by which a culture was produced, and imagined by their audiences. As a modern technology, film was especially suited to the articulation and negotiation of the crises of modernity faced by many cultures during the social and political upheavals of the early 20th Century. As such, it is conceivable to see how the cinema could have formed the site of a popular (re)-articulation of national identity in light of the changes brought about by secularization, technology, forced migration, urbanization and social conflict. As Hoberman relates,

Eternally Janus-faced, Yiddish cinema addressed the dislocation between the Old Country and the New World, parent and child, folk community and industrial society, worker and *allrightnik*, that existed within each member of the audience. If individual films often precipitated a conflict between tradition and modernity, the Yiddish cinema in toto can be seen as something of an extended family quarrel.⁶⁵

Carlos Monsiváis, in his discussion of Mexican cinema and popular audiences from 1935-1955, a period of intense modernization and urbanization in Mexico, discusses

⁶⁴ Hoberman, 5.

⁶⁵ Hoberman, 9.

the role that cinema played for popular audiences in learning to negotiate their place within a changing national culture,

(T)he public plagiarised the cinema as much as possible: its way of speaking and gesturing, humour, respect of institutions and its typical perception of duties and pleasures were derived from the cinema...the public...among other things, trusted that its idols would explain how to survive in a bewildering age of modernisation.⁶⁶

People not only went to the cinema to be entertained, but to “understand how they belonged to the nation.”⁶⁷ In a way, to use Bhabha’s terms, the cinema in Mexico provided a new national pedagogy, one that could be easily assimilated and repeatedly returned to for guidance. In its perpetual repetition, both as a body of films in exhibition, and through the emulative behaviour of its audiences, the cinema also fulfills the performative dimension of Bhabha’s process of ‘writing the nation’. The peculiar closeness of pedagogy and performance provided by this example speaks to the immediacy of the solution provided by cinema to the increasingly rapid social changes arising from the processes of modernization. This, of course, was just a precursor to the new cultural relationships that would be created by broadcast technologies a few decades later.

As Hoberman points out, the Yiddish cinema served a similar function for its audiences. Faced with the bewildering changes brought about by a mass transition from “Old Country to New World,” both through immigration, and the social and political upheavals in Europe, which were forever changing the face of the “Old Country,” the Yiddish cinema provided a venue for the articulation of the anxieties arising from the search for a new identity. Hoberman further indicates that the Yiddish cinema was

⁶⁶ C. Monsiváis, “Mythologies,” in P.A. Paranagua, (ed.), Mexican Cinema (London, 1995), 117.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 118.

overwhelmingly, at least initially, secular and contemporary in its subject matter, "Unlike that of the Yiddish stage or Yiddish literature, the historical memory of Yiddish cinema extends back no further than the mid-nineteenth century, the childhood of its eldest spectators."⁶⁸ Thus the filmmakers, in the selection and presentation of the material, and the audiences, during and following the experience of exhibition, were engaged in a collective process of articulating, and attempting to resolve the problems inherent in the creation of a new, 'modern', (national) identity.

For both the Mexican example, and particularly for Yiddish cinema, the films went beyond the articulation of contemporary anxieties. As mentioned earlier, with reference to Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, they were also engaged in a project of creating a national mythology, or even, as Hoberman mentions, an imagined nation-state, contained within the confines of a celluloid world. The play between the search for a contemporary identity and the lure of nostalgia created a body of films that was somewhat contradictory. But as Hoberman explains, "Implicit in these discrepancies...is the urge for totality, the desire for a complete and self-contained Jewish world. No matter how debased or clichéd, disjointed or incoherent, each Yiddish movie offered the imaginary fulfillment of a new *Yidishland*."⁶⁹ The imagined nation created on film was one where everyone was Jewish and everyone spoke Yiddish, "In its evocation of realms where Jewish peasants tilled the soil and even police or party officials might address the spectator in *mame-loshn*, Yiddish cinema shares that utopian component common to all popular entertainment."⁷⁰ In the absence of the boundaries of a territorial nation, the

⁶⁸ Hoberman, 11.

⁶⁹ Ibid. The spelling is as it appears in the text, and was intended by the author as a more accurate transliteration of the term from the original Yiddish.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

films created the ultimate 'imagined community', bounded by the collective imagination of their audience, and called into being through each performance of a Yiddish film. The process of exhibition entailed more than a performance of national identity, rather it was the performance of the nation itself.

From this perspective, Higson's exhibition-based approach to evaluating a national cinema becomes particularly relevant. If the most important aspect of the Yiddish cinema is in how it articulates an imagined ideal of a self-contained Yiddish-speaking world, then this will encompass a much broader scope of films than a criticism-based, or comparative approach might value and include. As Judith Thissen mentions in her discussion of Jewish film audiences in New York City before the First World War, before there existed such an entity as a 'Yiddish cinema', film exhibitors in Jewish areas created an ethnically-specific bill of fare out of existing film material. She describes the selection of films at the American Movies theatre in the Lower East Side during the period of April 11 to July 24, 1914, as advertised in the *Jewish Forward*,

Esther and Mordechai (Gaumont, 1910?), 'a wonderful Biograph production: the biblical story of Judith and Holophernes' (*Judith of Bethulia*, Biograph, 1914), *Samson the Hero* (*Samson*, Universal, 1914), *Joseph's Trials in Egypt* (Eclectic Film Co/Pathé, 1914), *Mendel Beilis*, 'Jacob Gordin's greatest drama *Di Shkhite* made in Russia with the greatest Jewish actors, such as Ester Rochel Kaminski and Sam Adler' (*The Slaughter*, Kosmofilm, 1914), *Bar Kochba* (*Bar Kochba – The Hero of a Nation*, Supreme, 1913)...and 'Uriel Acosta performed in moving pictures by the best actors of the Yiddish stage' (*Great Players*, 1914).⁷¹

Similarly, Hoberman discusses what he terms the *Faryidisht* film, in which, after the arrival of sound technology, silent films were dubbed and re-released as new films, using Yiddish-speaking actors to provide the voices, or else they were fashioned with a

⁷¹ J. Thissen, "Jewish Immigrant Audiences in New York City, 1905-1914," in M Stokes and R. Maltby (eds.), *American Movie Audiences* (London, 1999), 25.

recorded running commentary by a Yiddish narrator.⁷² Although most frequently these were adaptations of Yiddish silents, other, non-Jewish, films were occasionally reworked and adapted in order to transform them into Yiddish films. One such film was the 1934 *Oy di Shviger!*, (*What a Mother-in-Law!*, Harry S. Brown, U.S.) which took the non-Jewish silent film *The Lunatic* (Harry Garson, U.S., 1927), and attempted to inject it with Jewish content, using a Yiddish narrator and the insertion of a Yiddish-language frame story. As Hoberman describes, Max Wilner, the narrator, “does what he can (to add Jewish content), calling the crying baby entrusted to Satz a “*khantze*” (female cantor) and providing Satz with a mock-Talmudic formula to chant after he spills the milk he’s heating for the child.”⁷³ Although the end result is a film plagued with incongruities, what the entire process amounts to, Hoberman proposes, is, in effect, an “attempt...to reverse the process of assimilation.”⁷⁴

Both Thissen and Hoberman’s examples illuminate Higson’s argument that a national film culture can be constituted by whatever is being shown within that national context. In the case of the American Movies theatre, each of the films on its program, shown individually, amongst more common fare, to an ethnically diverse, or non-Jewish audience, would perhaps not be considered exemplary of a uniquely Jewish cinematic tradition. But by assembling and marketing them together, for the purposes of exhibiting them to a specifically Jewish audience, the collective interaction between film and audience creates a uniquely Jewish cinematic experience. In Hoberman’s example, for Yiddish-speaking audiences, the addition of Yiddish voices is almost enough to transform

⁷² Hoberman, 181.

⁷³ Ibid. 189.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

the experience of any film into an illusory projection of that imagined utopian, self-contained *Yiddishland*, regardless of form or content.

There is a certain congruity between what Hoberman describes as salient about Yiddish film and theoretical assumptions about cinema and nationhood. What he describes as the desire to create utopian screen images of an imaginary *Yiddishland*, seems like an attempt to create a national mythos, a *lieu de mémoire*, a self-contained and coherent stage upon which national dramas can be revisited and re-enacted. In contrast with the real-life diversity, disagreements and inconsistencies which characterized the global Yiddish-speaking diaspora, Yiddish film presents a unified front, in order to represent complex issues of identity, and other problems and conflicts inherent in a minority culture, as uni-dimensional moral dichotomies, simplified and individualized for melodramatic narrative impact.

As appealing as it might be to undertake a performance or exhibition-based analytical approach to cinema and the Yiddish-speaking Diaspora, in the absence of first-hand research, it would be impossible to truly understand how the films might have functioned for individuals or groups within such a complex '*transnational*' community. It would be more productive, as a preliminary step, to perform a text-based analysis of the films, and by examining some of the recurring themes, conflicts and cultural dynamics, attempt to determine what 'national' sensibilities are being expressed. In light of the very real upheavals that faced the community at this time, and the generalized state of transition and acculturation, what solutions do the films propose? If a film culture can be both pedagogical and performative, in what ways are the films reflecting the experiences of their audience, and how are they helping them to navigate their way

through these changes? Is there an overarching national ideology emerging from these films? I would suggest that there is, and what will be examined in the subsequent chapters is how a potential national ideology, or recurring national concerns are expressed through the representations of the family, and the crisis in nuclear family brought on by the abandonment of the traditional seat. There appears to be represented through the various subsets within the body of Yiddish cinema, a transition from the power of the father and the regimented patriarchal religion of the Old World, to the empowerment of the mother in the emergence of a "performative" familial, hearth-based and secular Jewish way of life in the New World. Within this, new responsibilities are given to the children to negotiate a stable and workable balance between secular demands and traditional morality.

CHAPTER 3: The Father-Centred Films

The role of nostalgia is certainly central in positing the function and appeal of Yiddish cinema, in general, with respect to its original audiences, but we can also view this nostalgic preoccupation with the recent past from a national cinematic perspective, as a key factor in terms of the construction of a kind of “national mythology,” rooted in the places and ways of the now distant Old World. While many of the films attempt to engage with the issues and interests of contemporary life, there is a definite subset of films that are situated in the Old Country, usually in rural, or small town settings during the critical pre-emigration period of the mid- to late-19th century. These films dramatize and idealize certain elements of Old World life, indicating, perhaps, what audiences valued and found to be lacking in their new existence. One of the most significant elements, from the point of view of gender and family dynamics, is the presence of a strong, father-centred family within a rigidly patriarchal community organization, something that is largely lacking from the films set in contemporary times.

The nostalgic, father-centred films fall into a couple of basic groups. The first group celebrates the ways of the past and documents and idealizes the rural lifestyle and traditional cultural practices, as in *Grine Felder, Yidl mitn Fidl* (*Yiddle with his Fiddle*, Joseph Green, Poland, 1937), *Der Dybuk* (*The Dybbuk*, Michal Waszynski, Poland, 1937) and *Di Klyatshe* (*The Light Ahead*, Edgar G. Ulmer, U.S., 1939). The other group appears to warn of the dangers of the encroachment of secular and non-Jewish influences on a still-thriving, but threatened traditional lifestyle, as in *Tevye der Milkhiker* (*Tevye the Dairyman*, Maurice Schwartz, U.S., 1939), *Dem Khazns Zundl* (*The Cantor's Son*, Ilya Motyleff, U.S., 1937), and *Der Vilner Shtot Khazn* (*Overture to Glory*, Max

Nosseck, U.S., 1940). The father figure in all of these films remains the figure of authority, the material provider, and bearer and transmitter of cultural knowledge. He also metes out punishment for transgression of the rules of the community, or warns of the spiritual dangers of the transgression of those boundaries in terms of adherence to religious principles. The main conflicts in these films are thus often in the form of child-father or individual-community conflicts, in which the values and the power of the patriarchy are put to the test. However, the films inevitably conclude with the authority of the patriarchal figure being re-asserted as the morally correct perspective.

In opposition to the films which deal directly with the issues faced by Jews during the early 20th century, the nostalgic films largely bypass the conflicts with the larger communities that characterized this period in history, choosing instead to focus on family, community, love and issues of Jewish morality and spirituality. These films appear analogous to a search for an idealized, pure, and untainted form of Jewish life and culture, something that may never have in fact existed, but that might have seemed increasingly appealing as it got further out of reach. The overarching thematic conflicts that run throughout the body of Yiddish film continue to be observed: tradition vs. modernity, individual vs. community, parent vs. child; but in these films, the weight of authority continues to lie with tradition and patriarchal authority. By setting the films in a simplified and idealized past, the problems and their solutions have a distinct clarity to them, as they are uncluttered by the complications and contradictions of modern life.

In a similar example, Paul Willemsen, in his discussion of the 1949 Indian film, *Andaz* (Mehboob Khan), reveals how the family dynamics in the film symbolically represent India's attempts to negotiate a balance between pre-capitalist tradition, the

colonial legacy and post-colonial capitalist Westernization.⁷⁵ The central figures are a father and daughter, with the father representing patriarchal, Old Indian tradition, and the daughter as embracing Western values, as Willemen describes,

Pressures for change (presented primarily by her wearing Western clothing and adopting Western gestural patterns along with them) will be shown as impacting on the father-daughter relationship and will be judged acceptable or not depending on whether they allow the father's value-world to be transmitted to, and internalized by the daughter.⁷⁶

The conflict, similar to the overarching conflict in Yiddish film, is not simply between Old World values and Western capitalism, as it might seem at the outset, but rather, the film is interested in finding a means of reconciling these opposing tendencies in the interest of creating a new, modern nationalist ideology,

In the new India, pre-capitalist social relations should fuse with capitalism, leaving the culture and the traditional hierarchical arrangements undisturbed, repairing what was damaged by colonialism. An indigenous and independent capitalism should simply allow an updated form of Old India to come into existence.⁷⁷

Although whether this is in fact possible, is what the film never truly resolves, choosing instead to displace a coherent ideological resolution with a typical melodramatic narrative resolution, punishing the daughter for having transgressed the boundaries of her traditional role.

The ideological strategy of *Andaz*, as Willemen describes it, has much in common with the Yiddish films. Their ideological weight seems to lie with tradition, and Old World values, at the same time as the culture, as a whole, is faced with the contingencies of a rapid transition into modern industrial capitalism. The position of Jewish

⁷⁵ P. Willemen, "Negotiating the Transition to Capitalism," in W. Dissanayake (ed.), *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* (Cambridge and New York, 1993), 183.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 185.

communities in Europe over the centuries, however, has always been one in which there was a high degree of interaction and interdependence with non-Jewish groups. In addition, many of the regions in which they lived had laws prohibiting Jews from owning land, thus forcing them into trades and other commercial ventures. Therefore one cannot truly speak of the Jewish communities as having been "pre-capitalist" and culturally independent in the same way as the Indian example. However, for Jews forced to live in the economically depressed "Pale of Settlement" in Eastern Europe, essentially an extensive Jewish regional ghetto, there would have been a high degree of cultural uniformity and material scarcity that would have made a transition into the heterogeneous and prosperous cities of North America a difficult cultural adjustment. The strategy being represented through the films, then, similar to Willemen's example, is to determine which values and traditions, indigenous to life in the Old Country, are compatible with the culturally integrated, modern, secular, consumer-capitalist existence common to the New, and then to fuse them together, to allow for the emergence of a new, updated, and hopefully stronger, form of the old culture.

The nostalgic films are used primarily to represent these Old World traditions in a coherent and positive, or at least meaningful, way. To this end familial roles, gender roles, and community roles are all firmly delineated and established. The authority of the stern patriarch is absolute, and often unquestioned. Cultural traditions, in these films, also go unquestioned as they fit easily and organically into the daily life of the heavily structured community. In *Der Dybuk*, it is the pledge that two fathers make, in the presence of God, betrothing their unborn children, that fulfills itself as love later in their lives, and takes precedence over any efforts to the contrary. Another film that follows a

similar theme is *Ost und West* (*East and West*, Sidney M. Goldin, Austria, 1923), in which a visiting American girl, Molly, participates in a mock wedding with a religious Polish boy she dislikes, but in the end discovers that, according to Jewish traditional law, she is in fact legally wed. Nevertheless, even after many years of separation, she is unable to escape the persistence of tradition, and she ends up falling in love with a stranger who turns out to be her own husband.

In the Yiddish films set in contemporary, 1930s America, the films often draw on the 'aura of authenticity' of certain waning traditions, given to them through their association with the mythological Old World, in order to attempt to justify their continued relevance for Jews in the modern world. For example, Nat Silver, a successful but dissatisfied, young American businessman in *Amerikaner Shadchn* (*American Matchmaker*, Edgar G. Ulmer, U.S., 1940), only finds his direction in life when he emulates his uncle, a traditional matchmaker in the Old World, and becomes a modern, American-styled matchmaker. Nat only comes to this conclusion during a sequence in which, after listening to a story about his uncle from his mother, he imagines himself as a bearded Old World matchmaker in traditional garb, presiding over a boisterous, traditional wedding. This sequence draws heavily on the iconography of the idealized Old World *shtetl* found in the nostalgia-laden films, and appears to give these 'outdated' customs a new cachet when viewed from the perspective of time and distance.

In the same way, perhaps, the nostalgic films were trying to re-imbue old traditions, and cultural habits with this romantic aura of authenticity for their contemporary audiences. The relentless optimism and self-satisfaction of the characters in *Grine Felder*, for example, discussed below, seems almost deliberately propagandistic,

especially when put in contrast with the attitude of the cynical urban scholar who comes into their midst. Rare are images of the oppression, deprivation and misery that were a reality for many during this period. What seems to be at work is an attempt to create a national mythology out of a particular time and place in recent Jewish history. What is interesting is that it is a mythology located overwhelmingly just before the social turmoil in Eastern Europe that forced thousands of Jews to emigrate, and in the small towns and rural areas untainted by the overcrowding and poverty of the ghettos of the larger cities. Setting the films during this period intensifies their emotional significance, as we are aware of the impending demise of these seemingly perfect worlds, and also as this period would have been within the living memories of many of the members of their audience. They seem designed to trigger the dual sentiments of recognition and loss that form the core of nostalgia.

Jeffrey Shandler, in a discussion of the ethnographic qualities of *Ost und West*, discusses the role of film in terms of this kind of nostalgic attempt to document, and preserve the past, "the camera...becomes an important tool in the modern transformation of the idiosyncratic, ephemeral experience that is memory into the archetypal, fixed documents of history."⁷⁸ He recalls Pierre Nora's theory of the construction of "*lieux de mémoire*," or "sites of memory", which replace the disappearing "*milieux de mémoire*," the "real environments of memory". Nora's theory posits a conflict between history and memory that arises as a result of the separation of the modern world from the "repository of collective memory" which characterized pre-modern, or traditional cultures.⁷⁹ Nora further characterizes the Jewish Diaspora as a people whose identity is strongly rooted in

⁷⁸ J. Shandler, "*Ost und West*, Old World & New: Nostalgia and Antinostalgia," in S. Paskin (ed.), *When Joseph met Molly* (Nottingham, 1999), 79.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

the processes of memory as a kind of “national tradition, which has no other history than its own memory, to be Jewish is to remember that one is such.”⁸⁰ For Shandler’s argument, then, the impetus behind, and the value of the film *Ost und West*, and perhaps a large part of the Yiddish cinema, to a diasporic Jewish nation, was in the interest of turning what existed as part of the mythology of the collective national memory into the tangible symbolic system of a national history. Shandler likens this to the concurrent boom in other sectors of Jewish society at the time, in the desire to preserve and document the dying traditions of a ‘pre-modern’ existence, in photographs, films and archives, in order to fix the national mythology in the world of the symbolic as its people forged ahead into modernity. Interestingly, Shandler notes that while the Yiddish films made during the late teens and 20s were characterized by their somewhat irreverent treatment of the abandoned ‘Old World’ and its seemingly ‘pre-modern’ traditions, as this world began to come under threat, with the dual rise of Fascism and Stalinism in Eastern Europe during the 1930s, it increasingly became a locus of intense nostalgia in Jewish popular culture.⁸¹

Nostalgia is an effective tool in the construction of a national mythology, or myth of origin, upon which to build the foundation of a new culture. Through the palliative distance of time and space, a culture’s collective memory will tend to dwell on those aspects of their former lives that collectively hold the most continued emotional significance for them. It does not necessarily have to be something positive either, as many national myths are founded on some grave injustice done to them in the past. Take, for example, the American preoccupation with the War of Independence against their

⁸⁰ Pierre Nora, as quoted in *ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

"colonial oppressors", or the American Civil War. Or, more aptly, the Zionist ideology behind the founding of the State of Israel, which bases the nation's right to the territory on an injustice done to the Jews thousands of years before, with their expulsion from the Holy Land, something that continued to have a strong emotional resonance with Jews around the world. Indeed, in establishing a new, Israeli culture, they chose to draw primarily on those original roots, bypassing thousands of years of diasporic experience, with, for example, the resurrection of Hebrew as the national language. For the Yiddish films, they chose to focus on those aspects of daily life that formed the foundation of their cultural uniqueness, and which were no longer practicable in the new context; the so-called 'performative' aspects of the culture, which disappear once they can no longer be performed.

In keeping with this nostalgic/ethnographic interest in the disappearing cultural habits of the Old World, one can observe a decided preoccupation with ritual and ceremony in these films. Every film features either a wedding, a major holiday, a cantorial performance, an arcane religious ritual (such as the exorcism in *Der Dybuk*), or at the very least, a Sabbath meal. These sequences are often set apart from the rest of the film by their length and attention to detail, and are often positioned as the moral and dramatic centre of the film. Although the contemporary films are also not without weddings and holidays as well, they are usually convenient plot devices, subservient to the narrative, and the emotions of the characters are given precedence over the details of the ceremony, whereas in the nostalgic films, the narrative itself seems almost interrupted to make way for these sequences. In *Der Dybuk*, for example, the wedding sequence features carefully re-enacted folk dances, complete with superimposed titles indicating

their names. The filmmaker, Michael Waszynski, brought in Judith Berg, an expert in Jewish dance, to choreograph the wedding dance sequences, which she based, in part, on descriptions she received from her grandmother.⁸² *Yidl mitn Fidl* also pauses at a wedding, and we lose our main characters for several scenes as we witness such things as the traditional *badchan* attempting to make the women weep before the wedding, a large banquet, and several dance numbers. Any of the Moishe Oysher films inevitably features the celebrated cantor singing holiday prayers along with the usual musical fare, whether or not it is actually important to the plot. What seems to be at work is an attempt, not just to document, but to show these cultural traditions as an integral and meaningful part of a once thriving culture; to re-imbue them with a sense of authenticity in order to re-introduce them as the core of a national mythology.

DER DYBUK

Der Dybuk is notable for its dark, expressionistic setting, and for its interest in the supernatural elements of Jewish folk mythology. Set in the Eastern European village of Brinitz, sometime during the 19th century, the story revolves around a vow made, against religious doctrine, by two childhood friends, Sender and Nisson, binding their unborn children into an engagement. Nisson has a son, and Sender a daughter, but Nisson dies in an accident on his way to the birth, and after Sender's wife dies, he becomes distracted by business interests and forgets about the promise he made to his friend. One day, as fate would have it, a poor orphaned *yeshive bokher* (religious school student) named Khonnon shows up at Sender's house, unbeknownst to him that the boy is Nisson's son. Khonnon and Leah, Sender's daughter, in true fulfillment of their fathers' vow, fall instantly in

⁸² Hoberman, 281.

love. However, in his growing avarice, Sender arranges for Leah to be engaged to a rich man's milksop of a son, in order to obtain a handsome living for his daughter. Khonnon, in his desperation to be considered worthy as a match for Leah, turns to the books of Kabbalah and invokes Satan to provide him with a ton of gold. Khonnon dies during his attempts, and on the night of Leah's wedding, she visits his grave and implores Khonnon's soul to enter her body, which he does, becoming a *dybuk*. Various attempts are made to exorcise the spirit, but once accomplished, the film ends with Leah uniting herself in death with Khonnon's disembodied soul.

The film's moral authority lies with an otherworldly messenger, who repeatedly appears to warn people against the perils of their behaviour, and with the Rabbi of Miropol, whose task it is to struggle against the spirit inhabiting Leah's body. The messenger appears dressed in a long coat, of a style obviously from a time previous to that represented in the film. He is the age-old patriarch, bearer of cultural and spiritual knowledge, able to understand and predict behaviours based on his infinite familiarity with the ways of Jewish culture and spirituality. We are unable to discern whether he is associated with a divine, or demonic power as he seems, narratively, to be neither a force for good or evil. He merely observes, warns and predicts what is in store for those who transgress divine law. The rabbi, the one who should be filling this role, is distracted and unsure of himself. Had he been paying adequate attention to the needs of the community, he would have listened to Nisson and Sender when they attempted to ask him about their desire to enter into a vow. Similarly, when attempting to free Leah from the *dybuk*, he, and the rest of the community, fail to pay adequate attention to Leah and her needs and desires, so that when left unattended she brings about her own death.

One cannot particularly say, however, that the male figures are in a state of crisis. Although they fail to adequately live up to their responsibilities to their families and community, that responsibility is ultimately taken up by a divine power, given definite masculine form, in the figure of the ageless patriarch, the messenger. The universe is still a rigidly ordered one, and moral transgressions are strictly punished. One can assume that, through this experience, they would have "learned their lesson" and endeavoured to uphold the laws and morals of the community with a renewed vigour. Much like in *Der Vilner Shtetl Khazn*, where others are given the opportunity of learning from the Cantor's mistake, in wanting unwholesome secular pleasures and so receiving God's punishment through the death of his son.

The aesthetics are also important in the discussion of this film, as it is one of the few that managed to gain some international recognition outside of the Yiddish-speaking world. Its dark, expressionistic setting and preoccupation with the supernatural would suggest that it has more in common with horror films such as *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, Germany, 1922), or *Der Golem (The Golem)*, Paul Wegener, Germany, 1920), than with the light-hearted musical comedy, *Yidl mitn Fidl*. But, it is a story that will only work within the rigidly structured world of the traditional Jewish *shtetl*. One must believe that the rules and practices of the community fit seamlessly with religious doctrine, as the events can only be explained in terms of the consequences of breaching those laws. In effect, the village setting is a character unto itself; the buildings, the streets, the graveyard, made all the more ominous by the lighting and cinematography, exert an other-worldly control over the village inhabitants. The inhabitants appear to be trapped

forever in this 19th century Jewish village, under a vengeful God's watchful eye, prevented from joining the modern, secular world that presumably surrounds them.

DER VILNER SHTOT KHAZN

In *Der Vilner Shtot Khazn*, it is not a rural community which is being idealized, but rather a well-established Jewish community in the large city of Vilna. The place and period, late 19th century Poland/Lithuania, however, does set it into the realm of nostalgia, especially considering that it was made in 1940, in a studio in the U.S., by a German-born director. The central conflict, not a new one in the world of Yiddish film, is between a celebrated cantor's desire for secular pleasures, versus his commitment to his community and religious beliefs. The choice of Vilna, a renowned centre of Jewish culture and religious learning, further reinforces the conflict between Jewish religious commitment and secular frivolity, as a Vilna cantor would, by association, be expected to be more pious than, say, his counterpart from Odessa. By setting the story during a time and place where a traditional, observant lifestyle was still the norm for Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, the conflict can be more easily framed as one between faith and faithlessness. Unlike in *Dem Khazns Zundl*, another similarly themed Moishe Oysher vehicle, where the cantor's wayward son, Shloimele, chooses a Jewish secular lifestyle over a traditional one, thus avoiding a total estrangement from the community, Yoel Duvid's world does not offer such a choice. Therefore, the secular world is the non-Jewish world, and a secular lifestyle means estrangement from his community and his faith.

As the world is one of tradition, it is therefore also the world of fathers and sons. Yoel Duvid has no father of his own, so the figures of authority in his life are his father-in-law, Aaron, and the rabbi. There is certainly some suggestion that Yoel Duvid's lack of a father is partially responsible for his lack of commitment to his faith, just as we see the repercussions of Yoel's absence from his own son's life, melodramatically rendered as an hysterical illness resulting from his son's fears of having been abandoned by his father. Yoel's father's instruction to his son about his vocation was to always "sing from the heart," which Yoel, in the absence of his father's guidance, took also to mean "follow your heart," which is what led him to join the Warsaw Opera. Here the differences are delineated between secular pleasures and spiritual fulfillment, and evidently, Yoel Duvid, without the proper guidance, was unable to distinguish between the two, until he had his own life crisis.

That this is clearly a cautionary tale is made evident through the excess of punishment meted out for the seemingly minor infraction. His abandonment of the synagogue for the opera house is taken for all of its connotative symbolic meaning, turning a simple tale into a parable of morality. The sermonizing element of the film is best demonstrated in the final moments of the film, in which, having returned disgraced from Warsaw, following the death of his son, Yoel Duvid sings "Kol Nidre" one last time in his old synagogue, and collapses dead on the floor. The camera then takes a low angle position, looking up at the rabbi, as he praises Yoel Duvid's talents, and pronounces, "He sang for *them*, but he *prayed* for us!" He then reaches his hand towards the camera, and there is a cut, to reveal the rabbi closing Yoel's eyes. It is then that the viewer realizes that the previous shot had been from the point of view of the corpse's dead eyes, thus

placing the audience, horrifyingly, in Yoel's position, inviting one to imagine one's own fate, should one choose to follow in the same path.

The message of this film seems somewhat severe, especially considering that most of the audience for Yiddish film at this time would have been estranged, in one way or another, from the kind of traditional lifestyle depicted in the film. If we looked at it in terms of the power of nostalgic evocation, however, it might make more sense. The setting alone would likely be enough to inspire fond remembrances for those who could remember living or visiting there, but more symbolic, perhaps, is the evocation of a world in which the rules were firm, and the choices simple. For displaced Jewish immigrants, on the verge of the Second World War, it was no longer reasonably possible to choose to live that kind of strict traditional lifestyle. At the same time, the intensity of moral outrage within the Jewish community at the abandonment of those traditional values was beginning to dissipate with the younger, acculturated generations. In America, would-be cantors and cantor's sons such as Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor and George and Ira Gershwin, were successfully creating and performing secular music for the *goyish* masses with no suggestion of divine retribution. It might have been comforting to remember an idyllic time when religion, culture and lifestyle were inextricably linked, even if such a time and place never truly existed. If we are to view this sub-section of Yiddish film as an attempt to hold onto the ideal qualities of the past, in light of an uncertain future, then this film, one of the last made, epitomizes this sense of crisis.

TEVYE DER MILKHIKER

Tevye der Milkhiker offers a similar choice. Like many of the other nostalgic films, such as *Grine Felder* and *Der Purimshpieler* (*The Purim Player*, Joseph Green, Poland, 1937), it begins with evocative images of peasants, singing and working in luxuriant sunny fields, giving the sense of an idyllic bygone time. However, we soon discover that the happy peasants are not Jews. Khave is seen idly feeding ducks in a pond, a short distance from the main road, where the peasants pass by. As they pass, the men shout at her, commenting that she is a "lovely Jew-girl." We are made to understand that the idyllic pastoral space is the space of the goyim, and that Khave is trespassing in that space, with the intention of fraternizing with the handsome Russian peasants. As soon as that distinction is made between Jewish and non-Jewish space, we know that the issue is going to be one of conflict between the two communities.

Most of the other films pointedly create what seems to be a continuous Jewish space, a seamless series of Jewish communities, Hoberman's "imaginary fulfillment of a new *Yidishland*."⁸³ For example, in *Der Purimshpieler*, when the hero and heroine leave the Jewish *shtetl* for the big city (presumably Warsaw), we see them wandering through streets packed with Jews in traditional garb, admiring synagogues, and frequenting Jewish nightclubs. Similarly, New York is often cryptically depicted by images of the teeming streets of the Lower East Side, as in *Dem Khazns Zundl*, or *Tsvey Shvester* (*Two Sisters*, Ben K. Blake, U.S., 1938), that being the extent of necessary locales to establish a sense of America. So, by dividing the space in *Tevye*, it introduces the unwelcome intrusion of the outside world into the Jewish utopias created by other films, thus tempering the nostalgia which might be evoked by the setting.

⁸³ Ibid.

The inclusion of non-Jews or non-Jewish cultural elements certainly does occur in other films, most notably in *Der Vilner Shtot Khazn*, but in the more contemporary, American-set films, their intention is clearly different. In many of the films set in America, the ability of Jewish characters to successfully interact with and command the respect of non-Jewish, English speaking characters, indicates their successful acculturation, something that must also be balanced through a depiction of their simultaneous commitment to the Jewish community. An overly familiar relationship with the other culture is seen as suspicious, as is demonstrated by the overly-acculturated Mr. Geller in *Amerikaner Schadchn*, who makes a point of speaking English at all times, and who turns out to be greedy and shiftless. From this perspective, Tevye's friendly relationship with the non-Jewish community is seen initially as productive, as he makes his livelihood in selling them dairy products, but he remains committed to his family and his faith. However, his daughter Khava, in seeking a more intimate familiarity with the other culture, with her love of Russian literature, and the Russian peasant, Fedye, compromises her relationship with her family and abandons her faith. Whereas the American-set films see a balance between internal and external spheres as both tenable and desirable, the nostalgic films seem only to function ideally without the interference of the outside world.

There is an added ideological element to this film with regards to Jewish and non-Jewish space that was not present in Sholom Aleichem's original story. In the film, Tevye's family is, as far as we can tell, the only Jewish family in the area. This all but eliminates the nurturing and self-contained Jewish community that forms the entirety of the worlds of the other nostalgic films. It also further emphasizes the isolation of the

Jews from their non-Jewish neighbours, making them out to be the outsiders, the trespassers on non-Jewish land. From this perspective a balance between Jewish and non-Jewish influences seems unattainable, and Khave's fall to Russian culture and masculine charm, inevitable. This idea is continued with Khave's isolation and ill-treatment at the hands of her husband's family, and finally with Tevye's eviction from the village. The film concludes with Tevye declaring that he is through with trying to live within an unfamiliar and hostile culture, and decides to emigrate to Israel, where he can be with his own people. Thus the idea of a wholly integrated all-Jewish space is essentially equated with a Zionist perspective.

By making the family stand in for the community as a whole, the family dynamics take on an even greater symbolic significance. From the beginning, the mother is the moral centre of the family, from her position of power in the domestic sphere. She is perpetually shown cooking and feeding the family, and it is she who first expresses her discomfort with Khave's overly familiar relationship with Fedye, and with Tevye's friendliness towards the Christian Priest. However, since Tevye is still the breadwinner, and confident about his ability to successfully negotiate with the "outside" world, he dismisses his wife's fears as unfounded. When Khave elopes, the shock is so great to her mother that she takes ill and dies, and without its moral centre, this is when the family truly begins falling apart.

It is also interesting to look at *Tevye*, in terms of its depiction of the father. He is introduced to us as a strong and competent head of the household. His authority is deferred to in matters of familial import, and it is his judgment that is to be feared. However, as circumstances disrupt his sense of certainty about God and the world, he

becomes more and more weakened. Just as in other films, where the father dies, becomes sick, or is unable to provide for his family, Tevye is gradually reduced to a helpless state of total compliance. The father figure seems to suffer the most when he is removed from his sphere. If we are to view these films as depicting the crisis in Jewish identity in its transition to modernity, the patriarch is the most likely to be affected by the loss of the traditional seat. After his daughter's betrayal, Tevye finds himself on his knees, begging the Christian Priest to let him see her, to which the Priest remarks that it is shameful for him to be humiliating himself in that manner. Some time later, when Tevye is being forced out of town, he doesn't even put up a fight, but listlessly signs the eviction edict and packs up his belongings to leave. Finally, at the end of the film, as Tevye and the remains of the family are departing, Khave reappears and begs to be taken back, but he no longer has the strength to resist and uphold his religious convictions, deciding, instead, to defer them to God's judgment.

GRINE FELDER

In *Grine Felder* the nuclear, father-centred family is celebrated above all other aspects of Judaism. The story follows Levy Yitzkok, a young and idealistic *yeshive* scholar from the big city who has set out from his studies to wander the countryside in search of truth, and "true Jews". When he stumbles across a small, rural community of Jewish farmers, he is aghast to discover that they have no synagogue, no school, and the children have received only rudimentary religious instruction. As he is poor, homeless, and hungry, he agrees to stay on for a short while with the family of Duvid-Noich, and teach his youngest son in exchange for room and board, but his intentions are to leave as

soon as possible to continue his search for "true Jews." However, he ends up falling in love with the lovely, headstrong daughter, Tzine, and in the end he declares, that although he misses books and Talmud scholars, he would like to learn to till the soil as well, as he has discovered that these Jews are just as pious as those in the big city.

Superficially, it might seem strange that during a period in which Jews were predominantly living in urban areas, a film should be glorifying the Jewish peasant existence as the 'true' and sincere expression of Judaism. However, *Grine Felder* deals with what could be considered the more fundamental conflict between religious and secular Judaism. It could also be viewed, in this light, as something of a transitional film between the father-centred and mother-centred categories, as, although the family defers to the authority of a strong father, and they are living a traditional, if not strictly religious, lifestyle, the form of Judaism that is being celebrated is the more secular, hearth-based form. Levy Yitzkok, standing in as the religious authority, sanctifies their way of life by declaring that even though they are largely ignorant of religious doctrine and fail to obey the scrupulous laws of traditional Jewish living, their fundamental morality is intact, as well as their sense of communal responsibility, the things that overwhelmingly come to symbolize the new Judaism of the New World films.

Because he is young, and still open to outside influences, he can also be compared to the New World sons of the contemporary films, as he too leaves his traditional sanctum and comes to redefine his concept of Jewish life through contact with a less stringent lifestyle. But he is also an influential force on the community in his own way. Duvid Noich welcomes Levy into his home because he wishes that his children were more pious and learned. The oldest son, Hersch-Ber, is already set in his ways, and

uninterested in anything other than farming. However, the youngest son, Avram Yankov is curious and eager to be taught. He is the most receptive to Levy's teachings and so represents a more optimistic future for Jewish masculinity, one that combines secular competence with Jewish religious knowledge and morality.

Also significant is Tzine's transformation from wayward peasant child, to attentive future wife, through the influence of Levy Yitzkok. Although she scandalizes him by wanting to learn to read the sacred texts, she also manages to woo him by the end of the film by preparing and serving him a sumptuous, and strictly kosher, Sabbath meal. In fact, the detail given to this sequence marks it as the film's moral centre. It is shot largely in silence, giving attention first to the Sabbath prayers, and then to each dish as it is carefully brought to the table and served by Tzine and her mother. The camera dwells on Levy's reaction, both to the food, and to the figure of Tzine herself, now quiet, attentive and adept at her role. So, although the film is celebrating a 'simpler' time in the Jewish past, it is also specifically celebrating those aspects of Jewish life that can continue to be perpetuated, regardless of time or place, as they revolve around the small daily practices of hearth and home.

DI KLYATSHE

Di Klyatshe is also something of a transitional film, in that, although it is set in the past, and still romanticizes, somewhat, life in the rural *shtetl*, it is beginning to question the authority of the religious leaders, as well as mock the petty and superstitious ways of the village folk. It takes place in the fictional village of Glupsk, and follows a lame beggar, named Fishke, and his sweetheart, a blind chicken-plucker named Hodl. It

is essentially light-hearted in tone at the outset, and, much like the tales of Sholom Aleichem, details the comedic eccentricities of the village folk through a series of vignettes: a pair of itinerant book-peddlers argue over a horse's bellyful of hay, a mischievous beggarwoman tries to trick Hodl into breaking up with Fishke, a woman gets around paying for a prayer book by flattering the bookseller into reading it to her. Imbued with nostalgia, it is the small habits of daily life that are celebrated and examined: Fishke works as a bath attendant, and wanders the streets before sundown on the Sabbath, calling the men to the ritual bath, the men talk about the village's problems as they sit in the prayerhouse, Hodl sits on the street corner plucking chickens, gossiping with the village folk as they walk by. There is also a Sabbath dinner sequence in which the poor Fishke goes into raptures over his meagre bowl of chicken noodle soup.

This aspect of the film shares much with the musical comedy, *Yidl mitn Fidl*. Molly Picon's über-plucky persona does much to sentimentalize the plight of the penniless Jewish ghetto inhabitant, again, steering us away from the negative aspects of Old World life by forcing us to, as the cliché has it, "always look on the bright side of life." The story revolves around a young girl, Yidl, and her father, who, for whatever reason, are reduced to singing in the street in order to make a living. When they decide to hit the road to ply their trade in other towns, Yidl dresses as a boy, in order to avoid unwanted attention. Probably the most interesting thing about this film is its nostalgic sentimentalism, as the plot is really nothing more than a thinly veiled excuse for the musical performances by Molly Picon. The action takes place in the typical small towns, on rural roads through verdant pastures, or at a bucolic abandoned barn, as well as pausing in the middle, as was mentioned earlier, at an elaborate small town wedding, thus

elaborating on all of the archetypal nostalgic Old World settings, and depicting them in the happiest, rosiest way possible.

Di Klyatshe, however, is inevitably more interesting, as it also has a dark side. The film appears to take a turn towards the morality parable, when, against religious injunction, a group of young girls break Sabbath to go swimming in the river, and end up starting a cholera epidemic. However, what results is a battle between the religious authorities along with the naïve and superstitious villagers, who believe that the cholera was a divine punishment, and a group of forward-thinking community leaders and intellectuals, led by the writer, Reb Mendele, who proclaim that the outbreak was because of a dirty river, and the lack of a hospital in the town. Caught in the middle are Fishke and Hodl, who, according to folk-legend, as the poorest couple in town, are forced into being married in the cemetery in order to put an end to the plague.

What is essentially at stake, then, is not adherence to religious doctrine or deference to authority, but the maintenance of a more secular, communal morality. The religious leaders, usually respected figures, are shown as greedy and short-sighted, more interested in perpetuating the cumbersome religious infrastructures and outdated laws, than in tending to the basic health and well-being of the community. The alternative is represented by Reb Mendele, something of a father-figure to the whole village, who organizes a group of village men to lobby for the proper use of their taxes. Mendele also finally encourages Fishke and Hodl to leave Glusk for Odessa, where, he tells them, people are not as small-minded. Interesting is a speech made by Mendele, in which he bemoans the suffering of the Jews, and demands to know why God never intervenes on their behalf, except of course, this time, the suffering he bewails has been brought upon

them because of their own ignorance. The type of Judaism that is being sought is one in keeping with a community-based morality, grounded in secular learning rather than religious doctrine, and so in keeping with the lifestyle of the modern, urban diaspora of the time.

The nostalgic father-centred films, then, represent an attempt to mythologize the recent past and establish a national narrative and iconography that can be used to inform the creation of a new, modern Jewish culture. They embody an idealized model of how the Jewish community of the 1930s remembered or imagined the traditional families, communities and lifestyles of the Old World. The patriarchal family and community structure is shown to be the most stable and least problematic, provided that the internal harmony is not disrupted by outside forces. With the intrusion of secular modernization, war, emigration and generalized conflict and oppression from the larger community, the stable patriarchal structure is thrown into crisis, resulting in the next group of films that I will discuss, which describe what results when the father figure is absent.

CHAPTER 4: The Mother-Centred Films

While the father-centred films construct idealized notions of tradition and the patriarchal family, the next group to be examined, the mother-centred films, show traditional values and families in crisis, with the mother figure left in charge of the preservation of the family unit. These films are set in contemporary, or near past, urban locales, usually during or following some sort of cataclysmic change that challenges traditional patterns of living, and traditional family structures. The crisis varies between war, emigration, abandonment or death, but in each case it results in the figurative emasculation or absence of the patriarch, thus thrusting the responsibility for the maintenance of the family on the mother. The mother thus becomes the nurturer, the bearer and the disseminator of cultural knowledge. With the shift from patriarch to matriarch, the form which that knowledge takes also shifts from the pedagogical and religious, to more secular, "performative" forms, expressed in terms of community and familial relations and customs. As Paula Hyman observes in her examination of gender and assimilation in Jewish families during the mid to late 19th and early 20th centuries,

By the middle of the nineteenth century western Jews had adapted themselves, and their Judaism, to the prevailing bourgeois model of female domesticity...This ideology called upon women to create a peaceful domestic environment free from the stresses of the larger society and devoted to the preservation and transmission of traditional morality, while the men assumed the burden of earning a living and governing society. Religion fell naturally within women's domain, for it drew upon emotion to disseminate morality and fortify social order.⁸⁴

The main conflicts in these films tend to revolve around the mother and her attempts to successfully instil this cultural knowledge in her children, so that they might

⁸⁴ P. Hyman, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History (Seattle and London, 1993), 25.

productively perpetuate the values of the community. The barriers to the fulfillment of this goal might be situational, such as in the face of war and emigration, as in *A Brivele Der Mamen* (*A Little Letter to Mother*, Joseph Green, Poland, 1938), or *Vu Iz Mein Kind?* (*Where Is my Child?*, Abraham Leff, U.S., 1937). The barriers might also lie with the children themselves, and the opposing forces that are acting upon them, as in *Mamele* (*Little Mother*, Joseph Green and Konrad Tom, Poland, 1938), *Tsvey Shvester*, or *Mirele Efros* (Joseph Berne, U.S., 1939), in which ungrateful children fail to uphold the values of the community and of the family. The mother becomes the focal point of these conflicts, and her suffering guides the emotional and moral centre of the film. As opposed to the father-centred films, in which the child is punished for transgressing the father's authority, in these films it is the mother who is variously punished for raising her children improperly, or rewarded for having done it well, despite the obstacles.

As the New World films tend to focus overwhelmingly on the mother and her children, emigration, then, is largely portrayed as an emasculating experience for the traditional male head of the household. This is understandable, as the sphere of the breadwinner would be the one requiring the most rapid change and adaptation in the transition to a new culture. Limited to the trades and skills they had learned in the Old World, having, by and large, been prevented from obtaining forms of higher education, men often found themselves stuck in the very lowest economic rungs, as peddlers and garment workers. As the returning emigrant on the boat to America, in *A Brivele Der Mamen*, tells the arriving greenhorns, "In America, there are no troubles, and all the Jews are tailors!" In an environment glutted with a constant supply of cheap, unskilled,

immigrant labour, the prospects for a head of household to be able to support his family were slim.

The stresses on the father of the family manifested themselves in many ways. Irving Howe notes that the desertion of families by immigrant husbands was such a problem in the early decades, that in 1911 several national Jewish charities banded together to form a National Desertion Bureau, in order to find errant husbands and return them to their wives. The Yiddish newspaper, the *Forward*, for many years ran a feature entitled, "Gallery of Missing Husbands."⁸⁵ Howe quotes a 1910 article in the *Forward* by M. Baranov who hypothesizes that the problems immigrant men were having were a result of a too rapid transition to a society of loose morals,

In Europe (men) were not responsible for their lives; they lived within the framework of police regulations, religious ritual, teachings of relatives and neighbours. Every step was decided beforehand. Their road of life was narrow, but they could not get lost...In America young Jews are hurled into a world of freedom-- no fences, no police, no communal judgment. It's every man for himself. Nothing sacred; you can buy or sell everything for money. The aim of life is amusement; conscience and honour fall by the wayside...⁸⁶

Assuming that she is not forced to find outside work herself, the mother, whose primary sphere would ideally be the private sphere of home and family, would instead be expected to perpetuate the domestic and morality-based customs and traditions of the home culture. Thus insulated in the home, adjustment could take place more gradually, through her role as domestic consumer. In light of the father's death or failure, the mother, as is demonstrated in these films, would be forced to take on an even greater importance in the family, as she would be obliged to take on multiple roles, as breadwinner, partial or entire, and nurturer, disciplinarian and moral educator.

⁸⁵ Howe, 179.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 180.

It is not simply the process of emigration causes this gendered upheaval. More generally, it is the abandonment of traditional ways and patterns of living as the family or entire culture moves into a modern, urban, secular lifestyle. This is often most succinctly represented through a passage from rigid, traditional 19th century Eastern Europe to modern, capitalist America, but in films such as *A Brivele Der Mamen*, or *Mamele*, the effects of the processes of 20th century modernization on families in Eastern Europe are also examined, to similar effect. In a consideration of the Yiddish cinema as a national cinema, it is significant that such parallels can be made between the experiences of Jews on both sides of the Atlantic. By focusing on the individual experiences of families, the universal qualities of Jewish family-hood and how they are affected by social change, are highlighted in order to gloss over the differences of national origin and the exact experiences that instigated the change. As an evocation of Appadurai's 'translocalities,' this phenomenon allows for an evaluation of Polish films such as *A Brivele der Mamen*, and *Mamele* on the same terms as the American works, *Vu iz Mein Kind* and *Tsvey Shvester*, by how they deal with the figure of the mother.

A BRIVELE DER MAMEN

The film, *A Brivele der Mamen*, epitomizes the mother-centred melodrama, of which Yiddish cinema was particularly fond. Focusing on the trials and hardships of the long-suffering Jewish mother, it manipulates the audience's emotions at the expense of narrative realism, or even, perhaps, from a more cynical and worldly perspective, good taste. Quite often the subject matter, and even the lead actresses, were drawn from successful plays from the popular Yiddish stage. *A Brivele Der Mamen*, featuring the

celebrated stage actress Lucy German, focuses on Dobrish Berdichevsky and her family, living in a small Ukrainian town before the First World War. Dobrish supports her family with a small fabric and dry-goods store, as her husband, Duvid, is an unsuccessful tunesmith who spends his days singing with friends, in an attempt to come up with the '*nign*' or religious tune, that will make him rich and famous. The Berdichevskys have three children, Meyer, the directionless oldest son, Miriam, the teenaged daughter who longs for worldly pleasures, and Arele, the youngest son, and everyone's unquestioned favourite.

From the start, we are already presented with a dysfunctional family unit. The patriarch, and eldest son, the standard pillars of the traditional Jewish family, are portrayed as largely ineffectual, yet still benign and lovable. The only daughter carries on an affair with a foppish dance instructor from Odessa, who coerces her into an elopement, seduces her, then abandons her after he reveals that he is already married. Throughout the film, it is Dobrish, as the film's centre, who struggles to maintain the illusion of a cohesive family unit. As her husband deserts her, her daughter elopes, her eldest son is killed in the war, and her youngest is sent off to make his fortune in America, Dobrish continues to labour under the delusion that some day her family will be whole again. The film's title refers to her parting words to Arele, the last family member to be sent away, as she implores him not to forget her, that he should once in a while remember to write "a little letter to mother." Inevitably, he fails to do so.

Despite their obvious flaws, there is still a great longing for the restoration of the traditional family, as is exemplified by the tearful Passover scene that occurs shortly after Duvid's desertion. An empty seat is left for him at the family table, as the head of the

family plays an important role in the Passover ceremony. Young Arele at one point asks his father, in the form of the empty chair, "why did you leave us?" However, rather than condemning Duvid for his unmanly abandonment of his family, the film attempts to make the family whole again. This was symbolically accomplished by linking a scene of Duvid, alone on an American park bench, singing the Passover tune, "Had Gad-ya," with the scene of his family at dinner, singing the same song.

Later, when Miriam elopes with Solomon the dance teacher, Dobrish makes up a story that she is visiting her aunt in another town, thus negating her daughter's betrayal, both for others, and for herself. And when Miriam comes home unwed, Dobrish encourages her to lie to Yudke, her childhood sweetheart, and the son of neighbours Shimen and Malke, and accept his offer of marriage. The melodramatic condemnation of the fallen daughter and dishonest mother never comes, Yudke and Miriam are married, and shipped off to Odessa, where Yudke has a successful career, and they, presumably, live happily ever after, or at least until the spectator extends the narrative into the film's real life present, the eve of the Second World War.

Meanwhile, the errant husband in America has managed to scrape together enough money, by working as a sock vendor, for a ship ticket for his son, Arele, to come stay with him. Dobrish, ever grateful, celebrates this news that her favourite son will be taken away, to be granted the dubious protection of her good-for-nothing husband. After she tells the news to a neighbour, there ensues a montage of the small-town rumour-mill in action, as with each telling of the tale, it becomes more exaggerated, until it is generally assumed that Duvid has become a millionaire in America, and has sent for his son, to share in his success. Dobrish, presumably happy to have her husband's reputation

restored, says nothing to disavow them of this notion, even as, in the next scene, she is seen selling her belongings to the cloth merchant, in order to cover her debts. Interestingly, perhaps in a wilful act of self-delusion about the opportunities to be had in America, none of the gossiping neighbours ever wonder why Duvid has sent only for his youngest son, and not for his wife and other children.

While the ideological thrust of the film appears to lie in the restoration and maintenance of the traditional family, the narrative provides nothing but barriers to its completion. After killing off the husband and eldest son, and marrying the daughter out of the narrative, the best substitute for the nuclear family seems to be provided by the unit formed by Dobrish and her in-laws, Shimen and Malke, who live together during and after the war. This form of communal self-reliance seems to provide for their material and familial needs, interestingly replacing the father, or mother-centred family with a three-way partnership, each providing equally towards the maintenance of the group. Due to the exigencies of poverty and displacement, both in war-torn Europe, or for new immigrants to the U.S. during the period represent by the film, this form of living was often a necessary reality, as extended families, friends and boarders were often forced to share tenement apartments and pool their resources in order to survive. As their fortunes change, the group even emigrates together, the prospect of leaving Dobrish with her daughter seemingly unthinkable.

Another narrative possibility is presented, as Dobrish is befriended by Mr. Shein, a handsome and worldly official from the immigrant aid society in America, who helps her to discover the fate of her husband, and obtain for her a ship ticket, in order to look for her son. This man, played by Lucy German's real life husband, seems to proffer more

than an idle interest in Dobrish's well-being, which leads us to believe that perhaps he can restore the patriarchal family unit, but this particular plot line is never followed through. What is inevitably of primary interest is Dobrish's own son, Arele, who alone holds the hope for the perpetuation of the family, and the restoration of a competent male at its head. Dobrish is, at best, a temporary family head, having just barely kept them all from dissipation and ruin. This idea is exemplified by the film's melodramatic ending, which has Dobrish now completely stripped of whatever little agency remained to her, lying, gravely injured, in a hospital bed, after having been hit by a car. (Interestingly, it is never made entirely clear that it wasn't Arele himself who hit her.) It is at this point that the triumphant Arele appears, rich, successful, married, and devoted to the community-ready to take over the family name, and put his mother on the pedestal where she belongs.

Part of the double-edged sword of tainted nostalgia and reluctant optimism observable in this film likely lies in the conditions of production for the film itself. Filmed, as it was, on the very eve of World War Two, the choice posited between war-torn homeland and ambiguous future in a new country is pushed aside in favour of a nostalgic fantasy of familial union and happiness. In that condition of dispossession, family relations are the only force of stability in an otherwise unstable existence. That Dobrish seems compelled to create a myth of familial unity, where, in reality, it never truly existed, is revealing in the context of the greater forces at work to destabilize their lives. The reunion of mother and son serves to displace the anxieties of war, emigration, dispossession, and the gradual dissipation of traditional ways of Jewish life, by creating a narrative resolution that diverts attention from the film's inability to resolve the greater

conflicts at work in its subtext. Arguably, this structure is exemplary of the melodramatic mode, in which narrative conflicts are displaced and resolved by proxy through some kind of emotional resolution or catharsis. With the generalized state of conflict and disruption that characterize the mother-centred films, it is not surprising that the highly emotional melodramatic mode is the dominant one.

VU IZ MEIN KIND?

The next mother-centred film, *Vu Iz Mein Kind?* takes place entirely on American soil. The film opens with scrolling titles, informing us that Mr. Liebman died on the boat from Russia, leaving Esther Liebman to arrive, friendless, pregnant and inexperienced, in New York. After a few months, she gives birth to a son, but, due to her inability to adapt, she fails to find the means to support herself and her child, and after a thwarted suicide attempt, she decides to give her son up for adoption. But, a few hours after having handed over her child, she reconsiders, and returns to the orphanage to reclaim him, but, due to some melodramatic plot twists, the child has already been adopted, and the unscrupulous doctor in charge of the orphanage refuses to allow her to see him again. As Esther searches fruitlessly for her boy, we are granted the privilege of watching him grow up, now known, significantly, as "Victor," son to wealthy and doting parents. The years pass, and Esther is wrongfully incarcerated in an insane asylum by the evil doctor and Victor's adopted father, who want to keep her from seeing her son. Meanwhile, Victor grows up to be a famous and endlessly generous and empathetic psychiatrist. The film ends, predictably, with Victor inadvertently befriend- ing his mother

in the asylum, true identities are revealed, and Victor vows to forever protect his pathetic mother and avenge her oppressors.

The performance mode in this film, as with many of the mother-centred films, is highly inflected with melodramatic excess. It was created as a first-time film vehicle for popular Second Avenue stage actress, Celia Adler, and more than epitomizes the Yiddish term for such works: *shund*. It is not so much important to ask why she suffers, her suffering seems to be a reason unto itself, a recurring characteristic that inevitably raises disturbing questions about the popularity of the cult of the Martyred Mother in Yiddish culture. If one is to consider these films, as Hoberman describes it, as “an extended family quarrel”⁸⁷ pitting Parent against Child, Old World against New, I would suggest that the victor (no pun intended), by sheer emotional weight, is *The Mother*. By giving the moral authority of the Old World the loving face of a mother, it is impossible to entirely reject it. While one can reject the harsh discipline of a stern father, as a primary nurturing figure, the mother will always have an added emotional control over her offspring, often most effectively wielded as *guilt*. Riv-Ellen Prell describes the most lasting evocation of the Jewish Mother figure in American Jewish popular culture during this period, “the Yiddishe Mama of the Old World, to whom immigrants longingly turned with sentimental songs and harsh comparisons to American sweethearts and wives.”⁸⁸ As Nat Silver in *Amerikaner Schadchn* tellingly says of his mother, “She’s the only one in the world who truly understands me.” With the next generation, however, this gave way to “The Devouring Jewish Mother” who uses the guilt induced by her associations with the Old World to push for ever greater demands of success and achievement from

⁸⁷ Hoberman, 9.

⁸⁸ Prell, 143.

her New World children,⁸⁹ something that we see beginning to emerge with the child-mothers in *Tsvey Shvester* and *Mamele*. Essentially, the emotional over-valuation of the mother, whether through suffering, guilt, or sentiment, helps to reinforce the existing positive associations with what she represents of Old World values and traditions. Forsaking one's mother in these films means so much more than an estrangement from a family member, it effectively means estrangement from one's entire culture.

Vu Iz Mein Kind? has another mother as well. Victor's adoptive mother is eventually the key to the reunion of birth mother and son. When we first meet her, she is in an asylum herself, made crazy by the death of her baby. Her husband adopts Victor in the hope that this will give his wife the will to live. When, years later, she discovers that her husband and the doctor conspired to keep Esther from finding her child, her wellspring of compassion for other mothers who have lost their children overflows, and she tells Victor the truth about the pitiful mental patient he has brought home for the holidays: that she is his *real* mother. She performs the same selfless act that Esther had performed 20 some years earlier, giving up her son for the sake of his own happiness. That Victor is the happy, healthy, rich, successful, married, respected community leader that he becomes as an adult, is due in no small part to the nurturing of his adoptive mother. Without her influence, Victor would have perhaps fallen prey to the shady morality of her husband, or the greedy doctor who took him in; two very ambiguous male role models, to be sure.

The desire to do right by one's mother seems to be a defining characteristic of the successful and properly adapted New World child. With the failure of the Patriarchy being the most salient symptom of the cultural transition from Old World to New, the

⁸⁹ Ibid.

driving force in the lives of the male children appears to be a desire to properly re-establish a form of the Patriarchal family in the new environment. In watching their mothers suffer through the strain of emigration or in shouldering the entire responsibility of raising and supporting the family, the children are given the motivation to succeed, in order to relieve their poor mother of this burden. This is often achieved as quickly as possible, through the exploitation of their natural talents, rather than through the benefit of education, due, perhaps, to the relative inaccessibility of institutionalized higher education to poor, Jewish immigrants to America during this period. Although an education is seen as desirable, it seems as though it is only the selfish sons and daughters who would allow their mothers to continue to sacrifice themselves in order to provide them with an education first, but I will examine the children in more detail in the next chapter.

Mamele and *Tsvey Shvester* are two examples of the exploited mother, or rather, mother-figure, as both films feature children who have taken on the responsibilities of a mother who has died. Both seem to have taken to heart the role of the selfless, self-sacrificing Old World mother, who gives and gives and expects nothing in return, other than to see her children happy. In this case, they seem to have taken that role to a ludicrous extreme, approaching, instead, what Prell described earlier as the "Devouring Mother." She has given so much, and sacrificed so much for the sake of her children that she has nothing left for herself, other than the vicarious satisfaction of her children's success. The only tool that she has left is the enormous spectre of guilt, which she can wield at any point, to draw attention to what her children owe her. But, if her children

are immune to that guilt, as is exemplified in *Tsvey Shvester*, she is essentially left with nothing, other than a generalized pathos emanating from the community.

TSVEY SHVESTER

In *Tsvey Shvester*, set in New York, Betty and Sally Glickstein's mother dies when the girls are still a young age. On her deathbed, Mrs. Glickstein implores Betty, the eldest, to be like a mother to her little sister. Betty agrees, and so we see her over the years, acting as a little mother and housewife, giving Sally all the benefits of life, for which Sally is forever ungrateful. The father is, predictably, ineffectual and absent, and eventually sends his daughters to live with their aunt and uncle, removing himself from the scene altogether. Through Betty's sacrifices, Sally is able to go to school, where she trains to be a nurse, interesting, in that it is a traditionally nurturing occupation, something that Sally is not. Betty, however, becomes known as everyone's mother. In addition to the sacrifices she made for Sally, she has also worked in order to put her boyfriend, Max, who calls her "Mama Betty," through medical school. On top of that, for the last six years, she has also been sending money to her father, who has been confined to a sanatorium in Denver.

What Betty does for this money is never entirely made clear, but she gives it selflessly. Nevertheless, in reward for her efforts, her two "children," for whom she has suffered to educate, turn on her and carry on an affair behind her back. But good old self-sacrificing Betty just carries on, organizing their wedding, and arranging for them to move into the house that she had bought and furnished in the anticipation of marrying Max. Even when the family and community unanimously condemn Sally and Max for

their unforgivable behaviour towards Betty, she merely barrels on, anxious that Sally should have all the happiness in the world, even if it is at her own expense. Not that she doesn't manage to wield the weapon available to all mothers: guilt. When Sally announces her engagement to Max, Betty wails, "You stole the best years of my life, but that wasn't enough! Will you return what you owe me?" In spite of this, Sally manages to turn the tables again by threatening to jump out of the window, thus triggering Betty's maternal instincts, shown here as a flashback of their mother on her deathbed, reminding Betty to always look after her sister. Maternal guilt extends even beyond the grave.

The main problem seems to lie in the attempt to adapt the model of the Old World Mother into the modern context of the younger, acculturated generation. Those elements of the Old World Mother's persona that made her such a figure of respect and tearful sentiment, such as her wealth of traditional knowledge, and her malingering incompetence demanding rescue in the unfamiliar modern world, are absent in the daughters. She does not need, or ask for, her children's help, perhaps because she is of the younger generation herself, and therefore adept in her environment. With the children being the primary site of the conflict between tradition and modernity as family and community roles are renegotiated in the light of emigration and secular urbanization, the New World daughter seems to founder once she is thrust into the role of mother. There is an added pressure on the mother in a secular context, as she would play an important role in the transmission of culture once that culture is located primarily within the habits of the home and hearth. These films appear to be asking what the role will be for mothers in the subsequent generation and her usefulness to her offspring seems limited to a kind of cloying, overbearing nurturing.

MAMELE

Another film that features the child-mother is the Molly Picon vehicle, *Mamele*. Although ostensibly set and filmed in 1930s Warsaw, the film was based on the American writer Sholem Asch's story about a family in New York's Lower East Side, so it incorporates many elements found in the modern, New World films. In this film, Havche, the youngest daughter of a family of six takes over the role of mother when their own mother dies while the family is still young. The family is portrayed as buffoonishly incapable of looking after themselves, so Havche must selflessly run all of their lives for them. The father is an incompetent businessman, who spends his days playing dominoes and drinking coffee with his friends. The eldest son, Duvid, is unemployed, and refuses to marry his sweetheart because he has such a sweet deal at home. Yetke, the oldest sister, is a bitter old maid, who complains that Havche doesn't serve her well enough. Berte, the other sister, is incorrigibly vain, and is being courted by a gangster, because she will only marry a man who will be able to keep her well. The sisters are the breadwinners in the family, and so treat Havche like a servant, belittling her for not contributing financially to their upkeep. Then there are two young sons, Zishe and Avremele, who fall between the cracks because everyone else is kept so busy.

This type of family arrangement is clearly not an ideal one, and epitomizes the sense of crisis evident in the transitional period of the mother-centred films. Not only is Havche responsible for the maintenance of the house and the family, she is also the only one who possesses any common sense or morality. She is expected to solve all of their personal problems, but, if they don't like her advice, they ignore her and defer to the

'authority' of their father, who has no sense at all. In both of these films there remains a father figure, but, true to the trend of the mother-centred film, he is so vastly incompetent that he cannot provide an adequate disciplinary counterbalance to the mother's out-of-control nurturing. These two films are as much about the apparent crisis in masculinity, for both the fathers and the sons, as they are about the difficulties of the daughters in filling the role of their mothers. There is also no resolution to the families in crisis at the end of the films. Whereas in *A Brivele Der Mamen*, and *Vu Iz Mein Kind?* there is new hope for the future given by the successfully well-adapted modern sons, presumably pointing the way for a new patriarchy, the sons in *Mamele* and *Tsvey Shvester* seem unhealthily dependent on the women in their lives. When Havche decides that she has had enough, and leaves for a few weeks to be looked after by a neighbour, herself a real Old World mother, her family, unable to function without her, falls into disarray, and they beg her to return. Schlessinger, the neighbour's son, seems the best hope for a positive male figure, but, given that he works as a fiddle-player, and continues to live with his mother, even though an adult, his prospects are not great. The "happy" ending has Havche and Schlessinger married, but living with her family, so that she can continue to take care of them all.

We see in this film as well the imperfect adaptation of the Old World Mother role to an evidently modern family arrangement. Although Havche is in fact called "Mamele," or Little Mother, and performs all of the domestic duties in the household, her traditional nurturing approach is clearly not welcome in this new-style family, and is often a point of ridicule. At one point, Havche wants to accompany her sister, Berte, to a nightclub in order to act as chaperone, but the only fancy clothes she can find for the

occasion are a turn-of-the-century dress and bonnet, belonging to her dead mother. When she dons the outfit, her family laughs so uproariously at the sight of Havche masquerading as an Old World Mother, that she is forced to stay home, thus opening the door for Berte to behave in a scandalous manner which her real mother would never have permitted.

There is another example of the New World Mother in *Amerikaner Schadchn*, illustrated through the comparison between Nat's sister Hava, and her friend, Rosele. Hava is blonde, wears pants, and, to her mother's bewilderment, engages in American "sporting activities" with her friends. Her Yiddish is heavily interspersed with perfectly inflected English words and phrases, and she frequently tells her mother that she has no intention of marrying. Rosele, in contrast, is dark-haired, speaks more Yiddish than the Americanized Hava, and her English is heavily accented. She is also married and pregnant, and is shown already to be overly-anxious and superstitious about her child. She telephones the worldly Hava in a panic because she is afraid that the pickles and radishes that she has eaten might harm her baby.

The mother, then, appears to take on a new importance as the films move away from the isolated traditional lifestyles portrayed in the nostalgic Old World films. While the patriarchs in those films were most concerned with maintaining order and negating outside influences, the mothers in these films seem to perform a mediating role, allowing their children to be able to negotiate those outside influences by instilling in them a solid moral core. Through them we see the transition to a secular, domestic form of Judaism, adapted to the exigencies of life in a modern, capitalist environment. The test of its

effectiveness, however, lies in the ability of the children to survive and thrive in the new environment, while maintaining an adherence to Judaism's moral codes, and this is what will be examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5: The Children

The next group of films show how the children adapt and prove themselves, or don't, in the modern setting. With the families in a state of crisis, it is up to the next generation to re-establish a semblance of order. They are the ones that determine what cultural values to maintain and adapt for a successful life in the New World. The child-centred films emerge mostly out of the subset of mother-centred films, in that they deal with the children raised in the New World, or in the new modern, secular environment. With the shift from the power of the father to the power of the mother, it is not surprising that the focus, in these films, is overwhelmingly with the children. The raising of children would have traditionally been the domain of the mother. With her newfound importance in the modern, secular world as the primary site of cultural instruction, the fitness of her children for membership in the community would be a direct reflection on her abilities. The films show how the children fare in light of the crises of their upbringing, whether through the act of emigration, the absence of the father, or through the difficulties of acculturation. The child's success or failure in light of the community's values, is often determined, significantly, by how the grown child behaves towards his or her mother.

The main conflicts revolve around the processes of acculturation, and how to achieve a successful balance between Old World values, on the one hand, and the practical exigencies of living and succeeding in a modern, secular, and foreign culture on the other hand. Some of the films highlight the problems of over-acculturation, as in *Amerikaner Schadchn*, *Tsvey Shvester*, or *Uncle Moses* (Aubrey Scotto and Sidney M.

Goldin, U.S., 1930). Others celebrate cultural adaptation as the means to self-fulfillment, and to the acquisition of the proper skills with which to look after one's mother and family, as in *Vu Iz Mein Kind?*, *A Brivele Der Mamen*, or *Dem Khazns Zundl*. In these films, more than in the father-centred films, the daughters are also at the centre of the conflicts. This is likely due to the larger role given to women in the maintenance and perpetuation of a secular, family-based culture, as opposed to the patriarchal culture associated with the Old World.

In New York, by the early 1930s, the generational divide between American-born children and foreign-born parents was at its most pronounced. The Johnson Acts of 1921 and 1924 effectively stemmed the influx of new immigrants to the Jewish community, so for the first time, native-born Jews were beginning to outnumber the newcomers. As noted earlier, by 1935, "the city's Jewish youth were overwhelmingly native-born, but more than 90% had foreign-born parents."⁹⁰ The conflicts of a generation before between acculturated Jews and recent immigrants were now being played out to a larger degree within the context of the family. The dual pressures from parents to adhere to traditional values and to succeed in the New World often proved untenable or undesirable to the Americanized children who had grown up immersed in American cultural values. As Kramer and Leventman describe,

In the exodus from the ghettos of their fathers, the sons left behind the traditions of religious orthodoxy that might have slowed their flight. Few, however, rejected their Jewish identity. In their maturity, religious rebellion was replaced by a search for religious forms capable of perpetuating their identity...they had acquired a middle-class inclination to make distinctions between the sacred and the secular unknown in the ghetto, where all life came under the aegis of the sacred. What the second

⁹⁰ Wenger, 35.

generation required were religious institutions adapted to the norms of its new status.⁹¹

The theme of intergenerational conflict is a recurring one in both the melting-pot melodramas of the 1920s, and the Yiddish films of the 1930s, although the solutions proposed were different ones. Whereas the Hollywood films, such as *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, U.S., 1927), valorized the victory of the American son over the stifling strictures of the Old World father (reversing the ending of the short story upon which it was based), the Yiddish films frequently placed their sympathies with the long-suffering parents, wronged by their unfeeling American children. In these films, such as *Dem Khazns Zundl*, vindication comes when the hero, rich from his career as a celebrated cantor in America, returns to the home of his estranged parents in the Old Country. There, he marries his childhood sweetheart, companion to his dear parents for all these years, perfectly reconciling Old World values, and New World success.

As this group emerges from the subset of mother-centred films, in terms of familial structure, the mother is both the moral and emotional centre of the family. The father is either dead, absent, or ineffectual. The primary responsibility of the son becomes, first, filling his father's shoes as the breadwinner, and second, finding an appropriate mate in order to properly reproduce the model of the Jewish family. Often, it is the son's responsibility to master the culture of the New World, but with a firm grounding in the morality of the Old. Similarly, his wife must be worldly (and for some reason, often blonde), but still adhere to the values of the community. The failure of the father often is framed by his inability to adapt. The mother often is portrayed as the symbolic bearer of cultural knowledge and morality. Child-centred narratives attempt to

⁹¹ J.R. Kramer and S. Leventman, *Children of the Gilded Ghetto* (U.S., 1969), 11.

reverse this system of relations, by placing the modern son as the head of the household, with the New World wife, and Old World mother largely subservient by the end of the film. The tenability of the new model is never put to the test, however, as we are never witness to the full evolution of the new family. The narratives typically end at the point in which the children vindicate the struggles of their parents on their behalf.

The resolution in many of these films never seems entirely satisfactory with regards to the conflicts and questions raised throughout the course of the film. From this perspective, it might be helpful to examine three films that feature the estrangement of a son from his parent, or parents, *A Brivele der Mamen*, *Dem Khazns Zundl*, and *Vu Iz Mein Kind?* The conditions that create this estrangement, and the issues it raises, are different in each film, but the narrative arc is roughly the same, moving from imperfect familial group, to estrangement, a change in circumstances, reunion, and the strengthening of family ties. In *Brivele*, it is emigration and the desire for familial and material stability which separates them, in *Dem Khazns Zundl*, it is the conflict between traditional values and secular desires, and in *Vu Iz Mein Kind?*, it is a combination of failed acculturation, greed and a disregard for community values. Significantly, all three focus on the successful acculturation of the son in America as a means of rectifying the mistakes or failures of the older generation.

A BRIVELE DER MAMEN & DEM KHAZNS ZUNDL

A Brivele der Mamen and *Dem Khazns Zundl*, are thematically the most similar of the three. Both feature the European-born sons of musical fathers, Arele, son of a would-be composer, in *Brivele*, and Shloimele, an Old World Cantor's son in *Dem*

Khazns Zundl. Both are portrayed as possessing considerable natural talent, and on both rest the hopes of their parents for success in the future. Although for Shloimele, it is expected that he will remain in his birthplace, and continue the traditions of his family, by following in his father's footsteps. For Arele, his family is already in crisis, and it is expected that he will succeed where his father failed, in order to properly maintain the family. Shloimele runs away, against the wishes of his parents, with a troupe of actors to the bright lights of America. Arele is sent away reluctantly, in an attempt to salvage the family, to the uncertain promise of America.

Ideologically, the films would appear to be in opposition. *Dem Khazns Zundl* celebrates the value of Old World tradition and familial continuity, while *Brivele* seems less certain, allowing the son to define the parameters of a successful existence in the Diaspora. The first film ends with a filial reconciliation on parental soil, while the second forces the parent to search for her son, and ends with her in a state of complete dependence. Both place the burden of continuity on the son, and both posit the experience of emigration as the means to maturity, self-realization and material success. They also both include in the process of self-realization, the acknowledgement of the importance of the experiences of their childhoods within the traditional Jewish families and communities of the Old World. This forms an interesting contrast, especially in relation to similarities of theme and content, to the Hollywood produced Jewish-themed film, *The Jazz Singer*. This film also presents us with a Jewish son, who, through his experience of acculturation in America, comes to a form of self-realization with regards to familial and cultural traditions and expectations. However, in a kind of mean-spirited trick, Jakie Rabinowitz falsely convinces his dying father that he will perpetuate these

traditions, when, in fact, the film's resolution comes in the form of their wholesale rejection, in favour of the secular promises of the New World. Yet again, with the death of the patriarch, the son is responsible for the definition of the family's path for the future, and his poor bewildered Old World "Mammy" must simply follow along. This differs greatly from the more palliating compromise made at the end of the original story, "Day of Atonement," or the subsequent Broadway play, both of which, in contrast to the Hollywood movie, were aimed, like the Yiddish films, primarily at a Jewish audience.

Arele's supposed successful Americanization, as exemplified by the adoption of an anglicized name, is repeatedly undercut. For example, despite his 10-15 years of residency in the U.S., his English (though naturally limited to the English abilities of the Polish actor playing him) is appalling, and his success seems limited to performances in Yiddish for the Jewish community. The adoption of an anglicized name, in this case, is significant primarily as an indication of his level of integration into the American Jewish community, rather than necessarily into the American community at large. The English-sounding name, for non-American Jews or recent immigrants, gives Arele the cachet of American success, as it implies an ability to function in both the Jewish and non-Jewish spheres, whether or not this is actually the case. The ideological intention of the name-change is clearly different in the Hollywood film, aimed at a mostly non-Jewish audience, *The Jazz Singer*, where Jakie Rabinowitz, adopts the name of Jack Robin, in order to perform American music for American audiences.

We can also look at the tearful reunion scenes between parent and son that take place at the end of these films, in order to draw a comparison between their attitudes towards emigration and acculturation. In *Dem Khazns Zundl*, the ending is the least

ambiguous. Even though Shloimele ran away from home, as he finds increased success in America, he always sends money home to his parents. His first cheque, significantly, is intended for the purchase of a new prayer shawl for his father. At the peak of his success as a touring cantor in the U.S., he receives a letter from his parents, inviting him home for their wedding anniversary. He turns up a lucrative contract, and abandons his American girlfriend, in order to make the trip home to the *shtetl* of his youth. Once arrived, he is welcomed as a hero by his town and his parents, Shloimele sees the error in his errant ways, and is convinced by his father to take over as the town's cantor. He is reacquainted with his untrammelled childhood sweetheart, Rifke, who has been a faithful companion to his aged parents in his absence. The two fall in love all over again, and the film ends with their wedding. Ideologically, the film is firmly rooted in the traditions of the Old World, and in the moral supremacy of the older generation over the younger. Although Shloimele needed his period of absence in order to mature, and grow into his potential, it was seemingly only in the preparation for the continuation of his parents' and community's traditions.

Interestingly, the contrasted lifestyles as exemplified by Shloimele's American and European identities do not appear to be so very far apart. Though Shloimele changes his name as a performer in New York, he adopts the moniker of "Sol" Reichman, short for Solomon, the anglicized version of Shloimele, but still an identifiably Jewish name. "Sol" begins his career by singing Yiddish songs in a nightclub, significantly, these are mostly teary-eyed nostalgic lamentations for the lost *shtetl* of his youth, but he subsequently finds success as radio cantor. He then tours the country performing for the Jewish-American community as a celebrity cantor. The only opposition he meets is with

more traditional members of the community who chastise him for not wearing a beard. Even his girlfriend, Helen, though Americanized, and working as a singer, is still Jewish, and sings in Yiddish. The conflict here is not between Judaism and faithlessness, as is suggested by films such as *Tevye* or *Der Vilner Shtetl Khazn*, but it seems to be more between the generations, or the New vs. Old World interpretations of Jewish life and religious tradition. Here, the threats of secularization and acculturation are highlighted as the means for an estrangement between the generations and in the creation of a rift in the cultural continuity that forms a central guiding force in Judaism. Sol can only be recuperated into the fold once he submits to using his God-given talents for God, in accordance with religious tradition, and not for secular entertainment and self-aggrandizement.

Similarly, in his choice for a wife, he must choose between Helen, who is interested in his career and material success, and Rifke, who is interested in the happiness and well-being of his Old World parents. Helen is not a particularly negative figure, and neither is the film's portrayal of America in general an unambiguously negative one. Shloimele's decision to choose Rifke over Helen was not an easy one; in fact, the final image of the film is of the two women's faces superimposed over each of Shloimele's shoulders, suggesting a kind of yin-yang dualism of secular versus traditional Jewish femininity. So, although the film appears to come down on the side of Old World tradition, it is unwilling to completely dismiss the secular tendencies of the American Jewish experience. Realistically, it would be unwise to do so, as even though Shloimele settles down again in the Old World, we know that, given the circumstances, he will not be there for long. The narrative provides us with an emotionally satisfying ending, but

does not close the door on America, demonstrating, as it does, that life in the New World can still be rewarding and in keeping with Jewish morality.

For *A Brivele der Mamen*, it is the film's dramatic closing scenes that most positively demonstrate the forces at work behind the film's narrative. Once arrived in America, and having been unsuccessful at locating her son, Dobrish, at the behest of Mr. Shein, attends a benefit concert for the immigrant aid society, headlined by a certain Irving Bird, a famed Jewish-American singer. Singing in Yiddish, he closes his set with a song called "Memories from Home." As he sings, Dobrish recognizes the tune as one Duvid had proudly composed before his departure. Her emerging suspicions that Irving Bird may in fact be her long-lost Arele Berdichevsky, are soon confirmed as he concludes the song, essentially a paean to his homeland and his Old World mother, with the line, "don't forget to write a little letter to your mother." Mesmerized, and overcome with emotion, Dobrish rises from her seat and walks down the aisle towards her son, on stage. Mr. Bird, anxious to leave, in order to catch his boat to Europe, where he will go, with his new wife, to look for his dear mother, rushes off the stage and out the door. Dobrish, now afraid of losing her son forever, rushes blindly out into the street in order to catch him, and is hit by an oncoming car.

The accident, perhaps, is the symbolic cataclysmic collision of the opposing drives of the film, framed within the superficial narrative exigencies of a long-thwarted reunion between mother and son. The immigrant son, having achieved material success, now longs for a return to the Old World, and the traditional family nest. The mother, having exhausted the potential of the desolated and deserted home country, goes to the New World, where she hopes to find her now-American youngest son, the symbolic hope

for a better future life. When Dobrish opens her eyes in her hospital bed, she sees Arele, but not as Mr. Bird, the successful American, but rather as a montage of images of Arele from his childhood, superimposed on Irving Bird's face. So even though the family is reunited on American soil, the film still positively roots the source of familial happiness in the experiences of the Old Country.

VU IZ MEIN KIND?

In this film, where his parents were unable to adapt to the new culture, Victor succeeds and even excels. His surrogate parents, successfully acculturated Jews themselves, ease the boy's transition, making him, in the end, better able to care for his Old World mother. Had he been raised by Esther, it seems unlikely that he would have been able to achieve the levels of success that were required in order to make of him a proper head of the family. Consequently, his period of estrangement was also his period of self-realization, similar to the sons in the other two films. But like the other sons, Victor still roots himself within the ways and the morals of the Jewish community. His dedication to charity, and his boundless devotion to both of his mothers, speaks well for his perpetuation of the values of the Jewish community. But also, his mastery of English, and the facility with which he negotiates his way in the broader American community, gives a more positive impression of the opportunities for success and self-fulfillment that the New World has to offer for the immigrant Jew. Unlike the other films, there is no sense of longing for the Old World. The ambivalence seen in the other films figures to a certain extent in Esther's inability to make the transition into the new culture, but, unlike

Arele and Shloimele, who find material success but still long for the comfort of home, Victor's success, and psychological satisfaction, is ostensibly complete.

Interestingly, Victor is told by his adoptive parents that his real mother is dead and buried back in the Old Country. So, like the other sons, Victor goes through life in the belief that he has, or had, an Old World mother. Although, perhaps, since he believes his mother to be dead, he is not psychologically bound to the Old World, as are Arele and Shloimele. Victor is free to make a clean break, and establish an unambiguous future for himself in America. The longing that the others have to return to the places of their birth does not apply to him. Instead, the longing for home is replaced, once he learns of his true origins, by a longing for his mother, thereby succinctly equating the Old World culture entirely with the Old World mother.

That Victor is the man he ends up being seems to lie in the fact that he had not one, but two loving mothers. In addition, he had a Yiddish-speaking nanny who taught little Victor to sing Yiddish songs. This overabundance of mothering seems to be required in order to compensate for the complete lack of positive male influences in the boy's life. With his real father dead, his adoptive father willing to lie and manipulate in order to keep Esther from her son, and the doctor, the kingpin in the whole operation, too greedy and selfish to care about others, it seems unlikely that Victor would grow to be a responsible head of the family if he had only their examples to follow. The final scene of the film has Victor taking charge, by declaring that he will seek revenge for the wrongs perpetrated by his adoptive father and the doctor. He leaves their bad influence behind as he walks out the door with one arm around his real mother, Esther, and the other around

his new (blonde) wife, and the viewer is confident that with such a trio, a new and better family can be formed.

AMERIKANER SHADCHN

This brings us to a discussion of another New World son, Nat Silver, in Edgar Ulmer's *Amerikaner Schadchn*. In this film, the family is comfortably established in America, though we are given hints as to the hard times they experienced. Once again, the father is absent, having died years earlier. Like the sons in the other films, it was incumbent on Nat to succeed in his father's place, in order to provide for his mother and younger sister. Nat's success is made immediately apparent through his penchant for dressing in tuxedos and dress suits and throwing lavish parties in his penthouse apartment. He also keeps a maid, and an English-speaking butler, Morris, whom it is later revealed is in fact a Yiddish-speaking "presser" from Nat's factory. Despite Nat's material success, it is revealed that he is incredibly unlucky in love, as we witness the termination of his eighth unconsummated engagement. Nat's life is not complete, nor is his role as the good Jewish son, as in order to ensure the continuity of the family, and of Jewish tradition, he must marry a nice Jewish girl and have children of his own.

Not surprisingly, in the end, Nat's salvation comes from the Old World. Nat's mother draws his attention to the similarities he shares with his Uncle Shaya. Except for Shaya's beard and traditional clothing, the two are identical, and even share the same musical talent, and bad luck with women. Ma explains that Shaya overcame his lot by becoming a matchmaker for others, and this way eventually found love for himself. Nat balks at his mother's implied suggestion, saying, "This is not Europe, this is America!"

To which his mother replies, "Family characteristics can swim over deep waters." His mother's statement evokes the importance of familial and cultural continuity, and though the legacy for Nat seems dubious, her anecdote also serves to suggest a remedy for their shared problem, rooted in the traditions of the Old Country.

After a brief fantasy sequence, in which Nat imagines himself as Shaya, presiding over the wedding of a happy couple he has introduced, he absconds in secret to The Bronx, where he sets up an upscale Matchmaking service as "Nat Gold: Advisor in Human Relations" (or as Morris misunderstands, "Human Relishes? What, are they like pickles?") Nat's service is part charity, part corporate bureaucracy. He turns matchmaking into a scientific process, employing a doctor, a rabbi, psychiatrist, lawyer and a psychoanalyst (as Nat describes her, an "expert of the soul") to interview clients and "create a file" for them, in order to determine their ideal mate. In addition to them, Nat also agrees to hire a handful of 'traditional' matchmakers, foremost of which is the comical Schwaldenbrock, in order to give the practice some Old World authenticity, and also so as not to put them out of business, as Nat charges no fees for his matches. In effect, the business is the perfect blend of Old World and New: he is taking an old tradition, and turning it into a charitable New World business, all in the service of providing Jewish mates for Jewish clients, thereby ensuring a certain cultural continuity in the American community.

Love finally comes along for Nat, when he is asked to find a match for Judith Erens, who her mother describes as "too sophisticated", and spends too much time with "bohemians." The idea that these bohemians, horror of horrors, might not be Jewish is suggested when her mother says that she has come to the matchmaker in order to find a

"nice Jewish man" for her Judith. Mrs. Erens takes an instant liking to Nat, repeatedly commenting, "You're so nice!" not surprisingly, as Nat is the perfect Jewish Mama's Boy. Nat, on his first "date" with Judith, takes her to his apartment and shows her a picture of his mother, proclaiming, "She's the only woman in the world who understands me."

The sentimental favouritism for "Mama's Boys" in these films is prevalent enough to demand further consideration. One of the most emotionally charged moments in *A Brivele Der Mamen* occurs when a soldier comes to inform Dobrish of Meyer's death, and he tells her, "His last words were, *Mama!*" (Consequently one cannot be sure whether Dobrish's tears are a result of the shock of hearing of her son's death, or from the embarrassment of having had a good-for-nothing son who cried for his mother on the battlefield.) This could be explained, on the one hand, by assuming that the audience for Yiddish films would have been largely composed of those for whom Yiddish remained their first language, likely more recent immigrants, or those with stronger attachments to the Old Culture. The prevailing sentiment would then naturally lie with the suffering Old World parent. Ideologically, the strong bond between son and mother is also significant. With the mother, in these films, thus established as the primary conduit for the transmission of culture and morality, the son must have a close, respectful relationship with her, in order to absorb enough moral instruction to guarantee his successful perpetuation of the cultural ideals as the new head of the family. Even though Meyer Berdichevsky died before he could become a truly productive member of society, he dying words served as a vindication for all of Dobrish's efforts on his behalf. Duvid, the waning patriarch, was not mentioned.

In *Amerikaner Schadchn*, despite his close association with Jewish Mothers everywhere, thereby establishing that Nat is the right man for Judith, he goes about, self-deprecatingly, arranging a match for her with a certain Milton Geller, a "well-educated" young man. Geller is clearly an example of acculturation gone awry. He conducts all of his affairs in English, and shows an unwholesome interest in the matter of Judith's dowry. Geller gives Judith an opportunity to demonstrate her selfless femininity, as she agrees to marry him, only if it will make Nat happy. Of course, in the end, Geller absconds to South America, and Nat steps in to marry Judith, in part so as that she won't be humiliated by being left at the altar. So finally, like the other sons, Nat caps off his successful achievements as the American son by taking a nice, blonde, Jewish wife.

The contrast between Geller and Nat is an interesting one. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the fact that Geller is well-educated. The scholar is a figure of great respect in traditional Jewish culture, and we see this transferred to the American community with the response to Geller. Although, in the traditional culture, the scholar would have been studying religious works, and working, therefore, towards the perpetuation of Jewish morality. In Geller's case, his education in the American system has taken the form of a rigorous acculturation, stripping him of his outward signs of Jewishness, with his inability to speak Yiddish, as well as his moral sense, in his obsession with money, and his refusal to honour the obligation he entered into with his betrothal to Judith. Nat, on the other hand, it is suggested, had no formal education. His success was due to innate talent, having worked his way up from the factory floor. His moral sense is demonstrated, both through his treatment of his family, and through his commitment to charity. Morris, his friend and butler, was described as Nat's '*landsman*,'

and it is implied that Nat feels obligated towards him because of their common roots in the Old World. The fact that Nat would honour these kinds of Old World connections through his assistance to Morris, speaks well of his position in and respect for the Jewish community. Geller's aims seem entirely selfish in comparison. One must wonder how considerate Geller might have been to his mother, if he was willing to pack up and move to South America on a moment's notice. Of all the successful American sons, and daughters, only Victor in *Vu Iz Mein Kind?* seemed to benefit from a formal American education. Victor, in this case, obtained his education from his prosperous adoptive parents, in this way negating any demands on his real mother, whom he is then able to rescue at the end of the film. For a successful New World Son, the emphasis is more often placed on the merits of the combination of hard work and natural talent.

TSVEY SHVESTER

Another film that posits this notion is *Tsvey Shvester*, except in this case it is daughters, rather than sons, who are the focus of the narrative. The self-motivated and uneducated Betty here plays the roles of both the successful American child, in her ability to provide for her family, and in her adherence to the morals of the Jewish community, and also the Old World mother, in her self-sacrificing desire to give up her own happiness for the sake of her "children." Betty, having absorbed the abortive moral education of her mother, before her death, to such a degree that she is able to take up the role of the mother even while still a child. At the same time, she has the resourcefulness of the New World child, so that she is able to be both nurturer and successful breadwinner, without the benefit of a formal education. In contrast, her charges, Sally

and Max, for whom she has suffered to provide with an education, are selfish and greedy. Sally, in explanation for why she is the better match for Max, tells Betty that Max is embarrassed by her, because Betty is "common and uneducated". Hence the educated children have failed to learn respect for the morals of the community, exemplified by their willingness to allow their "mother" to suffer while they better themselves, without any intentions to do right by her in the end.

UNCLE MOSES

Uncle Moses is an example both of the successful son, and of wrongful acculturation. Uncle Moses himself would appear to be a pillar of the community, he owns and runs a successful sweatshop, and everyone looks to him for advice and assistance. As the film progresses, however, we learn that Moses is not such a benevolent community leader. We are first given a hint of this through the condemnation that Moses' father lays on him. The father is disillusioned with America and disgusted with his son, despite his seeming success. He likens Moses to the Egyptian Pharaoh, and taunts the workers for acting like his slaves. His one remaining goal is to return to the *shtetl* of his birth in order to die.

Moses would seem to have achieved all the goals of the successful New World son: he is rich, he looks after his father, he still functions within the Jewish community. Where he fails is in his inability to uphold the values of the community: he exploits his workers, he begrudges giving to charity, he ignores his father's advice, and he has failed to produce a family. It is on this last point that the film revolves. Moses' Old World wife died without having children, so he takes it upon himself to find a new wife. This he

does with all of the acumen of a successful businessman. He fixates on Masha, the mouthy daughter of a worker he has just fired, and proceeds to manipulate her into an engagement by offering her family comfort and luxury. Her family bows and scrapes, and thanks Moses for his generosity at the same time as they chastise the reluctant Masha for not wanting to allow them the opportunity of bettering themselves. To a man twenty years younger, Masha would have been the perfect, blonde, Americanized wife for a successful New World son. She is played by Judith Abarbanel, who also played the ideal young wife in both *Amerikaner Schadchn*, and *Dem Khazns Zundl*. Moses' despotism is played off against the young Marxist, Charlie, to whom Masha was nominally engaged before Moses appeared on the scene. Charlie is interested in the welfare of Moses' workers, and it is he who organizes the strike that brings Moses down. Charlie and Masha are represented as the more well-matched couple, although Charlie's idealism has left him in poverty, thus opening the door, from her parents' perspective, for Moses.

The couple are married, and after the birth of their son, Moses is a changed man. He abandons work in order to spend time with the child, and his new wife. In the absence of his vigilant, despotic control, the workers strike, thanks to Charlie, and Moses' assistant takes charge of the situation. Then Masha announces that she can no longer live a lie, and demands a separation. Moses ends the film sick, broken, alone and powerless. The final scene shows Moses in the factory, singing and chatting to the workers just like his father did at the beginning of the film, but they pay him only passing attention, and eventually he is drowned out by the sound of the new electric sewing machines that they won in the strike. Uncle Moses is punished for allowing greed and the abuse of power to disrupt his adherence to community values.

Other than his father, and certain disgruntled workers, the other source of censure comes from Moses' dead wife. Over his mantelpiece hangs a large portrait of his first wife that seems to haunt him, changing expressions in accordance with her condemnation or approval of Moses' behaviour. She looks less like a wife than a stern Old World mother. At the beginning of the film, Moses tells his assistant, Sam, that he had another dream about her, in which she berated him, "half in Yiddish, half in English." Both her and Moses' father would seem to represent Old World values and traditions, expressing themselves, in this sense, through Moses' own conscience. The somewhat ominous portrait of the Old World Mother-figure occurs in other films as well. We see it in *Amerikaner Schadchn*, when Nat takes Judith to his apartment on their first date. It also appears in a more menacing sense in *Tsvey Shvester*. During the final scene when Betty has just allowed her sister to marry her boyfriend, she tearfully proclaims to a portrait of her mother, that she has fulfilled her promise to her, by sacrificing everything for the sake of Sally's happiness. Even when she is no longer there, the mother still forms a symbolic guiding force in the lives of the New World children, usually for the better, but sometimes for the worse.

MAMELE & OST UND WEST

Mamele, although ostensibly about a mother, the story is more accurately an examination of modern children. The family is very much a modern one, with the father sidelined as an irresponsible gambler, and the mother dead, the burden is on the children to support and make the family function properly. Unfortunately, most of the children have not made the transition into secular living well. Like in *Tsvey Shvester*, the

daughters, Berte and Yetke, treat their sister-mother, Havche, badly, taking what she gives them without thanks, and demanding always more. They are the breadwinners of the family, as their father, and older brother, Duvid, are too lazy to work. As a result, Berte has become vain and materialistic, and ends up falling for Max Katz, a gangster, because he drives a flashy car, and can afford to keep her well. Yetke, on the other hand, is an old maid, having acquired none of the feminine, nurturing qualities that would make her a desirable wife, as she has essentially been living the life of a man.

Although gender and appropriate gender roles are at the heart of the narrative dysfunctions of the film, they are never entirely addressed or resolved. Havche manages to foil Berte's planned elopement with Max, and prevent Zishe from falling into a life of crime, but other than getting Duvid off her hands by marrying him off to the neighbour, there is no grand revelation or reversal of family order by the conclusion of the film. Havche, though now a wife as well as mother, is still expected to manage their lives, the daughters are still single and working, and the father is still a no-good lout. The film appears to be satirically highlighting the crisis in the traditional family brought about by modernization and secularization. The audience is invited to laugh at the outrageous caricatures of the new family 'dis'-order, without being shown an appropriate moral resolution to the problem. It seems to suggest that the only appropriate response to a world in chaos, is more chaos.

Ost und West, an earlier, silent film, also starring Molly Picon, deals with two children, one born in America, and the other born in a *shtetl* in Galicia, though the film takes place on European soil. This film represents the best example of the attempt to reconcile Jewish identities across national boundaries, as the characters seek common

ground within the rubric of '*transnational*' secular Judaism. What begins as an opportunity for the American Molly Brown, the eternal gamine, to poke fun at the traditions of her orthodox Galician relatives, ends up as a love story, in which Old World meets New, and both are changed, presumably, for the better. Jacob is a *yeshive* scholar boarding at Molly's uncle's house in a small town in Eastern Europe, determined, before he meets Molly, to continue his religious training and someday become a rabbi. Molly, however, mocks his old-fashioned ways, and shortly after she discovers that she has accidentally married him, she imagines herself as a frumpy Old World mother, and she cries. In order to win her over, Jacob asks her to give him five years to prove himself worthy, before he will give her a divorce. During this time he goes to visit his own uncle, a wealthy, assimilated Jewish businessman, living in Vienna, where he shaves his beard, dons western clothing, and undergoes a rigorous secular education. Five years later, he has become a handsome and accomplished secular author, writing in Yiddish and going by the name of Ben-Alli. When Molly meets him, she falls instantly in love, not realizing that he is actually Jacob. He reveals his true identity, and they live happily ever after.

Although Old World tradition and religious orthodoxy would seem to come out the loser in this film, so too does Molly's extreme American irreverence come up for criticism. During the five years that elapse between Molly's arrival on the continent, and her re-acquaintance with Jacob, her and her father tour the Jewish regions of Europe, familiarizing her with her Old World roots, and preparing her for an acceptance of a somewhat more rigorous form of Jewish life than she had experienced as an acculturated American child. Similarly, Jacob is forced to adapt to the changing modern world and accept the value of a more secular form of Judaism. Interestingly, even the assimilated

Jews in Vienna mock Jacob's traditional garb when he first appears among them. So, although he does not actually go to America to learn this lesson, as did Arele and Shloimele in *A Brivele der Mamen*, and *Dem Khazns Zundl*, his experience in a secular environment was what was required in order to realize himself, become a success, and obtain a modern wife, but all the while retaining the strong moral and cultural foundation instilled in him during his traditional Old World upbringing. We don't know, at the end, if the couple will stay in Europe, or go to America, but we feel confident that with the balance they have struck, between East and West, they will fare well in either environment.

The children in these films, then, must take what they have learned at their mother's knee, and work towards the creation of a new family model, one that incorporates the morals and values of the Old World, but is adapted to the necessities of a modern, secular life in a foreign culture. For the son, it is incumbent on him to create a new model of fatherhood, as in most of these films, the father-figure is absent or mal-adapted to the new way of life. By and large, the New World is portrayed as a place of optimism and potential in these films, and, if not always preferred to the Old World, it serves as a means of self-realization for the son, in order to establish his new identity in the family. Success in the new culture is important, but not if it comes at the expense of community values or respect for one's family.

CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

The Yiddish films examined in this thesis demonstrate a decided preoccupation with issues of family, tradition, and continuity in the face of the uncertain forces of modernization, secularization and acculturation. Some films idealize the roots of Eastern European Jewish cultural traditions, with the films that are set during the late 19th century and that glorify the patriarchal family and rigid, insular traditional community structures. These films are characterized more by their nostalgic portrayal of this period, and their seeming desire to document disappearing customs and traditions, than in a desire to realistically represent the cataclysmic social problems that took place during this time. The other films are mostly set in a contemporary period, and deal with the stage of crisis and transition that faced the culture as it attempted to adapt to a modern, secular way of life, also within the foreign culture of the United States. The crisis, in these films, is most often symbolically represented by an inadequacy in the family unit, usually with the removal of the father, but sometimes of the mother as well. It then becomes incumbent on the children of the immigrant, or traditional parents, to renegotiate and restructure the family and familial roles in a manner that is well adapted to the new environment, but that does not abandon the core morality of the Jewish community.

If we are to consider the body of Yiddish films as a form of national cinema, then what appears to be at work is a dual project of mythologizing the culture's origins and determining which elements of that cultural mythology can be integrated into a new, modern form of cultural nationalism. The family unit is more than just a convenient narrative device, as in a mobile, diasporic culture, such as in the Yiddish case, the family

represents the primary unit of cultural dissemination and continuity for the subsequent generations. This is highlighted in the films that focus on crisis and emigration, with the overvaluation of the mother, the traditional domestic centre of the family, as the new locus of desirable morality and cultural knowledge. Thus the father and the mother form the dual poles of the new modern culture, the one tied in with the mythology of the Old World: patriarchal authority, religious doctrine and strong community structures; the other representing the more mobile, hearth based elements of the culture: morality, artistic expression, and family-based cultural traditions.

Appadurai's concept of '*translocalities*' and Bhabha's theorization of the performative acts of creating cultural meaning, combine to become applicable in the case of Yiddish cinema. In their concentration on the most 'local' unit of Yiddish culture, the family, the films create a level of identification that translates across many of the broader cultural variances inherent in a diasporic nation. Through their interest in the secular, familial and domestic habits, Bhabha's 'performative' aspects of the culture, the films effectively create a mythological shared 'translocal' nation. Their nostalgic preoccupation with a particular place and historic period that lay within the memorable past, served to create a common iconographic referent for the construction of a national mythology. This served to reduce the complexities and conflicts within the '*transnational*' nation to the narrowed scope of a shared cultural focal point. The placement of films within all-Jewish environments also serves to negate the varied outside influences at work on the scattered communities. Similarly, their thematic interests often lie with the phenomenon of cultural transition. By focusing on how this primarily affected the family, it allows for a level of identification regardless of the exact

circumstances that instigated the cultural shock. This is what allowed a film such as *Mamele*, taken from a play set in the ghettos of New York, transferred to Warsaw, and starring an American actress, to be well received by audiences on both sides of the Atlantic.

The limited production span of the films reflects their essential period of interest, that of the culture's transitional period. As the Yiddish language itself never truly made it past the second generation within the immigrant community in the U.S., the audience for the films would naturally have been limited to immigrants and, to a lesser extent, their children. For that reason it is not surprising that it is primarily their conflicts, and their nostalgic memories, that are depicted on the screen. The films generally conclude once the problems and anxieties of the parents' generation have been addressed, leaving any definitive resolution to the question of what form the Jewish family will finally take in the New World, up in the air. Presumably, by the time the children's children come along, they will have been more subsumed into mainstream American culture, and what elements of the Old World culture they choose to integrate into their lives will have been firmly established. With the loss of Yiddish as a viable language, subsequent generations will have turned, instead, to Hollywood for the expression of their hopes and anxieties, and it is there, perhaps, that a response to many of the unanswered questions raised in this thesis might finally be found.

Yiddish cinema, as a national cinema, could also no longer exist after the decimation of Jewish populations in Europe during the Second World War. Without even the living remnants of the Old World culture to refer back to, the mythological foundation of the diasporic nation was greatly diminished. There was no longer a

nostalgia-laden *shtetl* to return to once the promise of America had been exhausted, as there had been for Shloimele in *Dem Khazn's Zundl*, or Moses' father, in *Uncle Moses*. Neither was there a store of Old World relatives one could send one's apathetic American children to, in order to reacquaint them with their cultural heritage, as in *Ost und West*. The continuous cross-Atlantic cultural dialogue which sustained the thriving minority culture for so long was reduced to a kind of interior monologue within the memories of those who had lived in both worlds. Thereafter, Jewish communities were forced to look to themselves in order to determine their future form and course. In addition, the newly established State of Israel presented itself as an older, more authentic topos of origin for all Jews, regardless of diasporic affiliation. Offering itself as the birthright of all Jews, Israeli nationalism gave Jews a mythology of origin *and* belonging, rather than the somewhat irrational longing for a place associated with oppression and deprivation, as was represented by the Eastern European experience. The dominant forces of Jewish cultural expression after the war have largely emerged from either an American or an Israeli perspective, English and Hebrew being the languages of choice in each case; Yiddish having all but disappeared.

In the case of the American experience, Jewish cultural expression began to find an outlet in Hollywood once the generations of acculturated, American-born Jews began to be able to feel comfortable asserting their own identities in the American mainstream. Film historians such as Patricia Erens and Lester Friedman have examined Hollywood's treatment of Jews and Jewish subjects over the decades⁹². What this gives us, however, is essentially an accounting of how Jews were perceived and received by American popular

⁹² Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* and Lester Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew* (New York, 1982)

sentiment. With the disappearance of the Yiddish cinema, there ended any true cinematic forum for Jews to discuss and represent themselves to themselves. As they became more integrated and accepted into the American mainstream, both before and after the Second World War, the question that was being asked by the Yiddish films, "How will it be possible to be both a Jew and an American?" became, in Hollywood, the more general, but no less ideologically weighted question, "What is it to be an American?" Jews, in so doing, inserted themselves alongside other Americans from countless ethnic and national backgrounds in the examination of this one question which their culture finds so all-absorbing.

APPENDIX I

List of Films

- Andaz* (Mehboob Khan, India, 1949)
- Amerikaner Schadchn* (*American Matchmaker*, Edgar G. Ulmer, U.S., 1940)
- A Brivele der Mamen* (*A Little Letter to Mother*, Joseph Green, Poland, 1938)
- Counsellor at Law* (William Wyler, U.S., 1933)
- Der Dybuk* (*The Dybbuk*, Michal Waszynski, Poland, 1937)
- Der Golem* (*The Golem*, Paul Wegener, Germany, 1920)
- Grine Felder* (*Green Fields*, Edgar G. Ulmer & Jacob Ben-Ami, U.S., 1937)
- The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, U.S., 1927)
- Dem Khazns Zundl* (*The Cantor's Son*, Ilya Motyleff, U.S., 1937)
- Di Klyatshe* (*The Light Ahead*, Edgar G. Ulmer, U.S., 1939)
- The Lunatic* (Harry Garson, U.S., 1927)
- Mamele* (*Little Mother*, Joseph Green & Konrad Tom, Poland, 1938)
- Mirele Efros* (Joseph Berne, U.S., 1939)
- Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, Germany, 1922)
- Ost und West* (*East and West*, Sidney M. Goldin, Austria, 1923)
- Oy di Shviger!* (*What a Mother-in-Law!*, Harry S. Brown, U.S., 1934)
- Der Purimshpieler* (*The Purim Player*, Joseph Green, Poland, 1937)
- Skvov Slezy* (*Through Tears*, Grigori Gricher-Cherikover, U.S.S.R., 1928)
- Tevye der Milkhiker* (*Tevye the Dairyman*, Maurice Schwartz, U.S., 1939)
- Tsvey Shvester* (*Two Sisters*, Ben K. Blake, U.S., 1938)
- Uncle Moses* (Aubrey Scotto & Sidney M. Goldin, U.S., 1930)
- Der Vilner Shtot Khazn* (*Overture to Glory*, Max Nossek, U.S., 1940)
- Vu Iz Mein Kind?* (*Where Is my Child?*, Abraham Leff, U.S., 1937)
- Yidl mitn Fidl* (*Yiddle with his Fiddle*, Joseph Green, Poland, 1937)

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