*Chapter 2*

# Film and Vaudeville on New York's Lower East Side

Judith Thissen

In December 1909, Nathan Fleissig, the manager of a nickel-and-dime theater on New York's Lower East Side, announced triumphantly that the movies had been defeated and that his theater would be devoted again to "first class Yiddish variety."[1] By presenting the shift in programming practice in terms of a cultural war between Yiddish vaudeville and moving pictures, Fleissig shrewdly linked the reopening of his establishment with the "Grand Theater Affair." In September 1909, the Grand—a large legitimate playhouse especially built for Yiddish performances—had fallen into the hands of the movie exhibitors Marcus Loew and Adolph Zukor and was turned into a moving picture theater. The takeover scandalized public opinion and triggered highly emotional responses in the Yiddish press. In particular, it seemed to be a slap in the face of the community's cultural elite, because for several years the Grand Theater had been the home of literary drama. Many immigrant intellectuals, with Abraham Cahan at the forefront, found it difficult to put up with the idea that moving pictures were to replace Jacob P. Adler starring in Jacob Gordin's *Jewish King Lear*. But in the battle for Adler's Grand Theater, pressure from the *Jewish Daily Forward* and the United Hebrew Trades to retain the playhouse for Yiddish performances had been no match for the power of money. Adler eagerly accepted the generous offer that the future Hollywood moguls made him.

By using the rhetoric of power struggle, Fleissig (consciously or not) also tied the revival of Yiddish vaudeville to the demand for Jewish working-class solidarity. The linkage proved timely. The economic recovery following the depression of 1907–8 had revitalized the Jewish labor movement, leading to a series of strikes in the Hebrew trades. In the last week of November 1909, twenty thousand shirtwaist makers had left their work to walk the picket lines. Most shirtwaist shops in New York were still closed when Fleissig's theater reopened its doors as a Yiddish music hall. In what follows I will explore the revival of Yiddish vaudeville around 1910 in the context of the broad-based intensification of Jewish working class consciousness in

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp,
University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

these years and a growing resistance on the part of the Jewish working-class to top-down forgings of cultural identity. As I will demonstrate, the forces favoring immigrant "Americanization," those who advanced the cause of cultural refinement, and those who sought to promote a synthesis of immigrant and Americanized environments waged a complex struggle over the future of Jewish entertainment on the Lower East Side.

## The Jewish Labor Movement

Turn-of-the-century America went through a deep cultural and social crisis. Industrialization, urbanization, and the mass arrival of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe were rapidly transforming the American way of life. Native-born Anglo-Saxon Americans became increasingly confused and angered by the displacement they experienced as demographic changes threatened their economic situation, challenged their political leadership, and subverted their cultural authority. Some of them mounted virulent attacks upon recent immigrants whom they held responsible for the imminent collapse of traditional American values. "Unless we Americanize the immigrants, they will foreignize our cities, and in doing so foreignize our civilization," the religious leader and reformer Josiah Strong wrote in *The Challenge of the City* (1907).[2] The foreign born, who formed the bulk of the nation's workforce, were perceived not only as utterly "alien" but as politically radical as well. The Haymarket, Homestead, and Pullman strikes symbolized their power to destabilize the country. Indeed, social unrest constituted a major aspect of the immense changes taking place in America around 1900. Economic upheaval—booms interspersed with stock market panics and severe depressions—provided the context for violent labor disputes and a breeding ground for left-wing radicalism. Trade unions challenged the injustices of capitalism and sought to redress working-class grievances, supported by socialist and anarchist radicals who preached class struggle and revolution.

In the public mind, New York's East Side "ghetto" was intimately linked with radicalism, not least of all because the best-known anarchists—Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman—were Russian Jews. However, active participation in trade unions was a relatively late phenomenon among Jewish workers. Since the 1880s, considerable numbers of Jewish immigrants had participated in strikes and other collective political actions (such as economic boycotts, for example), but few had truly committed themselves to the cause of organized labor.[3] In 1909, ten years after its creation, the United Hebrew Trades had only five thousand members and most of its forty union locals were held together by a handful of militant workers. Yet this situation was about to change with amazing rapidity. Starting with the return of economic prosperity in the spring of 1909, America witnessed increased industrial unrest and a significant upsurge of socialism nation-

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp,
University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

wide. Radicalism intensified among Jewish workers too. Tens of thousands went on strike for higher wages, shorter hours, and improved working conditions. The first mass walkout was that of the shirtwaist makers in November 1909, which involved almost fifteen thousand young Jewish women. After their strike was settled, in February 1910, they passed on the torch of Jewish labor activism to their male colleagues in the needle trades. On July 7, 1910, seventy thousand cloak makers declared a general strike—the largest in the history of New York City. Over the next few years, the United Hebrew Trades consolidated its power. On the eve of World War I, it encompassed more than one hundred unions with approximately two hundred and fifty thousand members (compared to five thousand in 1909).[4] The renewed labor movement had forged a more explicit place for Eastern European Jews in the American public sphere and helped the Jewish working class to formulate a positive sense of collective identity vis-à-vis the mainstream.

That is one side of the matter. But there is more to it. As Daniel Soyer recently pointed out, the militancy of the Jewish working class coexisted with a strong aspiration of its members to rise out of that class and move into the middle class of shopkeepers, manufacturers, and professionals.[5] Many first-generation immigrants espoused two conflicting ideologies. On the one hand, they embraced working-class militancy, socialist ideals, and collective action. On the other hand, they harbored middle-class impulses toward individual advancement and ambitious entrepreneurship. According to Soyer, this ideological uncertainty "stemmed from their ambivalent attitudes about class and their ambiguous experiences of it." Many Eastern European Jews, he explains, "perceived themselves to be of essentially middle-class backgrounds." Their resentment at downward social mobility—before and after migration—led them to oppose "a class system that seemed to them arbitrary and unfair" and, at the same time, aroused the "desire to restore their (or their families') entrepreneurial independence."[6] The higher wages and better working conditions won by strikes and trade-unionism more generally allowed a considerable number of Jewish workers to leave their wage-earning jobs and become independent businessmen. This was yet another way in which participation in the labor movement pulled Jewish workers deeper into the dynamics of American society.

The mobilization of the Jewish proletariat—as Jews and as workers—and its impact on American Jewish life have been well documented by social historians. What has been largely overlooked, however, is that this mobilization was played out not only on the work floor but also in the realm of leisure. In particular, the new film medium—a national mass medium in the making—was an important arena for the articulation of cultural identities. The rise of the discourse of Americanization within the U.S. film industry led to sharp debates between the Jewish immigrant community

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

and the American host society, as well as within the Jewish immigrant community itself over cinema's nature and function. Like the revitalization of the labor movement, these debates formed a key aspect of a complex, multilayered process of cultural and social renewal, whereby the immigrant community of Eastern European Jews accommodated to "America" and, at the same time, forged a distinctive ethnic identity.

## Cinema and the Cultural Crisis

Around 1900, the concentration of workers and immigrants in America's largest cities spurred the emergence of new forms of commercial entertainment. The most popular activity of all was the movies. Largely due to their cheapness—five cents—the nickelodeons provided the lower classes with a regular basis for leisure. By 1908, attendance at moving picture shows in New York City was estimated at three to four hundred thousand people per day.[7] The majority of these moviegoers were foreign-born or first-generation Americans. In the Jewish part of the Lower East Side, there were more than thirty movie theaters, without counting those on the Bowery and East Fourteenth Street.[8]

The "moving picture craze" or "nickel madness" both fascinated and unnerved many New Yorkers of the older stock. Most people saw little difference between a mob of strikers and the unruly patrons of cheap amusements.[9] As the movies turned into a permanent feature of everyday life, the nation's cultural elites grew obsessed with the effects of moviegoing on the allegedly "underdeveloped" minds of uneducated working people, especially immigrants and their children. The concerns about the effects of moviegoing upon the lower classes were closely linked to the intense debates over whether or not the massive arrival of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe posed a threat to the American way of life.[10]Most troubling was that the nickelodeons relied heavily on foreign films. By mid-1905, the French company Pathé Frères had become the leading supplier of moving pictures for the American market.[11] Although American producers such as Edison, Vitagraph, and Biograph remained significant players on the domestic film market, the immigrants, who in cities like New York formed the bulk of the nickelodeon audiences, preferred above all the knockabout comedies, blood-and-thunder melodramas, and crime films made by Pathé. This worried social reformers and others who believed that the cinema could encourage the Americanization process of the newcomers, provided of course that they watched pictures that offered appropriate role models. To make sure that the foreign born would learn American values and virtues from clean, wholesome "American" movies, progressive reformers began to collaborate with the leading American film producers. As the film historian Richard Abel has demonstrated, the desire of these companies for economic expansion and control of the American moviego-

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp,
University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

ing market neatly converged with the demands for social control of the new film medium.[12]

The American film industry employed a broad range of strategies to make cinema ''respectable'' according to the terms defined by the dominant WASP culture. One of the industry's first attempts to uplift the moving pictures was the creation of the National Board of Censorship in 1909. The board was an instrument of self-censorship set up in close collaboration with the People's Institute, a strong advocate of progressive civic reform. Its members reviewed the majority of films, both domestic and foreign, before they were released to the rental exchanges. Significantly, Abel found that ''Pathé films were either rejected or returned for alteration much more frequently than were the films of American producers.'' Thus, the board curtailed what they viewed as an undesirable, immoral, ''foreign'' influence and, at the same time, helped American manufacturers to curb Pathé's economic power.[13]

But censorship alone was not enough. It exerted little influence on the actual conditions that prevailed inside the nickelodeons. Poor sanitation, insufficient ventilation, obstructed exits, inadequate seating, dim lighting, and lack of chaperonage were all seen as posing physical and moral threats to the well-being of the audience. While reformers and legislators lobbied for stringent safety regulations and better building codes for moving picture theaters, much of the advice given to exhibitors in trade journals underscored the importance of improving storefront theaters or moving into more upscale venues. For the same reason, the Board of Censorship and other reform institutions pressured local exhibitors with site inspections, which targeted in particular nickelodeons located in immigrant neighborhoods. Between September 1909 and February 1910, for instance, inspectors of the People's Institute visited about twenty movie theaters on the Lower East Side, reporting on sanitary conditions, fire exits, audiences, and quality of the show (film and vaudeville). The conditions in the larger theaters on the Bowery were generally found to be satisfactory. The general conclusion about the storefronts in the heart of the Jewish quarter, however, was that ''a better class of moving picture shows must be encouraged, then these small proprietors will either have to correct their methods of handling trade or get out of business.''[14] That the problem was not so easily remedied is apparent from the fact that two years later, in December 1912, the East Side Neighborhood Association (in collaboration with the New York Motion Pictures Exhibitors' Association) called a conference of East Side nickelodeon managers asking them to cooperate ''for better, cleaner and more wholesome picture places, and to report all nuisances to the association.''[15]

Special points of concern for those inside and outside the industry were the songs and vaudeville acts that nickelodeon managers interspersed between the films. It should be emphasized that these live ''extras'' defined

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

the experience of moviegoing as much as the moving pictures themselves. In particular, reformers criticized the mixing of vaudeville and film in five-cent theaters because these outlets could only afford to offer live entertainment of "the poorest grade." "Peculiarly vicious is the Yiddish vaudeville given in many lower East Side picture shows," a social worker complained in 1909.[16] The anti-vaudeville discourse was taken up by the film trade press. Vaudeville—more precisely "cheap" vaudeville—dragged the movies down rather than lifting them up, according to the editor of *Moving Picture World*. "Is it not a disgusting shame for those of us who love the picture for its own sake here in New York City [that] when we go to leading moving picture houses [we] have to endure the stupidity, the inanities, the crudities, sometimes indecencies and the obscenities of cheap low vaudeville?"[17] Trade papers repeatedly urged exhibitors to reduce nonfilmic activities, such as vaudeville acts, songs, and amateur nights. Though rarely expressly thematized, the anti-vaudeville discourse in the trade press was clearly directed against manifestations of working-class culture and ethnicity. The variety format, as Miriam Hansen argues, offered structural conditions around which "working-class and ethnic cultures could crystallize, and responses to social pressures, individual displacement, and alienation could be articulated in a communal setting."[18] To transform the movies into a vehicle for mainstream values, nonfilmic activities that aimed at building audiences on the basis of a shared ethnic and working-class identity had to be eliminated. The "real" social, cultural, and physical space of the movie theater had to become subordinated to the fictional world on the screen so that the film text, rather than the exhibition context, could become the prime site of meaning.

Apparently, the problem with vaudeville acts and sing-alongs was not only their content but also the fact that these activities encouraged modes of behavior that stimulated an active sociability between members of the audience. The rowdy behavior of the nickelodeon audiences was considered un-American. Moreover, critics feared that this participatory mode of audience response would lead to more overt political action. As Hansen points out, filmmakers increasingly sought to enhance the viewer's absorption in the imaginary flow on the screen in order to impose a discipline of silence on movie audiences and make the viewing experience an individual experience rather than a collective one.[19] This shift from collective to individual viewing experience marked one of the major differences between early cinema and Hollywood cinema.

While the anxiety of the native-born Americans over changing social, economic, and cultural conditions led to an embourgeoisement of American cinema in the years after 1910 (and eventually to the classical Hollywood style), film exhibition practices remained an arena of considerable conflict throughout the silent cinema period. A closer look at the moviegoing experiences of Jewish immigrants challenges the dominant notion of a

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

fast and consensual process of gentrification and standardization.[20] Nickel-and-dime theaters on Manhattan's Lower East Side and in Brooklyn neither played out the embourgeoisement scenario nor fostered the simple assimilation of their patrons into the mainstream of American entertainment. Significantly, Yiddish vaudeville experienced a revival in Jewish neighborhood movie theaters at the very moment that the American film industry and progressive reformers sought to make cinema "truly" American, in part through banning nonfilmic activities (especially vaudeville) from five-and-ten cent moving picture shows. Does this indicate that Jewish film exhibitors and their audiences sought to counteract the increased demand for conformity to American norms? Was the revival of Yiddish vaudeville around 1909–10 a sign of grassroots resistance to the "Americanization of American cinema"?[21] Before I can begin to answer this question, I must explain how vaudeville and film figured in the Jewish immigrant experience.

## American Novelties

The first Yiddish music halls and concert salons appeared on the Lower East Side during the winter of 1901. Nina Warnke found that these new amusement venues met with fierce resistance from the community's cultural elites and guardians of immigrant morality.[22] Both conservative and socialist newspapers condemned the Yiddish music halls as the wrong kind of Americanization. They sharply criticized the bawdy songs, vulgar jokes, and suggestive dances of the vaudeville stage. What was happening in the music halls was "a crime against decency," in the words of Abraham Cahan.[23] According to Warnke, Yiddish music halls "presented exactly those aspects that socialist intellectuals were fighting so hard to reduce in the [legitimate Yiddish] theaters. [ . . . ] Horrified at realizing their obvious lack of power of immigrant entertainment, the critics constructed the music halls as the new 'low-other,' relegating it to a position even lower than the *shund* [trash] plays in the theaters."[24]

Under the editorship of Cahan, the *Forward* endlessly railed against the vaudeville "*shmuts.*" Time and again, the paper warned "respectable" workers to stay away from the Yiddish music halls. It goes without saying that its anti-vaudeville campaign reflected Cahan's own moralistic bias rather than his readers' responses to this new possibility for leisure. Not unexpectedly, many Jewish workers and their families frequented the music halls on a regular basis, turning a deaf ear to the warnings in the press. By 1906, Yiddish vaudeville had become a prime attraction and big business (by ethnic entertainment standards, at least). The Lower East Side counted a dozen Yiddish vaudeville theaters. Some of them, including Fleissig's Grand Street Music Hall, could seat up to a thousand patrons and

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

offered elaborate shows with at least one playlet or three-act sketch, supplemented by songs, jokes, dances, single turns, and moving pictures.[25]

During the 1905–6 season, the first nickelodeons appeared on East Fourteenth Street and the Bowery, the two main arteries of night life in downtown Manhattan. The following year, five-cent *muving piktshur pletser* were also opening up east of the Bowery, in the heart of the Jewish quarter. One of the first film exhibitors to venture into tenement district was Adolph Zukor, who with his business partners operated a large and elegant seventy-five-thousand-dollar penny arcade and moving picture theater on East Fourteenth Street near Union Square. The success of their Automatic Vaudeville subsidiary at 265 Grand Street (next to Jacob P. Adler's Grand Theater) was emulated by other Jewish immigrant entrepreneurs. Moving picture shows continued to multiply during the recession of 1907–8. The economic downturn fueled the demand for inexpensive entertainment and fed the expansion of five-cent theaters specializing in moving pictures. Yiddish music hall managers, who suddenly saw a falling off of business because many immigrants could no longer afford to pay a dime or a quarter for admission, became increasingly interested in film exhibition. They lowered their ticket prices and switched to moving pictures as their main attraction. Others with no prior experience in the field also tried their luck in the booming nickelodeon business. By mid-1908, Jewish working-class neighborhoods of Manhattan and Brooklyn had the highest density of motion picture shows in New York City.[26]

Initially, the proliferating nickelodeons caused few complaints in the Yiddish press. In May 1908, the socialist *Forward,* by now the leading Yiddish-language newspaper, described the nickel theater as "a novelty which just like the music halls comes from uptown, from the Christians," but this seemed not a matter of concern.[27]On the whole, Cahan's staff showed slight interest in the latest pastime activity of their readers. They occasionally published a human interest story about the nickelodeon boom, but with little of the moralizing commentary that accompanied discussions of Yiddish vaudeville. In fact the *Forward* discussed the popularity of moving pictures with immigrant audiences primarily in relation to the decline of Yiddish vaudeville entertainment.[28] Did Cahan prefer the cinema to Yiddish vaudeville? Perhaps. In the early days of the motion picture craze, he certainly observed with satisfaction the nickelodeons pushing the music halls out of the market. Significantly, the impact of movies on Jewish workers was not an issue at all, despite the fact that *Forward* articles devoted to the East Side picture shows frequently underscored how spellbound audiences were by the events on the screen. This initial indifference was in marked contrast with how other segments of contemporary American society reacted to the popularity of the cinema with working-class immigrants. The progressive reformers, for instance, embraced "Americanizing" movies in their efforts to acculturate immigrant Jews and their children. The

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

American Federation of Labor, for its part, realized that socialist pictures could help the labor movement and urged workers to boycott theaters that showed anti-labor films. Yet Jewish socialists like Cahan apparently failed to see cinema's potential as an agency for edification, acculturation, and class struggle.[29]

At the other end of the political spectrum, the leading conservative Yiddish newspapers—the *Tageblatt* and *Morgen zhurnal*—satisfied the public's interest in the nickelodeon boom with up-to-date information about the film trade. The *Tageblatt* covered extensively what was happening in the new motion picture business, informing readers about such topics as the formation of the Motion Picture Patent Company, the introduction of a new system for colored pictures, and the first experiments with television.[30] What accounts for this perspective is the targeted readership of the conservative press: predominantly (lower) middle-class immigrants, who were politically moderate and emotionally bound to the Jewish way of life.[31]The *Tageblatt* and the *Morgen zhurnal* played on the traditionalism of these immigrants as far as religion and politics were concerned, but they also served their upwardly mobile aspirations by publishing the latest business news. Inclined to defend the interests of small Jewish businessmen, they consistently rallied to the side of the film exhibitors. After a fatal nickelodeon accident on Rivington Street, for instance, both papers insisted on more stringent rules for picture shows, at the same time defending the proprietors of the theater, who were charged with homicide. According to the *Tageblatt,* ''hot-heads'' in the audience were responsible for the deadly accident.[32] As a matter of fact, even their socialist competitor did not accuse the proprietors of the Rivington Street nickelodeon outright. In a strongly worded editorial, centering on the physical threats storefront shows posed to moviegoers, Cahan stated:

> The masses that are squeezed together in the tenements do not know where to go during the cold evenings. In the gloomy buildings where they sleep and have their sacred homes, there is no space to live. They are forced to go outside. They cannot afford real amusement, so they pass their time for five cents in a moving picture show. This business is booming thanks to the sorrowful life of the masses. These places are crammed like the rooms where they live. Who cares when this human merchandise is crushed? One more person squeezed inside, one more nickel earned.

With the usual socialist rhetoric, Cahan concluded that the capitalist system was to be held responsible for the accident, rather than the individual film exhibitor who was living off the poverty of the workers.[33]

As these examples illustrate, a broad range of descriptions of East Side nickelodeons, their owners, and audiences circulated in the Yiddish press. However, in sharp contrast to the initial reception of Yiddish music hall entertainment in the Yiddish press, or to the depiction of the nickelodeon

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

boom in the mainstream English-language press, the Yiddish dailies did not initially define the cinema as a contested site of Americanization. Regardless of their orientation, almost no Yiddish newspaper touched on the subject of the moral influence movies had on immigrants—that is, until late 1909, when attitudes began to change.

## The Grand Theater Affair

The attitude toward the new film medium changed after the takeover of Adler's Grand Theater by Zukor and Loew in September 1909. Throughout the following decade, the Yiddish press expressed deep concern with the power and propriety of the cinema. At stake in the debate over film was the question of who ultimately would define the nature of the Jewish experience in America and direct the Jewish immigrant "masses" toward Americanization. Would it be the East Side's self-acclaimed leadership of newspaper editors, writers, and labor organizers, or would it be the American film industry and its agents? The "Grand Theater Affair" pointed toward the answer.

In September 1909, after weeks of negotiation, Loew and Zukor secured the lease of the two-thousand-seat Grand Theater. The occasion held special significance because, under the management of the Yiddish theater star Jacob P. Adler, the playhouse had become the home of Yiddish literary drama. Although the leading Yiddish newspapers were sharply divided with regard to Adler's motives in selling his lease of the Grand, there existed a virtual consensus on the question of who was to blame for the fact that the playhouse was lost for Yiddish performances. As the Grand drama unfolded, Loew and Zukor were exposed as the true villains. At the same time, the editors of the Yiddish dailies did not wish to antagonize their readers by blaming upwardly mobile Jews for destroying the community's cultural heritage. Hence they carefully avoided revealing the Jewish identity of the Grand's new lessees. At first, commentators insisted that the Grand Theater had fallen into the hands of "*American* theater managers" (italics mine). Eventually, the Yiddish newspapers got so caught up in their efforts to hide the truth that they stripped Zukor and Loew of their Jewishness. For instance, a few days before the reopening of the Grand Theater, the leftist *Warheit* described the people behind the moving picture company that had secured the lease of the playhouse as "*goyim*" (Gentiles) and "Yankees."[34] Thereafter, the paper repeatedly used the term *goyim* in association with the new proprietors of the Grand, although its editor, Louis Miller, clearly knew better, for he himself had played a crucial role in the negotiations between Adler and Zukor. Miller's involvement in the deal was perhaps the very reason why the *Warheit* tried so hard to conceal the fact that both Zukor and his business partner Marcus Loew were Jews. Still, *Forward* readers too were made to believe that "*goyim*" had gained control over the

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

"glorious *kunst tempel* of the East Side."[35] Even the *Tageblatt*, which at first hushed up much of the commotion around the Grand Theater, eventually joined in with its competitors.[36] Evidently, the Yiddish newspapers editors were so horrified to realize that their authority over the immigrant community had been challenged by two "*proste jidn*" (people without learning, taste, or spiritual virtues) that they decided to repress this social and cultural upheaval by redrawing the boundaries of the Jewish ethnic group. They outlawed Loew and Zukor by defining them as "*goyim*" rather than "*alrightniks*," the sneering Yinglish term that the East Side's intelligentsia normally used for the allegedly uneducated Jews who had done economically well in America.

## Di Muving Piktshur Frage

During the decade after 1910, the Yiddish press repeatedly addressed what the *Tageblatt* defined in 1911 as "*di muving piktshur frage*" (the moving picture issue).[37] By far the most remarkable response was that of the *Jewish Daily Forward*. For almost two decades, Jewish socialists like Cahan had promoted Yiddish legitimate drama (especially realist plays) as an instrument of enlightenment and a weapon against "American" influences that threatened to corrupt the uneducated "masses." But now, with legitimate Yiddish theater clearly ill-equipped to do battle with the cinema, they turned to Yiddish vaudeville to keep Jewish immigrants on the "right" road to Americanization.

At first sight, it was an obvious choice. The legitimate Yiddish stage was experiencing a deep economic and artistic crisis. Yiddish vaudeville, on the other hand, was thriving. At the beginning of the 1909–10 season, most former Yiddish music halls on Manhattan's East Side and in Brooklyn, which had turned to moving pictures as their entertainment staple during the depression of 1907–8, were switching back to full-fledged variety shows. In their footsteps, film exhibitors with no previous experience in the Yiddish variety business began to incorporate elaborate Yiddish vaudeville acts into their programs so as to satisfy the increased demand for ethnic entertainment. Until then, nonfilmic activities had played a minor role on the bills of local movie theaters. The time needed to change reels was usually filled with an (illustrated) song, a joke, or a dance, at most a simple sketch. By December 1909, however, moving picture shows were being recognized as important outlets for Yiddish vaudeville entertainment, ranging from single turns to three-act sketches with scenery and props. Over the next few months, most nickel-and-dime theaters in Jewish neighborhoods switched to "vaud-pic" shows.

Still, the *Forward*'s endorsement of the grassroots revival of Yiddish vaudeville came as quite a surprise, given its long-standing hostility to this form of entertainment. Cahan himself had been the driving force behind

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

several campaigns against the Yiddish music halls. Yet Cahan's desire to maintain his leadership position—in the cultural sphere as much as in the domain of immigrant politics—proved even stronger than his aversion to Yiddish vaudeville. In an attempt to protect the status quo, Cahan and his staff had decided to incorporate—or rather "assimilate"—Yiddish vaudeville into the mainstream of Jewish culture. In December 1909, the *Forward* made a remarkable U-turn: from condemning Yiddish vaudeville as the wrong kind of Americanization to promoting it as an authentic expression of *yidishkayt*.

The reinvention of Yiddish vaudeville—now with the Jewish socialist elite's seal of approval—entailed a new emphasis on the "Jewishness" of Yiddish vaudeville and an obfuscation of its American roots. The Yiddish music halls were structurally promoted to a middlebrow position within the cultural hierarchy.[38] The cinema, for its part, was relegated to the bottom end of the scale, the position previously occupied by Yiddish vaudeville. In the process, prostitution, white slavery, and loose sexual behavior—vices of urban America that had been associated with the early Yiddish music hall business—became more and more linked with the moving picture houses on the East Side. Most *Forward* articles and editorials that condemned the cinema focused on the practice of moviegoing rather than on specific films. Put differently, it was primarily a discussion about the corrupting influence of the movie theater as a social space—the movies themselves did not seem to matter. From late 1909 onward, the *Forward* repeatedly wrote about the moral dangers that the nickelodeons held for young people, especially young women. Speculations about the connection between movie houses and the white slave trade gained momentum on May 13, 1910, when the paper's headline screamed: "Don't let your children go alone into the moving picture houses: Mothers beg the *Forward* to save their children from ruin and shame."[39] In addition to highly sensational front page stories that associated moviegoing with the sex trade, short back page news items with titles such as "Break into a home because of moving pictures" and "Movies turn children into gangsters" depicted local movie houses as schools of crime where murder, shoplifting, robbery, and hold-ups were illustrated.[40] Admittedly, such articles highlighting the moral dangers of moviegoing were commonplace in the English-language newspapers too. Yet, in the mainstream press, cinema's critics often used these stories to illustrate the need for regulation and censorship. Many argued that if immoral movies could turn children into criminals, moral subjects might just as well turn them into good citizens. This type of reform discourse was absent in the comments of the *Forward*, whose denunciation of the cinema now seemed unqualified.

Cahan's competitors shared his concern about the corrupting influence of the moving pictures, but they were less convinced that Yiddish vaudeville was the right answer to the *muving piktshur frage*. Hence they merely out-

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

lined the potential dangers of cinemagoing to their readers. The editor of the Orthodox *Tageblatt*, for instance, warned parents time and again that the establishment of the National Board of Censorship offered no guarantee that all movies were suitable for *Jewish* children.[41] Like the *Forward*, the conservative Yiddish newspapers primarily addressed the issue in abstract terms, rarely focusing on specific movies. However, the *Tageblatt* did speak out against such ghetto films as *The Jew's Christmas* (Rex, 1913), in which the daughter of a rabbi marries a Gentile. According to *Moving Picture World*, ''a large delegation of rabbis witnessed the projection of the picture. They were pleased with the story, with its treatment and with the fidelity with which the producers had followed Jewish ceremonies and customs, but were inclined to look with disfavor on the title.''[42] The *Tageblatt* was less enchanted with this holiday release. Particularly offensive for Orthodox Jews was the scene in which the rabbi sells his copy of the Torah to buy a Christmas tree for the poor little girl, who turns out to be his granddaughter, and the ''happy ending'' with the family reunited around the same Christmas tree.[43]

A remarkably blunt example of the strategy to discourage moviegoing was ''Abie's Moving Pictures,'' a series of cartoons published in the leftist *Warheit*, which depicted the misadventures of little Abie and Izzy after their return from the picture show. Cartoons depicted the boys imitating much of what they saw at the movies, kidnapping a baby, dressing up in their parents' best clothes to go out, and hanging the neighbor's cat. Each and every cartoon concluded with a punitive ending, usually their mother beating the hell out of them.[44] Thus, Yiddish newspaper editors of both left and right came to decry the dangerous influence of the cinema. An ''American'' entertainment form that had at first attracted admiration (or at least little controversy) among these self-acclaimed leaders of the Jewish immigrant community was by the beginning of the second decade of the century essentially proscribed by them.

The new hostile discourse on the cinema was more than a rescue action on the part of the Yiddish press to protect Jewish culture against the onslaught of Americanization. As we have seen, it followed a deep crisis in the immigrant community itself. In the aftermath of the takeover of the Grand Theater by Loew and Zukor, the immigrant elite of newspaper editors and labor organizers realized that they were losing their grip on community matters. Loew and Zukor had challenged their vested cultural authority and leadership positions. In response to this subversion of the traditional distribution of power between the ''educated'' and the ''uneducated,'' the editors of the Yiddish press redefined the community's relationship to the newly emerged national mass medium of the movies. Thus, they sought to reestablish their authority over the Jewish ''masses.''

The anti-cinema discourse in the Yiddish press is but one side of the matter. Its logic should not be confused with the logic that commanded the

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

Figure 2.1. *Der kidneper* (The Kidnapper), "Eybi's muving piktshurs," *Die wahrheit*, October 30, 1912.

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp,
University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.

actual entertainment practices and preferences of East Side audiences. As Roger Chartier points out, "there is a radical difference between the lettered, logocentric, and hermeneutic rationality that organizes the production of discourses and the rationality informing all other regimes of practices."[45] Like the leaders of the immigrant community, the Jewish "masses" displayed a strong commitment to the core values of their culture. But in this case, the impetus did not arise from a sustained striving for continued hegemony but from the contemporaneous revitalization of the Jewish labor movement and the increased Jewish ethnic and working-class assertiveness that went with it. The growing prominence of Yiddish vaudeville on the bills of moving picture theaters should thus be explained as a grassroots resistance on the part of working-class Jews to outside interference in their leisure-time activities, especially to mainstream efforts to Americanize the cinema. Programmed in between moving pictures, Yiddish vaudeville shaped the reception of the films that were shown, thus reducing the impact of the growing Americanizing tendency of the silver screen. Moreover, Yiddish vaudeville reinforced feelings of belonging to an ethnic community with shared values and pleasures based on a communal language and history. In sum, what the revitalization of the Jewish labor movement marked at the level of the factory, the revival of Yiddish vaudeville signified in the domain of leisure: a reassertion of Jewish ethnic attachments and loyalties.

What is remarkable in this light is that, unlike Cahan and other socialist leaders, working-class Jewish immigrant audiences embraced Yiddish vaudeville anew without rejecting the film medium. They liked the entertainment of the "American" movies enough not to want to do away with them as an act of cultural correctness. While sympathetic and responsive to the message of ethnic solidarity, both in the workplace and in their leisure time, the Jewish masses did not oppose acculturation into the American mainstream. Rather, they sought to exert some measure of control over their own process of Americanization. At their local movie theaters, they resisted the top-down pressures from mainstream society by embracing Yiddish vaudeville anew. As well, they resisted the top-down pressures from their own cultural elites—by continuing to enjoy the movies. What emerged from this dynamic dialogue was a heterogeneous entertainment product that remained flexible enough to serve multiple, often contradictory purposes: providing the basis for ethnic solidarity among audience members and, at the same time, inviting them to participate in the American dream of the movies.

Copyright © 2008. University of Pennsylvania Press. All rights reserved.

<i>The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times</i>, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Jonathan Karp, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=3442042.
Created from uunl on 2019-10-14 12:29:21.