

Bridge of Light

YIDDISH FILM BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

J. Hoberman

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The Cantor's Sons

FOR THREE-QUARTERS of a century in *Yidishland*, the defenders of tradition had waged a rearguard action against the forces of modernity. With the Nazi threat, and in the light of widespread Gentile indifference, the argument between cultural separatism and cultural adaptation took on a new immediacy. *Yidishland* was polarized between a desire for greater internationalism and the recognition of internationalism's failure, torn between a need to publicize the fate of European Jewry and a revulsion against the spurious universality of the mass media.

The situation in Poland precluded cultural assimilation, that in the Soviet Union assumed it. Only in the United States were Jews sufficiently distanced from Europe—its orthodoxies and its constraints—

to act out their often bitter ambivalence about precisely that freedom. Then, too, the American-Yiddish audience was older than the Polish-Yiddish audience, and inherently more nostalgic. Thus, by the late 1930s, all representation of the struggle between secularism and religion was confined to American films. Indeed, Moishe Oysher—a sometime cantor and the one Yiddish movie star without equivalent stage celebrity—spent much of his career dramatizing that very conflict.

"A cantor is not an actor," Sholom Aleichem explains in *Yosele Solovey*, his 1889 novel about a young *khazn's* rise and fall.

Jews certainly love to hear good singing, admire virtuosity and vocal feats in the synagogue; however, the cantor must never forget he is called

sheliekh tsiber, a messenger of the congregation, an advocate, a representative, and consequently the congregation demands of him that he be a person of impeccable virtue, a respectable Jew, not a profligate. A house of worship is not a theater.

A cantor is not an actor, a synagogue is not a theater. And yet, the archetypal Yiddish stage performer is a cantor's son or daughter. (Esther-Rokhl Kaminska was the child of a cantor, as is the actress-heroine of Sholom Aleichem's *Blondzhende Shtern*. Boris Thomashefsky, Sigmund Mogulesko, Seymour Reichtzeit, composer Sholom Secunda, and poet Peretz Markish were all either cantors' sons or child cantors, or both.)

In terms of Jewish ritual, the *khazn's* prominence steadily increased throughout the Diaspora despite a rabbinical disapproval which, as Mark Slobin points out, "parallels outbursts of archbishops and popes against music's preempting of sacred texts for 'sensual' musical purposes in Christendom." By the time Sholom Aleichem wrote *Yosele Solovey*, the *khazn* had become the most important figure in Jewish musical culture. The virtuoso *khazn* was venerated as a star. But, as if in recognition of the Old Testament injunction against idolatry, such veneration carried the seeds of disaster.

The quintessential star *khazn* was Yoel-David Levinshteyn-Strashunsky (1816–1850), already renowned by age eleven, and popularly known as the "*Vilner Balebesl*" for his marriage at thirteen to the daughter of a wealthy Vilna merchant. (*Balebesl* is the affectionate, and sometimes ironic, diminutive for *balebos*, from the Hebrew for master of the house.) The legend has it that, while on tour, Strashunsky fell in love with a Polish singer and ran off

with her to Vienna. This impetuous affair cost the *Balebesl* his voice and his sanity. He returned east a mute penitent, wandering from *shtetl* to *shtetl* before dying, alone, in an insane asylum at the age of thirty-five.

Sholom Aleichem includes a version of Strashunsky's story in *Yosele Solovey*, which echoes the Old Testament tale of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in blaming the jealousy of a wanton Gentile seductress for the *Balebesl's* destruction. When a Polish count demands to hear the *khazn* sing, the chaste prodigy performs, but with his face to the wall. Nevertheless, the degenerate countess is smitten, and when the *Balebesl* rejects her advances, she turns the count against the Jewish community, then wreaks vengeance on the hapless cantor.

There are to be found, even among Jews, people who for money will do away with a person. Such people were hired by the countess. They gave the *Balebesl* a poisoned drink that robbed him of his voice. As soon as the poor *Balebesl* realized he had lost his voice, he fell into a deep melancholy and went completely mad. He wandered about the world, tattered and torn, not speaking a word to anyone. That was the end of the *Vilner Balebesl*—and all because of her, may her name be cursed.

The most famous literary version of this cautionary tale is Mark Arnshteyn's play *Der Vilner Balebesl*. Here, the *Balebesl* embodies the paradox of the Jewish artist, torn between traditional imperatives and a desire to participate in the culture of the West. That, having gone on the Warsaw stage, Arnshteyn's cantor falls in love with the niece of Polish composer Stanisław Moniuszko is a symptom rather than a cause of his estrangement. The *Balebesl's* defection,

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like that of the Jazz Singer, is potential catastrophe for the Jewish community: "They have many singers," his father (a cantor) reproaches him, "we have only you."

Der Vilner Balebesl was first produced in Polish as *Pieśniarze* (Singers) in Lodz in 1902. Four years later, the play was staged in Yiddish, and although controversial, it soon entered the Yiddish repertoire. In 1912, after directing the first films with the Kaminsky troupe in Warsaw, Arnshteyn brought *Der Vilner Balebesl* to London, where, according to theater historian M. J. Landa, it was regarded as "something absolutely new in Yiddish stage-craft—something superior, in fact, to the stage-technique of the West End." The play was performed in Paris during the World War and introduced to New York by the Vilna Troupe in 1924. As *Der Vilner Balebesl* suggests a link between the universalist ethos embodied in *Uriel Acosta* and the assimilationist drama of *The Jazz Singer*, it is scarcely surprising that in 1926 Arnshteyn had been interested in staging a Polish version of the latter.

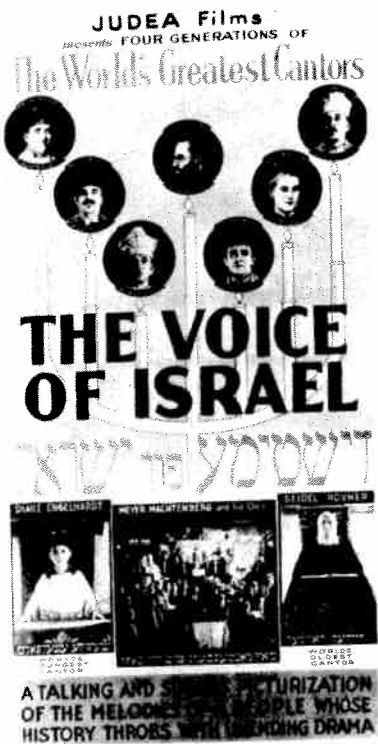
A spiritual middleman, negotiating the realm between religion and show business as well as God and the congregation, the cantor is a key figure in Jewish modernization. The rise of the star *khazn* coincides both with the Great Immigration and the birth of the Yiddish stage. The Lomzer *khazn*, a minor character in Sholom Aleichem's *Blondzhende Shtern*, comes to America and reinvents himself as the "Lomzer Nightingale," singing *Kol Nidre* "every night in the famous operetta called, by a strange coincidence, *Kol Nidre*." The rabbi is the congregation's teacher, the *khazn* is its "emissary." In the

larger towns of Eastern Europe, study- and prayer-houses were often organized by profession, with shoemakers or tailors sometimes hiring one of their own as *khazn*.¹

Thus, in the figure of the cantor, the lines between the sacred and the secular blurred—particularly in America, where cantorial music was a staple of the Second Avenue theater and a *khazn* might double as a vaudeville performer, endorse products, make movies, and sing on the radio. The 1919 Boris Thomashefsky production *Tsvey Khazonim* (Two Cantors) put this conflict at center stage. The play concerns the rivalry between a traditional *khazn* and a Westernized, Reform cantor—the latter, significantly, played by Thomashefsky, himself the son and grandson of cantors who, at age five, had created no less a sensation singing an entire service in the Asitnaitchka Synagogue than he would a quarter century later on Second Avenue.

Der Vilner Balebesl makes explicit the commonplace that the adoration accorded a star cantor was akin to that which the Gentile world showered upon a brilliant operatic singer. Indeed, the tales that follow star *khazonim* like New York's Yosele Rosenblatt and Warsaw's Gershon Sirota suggest a desire to engage opera and transcend it. The program of Sirota's American tour included an aria from *Aïda*, which supposedly inspired Caruso to thank God that the *khazn* had chosen "to employ his heavenly gift in a different field"; Rosenblatt, known as "the Jewish Caruso," was known to have spurned a lucrative offer from the Chicago Opera.

Nevertheless, traditionalists remained skeptical of the hoopla surrounding the stars. A youthful cantor in *Hayntige Mames*, the *shund* film most concerned with the erosion of Jewish tradition, is first framed



Judea Film's twenty-thousand-dollar "special," *Di Shtime fun Yisroel* (U.S.A., 1930), featured nine *khazonim* plus the Cantor Meyer Machtenburg Choir.

by a Jewish gangster and then led astray by the criminal's girl, an aggressively modern girl who wants him to become a pop star. The pious Rosenblatt, who himself was forced to go on the vaudeville stage after he lost all his money in bad investments (an ultra-Orthodox Yiddish daily, a luxury *mikve* on the Lower East Side), was regarded with suspicion. The 1925–26 run of the *Jewish Theatrical News* amply documents that, in leaving the synagogue for show business, Rosenblatt sustained frequent charges of impropriety by Jewish traditionalists.

Similarly, even though Sirota made strenuous attempts to placate his Orthodox critics, the purists, as Slobin reports, were unsatisfied: "He was taken to

task for his frequent use of banal and cheap effects and for his sudden outbreaks of unrelated, stunt-like roulades and coloratura acrobatics." The Yiddish poet Judd Teller recalls that during the 1920s the novelty of Yiddish and liturgical recordings created a new form of Lower East Side street theater:

Every evening of the week except Fridays, holidays, and in foul weather, crowds assembled outside the phonograph stores for concerts of records, which were amplified through a horn in the transom. Liturgy and popular music were interspersed. The serious waited patiently for the moment when a cantorial record was put on. Then they exploded into a minor riot of heated polemics, drowning out the voice pouring through the horn. Each coterie of fans acclaimed the records of its favorite cantor, but was divided against itself as to which items in his albums were superior to the others. These disputations involved the pitch of the cantor's voice, the clarity of his diction, the pathos of the sighs, sobs, and exclamations that laced his liturgy.

The rise of Yiddish-language radio in the late twenties, and Yiddish-language movies soon afterwards, created further opportunities for star cantors. The 1929 *Ad Mosay*, only the second Yiddish talkie, was a double novelty for featuring the child *khazn* Shmulikel. Over the next few years, Judea mixed vaudeville shorts with a number of one- and two-reel cantorials. Shmulikel's *Kol Nidre* was released in the autumn of 1930, and Judea put out at least four other cantorials over the next twelve months before releasing their ten-reel, \$20,000 "special" *Di Shtime fun Yisroel* (*The Voice of Israel*), which featured nine *khazonim* plus the Cantor Meyer Machtenburg Choir.

There is no question that these cantors were among the brightest stars of the Yiddish firmament.

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The \$500 that Judea paid Rosenblatt for his participation in *Di Shtime fun Yisroel* is most likely the highest salary Seiden ever paid any performer. The posthumously released *Der Kholem fun Mayn Folk* (*The Dream of My People*), which presented Rosenblatt praying at the Wailing Wall, among other Holy Land locations, was the most successful of all cantorials. Opening in February 1934 at the Yiddish Art Theater (then struggling through a disastrous season), *Kholem* played there and two other Lower East Side venues for a total of eight weeks, with holdover engagements in Brooklyn and the Bronx as well.

If Rosenblatt was the most celebrated of American *khazonim*, the most filmed was certainly the American-born, baseball-loving Louis "Leibele" Waldman, who began in Rosenblatt's choir and had been a nine-year-old *khazn* on the Lower East Side (as well as a musician on a Hudson River cruise boat). Disparagingly called the "microphone cantor" because he lacked projection, Waldman first recorded in the early twenties. He appeared in at least six shorts released in 1930 and 1931, and was employed by Seiden in another six features over the next decade. (Waldman was "inserted" into, rather than "featured" in, Seiden's potboilers. The cantor was seldom, if ever, given any dialogue; his main function was to provide a suitably thrilling service for a film's climactic wedding.)

Although most of Waldman's performances were straight recordings of various prayers, a few had decided novelty-vaudeville elements. The 1931 one-reeler *Khazn afn Probe* (*A Cantor on Trial*) is a dramatization of a cantorial audition. The film opens with Waldman in evening clothes, singing against a black backdrop; Waldman subsequently performs as a bearded, old-fashioned *khazn*, and then, made up with goatee and mustache, as a German cantor. (In

Clinton Theater, New York, April 1934. The current attraction is the feature-length cantorial *Der Kholem fun Mayn Folk*, which documented Yosele Rosenblatt's trip to Palestine.



Leibele Waldman in the early 1930s. The American-born, baseball-loving "microphone cantor" was featured by Joseph Seiden in a half-dozen shorts and as many features.



Moishe Oysher (turning toward camera) on location for *Dem Khazns Zundl*, in Easton, Pennsylvania, summer 1937.

each case he faces the camera, away from the congregation which forms his ostensible audience.) The committee members start quarreling among themselves, but a fat fixer solves the problem by bringing on a third, "American" Waldman. Hilariously full of himself, the dapper, clean-shaven cantor struts in and sings a pop song (complete with Helen Kane-style boop-boop-a-doops). Improbably won over, the committee forms a circle around him and begins to dance.

A 1937 press release put out by Waldman's radio sponsor, the World Clothing Exchange, termed him "the only cantor who is under contract to make Jewish talking pictures." In fact, Waldman's hegemony was about to be challenged by a younger and more dynamic figure. Late that year, the thirty-year-old-Moishe Oysher would make his film debut in *Dem Khazns Zundl* (*The Cantor's Son*).

In the wake of *Yidl mitn Fidl*, two youthful would-be moguls, Arthur Block and Samuel M. Segal, both with extensive experience in the business end of Yiddish theater, formed Eron Pictures. They immediately signed Oysher and hired the ailing Sidney Goldin (inactive in the five and a half years since *Uncle Moses*) to direct the charismatic singer. Alexander Olshanetsky, a former concert violinist who had previously worked with Oysher at the Second Avenue Theater, composed a score that included his 1932 hit "Mayn Shtetle Belz" (My Little Village Belz). The song, which had been introduced on the stage by Aaron Lebedeff and was full of nostalgia for the old country, was crucial. No less than *Grine Felder*, also in the works during the summer of 1937, *Dem Khazns Zundl* was a post-Green undertaking—an open-air production that looked back toward the tribal wholeness of *shtetl* life.

The film's announced budget was \$40,000. Robert Van Rosen, who had worked with Schwartz at the Yiddish Art Theater, built a plywood "Belz" in the Pocono Mountains, near Easton, Pennsylvania. For the first time since the advent of sound, Goldin would have the opportunity to shoot extensive exteriors. However, the director suffered a heart attack in the midst of production and returned to New York, where he died two weeks later at the age of fifty-seven. Goldin was succeeded by the cosmopolitan Ilya Motyleff, who had studied with Reinhardt, assisted Stanislavsky, and directed Pirandello. This last credit seems appropriate to *Dem Khazns Zundl* insofar as it is a movie that self-consciously reflects and comments upon its star's life. Indeed, more than being a pastoral romance or a glorified cantorial, *Dem Khazns Zundl* is an anti-*Jazz Singer*—with Louis Freiman's script designed to dramatize Oysher's return to the fold.²

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Born not in the Galician town of Belz but in the Bessarabian village of Lipkon around 1908, Oysher was descended from seven generations of cantors and was a vocal prodigy who made his debut at the age of six. Nine years later he joined his (unemployed) father in Canada but, because his voice was changing, could only find work as a dishwasher. Once his voice returned, Oysher sang light opera in dramatic clubs, supplementing his income with freelance cantorial work. The Yiddish actor Ben Galing, who encountered Oysher in the mid-twenties in Minneapolis, recalls that the singer claimed to "make \$50 a shabes."

In the summer of 1928, Oysher came to New York, hired by Louis Weiss, manager of the Hopkinson Theater in Brownsville and future producer of *Uncle Moses*, to star opposite his wife, Florence. However it may have improved Weiss's box office, the move cost him his marriage. After a hastily arranged South American tour, Oysher and Florence Weiss spent their next season in Newark. Admitted to the Hebrew Actors Union in late 1931, Oysher played one season for Thomashefsky, managed the Amphion Theater in Williamsburg for another, and became a fixture of Yiddish radio as "*Der Mayster-Zinger fun Zayn Folk*" (The Master Singer of His People).

Oysher did not make his Second Avenue debut until the fall of 1935. *Variety*, which caught him in *Der Mazldiker Bokher*, known in English as *Lucky Boy* (the same show that introduced Leo Fuchs), was not impressed: Oysher "has a fine voice [but] his vocal training doesn't alter the fact that he hasn't the vaguest conception of stage acting. He doesn't know what to do with his hands, he doesn't know how to walk, he doesn't know how to make even the slightest speech convincing." This was not *Der Mayster-*

Zinger's only problem. During the High Holy Days, he accepted an offer to serve as cantor at the First Rumanian-American Congregation, on Rivington Street. This return to the pulpit was opposed by a faction of the congregation who were sufficiently impassioned to surround the *shul* with pickets.¹

The controversy was revived a year later when, after a successful season on Second Avenue, the erstwhile star of *Der Mazldiker Bokher* was engaged as guest cantor at the Yeshivah Hacoheh, in East Flatbush. Clearly amused by this "real life parallel" to *The Jazz Singer*, the *New York Evening Journal* reported that Oysher would be "escorted by police to prevent a recurrence of a disturbance which took place in Manhattan a year ago." A disturbance occurred, and *Variety*, too, became intrigued by the tale of the show-biz *khazn* trapped between two worlds:

AN ACTOR OR A CANTOR,
YIDDISH THESP'S WORRY

Moishe Oysher is in trouble because he couldn't make up his mind whether he wants to be a Yiddish actor or a cantor. Now he seems to be caught between the two, with no jobs at either.

Oysher started out as a cantor, doing quite well. Radio appearances followed and were clicks, so he went on to legit, making his bow last season as a star at the Second Avenue Theater. But, at the recent high holidays, Oysher, with the Yiddish legit season over, went back to cantoring at a Brooklyn synagogue. That meant probably the first time that an official in a religious ceremony and in a holy house met with critical attention, because a number of Jews objected to an actor, obviously not "a holy man," getting the assignment.

Serious rumpus followed, with a lot of squawking and many cancellations from the synagogue membership, etc., plus a few open catcalls during the services.

Now Oysher is pretty well convinced he is probably through as a cantor unless he forgets all about acting, but he likes acting. At the same time he hasn't been offered a star or feature spot in any of the next season Yiddish legit troupes in New York, because managers feel that perhaps his presence in the cast may bother some prospective customers.

Oysher resolved the issue in 1937. Leaving the stage, he became a certified cantor, employed (often simultaneously) by the Stone Avenue Talmud Torah, in Brownsville, and the Minford Place Synagogue, in the Bronx, as well as by the First Rumanian-American Congregation—which nearly twenty years later he would proudly term “the most Orthodox synagogue in town.” But if the theater was now off-limits for Oysher, *Dem Khazns Zundl* might be interpreted as part of his rehabilitation.

The film opens in Belz with the revelation that thirteen-year-old Shloyme is “*tsvishn di komediantn*” (with the actors). As his distraught mother rushes to Felden's Summer Theater (a copy of the outdoor Green Tree Café in Jassy, where Avrom Goldfadn more or less originated Yiddish theater sixty years before), one player is explaining to the boy that he too was a cantor's son, and “so was the great Mogulesko.” When Shloyme is recruited for a minor role, his father takes it as near-conversion to Christianity: “He'll beat up Jews yet!” the *khazn* cries. Unheeding, Shloyme runs away with the troop to the Lower East Side.

There he learns that “America is not America.”

Fifteen years later, having grown into Moishe Oysher, the starving cantor's son wanders into the Roumanian Garden on Second Avenue and is given a menial job. One day, while the resident chanteuse (Florence Weiss) is rehearsing, the humble floor-washer bursts into song. Overwhelmed, she prevails upon her lover, the nightclub owner, to hire this unknown singer immediately. Success is assured when sultry Weiss and virile Oysher perform a dreamy, subtly syncopated duet of “Mayn Shtetle Belz” in their trademark close harmony.

Back in the *shtetl*, the cantor has been somewhat mollified by a letter from his son that included \$25 for a new *talit*: “So our boy didn't forget he was a Jew,” he grumbles. Indeed, despite his new celebrity, Oysher remembers little else. A vulgar radio booker (Isidore Cashier) associates Jewish material with “sadness” and pressures the burgeoning star to sing Mozart instead. Oysher, meanwhile, wishes he could drop secular material altogether and chant his father's prayers. Finally, in the midst of a national tour, he decides he must go to Belz for his parent's fiftieth wedding anniversary, and, walking out on his contracts, returns to the Old Country—accompanied not by his consort Weiss but by his manager (a comic role played by Michael Rosenberg).

“America is here! Shloymele has come!” the natives shout. Oysher, in turn, is thunderstruck when he discovers that his childhood sweetheart has become the gorgeous Judith Abarbanel. The New World recedes to but an inexplicable interlude. (As Rosenberg attempts to describe the *goldene medine* to the old maid who is courting him, “America is . . . America is . . . America is . . . America.”) In Goldin's two previous features, America was associated with economic exploitation and the failure of community. Here it carries aspects of inauthenticity. “I tried to

find my real Abarbanel.

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find my real self but I couldn't," Oysher tells Abarbanel.

Weiss, meanwhile, has had no word from Oysher and, in desperation, sails for Belz, arriving the day before Oysher's wedding. She finds him chanting for the delighted townspeople, and wringing the situation for every tear, congratulates the bride while declining to remain for the ceremony. In the last shot, Oysher watches this manifestation of modernity vanish back across the sea. Then, with a momentous "Yes," he advances toward his untainted Belzer bride. In a sense, American-Yiddish films would do the same: the major features of the next three and a half years would all be set in an idealized Eastern Europe.

Unlike the Jolson of *The Jazz Singer*, Oysher's *Khazns Zundl* comes full circle to willingly endorse traditional Jewish values. Although Oysher's own return to the cantorate was more ambiguous and problematic, the movie was presented as the dramatization of his story. "There is only one slight divergence," the *New York Post* coyly noted. "Florence Weiss, Mr. Oysher's wife in real life, in the film plays the other woman and loses out in the end. That Mr. Oysher regrets very much but he does admit that it would not have been too good box office if the film showed him as a married man of ten years' standing."

Promoted as the most expensive Yiddish talkie to date, *Dem Khazns Zundl* opened on Christmas Eve 1937 at the Squire, the same Broadway-area theater where *Grine Felder* had its premiere ten weeks before. The English-language reviews were mixed, although most praised Oysher's tenor and Olshansky's score. If its midtown run was shorter, the Oysher vehicle proved nearly as popular as *Grine Felder* in Jewish neighborhoods, playing some Bronx

movie houses that had never shown a Yiddish talkie before (and some that never would again) for as long as a month as it worked its way up and down Southern Boulevard throughout the winter and spring of 1938.¹

Flush with the success of *Grine Felder* and mindful of *Dem Khazns Zundl's* appeal, Collective Film Producers followed with a synthesis of the two. Their source was another Yiddish classic—David Pinski's 1906 drama *Yankl der Shmid* (Yankl the Blacksmith). Reworking *Yankl* as a vehicle for Oysher, with a supporting cast drawn heavily from the Yiddish Art Theater, producer Roman Rebush and director Edgar G. Ulmer engaged Jacob Weinberg to compose a score and playwright Ossip Dymow to work with Pinski on the adaptation.²

A naturalistic drama, *Yankl der Shmid* was one of the first Yiddish plays to offer a psychological study of physical passion. Sexual desire is at once a primal drive and a source of ambivalence. Although robust Yankl loves his sickly Tamara, he cannot help but succumb, however guiltily, to the more sensuous charms of his neighbor's wife. In this sense, *Yankl* reflected a part of Oysher's own personality: *Der Mayster-Zinger* had a reputation as a lusty skirt-chaser who drank, smoked, and didn't necessarily keep the sabbath. (It was said that he smoked on *shabes*, even in *shul*, claiming it was necessary for his voice.) Indeed, when Oysher sang in synagogue on Friday nights, he often had witnesses escort him to temple on foot to reassure the congregation that he had not violated the sabbath by taking a taxi.

Religion, however, barely exists in *Yankl der Shmid*, known in English as *The Singing Blacksmith*. Dymow and Pinski modulated the original drama,

lightening the tone and opening up the plot with a lengthy prologue and additional (mainly comic) characters. Where the play began with Yankl's engagement to the delicate Tamara, the movie goes back to his childhood. Desiring to leave *kheyder* for the gymnasium, young Yankl (Herschel Bernardi) is instead apprenticed to the hard-drinking blacksmith Bendl (Ben-Zvi Baratoff), from whom he eventually inherits the smithy. Growing up into the dashing Oysher, Yankl is for most of the movie an impetuous roughneck and womanizer—almost as much Cossack as Jew, a "*molodyets*" (a loanword from Russian, meaning a fine youth).

In 1927, A. Mukdoyni elaborated on this development in the Yiddish theater:

In the early days of Jewish operetta the dancing comedian was always a *shlimazl* with *paves* and a long *kapote*. Then a new type of Jewish lad appeared in the Russian-Jewish milieu. He spoke half Russian and half Yiddish. He was a mixture of Russian munificence and good nature with Jewish cleverness and agility. He was a lad with a Russian shock of hair, polished boots, an embroidered shirt and a cap that sat jauntily and cockily on his head.

He had become aware that there are bourgeoisie and proletarians in the world, and he was with the latter. . . .

[The *molodyets*] appeared first in real life, out of the ranks of the Bund and other Jewish socialist parties, who adored these vital, courageous folk children of theirs. . . .

An agile dancer, with a quick tongue, he will beat up anyone who insults him; he will fight for a girl, for the revolution, for a comrade. He is not comical. He is not a *yold* [fool] like the bourgeois sons and daughters. He is full of joy.

He is Yankl.

The movie's plot revolves around the smith's philandering and his eventual marriage to the orphan Tamara (Miriam Riselle). Initially Yankl is resolved to remain free: "Why eat stale bread when I can get fresh rolls?" he jokes. ("Someday you'll choke," warns the freelance *shadkhnte* played by Anna Appel.) Yankl is presently dallying with Rivke, a married woman played by Florence Weiss, but drops her when smitten by the beautiful, lavender-eyed Tamara (scarcely the frail creature of Pinski's play). The pious instinctively dislike Yankl, but Tamara responds to his life-affirming qualities. "I prefer him to that dried-up *yeshive-bokher* who courted me last year," she tells her rich, stingy, disapproving aunt and uncle. Although again tempted by Rivke, Yankl is ultimately transformed. Thanks to Tamara, he becomes a *mentsh*—a conscientious worker, husband, and father (the baby played by Ulmer's infant daughter). Thus, *Yankl* celebrates the *proster Yid* and a *Yidishkayt* (or a *mentshlekhkayt*) far more secular than that of *Grine Felder*.

Visually *Yankl* is closer than *Grine Felder* to the expressionistic noirs and thrillers Ulmer would make in Hollywood during the 1940s. The interiors are dramatically lit and exhibit his characteristic use of odd angles and bold perspective (for example, positioning outsized furniture in the foreground of the frame). The exterior set, with its onion-dome façades and plywood cottages, is far more elaborate than *Grine Felder's*. The pace, however, is less fluid, although as *Yankl* was first released at nearly two and a half hours and has since lost almost forty minutes (including a scene of the young Yankl's Bar Mitzvah), it is difficult to judge its erratic narrative rhythms. Unlike the principals of *Grine Felder*, Oysher and Weiss had star temperaments—he stub-

Moishe Appel in (U.S.A. onion-d church) Edgar C "shtetl" near Ne and usec subsequ talkie, C

born, sh a halt fc Agair a portal where h director in a stat May 19: ate spot ton, in which t Shrine (were ini

Moishe Oysher and Anna Appel in *Yankl der Shmid* (U.S.A., 1938). Note the onion-domed Orthodox church in the background: Edgar G. Ulmer built this "shtetl" on a monastery near Newton, New Jersey, and used it for his subsequent Ukrainian talkie, *Cossacks in Exile*.



born, she jealous—and the action tends to grind to a halt for their numbers.

Again, Ulmer had to cut corners. To avoid renting a portable electric generator, he sought a location where he could tap into overhead power lines. The director and his staff—"two boys and four old Jews, in a station wagon we bought for \$110"—set out in May 1938 to comb rural New Jersey for an appropriate spot. Following an old dirt road outside of Newton, in Sussex County, they found a perfect site, which turned out to belong to a Catholic monastery, Shrine of the Little Flower. Ulmer and company were initially dubious—after all, 1938 was the year

that *Social Justice*, the print organ of the "radio priest" Father Coughlin, began to serialize *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The brothers, however, reminded them that "the Catholic Church has always sponsored the arts," and, as they all had beards, even volunteered to play the parts of the townspeople. Ulmer subsequently discovered that a nudist camp was located on one side of the monastery, while on the other stood Camp Nordland, owned by the pro-Nazi German-American Bund. (This South Jersey sampler of American free speech inspired some useful publicity when the *New York Mirror* ran a color spread on Newton's "Hollywood in Miniature.")



There's Freedom in the Western Hills—for Jewish and Russian Artists, Models, Musicians and Actors



Anna Popov, Russian Actress, in the scene "The Day of the Execution" in the Motion Picture Version of "Yankl" (left)



A Ukrainian Model in the Jewish Film "Yankl" (left) and the Russian Actress in the scene "The Day of the Execution" in the Motion Picture Version of "Yankl" (right)



Ukrainian Model in the Jewish Film "Yankl" (left) and the Russian Actress in the scene "The Day of the Execution" in the Motion Picture Version of "Yankl" (right)

Hollywood in Miniature

It is a fact that the motion picture industry has been a great success story since its inception. The industry has grown from a small-time operation in the late 19th century to a multi-billion dollar industry today. The success of the industry is due to many factors, including the invention of motion pictures, the development of the film industry, and the marketing of motion pictures to a wide audience.

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Impressed by the project's ingenuity, the *New York Mirror* ran a production story on *Yankl der Shmid* in its Sunday color supplement (September 18, 1938).

With his usual resourcefulness, Ulmer built a trompe-l'oeil *shtetl* that would serve the combined purposes of *Yankl* and his second Ukrainian production, *Zaporezets za Dunayan* (Cossacks Across the Danube; known in English as *Cossacks in Exile*). Having survived a fire that damaged the cast and crew's Newton hotel, Ulmer shot both pictures simultaneously over the course of the summer. *Morgn Frayhayt*

hayt reporter Ber Green rhapsodized over the "homey Russian *shtetl* transplanted bag and baggage to the green fields of New Jersey."

The sun was setting. The technicians, the actors, and the director were all exhausted. . . . I glanced at the nearby lake. It swallowed long shadows from the trees, indifferent to the film that was being born here. Even the field looked tired. It would soon be asleep. Tomorrow it would have another hard day's work. It will have to act in a movie. . . .

According to Ulmer, when *Yankl* had its Broadway premiere in early November, the "entire Catholic clergy of New Jersey arrived in full regalia to see the picture." So, too, did Oysher's *patriotn*. "Not since *Marie Antoinette* opened [at the Astor on August 16] has a night film premiere attracted such an enthusiastic crowd," reported the *Brooklyn Eagle*. "The Continental was packed to capacity. This was Oysher's crowd. It applauded vigorously after he completed each important scene."

Yankl has its share of bravura, chest-baring performances—not to mention a scene in which Oysher demonstrates that he can vocalize while cracking and eating nuts, and another, somewhat anachronistic, number in which he and Weiss scat-sing their current hit "Khasidl in New York," punctuating the harmonized *bim-boms* of this syncopated *nign* with an occasional "Oy-vey." The movie opened less than a week before Kristallnacht, but American Jews, too, were in need of a fearless *molodyets*: that same month, Father Coughlin broadcast a speech explaining that German anti-Semitism, greatly exaggerated by Jews, was just a form of anti-Bolshevism.

As an audience film, *Yankl* turned out to be less epochal than either *Grine Felder* or *Dem Khazns Zundl*; it ran a respectable four weeks on Broadway

but vanished from the January. Reviews, however, were favorably. If *Kempfer* (The Jewish-minded vulgarization of the *Morgn Frayhayt* movie's *literarish* quality did picture," William "the producers of *Grine* standards"; Ber Green while singling out Art particular praise in the hapless husband. (Des other *Artefnik*—Lubartoff's wife—*Yankl's* papers boasted its "Art The English-language *The New York Herald* "definite improvement scenes demonstrating to Benno Schneider." This as well:

One is not so interested in about-town and his capitol love influence as one is in these Russian Jews went a mess of getting married. T ritual even in the approach charm.

Others were more sensitive implications. Finding *Yankl* embarrassing Yiddish film *Be A Mother*," the *Daily* this "comic-tragic story splendid people, its background divisions, its fascinating humor."

but vanished from the neighborhoods by the end of January. Reviews, however, were almost unanimously favorable. If the Zionist weekly *Der Yidisher Kempfer* (The Jewish Fighter) found *Yankl* a simple-minded vulgarization of Pinski's drama, *Der Tog* and the *Morgn Frayhayt* alike were impressed with the movie's *literarish* qualities. Terming *Yankl* "a splendid picture," William Edlin was gratified to see that "the producers of *Grine Felder* have not lowered their standards"; Ber Green used virtually the same words, while singling out Artef star Michael Goldstein for particular praise in the supporting role of Rivke's hapless husband. (Despite the presence of only one other Artefnik—Luba Riemer, who played Barattoff's wife—*Yankl's* advertising in left-wing newspapers boasted its "Artef cast.")

The English-language press was similarly positive. The *New York Herald-Tribune* deemed the film a "definite improvement" over *Grine Felder*, some scenes demonstrating the "finesse of [Artef director] Benno Schneider." The movie was a bit exotic as well:

One is not so interested in the gay blacksmith-about-town and his capitulation to a steady love influence as one is in the manner in which these Russian Jews went about the serious business of getting married. There is a good deal of ritual even in the approach, which takes on a certain charm.

Others were more sensitive to the film's political implications. Finding *Yankl* "a far cry from the usual embarrassing Yiddish films of the type of *I Want to Be A Mother*," the *Daily Worker's* David Platt praised this "comic-tragic story of life in old Russia, with its splendid people, its back-breaking poverty, its class divisions, its fascinating folk songs, dances and humor."

Indeed, the heartily folkloric and montage-filled *Yankl* resembles the Soviet cinema of the period more than it does any Russian reality: Yankl, who sings an anthem to labor as he sweats in his smithy, is an explicitly working-class hero, the first in American-Yiddish cinema since the Marxist union-organizer Charlie in *Uncle Moses*. Throughout, religion is identified with wealth and snobbery (or, alternately, ignorance and unhappiness). Even Appel's sympathetic *shadkhnte* is given a heroic proletarian dimension: "All week long we struggle for a living," she tells the smith in a bit of class-conscious coffee-klatching.

When Yankl is depressed because Tamara's friends reject him, she comforts him: "Why are they better? Because they are merchants and you are a worker? Great men have written, 'Life depends on the worker.'" A truly progressive girl, Tamara seems familiar with Freud as well as Marx. "A man knows so little of himself," she sighs when, after the designing Rivke leaves her husband, Yankl insists on taking his former mistress in as a boarder, just to prove she has no appeal for him.

After *Yankl's* premiere, the Collective Film Producers variously announced their next projects as an adaptation of Hirschbein's *Di Puste Kretshme* (The Empty Inn); *The Life of Paul Ehrlich*, a biography of the German physician who developed a cure for syphilis and would be the subject of Warner Brothers' 1940 *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet*; and *Kol Nidre: Song of the Ghetto*, an anti-Nazi film written by Ber Green on "the oppression of the intellectual Jews and Catholics." None of these came to fruition, and in 1939 the partners went their separate ways. Ulmer produced and directed *Di Klyatshe* (The Old Mare)



while Roman Rebush produced *Mirele Efros*, hiring filmmaker Josef Berne to direct.⁶

Ludwig Landy, also a member of the Collective, went into partnership with Ira Greene to make a third Oysher vehicle. Announced in August, along with an all-black feature and a "documentary on current labor problems," *Der Vilner Shtot Khazn* (The Vilna Town-Cantor), at one point known as *Forsake Me Not*, did not begin production for another three months. Ossip Dymow reworked Mark Arnshteyn's play, *Der Vilner Balebesl* (which is uncredited), the poet Jacob Glatstein polishing the dialogue and Alexander Olshanetsky supplying the music. Sam Rosen, a former associate of Joseph Seiden, manned the camera. To direct, the producers engaged a thirty-eight-year-old German exile, future B-movie director Max Nosseck.⁷

Although Nosseck had not directed a movie in five years (and directed this one illegally, having received a visa restricting his work to the New York World's Fair), his experience is evident: *Der Vilner Shtot Khazn* is characterized by sophisticated chiaroscuro and a reasonably developed film language. The movie's budget was a reported \$20,000, and the



mise-en-scène is lavish by Yiddish standards, if somewhat mechanical. (Columbia Pictures—where Nosseck's brother Martin worked as Harry Cohen's personal projectionist—was sufficiently impressed with the film to offer its director a contract.) Still, its dramatic power derives mainly from close-ups of Oysher's sensually melancholy face and liquid eyes.

Whereas Arnshteyn's play begins *in medias res* with the *Balebesl* and his family debating whether or not he should accept an offer to appear on the Warsaw stage, for the film, Dymow provides a prologue showing how Strashunsky (Oysher) is gradually seduced by the Gentile world, in the person of the Polish composer Stanisław Moniuszko. The first scene, a veritable production number, has Moniuszko, dressed as if for the opera, attending a Rosh Hashanah service at a Vilna synagogue to hear Strashunsky sing. A cantor and the son of a cantor, Strashunsky is initially as timid as he is pious. In secret, however, he visits the Gentiles to learn about their music. In a scene presided over by a bust of Beethoven, the *Balebesl* succumbs to the *Moonlight Sonata* and eagerly accepts the composer's offer to teach him how to read music.



Subsequently Strashunsky fees dreams of visitin at last, after tw too tenderheart stern father-in-l less yielding. "S took your golde it?" he cries up sidering a trip to hear my Jewish s vined, the old sands of years w deaf." The rabb that "If you go worlds." But the own, and, despi where he hears c foreboding melo pear in Moniuszk In the film, s placed onto the 1 *Khazn* was origin musical drama, [a



Der Vilner Shtot Khazn (U.S.A., 1940); frame enlargements. The legendary Vilner Balebesl (Moishe Oysher) chanting the Rosh Hashanah service. Polish composer Stanisław Moniuszko (Jack Mylong Munz) and his conductor (Leonard Elliot) are in the congregation. That night, they introduce the Balebesl to Beethoven; he succumbs. Moniuszko brings the cantor to Warsaw, where he sings opera and captivates a countess's niece (Helen Beverly). Too late, the Balebesl recognizes the price his family and community have paid for his desertion; emotionally exhausted, he returns to Vilna on the eve of Yom Kippur, and, after chanting *Kol Nidre*, dies in the synagogue.

Subsequently exposed to Chopin, the depressed Strashunsky feels that he is suffocating in Vilna and dreams of visiting Warsaw. His wife (Florence Weiss at last, after two films playing the other woman) is too tenderhearted to discourage him, though his stern father-in-law, Reb Aaron (Maurice Krohner), is less yielding. "So, you took care of their needs? You took your golden voice and made them a present of it?" he cries upon hearing that Strashunsky is considering a trip to Warsaw. "In any language they will hear my Jewish sorrow," the *Balebesl* reasons. Unconvinced, the old man reminds him that "For thousands of years we have called out to a world that is deaf." The rabbi (Lazar Freed) warns Strashunsky that "If you go to them, you'll be left between two worlds." But the *Balebesl* believes that his voice is his own, and, despite a visit to the empty synagogue, where he hears celestial voices and is beset by strange foreboding melodies, he departs for Warsaw to appear in Moniuszko's opera *Halka*.

In the film, some of this ambivalence was displaced onto the realm of language. *Der Vilner Shtot Khazn* was originally announced as a "six-language musical drama, [although] mainly in Yiddish." Three



Cast and crew of *Der Vilner Shtot Khazn*: an unhappy-looking Helen Beverly is flanked by her equally somber director, Max Nosseck (left), and costar, Moyshe Oysher.

are actually heard: the Gentiles sometimes speak German or *Daytshmerish*; in one scene, a countess, played by Luba Wesoly, starts off in Polish before lapsing into *mame-loshn*. According to film historian Judith Goldberg, Martin Nosseck was still upset nearly forty years after the movie's release that *Der Vilner Shtot Khazn* had been made in Yiddish, thereby limiting its audience. (Nosseck's hindsight may be colored by the failure of the Hollywood Yiddish Film Corporation, which he established in 1939, to produce even a single film.)

The *Balebesl's* sad, soulful demeanor frightens and excites the Poles, particularly the countess's niece Wanda (Helen Beverly). But enchanting as Wanda is, the cantor never forgets Vilna. As in *The Jazz Singer*, his dressing room mirror allows him to gaze into his past. "I'd give half my life to sing in a syn-

agogue once more," he tells the *shames* (sexton), now his dresser (Max Bozyk). On Passover, Strashunsky misses a performance to go to a synagogue, still wearing his evening clothes, to pray for his mother. ("A cantor is a cantor," his disgusted leading lady remarks.) Strashunsky resolves to return home, but Moniuszko and Wanda join forces to keep him: "You can't and you won't. All Warsaw is at your feet."

Back in Vilna, the *Balebesl's* little son cries for him in vain. When the child is taken ill and dies, his death scene is intercut with shots of Strashunsky cavorting onstage in some goofy, "goyish" antics. Like an avenging angel, Reb Aaron appears backstage: "The Almighty has punished you," he shouts and rips his clothes as a symbol of mourning. "There is a God!" Strashunsky drifts out in front of the footlights, near-catatonic. Then he disappears. Wanda is bereft; she and the composer visit Vilna, but Strashunsky is not there. "He never stopped loving you and his child," Wanda comforts the cantor's wife. Strashunsky finally returns to Vilna on *erev Yom Kippur* and wanders into the synagogue, stunning the congregation as he suddenly starts chanting *Kol Nidre*. When he is brought up to the Torah, the errant cantor is overcome and falls down dead. The rabbi has the last word: "For them, you sang. For us, you prayed—*Vilner Balebesl*." No cantor's son ever suffered so cruelly. Jewish tradition has lost the battle, but won the war.⁸

Or was it vice versa? In April 1938, when *Yankl* was about to go into production and *Dem Khazns Zundl* was still playing at the Radio, Jacob Glatstein published "Good Night, World":

Good night, wide world,
Big, stinking world.
Not you, but I, slam the gate.

In my long
With my f
With my p
At my own
I return to

NOTES

1. The selection over every quality and style, the Yiddish stage for the Sabbath a visiting *khazn* Ludwig Satz comparing the style Galician *khazn* Khazndl af Sh (the only Yiddish).
2. The forty-two States three years spent some tin *Khazns Zundl*, premiere, he was *Empress of Dest*.
3. Although C not impossible paying a high on New York dled and jobs in release, only positions.
4. Even so, the *Zundl* had beer but for Block a died of pneum which likely ac to the film (rev).
5. Along with

In my long robe,
 With my flaming, yellow patch,
 With my proud gait,
 At my own command—
 I return to the ghetto . . .

NOTES

1. The selection of a *khazn* could involve considerable negotiation over everything from salary and job description to personality and style, and these lively debates were often satirized on the Yiddish stage. The song "A Khazndl af Shabes" (A Cantor for the Sabbath), which details the variety of opinions concerning a visiting *khazn*'s performance, was frequently recorded. Both Ludwig Satz and Aaron Lebedeff made comedy recordings comparing the styles of New World and Old Country, or Litvak and Galician *khazonim*, and Al Jolson included a version of "A Khazndl af Shabes" in his 1932 stage production *Wonder Bar* (the only Yiddish song he ever recorded).
2. The forty-two-year-old Motyleff had arrived in the United States three years before, directed the Pasadena Playhouse and spent some time with RKO, before coming east to inherit *Dem Khazns Zundl*, his first and only movie. Three weeks after the premiere, he was directing the first of his two Broadway shows, *Empress of Destiny*, on the life of Catherine the Great.
3. Although Oysher was certainly resented as an apostate, it is not impossible that members of the congregation also opposed paying a high fee for a star *khazn*. The Depression took its toll on New York *khazonim* in general. Concert appearances dwindled and jobs disappeared. By the time *Dem Khazns Zundl* was in release, only 50 of New York's 300 *khazonim* held full-time positions.
4. Even so, the producers seem to have lost money. *Dem Khazns Zundl* had been announced as the first of six "Yiddish operettas," but for Block and Segal it would be the last. Block, not yet forty, died of pneumonia in 1939, and the Mecca Film Laboratory, which likely advanced payment on the lab work, assumed rights to the film (reviving it with some regularity into the 1940s).
5. Along with Peretz Hirschbein, the Russian-born Pinski was

among the most highly regarded Yiddish dramatists of the post-Gordin generation. *Der Oytser* (*The Treasure*), his most celebrated play, was produced in 1910 at the Reinhardt Theater in Berlin. He immigrated to New York in 1899 and was one of the first Yiddish writers to become an active socialist. Dymow, also Russian-born, who had at one time been associated with the Moscow Art Theater, did not begin to write in Yiddish until he immigrated to New York in 1913. One of his first American plays was a satire of the commercial Yiddish stage; he was thereafter associated with various art companies including Rudolf Schildkraut's short-lived theater in the Bronx.

6. Berne's *Dawn to Dawn*, a half-hour farm drama which made use of Soviet-style montage and had some art-house play in 1933, was one of the few nonethnic, nonpolitical examples of independent cinema produced in New York during the Depression. The same year as *Mirele Efros*, Berne directed Gilbert Roland in the Spanish-language *La Vida Bohemia*.
7. Nosseck, who also used the name Alexander M. Norris, was born in the East Prussian (later Polish) town of Nakel. After studies in Berlin, Nosseck broke into the Austrian film industry as a silent movie actor. He is credited with directing four features in Germany during the early thirties. Following the Nazi rise to power, Nosseck moved to Paris, where he directed Buster Keaton in *Le Roi des Champs-Élysées* (*The King of the Champs-Élysées*). He also made three films in Spain, and the first Portuguese talkie—all released in 1934.
8. Oysher and Nosseck worked together one more time. In 1954, four years before the singer's death (and one year before the filmmaker returned to Germany), Nosseck directed Oysher in the independent production *Singing in the Dark*. In this post-Holocaust variation on *The Jazz Singer*, Oysher plays a German cantor who loses his family and his memory during the war. After the Liberation, he makes his way to America and becomes a hotel clerk at the establishment housing Luli's Gypsy Paradise, "the gayest spot in New York." There, Oysher is befriended by the comedian in residence, Joey Napoleon (Joey Addams). One night the two get tipsy and Oysher bursts into song. Billed as "Leo the Fabulous," Oysher becomes Luli's star—although he can only sing when intoxicated. At length, Leo is knocked unconscious by a gangster trying to collect on Napoleon's gambling debt; when he comes to, he remembers his tragic past and resumes his identity as a cantor and a cantor's son.

Overleaf: The workings of an implacable fate. A wagon driver (Max Bozyk, left) meets the student Khonen (Leon Liebgold) by a ruined castle outside Kazimierz. *Der Dibek* (Poland, 1937).