

THE SPIRIT OF THE CHILLO

STUDIES OF THE JEWISH QUARTER OF
NEW YORK BY HUTCHINS HARRISON

More than 50 Drawings from Life by JACOB LANGSTON

New Edition — Preface and Notes by HARRY GOLDMAN

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Second Printing, 1967

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"The Nudnik" from MORRIS ROSENFELD:
Selected Poetry and Prose, *Yiddisher Kultur Farband*, 1964, translated by Max Rosenfeld. Reprinted by permission.

Designed by Adrienne Onderdonk



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THE SPIRIT OF THE GHETTO

Studies of the Jewish Quarter of New York

by **HUTCHINS HAPGOOD**

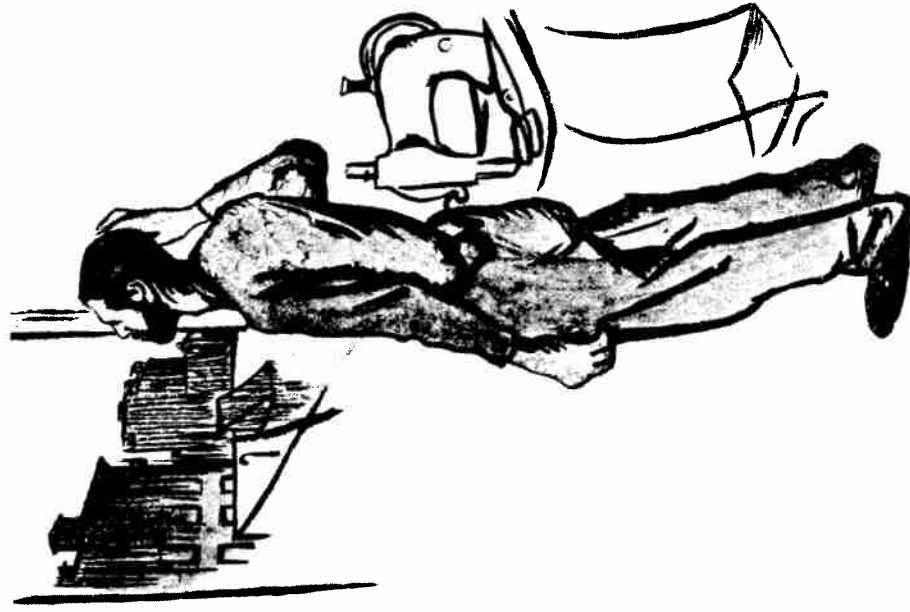
with drawings from life by

Jacob Epstein

New edition—preface and notes by

Harry Golden

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PREFACE

Hutchins Hapgood gathered the material for this book in the year 1901. Considering that the great mass of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe had yet to come, that the ghetto was not yet a part of American life and history, Mr. Hapgood's insights stand up remarkably well. And the first published work of the artist-sculptor Jacob Epstein makes this a historic book. I am proud to have my name now joined with such men as Hapgood and Epstein in this new edition of their work, sixty-three years after its initial publication.

I have received close to a half-million letters during the past ten years as a result of my own recollections about New York's Jewish ghetto.* My correspondence has convinced me that there is much more involved in these recollections than nostalgia and sentimentality. It is interesting that Mr. Hapgood, a Gentile observer, got the point of this even before the New York ghetto reached its full development.

For sentimentality does not per se change the quality of life; indeed the chief objection to sentimentality is that it is a lie about the quality of life. The life portrayed here, and particularly the life implicit in Epstein's drawings, had a more hopeful quality, a richer texture, than

* The word "ghetto" is used throughout to denote a section of the city that is occupied, mostly out of economic necessity, by an immigrant or minority group—in this case, Jewish—not in the sense of a restricted prisonlike community.

ville, light opera and historical and melodramatic plays a more serious art element, a simple transcript from life or the theatric presentation of a ghetto problem. But this more serious element is so saturated with the simple manners, humor, and pathos of the life of the poor Jew that it is seldom above the heartfelt understanding of the crowd.

The audiences vary in character from night to night rather more than in an uptown theater. On the evenings of the first four week days the theater is let to a guild or club, many hundred of which exist among the working people of the East Side. Many are labor organizations representing the different trades, many are purely social, and others are in the nature of secret societies. Some of these clubs are formed on the basis of a common home in Russia. The people, for instance, who came from Vilnyus, a city in the old country, have organized a Vilnyus Club in the ghetto. Then, too, the anarchists have a society; there are many socialistic orders; the newspapers of the ghetto have their constituency, which sometimes hires the theater. Two or three hundred dollars is paid to the theater by the guild, which then sells the tickets among the faithful for a good price. Every member of the society is forced to buy, whether he wants to see the play or not, and the money made over and above the expenses of hiring the theater is for the benefit of the guild. These performances are therefore called benefits. The widespread existence of such a custom is a striking indication of the growing sense of corporate interests among the laboring classes of the Jewish East Side. It is an expression of

THE STAGE

THEATERS, ACTORS, AND AUDIENCE

In the three Yiddish theaters on the Bowery is expressed the world of the ghetto—that New York city of Russian Jews, large, complex, with a full life and civilization. In the midst of the frivolous Bowery, devoted to tinsel variety shows, "dive" music-halls, fake museums, trivial amusement booths of all sorts, cheap lodging houses, ten-cent shops and Irish-American tough saloons, the theaters of the chosen people alone present the serious as well as the trivial interests of an entire community. Into these three buildings crowd the Jews of all the ghetto classes—the sweatshop woman with her baby, the day laborer, the small Hester Street shopkeeper, the Russian-Jewish anarchist and socialist, the ghetto rabbi and scholar, the poet, the journalist. The poor and ignorant are in the great majority, but the learned, the intellectual, and the progressive are also represented, and here, as elsewhere, exert a more than numerically proportionate influence on the character of the theatrical productions, which, nevertheless, remain essentially popular. The socialists and the literati create the demand that forces into the mass of vaude-

the socialistic spirit which is marked everywhere in the ghetto.

On Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights the theater is not let, for these are the Jewish holidays, and the house is always completely sold out, although prices range from twenty-five cents to a dollar. Friday night is, properly speaking, the gala occasion of the week. That is the legitimate Jewish holiday, the night before the Sabbath. Orthodox Jews, as well as others, may then amuse themselves. Saturday, although the day of worship, is also of holiday character in the ghetto. This is due to the Christian influ-

The theater



ences, to which the Jews are more and more sensitive. Through economic necessity Jewish workmen are compelled to work on Saturday, and, like other workmen, look upon Saturday night as a holiday, in spite of the frown of the Orthodox. Into Sunday, too, they extend their freedom, and so in the ghetto there are three popularly recognized nights on which to go with all the world to the theater.

On those nights the theater presents a peculiarly picturesque sight. Poor workmen and women with their babies of all ages fill the theater. Great enthusiasm is manifested, sincere laughter and tears accompany the sincere acting on the stage. Peddlers of soda water, candy, of fantastic gewgaws of many kinds, mix freely with the audience between the acts. Conversation during the play is received with strenuous hisses, but the falling of the curtain is the signal for groups of friends to get together and gossip about the play or the affairs of the week. Introductions are not necessary, and the Yiddish community can then be seen and approached with great freedom. On the stage curtain are advertisements of the wares of Hester Street or portraits of the star actors. On the programs and circulars distributed in the audience are sometimes amusing announcements of coming attractions or lyric praise of the stars. Poetry is not infrequent; an example literally translated is:

Labor, ye stars, as ye will,

Ye cannot equal the artist.

In the garden of art ye shall not flourish,

Ye can never achieve his fame.

*Can you play Hamlet like him?
 The Wild King? Or the Huguenots?
 Are you gifted with feeling
 So much as to imitate him like a shadow?
 Your fame rests on the pen;
 On the showcards your flight is high,
 But on the stage every one can see
 How your greatness turns to ashes,
 Tomashevsky! Artist great!
 No praise is good enough for you;
 Everyone remains your ardent friend.
 Of all the stars you remain the king.
 You seek no tricks, no false quibbles.
 One sees Truth itself playing.
 Your appearance is godly to us,
 Every movement is full of grace,
 Pleasing is your every gesture;
 Sugar sweet your every turn.
 You remain the king of the stage;
 Everything falls to your feet.*

On the playboards outside the theater, containing usually the portrait of a star, are also lyric and enthusiastic announcements. Thus, on the return of the great Adler, who had been ill, it was announced on the boards that "the splendid eagle has spread his wings again."

The Yiddish actors, as may be inferred from the verses quoted, take themselves with peculiar seriousness, justified by the enthusiasm, almost worship, with which they are regarded by the people. Many a poor Jew, man or girl, who makes no more than ten

dollars a week in the sweatshop, will spend five dollars of it on the theater, which is practically the only amusement of the ghetto Jew. He has not the loafing and sporting instincts of the poor Christian, and spends his money for the theater rather than for drink. It is not only to see the play that the poor Jew goes to the theater. It is to see his friends and the actors. With these latter he, and more frequently she, tries in every way to make acquaintance, but commonly is compelled to adore at a distance. They love the songs that are heard on the stage, and for these the demand is so great that a certain bookshop on the East Side makes a specialty of publishing them.

The actor responds to this popular enthusiasm with sovereign contempt. He struts about in the cafés on Canal and Grand streets, conscious of his greatness. He refers to the crowd as Moses, with superior condescension or humorous vituperation. Like thieves, the actors have a jargon of their own, which is esoteric and jealously guarded. Their pride gave rise a year or two ago to an amusing strike at the People's Theater. The actors of the three Yiddish companies in New York are normally paid on the share rather than the salary system. In the case of the company now at the People's Theater, this system proved very profitable. The star actors, Jacob Adler and Boris Thomashevsky, and their wives, who are actresses (Mrs. Adler being the heavy realistic tragedienne and Mrs. Thomashevsky the star *soubrette*) have probably received on an average during that time as much as a hundred and twenty-five dollars a week for each couple. But they, with Mr. Edel-

stein, the businessman, are lessees of the theater, run the risk, and pay the expenses, which are not small. The rent of the theater is twenty thousand dollars a year, and the weekly expenses, besides, amount to about eleven hundred dollars. The subordinate actors, who risk nothing, since they do not share the expenses, have made amounts during this favorable period ranging from fourteen dollars a week on the average for the poorest actors to seventy-five dollars for those just beneath the stars. But, in spite of what is exceedingly good pay in the Bowery, the actors of this theater formed a union, and struck for wages instead of shares. This however, was only an incidental feature. The real cause was that the management of the theater, with the energetic Thomashevsky at the head, insisted that the actors should be prompt at rehearsals, and if they were not, indulged in unseemly epithets. The actors' pride was aroused, and the union was formed to insure their ease and dignity and to protect them from harsh words. The management imported actors from Chicago. Several of the actors here stood by their employers, notably Miss Weinblatt, a popular young ingenue, who, on account of her great memory is called "the Yiddish encyclopedia," and Miss Gudinski, an actress of commanding presence. Miss Weinblatt forced her father, once an actor, now a farmer, into the service of the management. But the actors easily triumphed. Misses Gudinski and Weinblatt were forced to join the union, Mr. Weinblatt returned to his farm, the scabs were packed off to Philadelphia, and the wage system was introduced. A delegation was sent to Phila-

delphia to throw cabbages at the new actors, who appeared in the Yiddish performances in that city. The triumphant actors now receive on the average probably ten to fifteen dollars a week less than under the old system. Mr. Conrad, who began the disaffection, receives a salary of twenty-nine dollars a week, fully ten dollars less than he received for months before the strike. But the dignity of the Yiddish actor is now placed beyond assault. As one of them recently said, "We shall no longer be spat upon nor called dog."

The Yiddish actor is so supreme that until recently a regular system of hazing playwrights was in vogue. Joseph Lattener and Professor M. Horowitz were long recognized as the only legitimate ghetto playwrights. When a new writer came to the theater with a manuscript, various were the pranks the actors would play. They would induce him to try on, one after another, all the costumes in the house, in order to help him conceive the characters; or they would make him spout the play from the middle of the stage, they themselves retiring to the gallery to "see how it sounded." In the midst of his exertions they would slip away, and he would find himself shouting to the empty boards. Or, in the midst of a mock rehearsal, some actor would shout, "He is coming, the great Professor Horowitz, and he will eat you"; and they would rush from the theater with the panic-stricken playwright following close at their heels.

The supremacy of the Yiddish actor has, however, its humorous limitations. The Orthodox Jews who go to the theater on Friday night, the beginning of Sabbath, are commonly somewhat ashamed of them-

selves and try to quiet their consciences by a vociferous condemnation of the actions on the stage. The actor, who through the exigencies of his role, is compelled to appear on Friday night with a cigar in his mouth, is frequently greeted with hisses and strenuous cries of "Shame, shame, smoke on the Sabbath!" from the proletarian hypocrites in the gallery.

The plays at these theaters vary in a general way with the varying audiences of which I have spoken above. The thinking socialists naturally select a less violent play than the comparatively illogical anarchists. Societies of relatively conservative Jews desire a historical play in which the religious Hebrew in relation to the persecuting Christian is put in pathetic

Yiddish playwrights



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and melodramatic situations. There are a very large number of "culture" pieces produced, which, roughly speaking, are plays in which the difference between the Jew of one generation and the next is dramatically portrayed. The pathos or tragedy involved in differences of faith and point of view between the old rabbi and his more enlightened children is expressed in many historical plays of the general character of *Uriel Acosta*, though in less lasting form. Such plays, however, are called historical plunder by that very up-to-date element of the intellectual ghetto which is dominated by the Russian spirit of realism. It is the demand of these fierce realists that of late years has produced a supply of theatrical productions attempting to present a faithful picture of the actual conditions of life. Permeating all these kinds of plays is the amusement instinct pure and simple. For the benefit of the crowd of ignorant people grotesque humor, popular songs, vaudeville tricks, are inserted everywhere.

Of these plays the realistic are of the most value, for they often give the actual ghetto life with surprising strength and fidelity. The past three years have been their great seasons, and have developed a large crop of new playwrights, mainly journalists who write miscellaneous articles for the East Side newspapers. Jacob Gordin, of whom we shall have frequent occasion to speak, has been writing plays for several years, and was the first realistic playwright; he remains the strongest and most prominent in this kind of play. Professor Horowitz, who is now the lessee of the Windsor Theater, situated on the Bowery,

between Grand and Canal streets, represents, along with Joseph Lattener, the conservative and traditional aspects of the stage. He is an interesting man, fifty-six years of age, and has been connected with the Yiddish stage practically since its origin. His father was a teacher in a Hebrew school, and he himself is a man of uncommon learning. He has made a great study of the stage, has written one hundred and sixty-seven plays, and claims to be an authority on dramaturgy. Lattener is equally productive, but few of their plays are anything more than Yiddish adaptations of old operas and melodramas in other languages. Long runs are impossible on the Yiddish stage, and consequently the playwrights produce many plays and are not very scrupulous in their methods. The absence of dramatic criticism and the ignorance of the audience enable them to crib with impunity. As one of the actors said, Lattener and Horowitz and their class took their first plays from some foreign source and since then have been repeating themselves. The actor said that when he is cast in a Lattener play he does not need to learn his part. He needs only to understand the general situation; the character and the words he already knows from having appeared in many other Lattener plays.

The professor, nevertheless, naturally regards himself and Lattener as the real Yiddish playwrights. For many years after the first bands of actors reached the New York ghetto these two men held undisputed sway. Lattener leaned to "romantic," Horowitz to "culture," plays, and both used material which was mainly historical. The professor regards

that as the bright period of the ghetto stage. Since then there has been, in his opinion, a decadence which began with the translation of the classics into Yiddish. *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and plays of Schiller, were put upon the stage and are still being performed. Sometimes they are almost literally translated, sometimes adapted until they are realistic representations of Jewish life. Gordin's *Jewish King Lear*, for instance, represents Shakespeare's idea only in the most general way, and weaves about it a sordid story of Jewish character and life. Of *Hamlet* there are two versions, one adapted, in which Shakespeare's idea is reduced to a ludicrous shadow, the interest lying entirely in the presentation of Jewish customs.

The first act of the Yiddish version represents the wedding feast of Hamlet's mother and uncle. In the Yiddish play the uncle is a rabbi in a small village in Russia. He did not poison Hamlet's father but broke the latter's heart by wooing and winning his queen. Hamlet is off somewhere getting educated as a rabbi. While he is gone his father dies. Six weeks afterward the son returns in the midst of the wedding feast and turns the feast into a funeral. Scenes of rant follow between mother and son, Ophelia and Hamlet, interspersed with jokes and sneers at the sect of rabbis who think they communicate with the angels. The wicked rabbi conspires against Hamlet, trying to make him out a nihilist. The plot is discovered and the wicked rabbi is sent to Siberia. The last act is the graveyard scene. It is snowing violently. The grave is near a huge windmill. Ophelia is brought in on the

bier. Hamlet mourns by her side and is married, according to the Jewish custom, to the dead woman. Then he dies of a broken heart. The other version is almost a literal translation. To these translations of the classics, Professor Horowitz objects on the ground that the ignorant Yiddish public cannot understand them, because what learning they have is limited to distinctively Yiddish subjects and traditions.

Another important step in what the professor calls the degeneration of the stage was the introduction a few years ago of the American pistol play—meaning the fierce melodrama which has been for so long a characteristic of the English plays produced on the Bowery.

But what has contributed more than anything else to what the good man calls the present deplorable condition of the theater was the advent of realism. "It was then," said the professor one day with calm indignation, "that the genuine Yiddish play was persecuted. Young writers came from Russia and swamped the ghetto with scurrilous attacks on me and Latteiner. No number of the newspaper appeared that did not contain a scathing criticism. They did not object to the actors, who in reality were very bad, but it was the play they aimed at. These writers knew nothing about dramaturgy, but their heads were filled with senseless realism. Anything historical and distinctively Yiddish they thought bad. For a long time Latteiner and I were able to keep their realistic plays off the boards, but for the last few years there has been an open field for everybody.

The result is that horrors under the mask of realism have been put upon the stage. This year is the worst of all—characters butchered on the stage, the coarsest language, the most revolting situations, without ideas, with no real material. It cannot last, however. Latteiner and I continue with our real Yiddish plays, and we shall yet regain entire possession of the field."

At least this much may fairly be conceded to Professor Horowitz—that the realistic writers in what is in reality an excellent attempt often go to excess, and are often unskillful as far as stage construction is concerned. In the reaction from plays with "pleasant" endings, they tend to prefer equally unreal "unpleasant" endings—onion plays, as the opponents of the realists call them. They, however, have written a number of plays which are distinctively of the New York ghetto and which attempt an unsentimental presentation of truth. Professor Horowitz's plays, on the contrary, are largely based upon the sentimental representation of inexact Jewish history. They herald the glory and wrongs of the Hebrew people, and are badly constructed melodramas of conventional character. Another class of plays written by Professor Horowitz, and which have occasionally great but temporary prosperity, are what he calls *Zeitstücke*. Some American newspaper sensation is rapidly dramatized and put hot on the boards, such as *Marie Barberi*, *Dr. Buchanan*, and *Dr. Harris*.

The three theaters—the People's, the Windsor, and the Thalia (which is on the Bowery opposite the Windsor) are in a general way very similar in the character of the plays produced, in the standard of

acting, and in the character of the audience. There are, however, some minor differences. The People's is the "swellest" and probably the least characteristic of the three. It panders to the "uptown" element of the ghetto, to the downtown tradesman who is beginning to climb a little. The baleful influence in art of the nouveaux riches has at this house its ghetto expression. There is a tendency there to imitate the showy qualities of the Broadway theaters—melodrama, farce, scenery, etc. No babies are admitted, and the house is exceedingly clean in comparison with the theaters farther down the Bowery. Three years ago this company was at the Windsor Theater, and made so much money that they hired the People's—that old home of Irish-American melodrama; and this atmosphere seems slightly to have affected the Yiddish productions. Magnificent performances quite out of the line of the best ghetto drama have been attempted, notably Yiddish dramatizations of successful uptown productions. Hauptmann's *Versunkene Glocke*, *Sapho*, *Quo Vadis*, and other popular Broadway plays in flimsy adaptations were tried with little success, as the Yiddish audiences hardly felt themselves at home in these unfamiliar scenes and settings.

The best trained of the three companies is at present that of the Thalia Theater. Here many excellent realistic plays are given. Of late years, the great playwright of the colony, Jacob Gordin, has written mainly for this theater. There, too, is the best of the younger actresses, Mrs. Bertha Kalisch. She is the prettiest woman on the ghetto stage and was at one

time the leading lady of the Imperial Theater at Bucharest. She takes the leading woman parts in plays like *Fedora*, *Magda*, and *The Jewish Zaza*. The principal actor at this theater is David Kessler, who is one of the best of the ghetto actors in realistic parts, and one of the worst when cast, as he often is, as the romantic lover. The actor of most prominence among the younger men is Mr. Moshkovitch, who hopes to be a star and one of the management. When the union was formed he was in a quandary. Should he join or should he not? He feared it might be a bad prece-



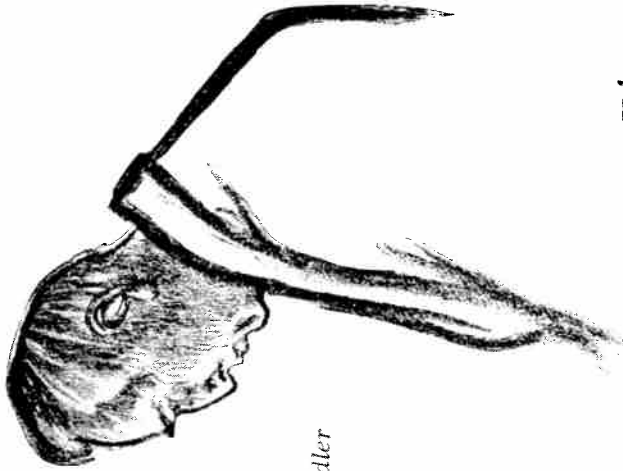
Mr. Moshkovitz

dent, which the actors would use against him when he became a star. And he did not want to get them down on him. So before he joined, he entered solemn protests at all the cafés on Canal Street. The strike, he maintained, was unnecessary. The actors were well-paid and well-treated. Discipline should be maintained. But he would join because of his universal sympathy with actors and with the poor—as a matter of sentiment merely, against his better judgment.

The company at the Windsor is the weakest, so far as acting is concerned, of the three. Very few realistic plays are given there, for Professor Horowitz is the lessee, and he prefers the historical Jewish opera and culture plays. Besides, the company is not strong enough to undertake successfully many new productions, although it includes some good actors. Here Mrs. Prager vies as a prima donna with Mrs. Karb of the People's and Mrs. Kalisch of the Thalia. Professor Horowitz thinks she is far better than the other two. As he puts it, there are two and a half prima donnas in the ghetto—at the Windsor Theater there is a complete one, leaving one and a half between the People's and the Thalia. Jacob Adler of the People's, the professor thinks, is no actor, only a remarkable caricaturist. As Adler is the most noteworthy representative of the realistic actors of the ghetto, the professor's opinion shows what the traditional Yiddish playwright thinks of realism. The strong realistic playwright, Jacob Gordin, the professor admits, has a "biting" dialogue and "unconsciously writes good cultural plays, which he calls realistic, but his realis-

tic plays, properly speaking, are bad caricatures of life."

The managers and actors of the three theaters criticize one another indeed with charming directness, and they all have their followers in the ghetto and their special cafés on Grand or Canal streets, where their particular prejudices are sympathetically expressed. The actors and lessees of the People's are proud of their fine theater, proud that no babies are brought there. There is a great dispute between the supporters of this theater and those of the Thalia as to which is the stronger company and which produces the most realistic plays. The manager of the Thalia maintains that the People's is sensational, and that his theater alone represents true realism; while the supporter of the People's points scornfully to the large number of operas produced at the Thalia. They both unite in condemning the Windsor, Professor Horowitz's theater, as producing no new plays and as hopelessly behind the times, "full of historical plunder." An episode in *The Ragpicker of Paris*, played at the Windsor when the present People's company were there, amusingly illustrates the jealousy which exists between the companies. An old beggar is picking over a heap of moth-eaten, coverless books, some of which he keeps and some rejects. He comes across two versions of a play, *The Two Vagrants*, one of which was used at the Thalia and the other at the Windsor. The version used at the Windsor receives the beggar's commendation, and the other is thrown in a contemptuous manner into a dust heap.



Jacob Adler

REALISM, THE SPIRIT OF THE
GHETTO THEATER

The distinctive thing about the intellectual and artistic life of the Russian Jews of the New York ghetto, the spirit of realism, is noticeable even on the popular stage. The most interesting plays are those in which the realistic spirit predominates, and the best among the actors and playwrights are the realists. The realistic element, too, is the latest one in the history of the Yiddish stage. The Jewish theaters in other parts of the world, which, compared with the three in New York, are unorganized, present only anachronistic and fantastic historical and biblical plays, or comic opera with vaudeville specialties attached. These things, as we have said in the last sec-

tion, are, to be sure, given in the Yiddish theaters on the Bowery too, but there are also plays which in part at least portray the customs and problems of the ghetto community, and are of comparatively recent origin.

There are two men connected with the ghetto stage who particularly express the distinctive realism of the intellectual East Side—Jacob Adler, one of the two best actors, and Jacob Gordin, the playwright. Adler, a man of great energy, tried for many years to make a theater succeed on the Bowery which should give only what he called good plays. Gordin's dramas, with a few exceptions, were the only plays on contemporary life which Adler thought worthy of presentation. The attempt to give exclusively realistic art, which is the only art on the Bowery, failed.



Jacob Gordin

There, in spite of the widespread feeling for realism, the mass of the people desire to be amused and are bored by anything with the form of art. So now Adler is connected with the People's Theater, which gives all sorts of shows, from Gordin's plays to ludicrous history, frivolous comic opera, and conventional melodrama. But Adler acts for the most part only in the better sort. He is an actor of unusual power and vividness. Indeed, in his case, as in that of some other Bowery actors, it is only the Yiddish dialect which stands between him and the distinction of a wide reputation.

In almost every play given on the Bowery all the elements are represented. Vaudeville, history, realism, comic opera, are generally mixed together. Even in the plays of Gordin there are clownish and operatic intrusions, inserted as a conscious condition of success. On the other hand, even in the distinctively formless plays, in comic opera and melodrama, there are striking illustrations of the popular feeling for realism—bits of dialogue, happy strokes of characterization of well-known ghetto types, sordid scenes faithful to the life of the people.

It is the acting which gives even to the plays having no intrinsic relation to reality a frequent quality of naturalness. The Yiddish players, even the poorer among them, act with remarkable sincerity. Entirely lacking in self-consciousness, they attain almost from the outset to a direct and forcible expressiveness. They, like the audience, rejoice in what they deem the truth. In the general lack of really good plays they yet succeed in introducing the note of real-

ism. To be true to nature is their strongest passion, and even in a conventional melodrama their sincerity, or their characterization in the comic episodes, often redeems the play from utter barrenness.

And the little touches of truth to the life of the people are thoroughly appreciated by the audience—much more generally so than in the case of the better plays, where there is more or less strictness of form and intellectual intention, difficult for the untutored crowd to understand. In the "easy" plays, it is the realistic touches which tell most. The spectators laugh at the exact reproduction by the actor of a tattered type which they know well. A scene of perfect sordidness will arouse the sympathetic laughter or tears of the people. "It is so natural," they say to one another, "so true." The word natural indeed is the favorite term of praise in the ghetto. What hits home to them, to their sense of humor or of sad fact, is sure to move, although sometimes in a manner surprising to a visitor. To what seems to him very sordid and sad they will frequently respond with laughter.

One of the most beloved actors in the ghetto is Zelig Mogalesco, now at the People's Theater, a co-median of natural talent and of the most felicitous instinct for characterization. Unlike the strenuous Adler, he has no ideas about realism or anything else. He acts in any kind of play, and could not tell the difference between truth and burlesque caricature. And yet he is remarkable for his naturalness, and popular because of it. Adler with his ideas is sometimes too serious for the people, but Mogalesco's

naive fidelity to reality always meets with the sympathy of a simple audience loving the homely and unpretentious truth. About Adler, strong actor that he is, and also about the talented Gordin, there is something of the doctrinaire.

But, although the best actors of the three Yiddish theaters in the ghetto are realists by instinct and training, the thoroughly frivolous element in the plays has its prominent interpreters. Joseph Latteiner is the most popular playwright in the Bowery, and Boris Thomashevsky perhaps the most popular actor. Latteiner has written over a hundred plays, no one of which has form or ideas. He calls them *Volksstücke* (plays of the people), and naively admits that he writes directly to the demand. They are mainly mixed melodrama, broad burlesque, and comic opera. His heroes are all intended for Boris Thomashevsky, a young man, fat, with curling black hair, languorous eyes, and a rather effeminate voice, who is thought very beautiful by the girls of the ghetto. Thomashevsky has a face with no mimic capacity, and a temperament absolutely impervious to mood or feeling. But he picturesquely stands in the middle of the stage and declaims phlegmatically the role of the hero, and satisfies the "Romantic" demand of the audience. Nothing could show more clearly how much more genuine the feeling of the ghetto is for fidelity to life than for romantic fancy. How small a part of the grace and charm of life the Yiddish audiences enjoy may be judged by the fact that the romantic appeal of a Thomashevsky is eminently satisfying to them. Girls and men from the sweatshops, a

large part of such an audience, are moved by a very crude attempt at beauty. On the other hand they are so familiar with sordid fact, that the theatrical representation of it must be relatively excellent. Therefore the art of the ghetto, theatrical and other, is deeply and painfully realistic.

When we turn to Jacob Gordin's plays, to other plays of similar character and to the audiences to which they specifically appeal, we have realism worked out consciously in art, the desire to express life as it is, and at the same time the frequent expression of revolt against the reality of things, and particularly against the actual system of society. Consequently the problem play has its representation in the ghetto. It presents the hideous conditions of life in the ghetto—the poverty, the sordid constant reference to money, the immediate sensuality, the jocular callousness—and underlying the mere statement of the facts an intellectual and passionate revolt.

The thinking element of the ghetto is largely socialist, and the socialists flock to the theater the nights when the Gordin type of play is produced. They discuss the meaning and justice of the play between the acts, and after the performance repair to the Canal Street cafés to continue their serious discourse. The unthinking nihilists are also represented, but not so frequently at the best plays as at productions in which are found crude and screaming condemnation of existing conditions. The anarchistic propaganda hired the Windsor Theater for the establishment of a fund to start the *Freie Arbeiter-stimme*, an anarchistic newspaper. *The Beggar of Odessa* was

the play selected—an adaptation of *The Ragpicker of Paris*, a play by Felix Piot, the anarchistic agitator of the French Commune in 1871. The features of the play particularly interesting to the audience were those emphasizing the clashing of social classes. The old ragpicker, a model man, clever, brilliant, and good, is a philosopher too, and says many things warmly welcomed by the audience. As he picks up his rags he sings about how even the clothing of the great comes but to dust. His adopted daughter is poor, and consequently noble and sweet. The villains are all rich; all the very poor characters are good. Another play, *Vogele*, is partly a satire of the rich Jew by the poor Jew. "The rich Jews," sang the comedian, "toil not, neither do they spin. They work not, they suffer not—why then do they live on this earth?" This unthinking revolt is the opposite pole to the unthinking vaudeville and melodrama. In many of the plays referred to roughly as of the Gordin-Adler type—although they were not all written by Gordin nor played by Adler—we find a realism more true in feeling and cast in stronger dramatic form. In some of these plays there is no problem element; in few is that element so prominent as essentially to interfere with the character of the play as a presentation of life.

One of the plays most characteristic, as at once presenting the life of the ghetto and suggesting its problems, is *Minna*, the drama about the Yiddish Nora. Although the general idea of Ibsen's *Doll's House* is taken, the atmosphere and life are original. The first scene represents the house of a poor Jewish

laborer on the East Side. His wife and daughter are dressing to go to see *A Doll's House* with the boarder—a young man whom they have been forced to take into the house because of their poverty. He is full of ideas and philosophy, and the two women fall in love with him, and give him all the good things to eat. When the laborer returns from his hard day's work, he finds that there is nothing to eat, and that his wife and daughter are going to the play with the boarder. The women despise the poor man, who is fit only to work, eat, and sleep. The wife philosophizes on the atrocity of marrying a man without intellectual interests, and finally drinks carboic acid. This Ibsen idea is set in a picture rich with realistic detail: the dialect, the poverty, the types of character, the humor of Yiddish New York. Jacob Adler plays the husband, and displays a vivid imagination for details calculated to bring out the man's beseeching bestiality: his filthy manners, his physical ailments, his greed, the quickness of his anger and of resulting pacification. Like most of the realistic plays of the ghetto, *Minna* is a genuine play of manners. It has a general idea and presents also the setting and characters of reality.

The Slaughterer, written by Gordin, and with the main masculine character taken by David Kessler, an actor of occasionally great realistic strength, is the story of the symbolic murder of a fragile young girl by her parents, who force her to marry a rich man who has all the vices and whom she hates. The picture of the poorhouse, of the old mother and father and half-witted stepson with whom the girl is

unconsciously in love, in its faithfulness to life is typical of scenes in many of these plays. It is rich in character and milieu drawing. There is another scene of miserable life in the second act. The girl is married and living with the rich brute. In the same house is his mistress, curt and cold, and two children by a former wife. The old parents come to see the wife; she meets them with the joy of starved affection. But the husband enters and changes the scene to one of hate and violence. The old mother tells him, however, of the heir that is to come. Then there is a superb scene of naive joy in the midst of all the sordid gloom. There is rapturous delight of the old people, turbulent triumph of the husband, and satisfaction of the young wife. They make a holiday of it. Wine is brought. They all love one another for the time. The scene is representative of the way the poor Jews welcome their offspring. But indescribable violence and abuse follow, and the wife finally kills her husband, in a scene where realism riots into burlesque, as it frequently does on the Yiddish stage.

But for absolute, intense realism Gordin's *Wild Man*, unrelieved by a problem idea, is unrivaled. An idiot boy falls in love with his stepmother without knowing what love is. He is abused by his father and brother, beaten on account of his ineptitudes. His sister and another brother take his side, and the two camps revile each other in unmistakable language. The father marries again; his new wife is a heartless, faithless woman, and she and the daughter quarrel. After repeated scenes of brutality to the idiot, the daughter is driven out to make her own living. Ad-



Spitzer

David Kessler

ler's portraiture of the idiot is a great bit of technical acting. The poor fellow is filled with the mysterious wonderings of an incapable mind. His shadow terrifies and interests him. He philosophizes about life and death. He is puzzled and worried by everything; the slightest sound preys on him. Physically alert, his senses serve only to trouble and terrify the mind which cannot interpret what they present. The burlesque which Mr. Adler puts into the part was inserted to please the crowd, but increases the horror of it, as when Lear went mad; for the Elizabethan audiences laughed and had their souls wrung at the same time. The idiot ludicrously describes his growing love. In pantomime he tells a long story. It is evident, even without words, that he is constructing a complicated symbolism to express what he does not know. He falls into epilepsy and joins stiffly in the riotous dance. The play ends so fearfully that it shades into mere burlesque.

This horrible element in so many of these plays marks the point where realism passes into fantastic sensationalism. The facts of life in the ghetto are in themselves unpleasant, and consequently it is natural that a dramatic exaggeration of them results in something poignantly disagreeable. The intense seriousness of the Russian Jew, which accounts for what is excellent in these plays, explains also the rasping falseness of the extreme situations. It is a curious fact that idiots, often introduced in the Yiddish plays, amuse the Jewish audience as much as they used to the Elizabethan mob.

One of the most skillful of Gordin's Yiddish adap-

tations is *The Oath*, founded on Gerhart Hauptmann's *Fuhrmann Henschel*. In the first act a dying peasant is exhibited on the stage. In Hauptmann's play it is a woman; in Gordin's, it is a man. He is racked with coughing. A servant clatters over the floor with her heavy boots; another servant feeds the sick man from a coarse bowl; and the steward works at the household accounts. The dying man's wife, and their little boy, enter, and it is apparent that something has been going on between her and the steward. They and the servants dine realistically and coarsely and neglect the dying man. When they leave, the dying man teaches his son how to say *Kaddish* for his soul when he is dead. When he dies he makes his wife swear that she will never marry again. In the second act she is about to marry the steward, and the Jewish customs are here used, as is often the case with the Yiddish playwright, to intensify the dramatic effect of a scene. It is just a year from the time of her husband's death, and the candles are burning, therefore, on the table. According to the Orthodox belief the soul of the dead is present when the candles burn. The little boy, feeling that his mother is about to marry again, blows out the candles. The mother, horror-stricken, rushes to him and asks him why he did it. "I did not want my father to see that you are going to marry again," says the little fellow. It was an affecting scene and left few dry eyes in the audience.

At the beginning of the third act the wife and servant are living together, married. He comes on the stage, sleepy, brutal, calling loudly for a drink,

abuses the little boy and quarrels with his wife; he is a crude, dishonorable, coarse brute. He drives away a faithful servant and returns to his swinish slumber. An old couple (the woman being the sister of the dead man), who are always torturing the wife with having broken her vow, hint to her that her new husband is too attentive to the maid servant. She is angry and incredulous, and calls the maid to her, but when she sees her in the doorway, before a word is spoken, she realizes it is true, and sends her away. The husband enters and she passionately taxes him. He admits it, but justifies himself: he is young, a high-liver, etc., why shouldn't he? Just then the child is brought in—he has been drowned in the river nearby.

In the beginning of the fourth and last act the husband again appears as a riotous, jovial fellow. He has played a joke and turned a driver out of his cart, and he nearly splits his sides with merriment. Drunk, he admirably sings a song and dances. His wife enters. She hears her vow repeated by the winds, by the trees, everywhere. Her dead child haunts her. Her husband has stolen and misspent their money. She talks with the faithful servant about the maid's baby. She wanders about at night, unable to sleep. Her brute husband calls to her from the house, saying he is afraid to sleep alone. Another talk ensues between them. He asks her why she is old so soon. She burns the house and herself, the neighbors rush in, and the play is over.

Some of the more striking of the realistic plays on the ghetto stage have been partly described, but real-

ism in the details of character and setting appears in all of them, even in comic opera and melodrama. In many the element of revolt, even if it is not the basis of the play, is expressed in occasional dialogues. Burlesque runs through them all, but burlesque, after all, is a comment on the facts of life. And all these points are emphasized and driven home by sincere and forcible acting.

Crude in form as these plays are, and unpleasant as they often are in subject and in the life portrayed, they are yet refreshing to persons who have been bored by the empty farce and inane cheerfulness of the uptown theaters.

THE HISTORY OF THE YIDDISH STAGE

The Yiddish stage, founded in Rumania in 1876 by Abraham Goldfaden, has reached its highest development in the city of New York, where there are seventy or eighty professional actors; not far from a dozen playwrights, of whom three have written collectively more than three hundred plays; dramas on almost every subject, produced on the inspiration of various schools of dramatic art; and an enormous Russian-Jewish colony, which fills the theaters and creates so strong a demand that the stage responds with a distinctive, complete, and interesting popular art.

The best actor now in the ghetto, with one exception, was in the original company. That exception,

with the help of a realistic playwright introduced an important element in the development of the stage. With the lives of these three men the history of the Yiddish stage is intimately connected. The first actor was a singer in the synagogue of Bucharest, the first playwright a composer of Yiddish songs. The foundation of the Yiddish stage might therefore be said to lie in the Bucharest synagogue and the popular music-hall performance.

Zelig Mogalesco, the best comedian in the New York ghetto, has seen, although not quite forty years of age, the birth of the Yiddish stage and may survive its death. He was born in Koloraush, a town in the province of Bessarabia, near Rumania. His father was a poor shopkeeper, and Mogalesco never went to school. But he was endowed by nature with a remarkable voice and ear and composed music with easy felicity. The population of the town was Orthodox Jewish, and consequently no theater was allowed. It was therefore in the synagogue that the musical appetite of the Jews found satisfaction. It was the habit of the poor people to hire as inexpensive a cantor as possible, and this cantor might very well be ignorant of everything except singing. Yet these cantors were so popular that the famous ones traveled from town to town, in much the same way that the visiting German actor (*Gast*) does today, and sometimes charged admission fees.

When Mogalesco was nine years old, Nissy of the town of Bells, the most famous cantor in southern Russia, visited Mogalesco's town. The boy's friends urged him to visit the great man and display his

voice. Little Mogalesco, with his mezzosoprano, went to the inn, and Nissy was astounded. "My dear boy," he said, "go home and fetch your parents." With them the cantor signed a contract by which Zelig was bound to him as a kind of musical apprentice for three years. The boy was to receive, in addition to his board and clothing, five rubles the first year, ten the second, and fifteen the third—fifteen dollars for the three years.

Soon Mogalesco became widely known among the cantors of southern Russia. In six months he could read music so well that they called him "little Zelig, the music eater." At the end of the first year the leading cantor of Bucharest, Israel Kupfer (who, by the way, has been cantor in a New York synagogue of the East Side) went to Russia to secure the services of Mogalesco. To avoid the penalties of a broken contract, Kupfer hurried with little Zelig to Rumania, and the boy remained in Bucharest for several years. At the age of fourteen he conducted a choir of twenty men under Kupfer. He also became director of the chorus in the Gentile opera. While there he began "to burn," as he expressed it, with a desire to go on the stage, but the Gentiles would not admit the talented Jew.

It was when Mogalesco was about twenty years old that the Yiddish stage was born. In 1876 or 1877, Abraham Goldfaden went to Bucharest. This man had formerly been a successful merchant in Russia, but had failed. He was a poet, and to make a living he called that art into play. In Russia he had written many Yiddish songs, set them to music, and sung

them in private. In the society in which he lived he deemed that beneath his dignity, but when he lost his money he went to Bucharest and there on the stage sang his own poems, the music for which he took from many sources. He became a kind of music-hall performer but did not long remain satisfied with this modest art. His dissatisfaction led him to create what later developed into the present Yiddish theater. The Talmud prohibited the stage, but at the time when Goldfaden was casting about for something to do worthy of his genius, the gymnasiums were thrown open to the Jews, and the result was a more tolerant spirit. Therefore, Goldfaden decided to found a Yiddish theater. He went to Kupfer, the cantor, and Kupfer recommended Mogalesco as an actor for the new company. Goldfaden saw the young man act, and the comedy genius of Mogalesco helped in the initial idea of a Yiddish play. Mogalesco at first refused to enter into the scheme. A Yiddish drama seemed too narrow to him, for he aspired to the Christian stage. But when Goldfaden offered to adopt him and teach him the Gentile languages, Mogalesco agreed and became the first Yiddish actor. Other singers in Kupfer's choir also joined Goldfaden's company.

Thus the foundation of the Yiddish stage lay in the Bucharest synagogue. The beginnings, of course, were small. Several other actors were secured, among them Moses Silbermann, who is still acting on the New York ghetto stage. No girls could at that time be obtained for the stage, for it is against the Talmudic Law for a man even to hear a girl sing, and men

consequently played females roles, as in Elizabethan times in England. The first play that Goldfaden wrote was *The Grandmother and Her Grandchild*, the second was *Der Shmendrik*, and Mogalesco played the grandmother in one and a little spoiled boy in the other. His success in both was enormous, and he still enacts on the Bowery the part of the little boy. The first performances of Goldfaden's play were given in Bucharest at the time of the Russian-Turkish war, and the city was filled with Russian contractors and workmen. They overcrowded the theater and applauded Mogalesco to the echo. From that time the success of the Yiddish stage was assured. Goldfaden tried to get a permit to act in Russia, without success at first; but he played in Odessa without a license, in a secret way, and in the end a permit was secured. Other Yiddish companies sprang up. Girls were admitted to the chorus, and women began to play female roles. The first woman on the Yiddish stage was a girl who is now Mrs. Karb, and who may be seen in the Yiddish company at present in the People's Theater on the Bowery. She is the best liked of all the ghetto's actresses, has been a sweet singer, and is now an actress of considerable distinction. In Bucharest, before she went on the stage, she was a tailor girl and used to sing in the shop. She appeared in 1878 in *The Evil Eye*, and made an immediate hit. That was the third Yiddish play, and, in the absence of Goldfaden, it was written by Joseph Latteiner, who (with the possible exception of Professor Horowitz, who began to write about the same time) was for many years the most popular playwright in the New York ghetto.

In 1884 the Yiddish theater was forbidden in Russia. It was supposed by the government to be a hotbed of political plots, but some of the Yiddish actors think that the jealousy of Gentile actors was responsible for this idea. Two years before there had been a transmigration of Russian and Rumanian Jews to America on a large scale. Therefore the players banished from Russia had a refuge and an audience in New York. In 1884 the first Yiddish company came to this country. It was not Goldfaden's or Mogalesco's company, but one formed after them. In it were actors who still act in New York—Moses Heine, Moses Silbermann, Mrs. Karb, and Latteiner the playwright.

The first Yiddish theater was called the Oriental. It was a music hall on the Bowery, transformed for the purpose. A year later Mogalesco, Kessler, Professor Horowitz, and their company came to New York and opened the Rumania Theater. From that time they changed theaters frequently. It is worthy of note that with one exception the actors identified with the beginnings of the Yiddish stage are still the best.

That exception is Jacob Adler, who, not counting Mogalesco, is the best actor in the ghetto. They are both character actors, but Mogalesco is essentially a comedian, while Adler plays roles ranging from burlesque to tragedy. Mogalesco is a natural genius, with a spontaneity superior to that of Adler, but he has no general education nor intellectual life. But the forcible Adler, a man of great energy, a fighter, is filled with one great idea, which is almost a passion with him, and which has marked a development in the

Yiddish theater. To be natural, to be real, to express the actual life of the people, with serious intent, is what Jacob Adler stands for. Up to the time when he appeared on the scene in New York there had been no serious plays acted on the Yiddish stage. Comic opera, lurid melodrama, adaptations and translations, historical plays representing the traditions of the Jews, were exclusively the thing. Through the acting, indeed, which on the Yiddish stage is constantly animated by the desire for sincerity and naturalness, the real life of the people was constantly suggested in some part of the play. When Mogalesco took a comic part, he would interpolate phrases and actions, suggesting that life, which he instinctively and spontaneously knew, and it was so with the other actors also. But this element was accidental and fragmentary previous to the coming of Jacob Adler.

Until then Latteiner and Professor Horowitz, the authors of the first historical plays of the Yiddish stage, and still the most popular playwrights in the ghetto, held almost undisputed sway.

Joseph Latteiner, of whom brief mention has already been made, represents thoroughly the strong commercial spirit of the Yiddish stage. He writes with but one thought—to please the mass of the people—writes "easy plays," to quote his own words. His plays, therefore, are the very spirit of formlessness—burlesque, popularly vulgar jokes, flat heroism combined about the flimsiest dramatic structure. He is the type of the businessman of the ghetto. Although successful, he lives in an unpleasant tenement, and seems much poorer than he really is. He

has an unemphatic, conciliatory manner of talking, and everything he says is discouragingly practical. He is a Rumanian Jew, forty-six years of age. His parents intended him for a rabbi, but he was too poor to reach the goal, although he learned several languages. These afterward stood him in good stead, for he often translates and adapts plays for the Bowery stage. Unable to be a rabbi, Latteiner cast about for a means of making his living. As a boy he was not interested in the stage, but one day he saw a German play in one act and thought he could adapt it with music to the Yiddish stage. It was successful, and Latteiner, as he put it, "discovered himself." He has since written over a hundred plays, and is engaged by the company at the Thalia Theater as the regular playwright. He calls himself *Volksdichter*, and maintains that his plays improve with the taste of the people, but this statement is open to considerable doubt.

In speaking of the popular playwright, and the purely commercial character and consequent formlessness of the plays before the appearance of Adler, important mention should be made of Boris Thomashevsky, already briefly referred to as the idol of the Jewish matinee girls. He is the most popular actor on the Yiddish stage, and for him Latteiner particularly writes. Thomashevsky is a large fat man, with expressionless features and curly black hair, which he arranges in leonine forms. He generally appears as the hero, and is a successful though a rather listless barnstormer. The more intelligent of his audience are inclined to smile at Mr. Thomashevsky's talent in

romantic parts, of the reality of which, however, he, with a large section of the community, is very firmly convinced. In fairness, however, it should be said that when Mr. Thomashevsky occasionally leaves the role of hero for an unsentimental character, particularly one which expresses supercilious superiority, he is excellent. As time goes on he will probably take less and less the romantic lead and grow more and more satisfactory. He is the youngest of the prominent actors of the Bowery. Before the coming of Heine's company in 1884, he was a pretty little boy in the ghetto, who used to play female roles in amateur theatricals. But when the professionals came, he was eclipsed and went out of sight for some time. He grew to be a handsome man, however; his voice changed, and, with the help of a very different man, Jacob Adler, Thomashevsky found an important place on the Yiddish stage. He and Adler are now the leading actors of the People's Theater, but they never appear together, Thomashevsky being the main interpreter of the plays which appeal distinctively to the rabble, and Adler of those which form the really original Yiddish drama of a serious nature.

Jacob Adler was born in Odessa, Russia, in 1855, of middle-class parents. He went to the public school, but was very slow to learn, and was treated roughly by his teachers, whose favorite weapon was a ruler of thorns. School, therefore, as he says, "made a bad impression" on him, and he left it for business, but got along as badly there, not being able to brook the brutally expressed authority of his masters. But while he passed rapidly from one firm to another,

through the kindness of a wealthy uncle he was able to cut a swell figure in Odessa, and became a dandy and something of a lady killer. He was then only eighteen, but the serious ideas which at a later time he strenuously sought to bring into prominence in New York already began to assert themselves. Then there was no Yiddish theater, but of the Gentile Russian theater in Odessa he was very fond. The serious realistic Russian play was what particularly took his fancy. The Russian tragedians Kozelski and Miloslovsky especially helped to form his taste, and he soon became a critic well known in the galleries. It was the habit of Russian audiences to express their ideas and impressions on the spot. The galleries were divided into parties, with opposing artistic principles. One party hissed while the other applauded, and then and there they held debates, between the acts and even during performance. Adler soon became one of the fiercest leaders of such a party that Odessa had ever known. He stood for realism, for the direct expression of the life of the people. All else he hissed down, and did it so effectively that the actors tried to conciliate him. One season two actresses of talent, but of different schools, were playing in Odessa—Glebowa, whom Adler supported because of her naturalness, and Kozlowski, whose style was affected and artificial from Adler's point of view. After the strife between the rival parties had waged for some time very fiercely, one night Kozlowski sent for Adler, and asked him what she could do to get the great critic to join her party. Adler replied that so long as Glebowa played with such wonderful naturalness he

should remain faithful to her colors, and advised Kozlowski, who was a kind of Russian Bernhardt, to change her style.

Adler's lack of education always weighed on his spirit, and his high ideals of the stage seemed to shut that art away from him. Yet his friends who heard him recite the speeches of his favorites, which he easily remembered, told him he had talent. "I wanted to believe them," Adler said, "but I always thought that the actor ought to know everything in order to interpret humanity."

But just about that time, when Adler was twenty-three years old, he heard that a theater had been started in Rumania by a Russian Jew named Goldfaden and that the actors spoke Yiddish.

"I was astonished," he said. "How could they act a play in a language without literature, in the jargon of our race, and who could be the actors?"

Soon Adler heard that the Jewish singers of hymns, who sometimes visited Odessa, and who moved him so because "they sang so pitifully," were the actors of the first Yiddish company, and his astonishment grew. In 1879, Goldfaden went to Odessa with his company, and his theater was crowded with Gentiles as well as Jews; and Adler saw with his eyes what he had hardly believed possible—a Jewish company in a Yiddish play. The plays, however, seemed to Adler very poor—mainly light opera with vaudeville accompaniment—and the acting was also poor. But Israel Rosenberg, whom Adler describes as a long-faced Jew with protruding teeth, enormous eyes, and a mouth as wide

as a saucer, amused Adler with the wit which he interpolated as he acted. Rosenberg, "more ignorant than I," says Adler, "was yet very successful." The two became intimate, and Rosenberg and Fräulein Oberländer urged Adler to go on the stage—Rosenberg because Adler at that time was comparatively rich, and the fräulein because she loved (and afterward married) the vigorous young man from Odessa. And Adler felt his education to be superior to that of these successful actors, and decided to make the experiment. To choose the stage, however, was to choose poverty, as he had begun to succeed in business, but he did not hesitate and, leaving his friends and family, he went on a tour with the company.

In the first performance he was so frightened that he did not hear his own words. He lost all his critical faculty, and played merely instinctively. It was a long time before he acted better than the average, which was at that time very low; but, finally, in a small town named Elizabetgrad, Adler learned his lesson. A critic visited the theater every night, and wrote long articles upon it, but Adler never found his name mentioned therein. He used to get up in the morning very early, before any one else, to buy the newspaper, but was always chagrined to find that the great man had overlooked him. At first he thought that the critic must have a personal spite against him, then that he was not noticed because he had only small roles. At last he was cast for a very long and emotional role. He thought that this part would surely fetch the critic, and the next morning eagerly bought a paper, but there was no criticism of the play

at all. Rosenberg went to the critic and asked the reason.

"Adler spoiled the whole thing," was the reply. "His acting was unnatural and loud. I advise him to leave the stage."

"Then," said Adler, "I began to think. I cut my hair, which I had allowed to grow long after the fashion of actors, and was at first much discouraged. But thereafter I studied every role with great care, and read the classic plays, and never played a part until I understood it. Before that it was play with me; but after that it was serious work."

For a number of years Adler continued to act in the cities of Russia, and became the head of a company. In 1883, when Russia was closed to the Jewish stage, Adler took his company to London, where he nearly starved. There was no ghetto there, and the company gave occasional performances at various Yiddish clubs scattered through the city. Adler lost all his money and got into debt. His wife and child died, and at one time in despair he thought of leaving the stage. But it was too late to go back to Odessa, for he had once and for all cut himself off from his family and friends. He was falsely informed by a Jew who had been to America that to succeed there he would have to sing, dance, and speak German. So he stayed some time longer in London. The Rothschilds, Dr. Felix Adler, and others, took an interest in him, and told him that as the Jewish theater could have no future, since Yiddish must ultimately be forgotten, he had better give it up.

It was in 1887 that Adler came to New York,

where he found two Yiddish companies already well started. To avoid conflict with them, he went to Chicago, where, however, a Yiddish theater could get no foothold. Some rich Chicago people tried to induce Adler to learn English and go on the American stage; but Adler, always distrustful of his education and ability to learn, declined their offers, now much to his regret. He returned to New York, where Mogalesco and Kessler urged him to stay, but the ghetto actors in general were hostile to him, and he went back to London. The next year, however, he was visited by four of the managers of the New York ghetto companies (among them Mogalesco), vying with one another to secure Adler, whose reputation in the Jewish community was rapidly growing. He went back to New York in 1889, where he appeared first at the Germania Theater. He was advertised in advance as a Salvini, a Barrett, a Booth, as all stars combined. When he found how extravagantly he had been announced, he was angry, and wanted to go back to London, feeling that it was impossible to live up to what his foolish managers had led the people to expect. He consented to stay but refused to appear in *Uriel Acosta*, for which he was billed, preferring to begin in comedy, in order not to appear to compete with the reputation of Salvini. The play, which was called *The Rappicker*, can still be seen in the ghetto. In it Adler tried to score as a character actor. But the people, expecting a tragedy, took *The Rappicker* seriously, and did not laugh at all. The play fell flat, and the managers rushed before the curtain and told the audience that Adler was a poor actor, and that they

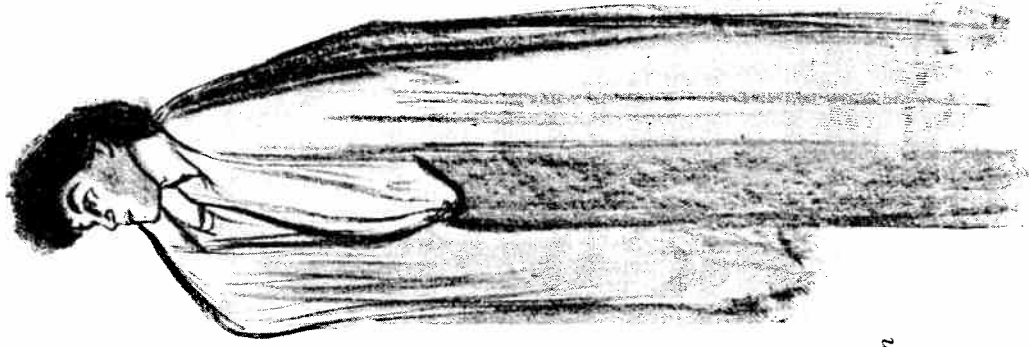
had been deceived in him. Through the influence of the management, the whole company treated him with coldness and contempt, except the wife of one of the directors. She is now Mrs. Adler, and is one of the capable serious actresses at present at the People's Theater. Finally, the lease of the theater passed into Adler's hands, and he dismissed the whole company and formed a new one. Soon after began the struggle which brought about the latest development of the Yiddish stage.

For some time Adler was successful, but he grew more and more dissatisfied with his repertory. He could find no plays which seriously portrayed the life of the people or contained any serious ideas. Only the translated plays were good from his point of view; he wished something original, and looked about for a playwright. One night in a restaurant he was introduced to Jacob Gordin, who afterward wrote the greater part of the only serious original Yiddish plays which exist.

Gordin at that time had written no plays, but he was a man of varied literary activity, of a rarely good education, a thorough Russian schooling, and of uncommon intelligence and strength of character. He is Russian in appearance, a large broad-headed man with thick black hair and beard. As he told me, in his little home in Brooklyn, the history of his life, he omitted all picturesque details, and emphasized only his intellectual development. He was born in the same town as Gogol—Ubigovrod, in southern Russia—of rich parents. As a boy he frequented the theater, and like Adler, became a local critic and hissed down

what he did not approve. Like Adler, too, he was often carried off to the police station and fined. He married early, became a schoolteacher and then a journalist (in Russian), writing every sort of article, except political, and often sketches and short stories for newspapers and periodicals in Odessa, where he finally controlled a newspaper—the *Odessakiano-vosti*. He was a great admirer of Tolstoy, and desiring to live on a farm to put into practice Tolstoy's ideas, he came to America in 1891, and nearly starved. He became an editor of a Russian newspaper in New York and contributed to other journals. In his own paper he wrote violent articles against the Russian government as well as literary sketches. In Russia, Gordin had never been in a Yiddish theater, and when he met Adler in the New York restaurant he knew little of the conventional Yiddish play. So he wrote his first play in a fresh spirit, with only the character of the people and his own ideals to work from. *Siberia*, produced in 1892, was a success with the critics and actors, and may fairly be called the first original Yiddish play of the better type.

The play struck a new note. It fell into line with the Russian spirit of realism now so marked in intellectual circles in the ghetto. Life and types are what Gordin tried for, and Jacob Adler had found his playwright. Since then Gordin has written about fifty plays, some of which have been successful, and many have been marked by literary and dramatic power. Some of the better ones are *Siberia*, *The Jewish King Lear*, *The Wild Man*, *The Jewish Priest*, *Solomon Kaus*, *The Slaughter*, and *The Jewish Queen*



Madam Liptzen

Lear. Jacob Adler has been until recently his chief interpreter, although Mogalesco, Kessler, and Thom-
ashevsky take his plays.

For several years an actress, Mrs. Liptzen, was the main interpreter of Gordin's plays. She is one of the most individual, if not one of the most skillful, ac-

tresses on the stage of New York's ghetto, and is sometimes spoken of in the quarter as the Yiddish Duse. She is the only actress of the East Side who is thus compared, by a subtitle, with a famous Gentile artist, although in many directions there is a great tendency in the ghetto to adopt foreign names and ideas. As a matter of fact, her art is exceedingly limited, but she has the unusual distinction of appearing only in the best plays, steadfastly refusing to take part in performances which she deems to be dramatically unworthy. She consequently appears very seldom, usually only in connection with the production of a new play by Jacob Gordin, who at present writes many of his plays with the Yiddish Duse in mind.

Mrs. Liptzen was born in Zhitomir, South Russia, and was interested exclusively in the stage from her childhood. The founder of the Yiddish stage, Abraham Goldfaden, and Jacob Adler played in her town for a few nights when she was about eighteen years old. Her parents were Orthodox Jews, and to go to the theater she was forced to resort to subterfuge. She became acquainted with Goldfaden and Adler, and ran away from home in order to accompany them as an actress. At first she sang and acted in such popular operatic plays as *Der Shmendrik*, and continued for three years in Russia, until the Yiddish theater was forbidden there. Then she went with a new company to Berlin, where the whole aggregation nearly starved. They were reduced to selling all their stage properties, the proceeds of which were made away with by a dishonest agent. During the time

their performances in Berlin continued, Mrs. Liptzen received, it is said, the sum of ten pfennigs (two and one-half cents) a day, on which she lived. She paid five pfennigs for lodging and five pfennigs for bread and coffee, and there is left in her now a correspondingly amazing impression of the cheapness with which she could live in Germany in those days.

Jacob Adler was at that time in London with a company, eking out a miserable existence. He wrote to Mrs. Liptzen's husband, an invalid in Odessa, to send his wife to London to play in his company. About 1886 Mrs. Liptzen went to London and played in *Esther von Engeti* (the Jewish *Othello*), *Leah the Forsaken*, *Rachel*, *The Jews*, etc. In London she stayed three years, when, the theater having burned down, she went with Adler to Chicago. They tried to find a place in New York, but the Yiddish company already in New York, with Kessler and Mogalesco at its head, froze them out, and they tried to get a foothold in Chicago. A little later Mrs. Liptzen left Chicago for New York, called by the Yiddish company there to play leading parts. She began in New York with *Leah the Forsaken*, and received only ten dollars for the first three performances. It is said that she now receives from one to two hundred dollars for every performance, a fact indicating not only her growth in popularity but also the great financial success of the Yiddish theaters in New York.

Twelve years ago Mrs. Liptzen retired for a time from the stage, the reason being that there were no new plays in which she desired to appear, since the demand was entirely supplied by the romantic and

historical operatic playwrights, Professor Horowitz and Mr. Latteiner.

It was not until Jacob Gordin came into prominence as a realistic playwright that Mrs. Liptzen came out of her dignified retirement. Jacob Adler was the first to play Gordin's pieces, but he played many others, too, trying in a practical way gradually to make the cause of realism triumphant. Mrs. Liptzen, however, made no compromise, and kept quiet until she was able to get the plays she wanted, which soon were written by Gordin.

Mrs. Liptzen's first success with a Gordin play was in *Medea*, for which Gordin received, it is said, the enormous sum of eighty-five dollars—having sold plays previous to that time for the well-fixed price of thirty-five dollars. *Medea's Youth*, written by Gordin for Mrs. Liptzen, was a failure, although the author thought so well of it as a literary production that he had it translated into English. The next of Mrs. Liptzen's successes was *The Jewish Queen Lear*, for which Gordin received two hundred dollars—an enormous sum for a Yiddish playwright in those days. *The Slaughter* was produced two years ago, and last year Mrs. Liptzen appeared in Gordin's *The Oath*, a Yiddish production of *Fuhrmann Henschel*. Of late Mr. Gordin's plays have been produced by a younger actress of more varied talent than Mrs. Liptzen—Mrs. Bertha Kalisch, on the whole a much worthier interpreter than the older woman.

It is Adler, however, who has been the belligerent promoter of the original and serious Yiddish drama. In 1893 he tried to introduce Gordin's plays and the

new spirit of realism and literature into his company at the Windsor Theater. But the old style is still strong in popular affection, and Adler's company rebelled. Whereupon Adler went to Russia to form a new company which would be more amenable to his ideas. He came back with the new troupe, and ordered a new play from Gordin, who produced *The Jewish King Lear*. At the first reading of the play the company protested, but Adler begged for a trial, telling them that they did not know what a good play was. The play proved a great and deserved success, and is now frequently repeated. It contains several scenes of great power, and portrays with faithful art the life of the Russian Jew. In 1894 Adler tried the experiment of leasing a small theater, the Rumania, in which nothing but plays which expressed his ideas should be presented. A number of Gordin's plays were given, but the theater had much the same fate that would befall a theater uptown which played only the ideally best. It failed completely. After that, both Adler and Gordin were compelled to compromise. Adler is now associated with a company which presents every kind of play known to the ghetto, and Gordin has had to introduce horseplay and occasional vaudeville and comic opera into his plays. Even the best of the Yiddish plays contain these excrescences.

But both Adler and Gordin, while remaining practical men with an eye to the box office receipts, are working to eliminate more and more of what is distasteful to them and impertinent to art. A year ago last autumn Gordin succeeded in having his latest play, *The Slaughter*, performed without any vaude-

ville accompaniment. He deemed it a triumph, particularly as it was successful, and felt a debt of gratitude to Mrs. Liptzen, who produced the play without insisting on unworthy interpolations.

Gordin now hopes that the days of compromise for him are past, and Adler expects to secure some day a theater in which he can successfully produce only the serious plays of Jewish life. But both these men are pessimistic about the future of dramatic art in the ghetto. They feel not only the weight of the commercial spirit, but also the imminent death of their stage. For the Jews of the ghetto, as they become Americanized, are liable to lose their instinctive Yiddish, and then there will be no more drama in that tongue. The only Yiddish stage, worthy of the name, in the world will probably soon be no more. Jacob Adler consequently regrets that his Yiddish confines him to the Bowery stage, and Jacob Gordin longs to have his plays translated and produced on the English stage.

Mogalesco, the actor, who has, perhaps, the greatest talent of them all, whose dramatic art was born with the Yiddish stage, and who is equally happy in a *comedia* by Latteiner or a character play by Gordin, is, like the true actor, without ideas, but always felicitous in interpretation, and enthusiastically loved by the Jewish playgoers. He and Adler, if they had been fortunate enough to have received a training consistently good, and had acted in a language of wider appeal, would easily have taken their places among those artistically honored by the world. Even

as it is, they have with Gordin, with Kessler, with Mrs. Liptzen, with Mrs. Kalisch and the rest, the distinction of being prominent figures in the short career of the Yiddish stage, which, founded by Goldfaden in 1876, in Rumania, has received today, in New York, its highest and almost exclusive development.

In 1902 the immigrants had not yet learned about Christy Mathewson or Ty Cobb; the heroes like Theodore Roosevelt or Al Smith were still to come. So the folk heroes of the ghetto were the actors, the journalists, the cantors, the critics, the playwrights, and the composers; but mostly the actors.

The greatest of the actors were Jacob P. Adler, David Kessler, and Boris Thomashevsky. All the tales ever told, especially those describing gastronomic and sexual prowess, were retold anew with modern heroes—Adler, Kessler, and Thomashevsky. I have never yet met an East Side Jew who didn't have a favorite story about them. Although Kessler stories centered on food rather than bed, Adler and Thomashevsky were considered trenchermen, too. Thomashevsky and Adler were the Don Juans of the ghetto. Each of them traveled with a court of hangers-on, like prototypical Frank Sinatras, and spread in an East Side café, each instructed flunkies to ward off worshippers. Safe, the actor washed down the caviar and eggs and potato *latkes* with huge goblets of Rhine wine and seltzer.

So important was the Yiddish theater that when David Kessler's Second Avenue Theater opened around 1912, the preparations were carried on with the enthusiasm reserved for a world's fair. I believe the governor was there, and the mayor cut the string in front of the box office. David Kessler opened in the most famous of all East Side

dramas, *Gott, Mensch und Teufel*, a loose adaptation of *Faust*.

One of the contributions the East Side made to the American culture was the "theater party." Everyone has theater parties today, from a Hempstead Hadassah to the Vassar Alumnae Association. But the theater party was invented by immigrant Jews around the turn of the century.

One rarely heard the statement, "I'm going to the theater." Instead one said, "I'm going to a benefit." "Benefit" was one of the first English words the immigrants learned, and probably one of the most important. Organizations sold theater benefit tickets to immigrants as they came off the gangplank. All the Jewish organizations, *vereins*, and fraternities were partly financed by benefits.

As a boy, I sat through many of them. My father was president of the Mikulincer *verein*. The Mikulinczers ran a benefit five or six times a year. My father always made a speech between the second and third acts. A Mikulincer benefit proceeded like the Vassar theater party. The organization bought every seat in the house at a discount, sold the tickets to members and friends, and the net profit went to a predesignated cause.

This was my introduction to the theater and I shall always be grateful for it. I thrill to this day remembering Madame Bertha Kalisch, Kessler, and a man who would have been a great comedian on any stage, Zelig Mogaliesco.

Often the plays depicted the patterns of ghetto life with surprising fidelity. Basically the people came to cry at scenes which more or less depicted their own problems: the family experience with a wayward son, an ungrateful daughter, an old-fashioned father, a cruel step-mother. Many of the immigrants had families in the old country. The Yiddish theater helped them to remember and to cry. A famous soprano, Lucy Gherman, made a career out of the song "*Eibiga Mama*" ("Eternal Mother"),

and thousands of shop girls wept through every performance of Jennie Goldstein, who sang "*Ich Bin ein Mama*" ("I Am a Mother").

Occasionally Shakespeare was translated literally, but more often only the theme was used and adapted to contemporary life. Mr. Hapgood tells of *The Jewish Hamlet* he saw. *The Jewish King Lear* was another popular adaptation.

Critics? There were thousands of them. Ben-Gurion of Israel once said he was the head of a nation with one and a half million prime ministers. By the same token, the Yiddish stage had fifty thousand regular critics. No one saw a show for simple enjoyment. Everybody was a critic, reciting observations to everyone—in the shop, in the store, in the coffee house, and in the lodge hall. Most plays qualified only as a *shmahta* (a rag), but the word *shmahta* is far more explosive than its literal translation.

"How did you like the show last night?" The fellow at the workbench shrugged his shoulders and said, "*A shmahta*." He did not know, of course, that what he had seen the evening before was a Yiddish adaptation of Ibsen's *Doll's House*.

There were many theaters, but the benefits took place for the most part in three: the People's Theater, the Windsor Theater, and the Thalia. As I remember it, the Thalia was the ritziest—no babies were allowed inside.

The actors hated the benefits as much as actors today hate theater parties. The audience came not so much to see the play but to see who else came. Their attention was bad. They brought children. And they talked! Theater parties or benefits—how they talk! They talked more than the actors.

Plays never ran long, twelve days at the most, and more usually three or four. Sometimes families went to the theater three times a week. In those days, prices scaled from twenty-five cents to a dollar. It is a long way from a Mikulincer benefit to a Daughters of the Ameri-

can Revolution theater party, but only the prices have changed.

We have not really begun to appraise the influence of the Yiddish theater on the English-speaking stage, motion pictures, radio, and television. That crusty old Mayor Gaynor, in 1911, saw it even as it was happening: "You came to this land but yesterday and now will give us that learning and culture which has produced such players as Bonne, and Von Sonnenthal, and Rachel, and Bernhardt."

The most popular player of the era was Adler. It was my good fortune to see Mr. Adler in the old Knickerbocker Theater on Broadway at the end of his career. It was a benefit performance and every Broadway star of stage, opera, and concert world came to pay homage to the great Yiddish actor. Each insisted on "going on" in his honor, and the show lasted till five o'clock in the morning. Mr. Adler himself performed a scene from *King Lear*. I remember particularly Al Jolson singing "*Vesti la Giubba*," followed by Giovanni Martinelli leading the audience in "Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag and Smile, Smile, Smile."

Everyone who reads this and can remember the old days will want to tell a favorite anecdote about an actor. Let me, therefore, tell mine first. Adler was on tour. (In all the stories, Jacob Adler or Boris Thomashevsky was on tour.) Before his performance a handsome young woman with a four-year-old child came to the great man's dressing room. "Mr. Adler, you remember me?" she asked. "When you were here five years ago you invited me to supper after the performance?" And with this she pushed the little boy ahead of her, "And this is the result—this little boy is your own son." Adler looked at the child with real satisfaction. "That's a nice boy, a really nice boy," he said. "Here, my dear, are two tickets to tonight's performance. Take the boy, you'll both like the show." The woman began to stammer. "But Mr. Adler,

this is your own son—we don't need theater tickets, our problem is to eat, we need bread." Adler shrugged and said, "You want bread, you go with a baker. From me you get tickets."

There must be many of my contemporaries who remember the famous Grossman poster announcing a new *pyessa* (a new play): "SAMUEL B. GROSSMAN, PRODUCER AND ACTOR, PRESENTS *THE SORROWING FATHER*, A NEW PLAY IN THREE ACTS BY SAMUEL GROSSMAN, WITH IRVING GROSSMAN, JOSEPH GROSSMAN, HELEN GROSSMAN, FANNY GROSSMAN; DANCES BY HELEN GROSSMAN; STAGE DESIGNER, MIRIAM GROSSMAN. FOR BENEFITS WRITE TO TREASURER JOSEPH GROSSMAN."

I'd like to say another word about the ghetto's tremendous interest in the theater. A few years after Mr. Hapgood wrote this book, the Neighborhood Playhouse was established on Grand Street. It was on that stage that Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* was produced for the first time in America. Indeed, some of the plays of Ibsen and Sudermann also made their first American appearance there.

The Neighborhood Playhouse sponsored an event which received national attention. On April 23, 1915, Ellen Terry came from England to give readings from Shakespeare. The greatest actress of the day was interested in the career of Lillian D. Wald of the Henry Street Settlement and accepted an invitation to honor Shakespeare's anniversary at the Neighborhood Playhouse in the heart of New York's Lower East Side. It was an event which filled the Jewish ghetto with a feeling of wonder and joy.