

CHAPTER 8

Liquor and Leisure: The Business of Yiddish Vaudeville

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Throughout the late nineteenth century, a visit to one of the Yiddish theatres on the Bowery was the most popular form of commercial entertainment for New York's eastern European Jews. In the early 1900s, however, their entertainment preferences and practices changed dramatically. New forms of public recreation developed alongside the legitimate Yiddish theatre and the sponsored balls, picnic outings, and other non-commercial entertainments organized by *landsmanshaftn* (hometown societies) and trade unions. By 1910, moving-picture shows, Yiddish vaudeville theatres, and commercial dance halls dominated the local leisure landscape.

The main victim of this process of differentiation within the entertainment infrastructure was the so-called "legitimate" Yiddish dramatic theatre. The decline in the number of seats available for Yiddish performances gives a clear indication of its decline in market share and popularity. In 1900, there were three large Yiddish playhouses on the Bowery: the Thalia Theatre, the Windsor Theatre, and the People's Theatre. Together, they could accommodate up to 9,000 spectators. With the inauguration of a fourth Yiddish theatre on Grand Street in 1903, the total number of seats jumped from 9,000 to 11,000. Almost immediately, however, it turned out that the market for Yiddish drama had reached a level of saturation that was not sustainable commercially. Despite the fact that the Jewish population in New York City was growing explosively due to mass migration following the Kishinev pogroms of 1903, there was an overcapacity in terms of "Yiddish" seats. To adjust supply and demand, one out of the four Yiddish legitimate playhouses was rented out to an English-language company every season until a more lasting solution was worked out. In 1909, the Grand Street Theatre was given over to motion-picture interests. That same year, the old Windsor Theatre was demolished to make way for the entrance to the Manhattan Bridge. On the other hand, two new Yiddish play-

houses opened their doors on Second Avenue in 1911–1912: David Kessler’s Second Avenue Theatre and Boris Thomashefsky’s National Theatre. Still, the balance remained negative. The total seating capacity declined from 9,000 in 1900 to 6,000 in 1912. In the same period, the city’s immigrant Jewish population had more than tripled.¹

The expansion of cheap, commercialized entertainment and the concomitant decline of legitimate Yiddish theatre was by no means an isolated phenomenon. All across the United States, ten-cent vaudeville and five-cent picture shows (nickel-odeons) made inroads into everyday life around the turn of the century, providing working-class families with unprecedented access to public entertainment and offering exciting new pastimes for the middle classes. Yet if we explain the emergence of Yiddish music halls and *moving piktshur pletzer* (“moving-picture” houses, or cinemas) only in terms of a more general expansion of cheap amusements nationwide, we would fail to perceive the specific local conditions that spurred the exceptionally rapid transformation of the Jewish immigrant entertainment business in New York City. In presenting a detailed material analysis of the economic forces that shaped leisure business on the Lower East Side, I hope to illuminate profound changes in the recreational patterns of immigrant Jews within less than a decade, culminating in the triumph of the movies as the most popular form of entertainment.

Public Meeting Halls: Spaces and Practices

The genealogy of the entertainment revolution that took place on the Lower East Side is closely linked with the history of the district’s public meeting halls. Between 1900 and 1905, the small neighborhood meeting hall in the heart of the Jewish quarter rapidly developed into the dominant site of cheap entertainment. Changing conditions in the meeting-hall business had created new challenges for the entrepreneurs who ran these halls, making ventures outside their regular realm of activities necessary, if not always as profitable as they had initially hoped.

Multi-purpose public halls and saloons with assembly rooms were central institutions of late nineteenth-century working-class culture and common in most immigrant neighborhoods.² In 1898, the *Trow’s Business Directory* listed forty-six meeting halls on the Lower East Side, twenty-five of which were located in the center of the Jewish quarter (the area east of the Bowery and below East Houston Street). The majority of these establishments were converted tenement buildings and could accommodate up to 500 people at most. Typically, the main floor served as a multi-purpose hall that would be rented out to immigrant organizations and private persons for a wide variety of activities, such as mass meetings, masquerade balls, and weddings. The basement housed a saloon, kitchen, and dining room. The upper floors were divided into small assembly rooms and makeshift synagogues.

Most meeting halls were operated by small-time entrepreneurs, who hardly ever owned the building. They secured its lease for several years and paid an annual rent for the entire premises, which they subsequently subleased. The smaller assembly rooms were rented out per month, the main hall per day or night. The rental of assembly rooms, however, was not the core business. It generated income, but not enough to make a profit. Figures from the Golden Rule Hall on Rivington Street, for example, suggest that the income from rentals barely covered fixed expenses such as the annual rent.³ The sale of liquor was almost certainly the main source of income for Samuel Friedman, who ran this well-attended hall during the 1890s. At the Golden Rule Hall and elsewhere, *landsmanshaftn*, trade unions, and other clubs often paid a nominal rental fee for the assembly rooms in which they gathered, on the understanding that their members would patronize the saloon in the building. It was standard practice on the East Side that when the receipts from the sale of drinks on the night of a ball or concert had been satisfactory to the management, the same organization could have the hall free of charge for its next function.⁴ Similarly, poor couples could rent a hall for a modest price or obtain it for nothing to celebrate their wedding. Even then, it was understood that the hall keeper would make money on the wine and beer ordered by the guests, as well as from the hat checks sold at the entrance.⁵ Only assembly rooms run by settlement societies did not serve liquor; all other meeting halls had a saloon function. In addition, many hall keepers operated a liquor and wine store on the premises or in the immediate vicinity.

Economically speaking, the trouble was that most Jews were moderate drinkers, unlike the district's older cast of Germans and Irish, who spent much of their leisure time around the bar. According to an 1898 report of the University Settlement Society, "the number of one saloon to every five hundred people" in the downtown Jewish quarter compared "well with many of the best suburban residence towns."⁶ Those data were confirmed by a sociologist who found that "as the Jewish population of a given district increases, the number of 'gin mills' decreases . . . [B]etween the [Russian Jew] and the saloon there is no affinity."⁷ Obviously, this is a somewhat exaggerated observation because "discussing the affairs of the day over a glass of beer or wine" was not uncommon among Jewish workers, as a settlement worker observed.⁸ Still, for the majority of East Side Jews, drinking was not a fact of everyday life, but an occasion for celebration, whether social or religious. In addition, many newly arrived immigrants could simply not afford to socialize around a glass of beer. As labor organizer Bernard Weinstein explains in his memoirs, greenhorns "didn't have a nickel" (the standard price for a glass of beer).⁹ Slack seasons in the garment industry, which employed many immigrant Jews, also affected the turnover of retail businesses that catered primarily to a working-class clientele. In sum, then, operating a meeting hall was an insecure business, strongly subject to economic and seasonal fluctuation (winter being the best season).

Cutthroat competition was not uncommon and the leases of the halls frequently changed hands.

For the small-time meeting-hall managers, the situation became increasingly difficult at the end of the nineteenth century, when real-estate developers began to invest in large, modern meeting-hall buildings that offered a wide range of rooms, including halls that could accommodate up to 1,200 people. The older and much smaller meeting halls, almost all located in former tenement buildings in the central part of the Jewish quarter, could not compete with their new counterparts, such as Liberty Hall on East Houston Street or Progress Assembly Rooms on Avenue A.¹⁰ There was still enough interest for the smaller assembly rooms on the upper floors of these older establishments, because the demand for this type of space was higher than the supply. But immigrant organizations and private persons showed little interest in the outdated halls on the ground floor and preferred to organize their annual balls or celebrate their weddings in a more fashionable hall that offered the latest conveniences, including such exciting novelties as an electric *khupe* (wedding canopy). Confronted with a decline in net earnings, the more enterprising hall keepers radically changed their strategy. Rather than renting the main hall out to third parties for non-commercial activities, they began to develop the space as a site for cheap commercial entertainment, often in close partnership with a “specialist.” At the Golden Rule, for instance, one “professor” Ueberall ran a dancing academy on weekday evenings.¹¹ Around 1900, commercial dance halls began to spread all over the East Side, soon followed by the latest trend on the Bowery: the Yiddish music hall.

Early Yiddish Music Halls and Concert Saloons

The first Yiddish music hall, the Eldorado Theatre, opened in September of 1901. Four months later, there were three Yiddish music halls on the Bowery. On their heels, a number of East Side saloon- and hall keepers started offering free variety shows in the back rooms of their establishments or in the main hall. It is important to emphasize that in the early days there were considerable differences between the Yiddish music halls on the Bowery (the traditional entertainment zone) and the Yiddish concert saloons, which were located in the residential tenement district east of the Bowery.

The Yiddish music halls on the Bowery—the Eldorado Theatre, London Theatre, and People’s Music Hall—were run by vaudeville actors who maintained strong ties with the Yiddish legitimate stage and borrowed many of its business practices. Unlike concert saloons, all three Bowery music halls charged admission for their shows. Tickets were the main source of income, although it should be noted that patrons could order refreshments at the bar inside the auditorium or in

an adjoining saloon. This was also a common practice in the legitimate Yiddish playhouses and a much-welcomed source of additional income, just like the sale of confections. At the Eldorado Theatre, ticket prices ranged from fifteen to fifty cents at night; for matinee seats prices were set at ten, twenty, and thirty cents. The schedule was the same as in the nearby legitimate playhouses. For instance, the Eldorado Theatre presented a daily show at 8:15 p.m. and matinee performances on Saturdays and Sundays at 2:15 p.m. In addition to the box-office shows, the Bowery music halls also sold blocks of tickets at reduced prices for benefit performances. Abraham Tantzman, the manager of the Eldorado, promised “congregations, lodges, societies, and private persons very cheap benefit nights”—again a well-established practice in the Yiddish theatrical business.¹² Finally, it should be noted that from the outset some prominent Yiddish theatre managers were involved in vaudeville activities. The People’s Music Hall was launched by Jacob Adler, Boris Thomashefsky, and Joseph Edelstein as a vaudeville subsidiary of the People’s Theatre. In February 1902, they engaged Yudele Beltzer’s double-brass dance quartet and a few talented youngsters, and presented their own vaudeville show in the small playhouse where Hurwitz’s Rumanian troupe had played for years.

In sharp contrast with the Yiddish music halls on the Bowery, the concert saloons that had opened up in the heart of the Jewish quarter did not sell tickets at first. Until 1905–1906, all that was demanded of those who watched these “free” shows was that they spend five cents on a glass of beer or wine, preferably ordered in combination with some Hungarian meat patties, Romanian peppers, or other well-seasoned snacks that would further stimulate the consumption of drinks.¹³ For obvious reasons, the saloon keepers did not empty the house after each performance. They allowed customers to sit as long as they liked or, more precisely, as long as they continued drinking and eating (most concert saloons served food). The particular circumstances under which saloonkeepers operated their variety houses prompted the practice of “continuous” shows, meaning that the first act was brought back on stage when the final act exited, so that customers could enter at any point during show.¹⁴

Within a few years, Yiddish vaudeville would become a major force on the local entertainment market. Initially, however, “the public kept far away from the Yiddish music halls,” according to the first historian of the Yiddish stage, Bernard Gorin.¹⁵ A fierce anti-vaudeville campaign by the *Tageblatt* and *Forverts*, in combination with bad management and lack of capital, were the main reasons for the slow start.¹⁶ Of the three admission-charging Yiddish music halls that opened on the Bowery, only the People’s Music Hall survived its first year. The smaller music halls in the heart of the Jewish quarter fared a little better. A few concert saloons went under, but most remained in business, even if it was not a particularly booming business. Vaudeville gave these halls something extra over the competition, and the free entertainment program bolstered the consumption of alcohol.

Regulating the Liquor Trade

A higher turnover in terms of liquor sales might well have been the strongest incentive for saloon- and hall keepers to offer vaudeville shows. Due to major changes in the liquor business following new legislation, their profit margin on beer had declined significantly. Large corporate brewers had gained control over the market and often held iron-clad contracts over their clients. Many independent saloon keepers feared that they had to “work their entire life for a brewer.”¹⁷ Brewery control began in 1896, with the introduction of the Raines Law, a New York State anti-vice bill that imposed severe restrictions on the liquor trade. Among other measures, the yearly license fee was raised to an excessive \$1,200, and an \$1,800 bond was required on all saloons, to be forfeited upon any violation of the law. To protect their own commercial interests, large breweries began to facilitate the payment of the license fee and stood surety for the bond. In return for this financial assistance, saloonkeepers were bound by contract to purchase all beers and ales from their backer at a fixed price.¹⁸ As brewers reaped a substantial part of their clients’ profits, saloon keepers saw their net earnings go down. To survive, they had either to sell more beer or to find additional sources of income (or both). Add to this the growing competition from large meeting halls and the fact that drinking in a commercial setting remained a relatively marginal affair among Jewish immigrants, and we begin to understand why so many meeting-hall managers ventured into the amusement business proper.

Five years after the introduction of the Raines Law, about twenty percent of the East Side saloons and meeting halls increased their profits by running commercial dances.¹⁹ About a dozen meeting halls had been turned into concert saloons and offered vaudeville entertainment to attract more customers and keep them longer on the premises. For yet another group of saloon keepers, “the difference between bankruptcy and solvency was the prostitute,” according to social historian Timothy Gilfoyle.²⁰ Throughout the nineteenth century, saloons had accommodated prostitutes in several ways, ranging from allowing them to solicit their customers to maintaining rooms for intercourse upstairs. One of the unanticipated results of the Raines Law was that prostitution in saloons became more prevalent.²¹ The Raines Law prohibited Sunday sales of liquor except in hotels. Since hotels were defined as establishments that served meals and had at least ten beds, over 1,000 saloons, halls, and restaurants in New York simply subdivided their rear or upper floor space into small bedrooms and took out hotel licenses. The Victoria Hall at 80–82 Clinton Street was one of these so-called “Raines Law hotels.” A few weeks after the bill was passed, the proprietor of the hall—a wholesale liquor dealer—turned the beer saloon in the front building into a hotel with bedrooms and a restaurant.²² The tiny, noisy rooms did not attract many regular guests, but prostitutes and pimps went in and out. Meanwhile, the rear of the building continued to serve

as a dance hall and banquet room with lodge rooms upstairs. A decade later, the hall would reopen as a Yiddish vaudeville house.²³

A Surplus of Performers

A close look at the transformation of the meeting-hall business helps us to understand how Yiddish vaudeville could make its way into the traditional structures of public life on the East Side. However, in seeking to explain the emergence of Yiddish music halls, we also have to examine the changing conditions in the theatrical business. From the perspective of Yiddish theatre history, the major impetus behind the development of Yiddish vaudeville was the surplus of Jewish immigrant performers, which resulted in a desperate struggle for jobs and constant search for new opportunities to make a living on the stage.

Throughout the late nineteenth century, impresarios kept bringing in new talent from eastern Europe, while others crossed the Atlantic on their own initiative. Consequently, more and more Yiddish performers—actors, singers, dancers, musicians—were competing for work. By the late 1890s, employment had become more uncertain than ever and the payment, either by marks (shares in a theatre company, for which performers of greater stature were eligible) or salary, was often extremely low. Only a handful of top stars, actor-managers in particular, cashed in on the thriving theatrical business. Growing dissatisfaction with working conditions led to various unionization efforts among actors, chorus members, and musicians. In 1899, partly in response to the abuses of the star system, the actors of the Yiddish playhouses in New York City founded the Hebrew Actors' Union, which soon developed into a powerful organization. To secure its members a decent standard of living, the new union imposed rigid closed-shop rules. Any manager who desired to employ non-union staff was confronted with threats of a strike. More important, the union kept virtually all newcomers out of its ranks. Actors could apply for membership only if they had played several years outside New York City. Admission procedures were so difficult in actual practice that very few candidates passed. Other Yiddish theatre unions, such as the Hebrew Choristers Union, were organized along the same lines.²⁴

The lockout measures had far-reaching consequences for would-be actors and newly arrived immigrant performers: both groups were relegated to the margins of the theatrical business. Since for most of them a career on the English-language stage seemed beyond reach, they had to look for opportunities outside New York City. Yet the road business was risky and unstable. Scores of troupes failed due to lack of capital and management experience.²⁵ Moreover, the well-established New York-based companies began to extend their control to the “provinces,” in particular to nearby cities with large Jewish communities such as Philadelphia and Newark. To protect the interests of the existing road companies, Local 2 of the Hebrew

Actors' Union, with jurisdiction over traveling troupes, was established in 1902. Thus the job openings for newcomers were further reduced.

The almost inexhaustible supply of fresh faces, both amateur and professional, provided a key precondition for the emergence of Yiddish vaudeville. Many vaudevillians were still in their teens when they started out on the Yiddish music-hall stage.²⁶ The East Side music-hall business proved a fertile ground for their careers. Some of them achieved stardom far beyond the immigrant milieu in which they grew up, like Bella Baker, one of the “red-hot mamas” of American vaudeville, who started at age fourteen in a small music hall on Cannon Street.²⁷ Not everyone started from scratch. Several young vaudevillians had been trained in amateur dramatic clubs.²⁸ Others were *patriotn*—fanatical fans of particular stars—who grasped their chance to enter the theatre professionally and show their great passion for the Yiddish stage by imitating their idol (or a rival star) before music-hall audiences.²⁹ Yiddish vaudeville also absorbed a number of Yiddish theatre veterans. Almost all of them came from the road and excelled in comic roles.³⁰ The career of the character-comedian Abraham Tantzman (1857–1906) was typical of the experienced vaudeville actors. In eastern Europe, he had worked with Goldfaden and other Yiddish touring companies until 1889, when a New York theatre manager sent him tickets to come to America. After a brief engagement in New York, Tantzman and his wife, the actress Bertha Berlin, toured the United States from Chicago to California, where they won much praise with a production of Goldfaden's *Shulamis*. In 1901, at the age of forty-four, Tantzman returned to New York. Barred from the legitimate stage, he ventured into Yiddish vaudeville and launched the Eldorado Theatre. As we saw, the Eldorado closed down after one season. Five years later, however, when Yiddish vaudeville became a booming business in New York City, Tantzman was back in town again.

Yiddish Vaudeville Becomes a Booming Business

Three years after the opening of the Eldorado Theatre, many Jewish workers and their families had occasionally visited one of the East Side music halls, but Yiddish vaudeville had not become a major force on the local entertainment market. This situation changed in 1905. The rapid expansion of the potential audience due to mass immigration helped to create a firm market for cheap theatrical entertainment. The upsurge in patronage was further precipitated by the collapse of Moyshe Hurwitz's Windsor Theatre in November of 1904. Hurwitz's troupe had been the main provider of Yiddish operetta, a type of theatrical entertainment that in many respects—horseplay, slapstick, a wild mixture of genres, and an abundance of singing and dancing—closely resembled music-hall fare. Managers of concert saloons, who until then had offered free shows, were quick to capitalize on the increased demand for their product: they renovated their establishments and began to charge

admission, ranging from ten to twenty-five cents. Their example was promptly copied. Suddenly there seemed to be a Yiddish vaudeville house on every corner. “Today every important street [on the East Side] has its glaring sign which announces ‘Jewish Vaudeville House’ or ‘Music Hall,’” a settlement worker reported in late 1905.³¹

On Grand Street, two blocks from Adler’s Grand Theatre, Julius Prince opened a 1,000-seat music hall above his father’s liquor store with the help of the actor-impresario Morris Heine, Hurwitz’s former partner at the Windsor Theatre. Other halls were directly rented out to Yiddish vaudeville entrepreneurs.³² Abraham Tantzman rented the Golden Rule Hall, which had been transformed into a large dance hall in 1903. On Friday, September 1, 1905, he opened the Golden Rule Vaudeville House. Prospective customers were promised “first class variety: sketches and vaudevilles by the greatest dramatists and actors.”³³ Shows were given every night, with matinee performances on Saturdays and Sundays (the bill changed on Friday night). Samuel Agid, an experienced Galician saloon keeper and restaurateur with a passionate commitment to Yiddish theatre, secured the lease of the Victoria Hall on Clinton Street and reopened it as Agid’s Clinton Street Vaudeville House. He also acquired an interest in the Union Vaudeville Hall on Eldridge Street and the Bismarck Garden in Brooklyn. By the early 1910s, Agid was known as the “King of Jewish Varieties.”³⁴

While favorable market conditions spurred the demand for Yiddish vaudeville, widespread acceptance of Yiddish vaudeville as a suitable pastime did not come until the music halls began to charge admission, and thus dissociated their shows from the compulsory beer-drinking accompaniment. Most vaudeville entrepreneurs conveniently kept a liquor bar on the premises, but it seems that the policy of charging admission (rather than obliging customers to order a glass of beer) made the music halls more acceptable for a broad audience, women and children in particular.³⁵ In fact, time and again, the newly opened or renovated vaudeville houses sought to divorce themselves from the controversial image of the early concert saloons. The Grand Street Music Hall, for instance, was marketed as “a truly honest new Yiddish variety for Jewish families” and “a beautiful family place.”³⁶ To further enhance the status of his establishment, Prince hired Morris Heine—the “founder of the Yiddish theatre in New York”—as stage manager.³⁷ As historian David Nasaw points out, through this type of advertising, “audience members, still unsure as to whether or not they should be paying their dimes and quarters to see variety acts in cheap theatres, were reassured that in doing so they were certifying their inclusion in a new and expanding respectable public for respectable amusements.”³⁸ Prince’s publicity campaign worked out very well. Jewish immigrants flocked to the Grand Street Music Hall to enjoy an evening’s entertainment that cost not even half the price of a gallery seat in Adler’s Grand Theatre, two blocks down the street.

Moving Pictures: From “a *tsimes* to the show” to Main Dish

Motion pictures were soon to conquer both Adler’s Grand Theatre and the Grand Street Music Hall, but around 1905, they were still very much a novelty in the Jewish quarter. This is remarkable considering that American vaudeville managers had integrated the short-reel films of the early years into their programs soon after the first commercial presentation of Edison’s *vitascope* at Koster and Bial’s Music Hall in 1896. We may assume that many East Siders discovered the excitement of moving images in the vaudeville theatres on East Fourteenth Street and Union Square, at the Eden Musee waxworks or at Coney Island. On the Bowery and Grand Street, motion pictures could also be seen in penny arcades, which had peepshow devices such as the *kinetoscope* and *mutoscope*. And many eastern European Jews had been introduced to the *Lumière cinématographe* before they migrated to America. Several itinerant film exhibitors toured the Pale of Settlement, and many cities and towns in Russia had permanent movie theatres as early as 1904.³⁹

It took over a decade before the cinema established itself firmly in the heart of the Jewish quarter. Until late 1907, Yiddish music halls in New York City remained limited outlets for films. Short film programs were presented by self-acclaimed “professors,” who operated as itinerant film exhibitors, touring the local Yiddish vaudeville circuit with their own film projector and a set of moving pictures.⁴⁰ In the eyes of the managers, moving pictures were merely “a *tsimes* [sweet side dish] to the show,” as the *Forverts* explained, and hence most of them did not invest in the new medium.⁴¹ Others, however, did.

During the 1905–1906 season, the first nickelodeons—storefront theatres that offered a continuous show of short movies and illustrated songs for a nickel—opened in Manhattan. Within a few months, New York had more movie houses than any other American city. The largest concentration of them was found on Park Row and the Bowery.⁴² On Saturday, these new entertainment venues allegedly attracted “great holiday crowds from the East Side.”⁴³ Yet it would take another year before the first theatre specializing in moving pictures would open in the heart of the Jewish quarter. In the summer of 1906, Adolph Zukor, the future president of Paramount Pictures, operated a penny arcade with slot machines on Grand Street next to Jacob Adler’s theatre, and “determined to take the chance” and transform the place into “a very attractive little theatre” for moving pictures. According to *Views and Films Index*, an early trade paper for film exhibitors, “the result was very gratifying. The place commenced to do a rushing business and is doing it yet. The films are changed frequently and the East Siders are willing to be kept interested.”⁴⁴

The following year, more Jewish entrepreneurs tried their luck in the film exhibition business.⁴⁵ Yiddish music-hall managers also became more interested in showing movies. The Golden Rule Hall was the first Yiddish music hall to switch

to films as the main attraction. In November of 1906, following the untimely death of Abraham Tantzman, the lease of the main floor was taken over by Stephen J. Scherer, the owner of a photographic firm.⁴⁶ Under the new management, moving pictures dominated the bill. The new formula was a great success. *Views and Films Index* reported in August 1907 that the Golden Rule “had a record of 4,038 patrons to their theatre on Saturday, July 13th [. . .] and during the past weeks the average has been fourteen thousand tickets sold.”⁴⁷ In December 1907, the weekly take of the Golden Rule had mounted to \$1,800. With operating costs estimated at about \$500, the house was reported to make a net profit of \$1,300 per week.⁴⁸

During the 1907–1908 season, nickelodeons were “spreading like mushrooms after the rain” on the East Side.⁴⁹ The boom was fueled by a severe economic depression that hit the United States in the winter of 1907. The thin purses that went with the recession forced many Jewish immigrants to look for cheaper forms of entertainment. The immediate effect of the crisis was a significant drop in theatrical attendance in the middle and upper segments of the entertainment market. The legitimate Yiddish playhouses lost “a considerable number of patrons” to the moving pictures, according to the *Forverts*.⁵⁰ Yiddish music halls also struggled to survive. The majority switched to moving pictures as their staple entertainment. Many vaudevillians lost their jobs but some continued to make a few dollars per week by entertaining the audience in between films (while the reels were changed) with skits, jokes, dances, and songs.

The nickelodeon business on the East Side witnessed phenomenal growth, attracting many newcomers who believed it to be a get-rich-quick scheme. At the end of 1908, the number of moving-picture outlets in the downtown Jewish quarter had climbed to about thirty-five, without counting those on the Bowery and East Fourteenth Street. On the corner of Essex and Rivington Streets alone, three of the nickel theatres were now offering moving-picture shows: the Golden Rule Vaudeville House, Steiner’s Essex Street Theatre at 133 Essex Street, and the WACO Theatre at 118–120 Rivington Street. Film historian Ben Singer found that Jewish neighborhoods had the highest density of nickelodeons in Manhattan. It seems that immigrant Jews went more frequently to the movies than any other ethnic group in New York City.⁵¹ The inexpensive picture shows provided them with a regular basis for leisure on a scale unmatched by the legitimate Yiddish theatre and Yiddish music halls.

Vaudeville in the Age of the Movies

As Jewish immigrants became committed filmgoers, the film exhibition business created ample opportunities for expansion. However, Yiddish music-hall managers failed to seize these opportunities. When the crisis was over, most music halls on the Lower East Side and in Brooklyn switched back to fully-fledged vaudeville

shows. The lead in the local entertainment business was taken up by the film exhibitors who had started out during the nickelodeon boom. In sharp contrast with the music-hall managers, these entrepreneurs maintained ties neither with the liquor trade nor with meeting-hall business. In their theatres, one could purchase only soda water, ice cream, peanuts, and candy. More important, the majority of this new generation came from consumer-oriented trades and introduced business methods that were far more innovative and aggressive than those of the Yiddish music-hall managers. Eager to take advantage of the growing leisure market, the newcomers set up corporations and entered into partnerships with more affluent investors to expand their activities both on and beyond the Lower East Side.⁵² They built new 600-seat “photo-play” houses and launched local chains that soon began to swallow the smaller independent movie theatres and music halls. The saloon- and hall keepers who operated the typical East Side Yiddish music hall lacked the necessary funds and expertise to compete in this increasingly professionalized leisure market. By the mid 1910s, most of them had stepped out of the film exhibition and vaudeville business.⁵³ In December of 1914, the death of Samuel Agid, the “King of Yiddish Varieties,” marked the end of an era.

At 80–82 Clinton Street, where Agid had started his career by turning a former Raines Law hotel into a Yiddish vaudeville house, the brand-new Clinton Street movie theatre opened its door in 1917. During the following decade, the movies continued to gain popularity thanks to famous Hollywood stars, improved viewing conditions in picture palaces, and the introduction of talking pictures. While the feature-length film left little room on the program for non-filmic acts, new immigration laws put an end to the stream of Yiddish-speaking newcomers from eastern Europe who formed the natural audience for Yiddish vaudeville. Pushed to the margins of the local entertainment business, Yiddish vaudeville survived in neighborhood movie theatres such as the Clinton Theatre and Palestine Theatre, which combined live shows with Yiddish talkies and other Jewish theme films and catered primarily to a clientele of first-generation immigrants. By the 1930s, it had become an object of nostalgic reminiscence and a tourist attraction—a remainder of the Old-World-flavored immigrant culture that was rapidly fading away.

Appendix

Paul Klapper, “The Yiddish Music Hall,” *University Settlement Studies* (New York: University Settlement Society), vol 2, no. 4 (1906): 19–23.

To the average Jewish immigrant, life is an extremely grave and serious proposition. From the cradle to his present moment, the struggle for existence amidst adverse conditions has forced him to the realization of this fact. Economic, social, and religious iniquities drive him to our shores. America, the panacea for all his ills, is his inspiration of courage and hope. But he is invariably doomed to disappointment. He is suddenly thrust into a new

environment. A new language greets his ear. He is a stranger in the promised land. Assimilation is slow and discouraging. Everybody knows that he is a “greenhorn.” He finds thousands like himself, competing for the same miserable positions. In the sweat-shop he must submit to the new tyranny of the “boss,” and abide by the regulations of an arbitrary labor union, in order to eke out a mere pittance. The economic question eclipses all others. It becomes the glasses through which he views life in the “land of milk and honey.” The natural reaction to this intensity of existence is very strong indeed. Recreation becomes essential. His soul craves for it. The saloon and the brothel have no attraction for a great body of Jewish immigrants. Their well-developed social instincts lead them rather to the cafe and the theatre. The Yiddish stage reflects very faithfully the Jewish temperament. The playwright produces his work because he has a lesson to teach, a moral to preach, a social question to solve. The drama is intensely realistic and portrays very forcibly the tragedies of daily life. Inter-marriage of Hebrew and Gentile, the domestic triangle, the liberation of the downtrodden Jews in Russia, free love, anarchistic and socialistic propaganda are the topics of these plays. They are thoroughly “Ibsenisk,” and necessitate deep thought and subtleties of argument. The humor, paradoxical as it may seem, serves only “to aggravate the tension by relieving it.”

There is a lighter element among the Jewish theatre-going population that rebels against this seriousness. Their tastes are like those of our own comic opera and vaudeville habitués. About five years ago the possibilities of the present Jewish vaudeville first dawned upon an East Side saloon-keeper. He set aside the rear end of his establishment to this purpose. Here he constructed a small stage for the cheap talent he found. The rest of the place was utilized for chairs and tables where the patrons enjoyed their beer. The plan soon made its popularity manifest, and others, with more capital to invest, went into the vaudeville business, as it promised lucrative returns. To-day every important street on the lower East Side has its glaring electric sign which announces, “Jewish Vaudeville House” or “Music Hall.” These vaudeville houses are generally reconstructed “dancin’ halls.” A flimsy wooden gallery, and a flimsier stage is erected. The scenery and the theatrical paraphernalia are crude and cheap. The places can be arranged to accommodate any number, ranging from three hundred to over fifteen hundred. But the point of maximum elasticity is never reached. The Law provides that places not built as theatres should not seat more than three hundred. The chairs in these places are often movable because there are times when it is absolutely essential to live up to the letter of the law. “But these occasions are few; it only takes a day or two to fix a new official,” one of these new Frohmans explained. Many building regulations and safety provisions are neglected with impunity, because the proper inspector has been “fixed.” Only the ravages of flame and the madness of a panic will tell how many of our brethren are to pay with their lives for this “fixing.” In case of a future calamity, we may find some consolation in the fact that the various municipal departments concerned will surely institute the regular fiasco, “a rigorous investigation, in order to bring the culprits to justice.” The performers are an ignorant lot,—the greater part, far more efficient in the intricacies of gambling, and still more experienced in the manifold forms of petty vice, than in acting. The rest are in the “vaudeville actin’ business” because they are not fit for any profitable labor. Those with talent and a little refinement are absorbed by the regular Jewish theatres, where ability is essential. The inevitable result is that these music halls utilize the talent that is left,—the worst talent. The proprietors are often unduly censured for employ-

ing these people, but they really cannot help themselves, as we shall see. These vaudeville actors have a most exclusive union. They control every Jewish vaudeville house on the East Side. The patrons are union members, and refuse to frequent a particular house unless it employs "union labor." This organization dictates the policy of the vaudeville houses, fixes salaries, which range from twelve to fifty dollars a week, and allots a certain number of actors to each establishment, so that every member will be employed. The initiation fee is so high that is practically prohibitive for the poorer applicants. The "entrance examination" is so exacting, and the results judged with such careful scrutiny, that the applicant, however able, is often excluded at the end of the farce. Every conceivable injustice which labor unions may commit was practiced at one time or another by this vaudeville actors' union. The proprietor, therefore, is controlled, rather than controls, in matters relating to the performance. The character of these shows can easily be inferred from what has been said about the players. The evening program consists of a number of "turns" and the production of a short farce. The sketch, or farce, is a short play, portraying some phase of Jewish life, or caricaturing such American customs as seem strange and ludicrous to the immigrant. Those which base their plot on the recent Russian riots are extremely popular. Many in the audience have either experienced these incidents themselves, or have relatives that are to-day suffering the consequences of these anti-Semitic outbreaks. The climaxes are as melodramatic as the futile brain of the playwright can possibly make them. The villain is hissed vociferously, but he continues his nefarious plotting throughout the play. The hero, the unfortunate victim of all this, positive that poetic justice will be done, and that he will marry the girl in the end, is unmindful of all the dastardly plans.

Those actors who do a "turn" either sing and dance, or conduct a dialogue. In most of these numbers, there is a marked effort to imitate the poor English vaudeville actors; but the vulgarities are so exaggerated that they make the performance positively filthy. The songs are suggestive of everything but what is proper, the choruses are full of double meanings, and the jokes have broad and unmistakable hints of things indecent. All this is greeted with wild applause. What adds an element of pathos, is the number of young girls and children who are always to be found in the audience, thoroughly enjoying themselves, yet in ignorance of the true meaning of the songs in which they join. The children learn these ditties and often in all their glee, sing them in the streets. There are a number of small music halls that seldom, if ever, have enough patronage to pay for running expenses. Still, these places keep open, month after month, even in the summer, when the largest houses find business too slow to warrant a continuance of the performance. These places are the rendez-vous of well-known East Side Fagans [sic], and of those moral leeches that fatten on the virtue of innocent womanhood. How can we avoid the conclusion that these establishments are conducting gambling dens, or kindred vicious businesses? Can we prove this? Legally, no. But these facts nevertheless cannot be refuted, according to all outward appearances, these music halls in question, are run at a loss, and these notorious characters make them their "hangouts." A continuance of these low class vaudeville houses reflects on the moral standard of our immediate community. Our own Settlement, under the auspices of the Milton Club, has registered its sentiments on these matters, with the proprietors of these music halls, and with the vaudeville actors' union. The plea of those who commit these improprieties, is "the audience demands this; they enjoy it." This is most decidedly not so. It is true that many in the audience do get a certain pleasure out of this kind of a

performance, but still there is no demand for it. Those houses that have set up a standard, and are earnestly living up to it, have packed houses; thus showing clearly that there is no clamor for the low character show. The union gave a very encouraging answer to the letter of protest which was sent to them. They promised faithfully that union regulations would demand decency on these stages, and that they would do all in their power to raise the moral tone of the shows. Thus far no improvement has taken place, and we must infer that either the union standard of a decent show is very low indeed, or else they have not lived up to their promise.

The radical Jewish press has had periodic qualms of conscience, and has intermittently attacked the character of these performances. The more conservative Jewish press, charmed by the metallic clink of the coin, and in fear of losing advertisements, deemed it a very politic move to close their eyes and shut their ears against all this. Yet they, more than anybody else, can render the most material aid towards creating a marked improvement. They can carry on a crusade of education, showing how bad and vicious these places are, and what a reflection they cast on the Jewish community.

We must not forget, however, that these places answer a need more or less urgent. Besides the cafe, there is no other place of amusement that would attract the young and giddy element. If these music halls were all conducted on absolutely proper lines, they would be a decided blessing to the neighborhood. It is a pity, therefore, that the old plan which some of the East Side Settlement workers started in this direction, was abandoned. They tried to establish a model German Bier-Garten and concert hall. The management was turned over to practical business men, as the theoretical Settlement workers feared that they would make a failure of the business end. But in doing so, they also gave over the supervision of the house to men who were far more anxious to make a business success of the venture, than to set a model of such a place for the neighborhood. A high-class music hall where the Eastsider can spend an enjoyable evening with his wife and children, is therefore, as far from a reality as ever.

Notes

1. For a detailed analysis, see Judith Thissen, "Reconsidering the Decline of the New York Yiddish Theatre in the Early 1900s," *Theatre Survey* 44 (2003): 173–97.

2. See, for instance, Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 35–64, 93–126, 183–190; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 17–21; and Harmut Keil and John B. Jentz, eds., *German Workers in Chicago: A Documentary History of Working-Class Culture from 1850 to World War I* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 175–182.

3. Office of the City Register, Pre-1917 Conveyances, Section II, liber 24 cp 23, Henry Weil to Simon Friedman (lease 1895); liber 101 cp 363, Thomas Field to Israel Suchman (lease 1902); liber 144 cp 128, Thomas Field to Israel Suchman (lease 1905); liber 209 cp 129, Thomas Field to Israel Suchman (sale, 1911). Pre-1917 Mortgages, Section II, liber 300 cp 435, Israel Suchman to Thomas Field (mortgage, 1911).

4. John M. Oskison, "Public Halls of the East Side," *Yearbook of the University Settlement Society of New York* (1899), 38.

5. Nathan Zwirin, "Mekhutonim un hol-kipers oyf yidishe khasenes" [In-laws and hall keepers at Jewish weddings], *Amerikaner*, 26 (June 1908); "Khasenes in yidishn kvartal" [Weddings in the Jewish quarter], *Forverts*, March 27, 1902.
6. The University Settlement Society counted about 150 saloons and other liquor outlets in the Eighth Assembly District, the area bounded by the Bowery and Rivington, Norfolk, and Division Streets. Raymond C. Spaulding, "The Saloons of the District," *Yearbook of the University Settlement Society of New York* (1899), 34.
7. Edmund J. James, ed., *The Immigrant Jew in America* (New York: B. F. Buck and Co., 1907), 222.
8. Spaulding, "The Saloons of the District" (1899), 37–38.
9. Bernard Weinstein, *Fertsik yor in der yidisher arbeter bavegung* [Forty years in the Jewish labor movement] (New York: Jewish Socialist Verband, 1924), 106–107.
10. For a description of the halls, see Oskison, "Public Halls of the East Side" (1899), 39.
11. "Dancing teachers," *Trow's Business Directory* (1900–1901), 1070. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 96.
12. Advertisement for the Eldorado Theatre, *Forverts*, October 5, 1901.
13. For a description of a typical music hall, see Nina Warnke, "Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere: Yiddish Music Halls, the Yiddish Press, and the Processes of Americanization, 1900–1910," *Theatre Journal* 48 (1996): 326.
14. The practice of the continuous show had been introduced by B. F. Keith in the 1880s. David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 20.
15. Bernard Gorin, *Geshikhte fun idishn teatr* [History of the Yiddish theatre] (New York: Literarisher ferlag, 1918), 2:179.
16. For a detailed analysis, see Warnke, "Yiddish Music Halls."
17. "Vu zaynen ahingekumen di myuzik-hol 'stars'?" [What has become of the music-hall 'stars?'], *Forverts*, November 26, 1908.
18. Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York: Norton, 1992), 243–247. See, for instance, the contracts between the lessees of 80–82 Clinton Street (later Agid's Clinton Vaudeville Theatre) and the Welz and Zerwech Brewery, Office of the City Register, Pre-1917 Conveyances, Section II, liber 83 cp 23 and liber 80 cp 323, August 24, 1900; and the lease for a hall at 143–145 Suffolk Street (later the Oriental Palace) which also contained a clause regarding a contract with Welz and Zerwech. Pre-1917 conveyances, Section II, liber 228 cp 479, March 5, 1914.
19. Verne M. Bovie, "The Public Dance Halls of the Lower East Side," *Yearbook of the University Settlement Society of New York* (1901), 31–32.
20. Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 244.
21. *Ibid.*, 244–245. Raymond C. Spaulding, "The Saloons of the District" (1899), 37.
22. Office of the City Register, Pre-1917 Conveyances, Section II, liber 57 cp 137 and 185. Advertisement for the Victoria Hall, *Forverts*, October 12, 1900.
23. Office of the City Register, Pre-1917 Conveyances, Section II, liber 204 cp 490, Grosman to Samuel Agid, lease for five years starting May 1, 1911, renewal of lease dated April 24, 1906.
24. David Lifson, *Yiddish Theatre in America* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1965), 130–135. Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theatre* (1977; Syracuse, NY: rpt. Syracuse University Press, 1996), 295–297.
25. *Ibid.*, 296.
26. See, for instance, the biographies of Maurice Tuchband, Isidore Lillian, Jenny Atlas, Charlie Cohen, and Ella Wallerstein in Zalmen Zylbercweig, ed., *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* [Encyclopedia of the Yiddish theatre] (New York, Warsaw, and Mexico City: Farlag Elisheva, 1931–1969).
27. *Detroit Journal*, n.d., Bella Baker clipping file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

28. For instance, Jenny Atlas, Max Gabel, and Abraham Kogut had played in the David Kessler Dramatic Club, of which Kogut was the founder. Samuel Weintraub and his wife had been a member of the Goldfaden Dramatic Society. “Di stars fun di yidishe muzik-hols” [The stars of the Yiddish music halls], *Forverts*, February 16, 1906; “Fun vanen nemen zikh unzere verayeti ektors?” [Where do our variety actors come from?], *Forverts*, February 24, 1906; Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, 4:3046.

29. The coupletist Samulesko, for instance, had been a *patriot* of the great Yiddish comedian Sigmund Mogulesco. “Fun Mogulesko’s dresing rum tsu der verayeti steydzsh” [From Mogulesco’s dressing room to the variety stage], *Forverts*, February 27, 1906. See also, “Vu zaynen ahingekumen di myuzik-hol ‘stars’?” [What has become of the music-hall ‘stars’?], *Forverts*, November 26, 1908.

30. “Fun vanen nemen zikh unzere verayeti ektors?”

31. Paul Klapper, “The Yiddish Music Hall,” *University Settlement Studies Quarterly*, 2/4 (1906): 20. See also, David Bernstein, “Di yidishe teaters un di yidishe myuzik-hols,” [The Yiddish theatres and the Yiddish music halls] *Tsaytgayst* [Zeitgeist], September 8, 1905.

32. As a rule, the floors above the newly opened Yiddish vaudeville theatres remained in use as assembly rooms for *landsmanshaftn*, unions, and lodges. See advertisements for Yiddish music halls in the *Forverts* for the months of January–March 1906.

33. Advertisements for the Golden Rule Vaudeville House, *Forverts*, August 22, and September 1, 9, and 15, 1905.

34. “S. Agid,” Zylbercweig, *Leksikon*, 1:9. Obituary for Agid, *New York Times*, December 17, 1914.

35. Unlike their American counterparts, Yiddish music halls had never been an exclusively male institution. Right from the outset, they attracted young couples, single women, and even families with children. Still, the introduction of an entrance fee, which dissociated Yiddish music-hall shows from compulsory beer-drinking and made them more respectable for Jewish immigrants of both sexes, did pay off with the increased attendance of women and children in particular.

36. Advertisements for the Grand Street Music Hall, *Forverts*, August 22 and September 9, 1905.

37. Advertisement for the Grand Street Music Hall, *Forverts*, August 11, 1905. Morris Heine (Haimovitch) had been a member of the Silberman-Karp troupe, the first professional Yiddish troupe to perform in New York (at the Oriental Theatre).

38. Nasaw, *Going Out*, 25.

39. Malgorzata Hendrykowska, “Film Journeys of the Krzeminski Brothers, 1900–1908,” *Film History* 6 (1994): 206–218.

40. Advertisement for the Irving Music Hall, *Forverts*, September 5, 1905; advertisement for the People’s Music Hall, *ibid.*, September 15, 1905. The Irving Music Hall at 214–220 Broome Street was part of the New Irving Hall, one of the most popular meeting halls on the East Side.

41. “Vu zaynen ahingekumen di yidish myuzik hols?,” *Forverts*, May 24, 1908.

42. Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 424.

43. “An Unexploited Field and Its Possibilities,” *Views and Films Index*, October 6, 1906: 3.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Almost all of these moving-picture shows were located in (former) tenement buildings. Fire laws and building codes restricted their seating capacity to 299. Under the Aldermanic Standee Ordinance, another fifty persons were allowed to stand in the rear.

46. Obituary for Tantzman, *Forverts*, November 14, 1906.

47. *Views and Films Index*, August 3, 1907, 4

48. *Variety*, December 14, 1907, 12.

49. “Vu zaynen ahingekumen di yidishe myuzik hols?”

50. Ibid.

51. For the locations and figures, see Ben Singer, "Manhattan Nickelodeons: New Data on Audiences and Exhibitors," *Cinema Journal* 34 (1995): 5–35. For the distribution of moving-picture venues on the Lower East Side, see Judith Thissen, "Oy, Myopia!: A Reaction from Judith Thissen on the Singer-Allen Controversy," *Cinema Journal* 36 (1997): 104–106.

52. "Avarice and Amusement," *Views and Films Index*, October 26, 1907, 3. See also the biographies of the Hollywood moguls in Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

53. The final blow as far the smaller Yiddish music halls were concerned was the new building code for theatres, which New York City adopted in 1914. This so-called Folks ordinance obliged small vaudeville theatres to apply for an expensive \$500 theatrical license as well as to conform to very strict safety regulations. Only the large Yiddish music halls located in purpose-built theatres survived this rigid licensing process. Code of Ordinances of the City of New York (1914), Building code, article 24 (motion picture theatres) and article 25 (theatres and other places of amusement).