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THE HISTORY OF YIDDISH THEATRE IN SOUTH AFRICA FROM THE LATE
NINETEENTH CENTURY TO 1960

By

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Dissertation submitted in *fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Arts in Jewish Civilization

Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies

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2003

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature

Signed by candidate

Date 1. 11. 2003

Signature Removed

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Milly Penkin (Kitzner), who participated in Yiddish community theatre in Paarl, and who instilled in me a love of Yiddish and *Yidishkayt*. It is also dedicated to my father, Jack Penkin, who willingly suffered seven sisters in his sitting room on a Sunday *hakking a tshaynik* in a language that he could not understand.

University of Cape Town

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been written without the generous assistance of the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research in New York and the inspiration of the Faculty of the Weinreich Yiddish Summer Program at Columbia University. Thanks also to the assistance of the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town and to the encouragement of the Director of the Centre, Prof Milton Shain, who supervised this dissertation.

I am also indebted to my colleagues in Government Publications, Manuscripts and Archives, African Studies, Rare Books, and Hiddingh Hall Libraries who would always go the extra mile to assist me and share their extensive expertise. I must also express my appreciation to Dr Ute Ben Yosef, Chief Librarian at the Gitlin Library of the Western Province Zionist Council, Naomi Musiker, Archivist at the South African Jewish Board of Deputies Archives in Johannesburg, Aviva Astrinsky, Head Librarian at the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research in New York, and to all the Library Assistants in the Reading Room of the National Library of South Africa in Cape Town. Thanks also to Saul Ozynski for entrusting me with the precious photographs of his father, Benny. Finally thanks to my daughter, Galia, for proofreading the manuscript and to my son, Ayal, for scanning in the pictures.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation sets out to investigate the history of Yiddish theatre in South Africa. Yiddish theatre first emerged in Jassy in Rumania in 1876. However with Czarist persecution and the great Jewish migration from Eastern Europe, by the 1880s it had spread to Western Europe, the Americas, and South Africa. This dissertation attempts to answer the question as to why of all Eastern Europe's diasporas, Yiddish theatre at no stage put down permanent roots in South Africa. It aims to prove that the survival of Yiddish theatre was entirely dependent on the survival of the Yiddish language. Thus the fate of Yiddish theatre in South Africa was influenced by the early timing of the formative immigration, between 1890 and 1914, the common origins of the immigrants in Lithuania and White Russia, and their educational and cultural poverty. These factors were reinforced by the exclusive adherence of the Anglo-German Jewish establishment and the vast majority of the immigrants, to Zionism and the Hebrew revival. Yiddish was unequivocally rejected, so that it never featured in the construction of South African Jewish identity. Finally the Quota Act of 1930, reinforced by the Alien's Act of 1937, put a total halt to Eastern European Jewish immigration, the lifeblood of Yiddish theatre.

The scope of the research was defined by the history of Yiddish theatre. In 1896 the first performance was recorded, and by 1960 the Dramatic Section of the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* – the South African Yiddish Cultural Federation - had disappeared. Geographically the dissertation focuses chiefly on Johannesburg and its environs, the destination of the majority of the immigrants, as well as Cape Town and its environs. Durban in Natal, Port Elizabeth and East London in the Eastern Cape, the Orange Free State, and Kimberley in the Northern Cape, feature very briefly.

No research has ever before been attempted into the history of Yiddish theatre in South Africa which is virtually absent from the record. Thus this research was totally reliant on primary sources and even these were problematic. Firstly as very few of the original participants in Yiddish theatre are still alive, oral testimony was extremely scarce. Secondly the few archival collections relating to Yiddish theatre consist mainly of random newspaper clippings, playbills and programmes without any documentation to provide context. The only source was the local Jewish press, the weekly and monthly newspapers and journals in

English, Yiddish and Hebrew, whose coverage was generally very poor. An additional obstacle was the fact that one of the the chief promoters of Yiddish theatre was the Communist sympathizing anti-Zionist *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* – the Johannesburg Jewish Workers' Club, (1929-1950), whose activities were not reported in the pro-Zionist English Press.

This dissertation aims to prove that Yiddish theatre never put down permanent roots due to the fact that in its most vibrant and productive years, communal support was not forthcoming. Nonetheless the establishment was unable to suppress the innate love of the *Litvaks* for Yiddish theatre, which was a lively presence at times with a large following. Moreover the dissertation aims to disprove the claim of the Yiddish writer, Richard Feldman, that during the 1930s Yiddish activity was at its lowest ebb due to 'the dark cloud of Hitlerism'. On the contrary this period was the most active and innovative in the history of Yiddish community theatre in South Africa.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Yiddish theatre originated in the densest Yiddish speaking communities in Eastern Europe, starting in Jassy in Rumania in 1876, moving over to Odessa in the Ukraine from where it spread rapidly throughout the Russian Pale of Settlement.¹ However only seven years after its first appearance in 1883 it was banned by an oppressive Russian edict.² Thus Yiddish theatre followed the route of the immigrants who formed part of the great Jewish migration from Eastern Europe which occurred between 1881 and 1914.³ Yiddish theatre found its second home in New York where by 1900 close to a million of the immigrants had settled.

The lifespan of Yiddish theatre was entirely dependent on the transmission of the language to the second generation. Thus the history of Yiddish theatre is synonymous with the history of the Yiddish language and any investigation into its existence has to examine the factors which favoured or mitigated against its survival. Outside of Eastern Europe the survival of Yiddish was dependent on the size and timing of the immigration, of the country of origin and the cultural and ideological baggage of the immigrants. As soon as immigration declined, Yiddish theatre would also decline. As the Jews gradually adopted the language and culture of their host countries, and the greater proportion of Jews were locally born, it was almost inevitable that Yiddish theatre would wane.

Of all Eastern Europe's diasporas the South African Jewish community is unique in its consistently negative to indifferent attitude to Yiddish, and in the rapidity with which it discarded its use. Thus whilst the appearance of Yiddish theatre in South Africa is almost contemporaneous with the great immigration of the 1880s, its persistence cannot be attributed to the support of the community but was rather despite it. The elements at work in the fate of Yiddish theatre in South Africa are brought into focus by a comparison with three other Jewish frontier communities where Yiddish language and culture formed an essential ingredient in the construction of their Jewish identity, and where Yiddish thrived long after the period of mass immigration. These are the Jewish communities of Buenos Aires in Argentina, Montreal in Canada, and Melbourne in Australia.

¹ The Pale of Settlement is the area in Czarist Russia where Jews were allowed to settle during the years 1771-1917. It stretched from the Prussian border to the Black Sea on Russia's southernmost border. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Keter, Jerusalem, 1972, vol. 13, p. 24.

² N. Sandrow, *Vagabond stars: a world history of Yiddish theater*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, New York, 1996, p. 57

³ J. Frankel, 'The crises of 1881-82 as a turning point in modern Jewish history', in *The legacy of Jewish migration: 1881 and its impact*, ed. D. Berger, Brooklyn College Press, New York, 1983, pp. 9-22.

Like South Africa, the formative years of Argentinian Jewry were also between 1881 and 1914. However as against the 44 377 Eastern European immigrants, mainly petty traders and *luftmentshn*⁴ from Lithuania and White Russia, who came to South Africa, the majority of the 112 614⁵ Russian, Romanian, and (Austrian) Galician and Polish Jews who went to Argentina, were artisans employed in light industry, such as garment production, leather crafts, cabinet making, etc., as well as shopkeepers, pedlars and small traders. They were among the founders of the unions and of the Argentine Socialist party, whilst also founding their own Socialist organisations *Avangard* in 1907 and the Yiddisher Arbeter Farband in 1909.⁶ Yiddish, the language of the Jewish proletariat, was thus the central element in the construction of identity of the Argentinian Jewish community. By 1916 two Yiddish theatre companies were performing twice weekly in Buenos Aires, and by 1929 three theatres were presenting Yiddish plays daily.⁷

In the early Jewish community of Montreal, dominated by Litvaks, a unique Yiddish-Hebrew synthesis was achieved. Between 1881 and 1921 the Jewish population of Montreal, the largest Jewish community in Canada, grew from 811 to 45 846, consisting largely of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe. Between 1911 and 1920 at a time when the Bund⁸ was committed exclusively to Yiddish and the *Poale Zion* in *Erets Yisroel* exclusively to Hebrew, the *Poale Zion* in Montreal, sought to maintain an internal Jewish bilingualism of Hebrew and Yiddish in a unique effort to reinvent the internal cohesion of *shtetl* culture. Roskies stresses that this was not a reaction to environmental influences, but 'a cognitive and... ideological construct, the work of a tiny group of secular Zionists intellectuals.' Beginning in 1913 they established Yiddish secular schools, a Yiddish library, the first Yiddish day schools anywhere in North America, and a Jewish Community Council.⁹

Australian Jewry's formative years as an immigrant European diasporic community. occurred much later than either South Africa, Argentina or Canada, because of its anti-Jewish immigration policy. In 1921 Melbourne, the second biggest Jewish community in Australia, numbered only 6 927. The initial reception to Zionism was mixed and a Zionist Federation was only established in

⁴ In Eastern Europe the term, *luftmentsh*, referred to Jews with no fixed occupation. Sholem Aleichem's character Menahem Mendel with his wild schemes of making a fortune is the archetypal *luftmentsh*. L. Rosten, *The joys of Yiddish*, Penguin books, London, 1971, pp. 216-217.

⁵ J. Lestschinsky, 'Jewish migrations, 1840-1956', in J.Laikin Elkin, *The Jews of Latin America*, Rev. ed, Holmes & Maier, New York, 1998, p. 52.

⁶ J.Laikin Elkin, *The Jews of Latin America*, Rev. ed, 1998, pp. 52-57.

⁷ V.A. Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930: in search of an identity*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1990, p. 173.

⁸ The Bund is the abbreviation for the *Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln un Rusland*, the General Jewish Workers' Union in Lithuania, Poland and Russia, the Jewish Socialist Party that was founded in Russia in 1897. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 1972, vol. 4, p. 1497.

the 1920's with the arrival of 2 000 East European Jews. After the Second World War the anti-immigration policy was reversed and by 1947 the Jewish population of Melbourne had doubled, the increase made up of Polish, Russian, Palestinian, German and Austrian Jews, refugees from Hitler's Europe.¹⁰ This late immigration meant that in 1983 the Melbourne Jewish community had a higher proportion of post-Second World War immigrants than the United States¹¹ and the life span of Yiddish culture was extended. Kadimah, the Jewish National Library and Cultural Centre, Australia's premier Yiddishist cultural organization, was founded in 1911. The oldest Yiddish supplementary school was founded in 1935 and in 1981, 7% of all Jewish children were receiving Yiddish education as compared to 3% in the United States.¹² Despite small numbers Yiddish theatre was first performed in Melbourne in 1909 and before and during the First World War Melbourne had two theatre companies.¹³ After a hiatus immediately after the war, in 1925 two companies were formed which eventually amalgamated.¹⁴ In 1939 with the arrival of the famous Polish theatre director, Yankev Waislitz, who had spent 7 months in South Africa in 1937 in an unsuccessful attempt to establish a Yiddish theatre, the company was renamed the David Herman Theatre Company.¹⁵ It was sponsored by Kadimah and lasted until as late as 1992.¹⁶

What distinguishes the South African Jewish community from the former communities is its homogenous nature; its Jews came almost exclusively from a cluster of small towns and villages, within a relatively small radius in Lithuania and White Russia. The Lithuanian Jews were traditional, and staunchly Zionist, imbued with the spirit of the *Hibbat Zion* movement. They spoke Yiddish, but were ideologically committed to the Hebrew language. Added to this was the fact that South Africa's racially divided society, where entrepreneurial Whites enjoyed relatively rapid upward mobility, mitigated against the formation of a Jewish proletariat and the adoption of Bundist ideologies including Yiddishism.¹⁷ Thus of all Eastern Europe's diasporas South Africa is the only one where a permanent Yiddish theatre never existed. However this does not mean that

⁹ D.G. Roskies, 'A Hebrew-Yiddish utopia in Montreal: ideology in bilingual education', in *Hebrew in America: perspectives and prospects*, ed. A. Mintz. Wayne State University Press, 1993, pp. 155-166.

¹⁰ D.J. Elazar. & P. Medding, *Jews in frontier societies: Argentina, South Africa and Australia*, Holmes & Maier, New York, 1983, pp. 287, 279.

¹¹ F. Klarberg, 'Yiddish in Melbourne' in *Never say die: a thousand years of Yiddish in Jewish life and letters*, ed. Joshua A. Fishman. The Hague: Mouton Publishers, c1981, p. 623.

¹² D. J. Elazar, & P. Medding, *Jews in frontier societies: Argentina, South Africa and Australia*, 1983, p. 287.

¹³ S. Rutland, *Edge of diaspora: two centuries of Jewish settlement in Australia*, 2nd rev. ed., Brandl & Schlesinger, Rose Bay, NSW, 1997, pp. 91-92.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁶ See A. Zable, *Wanderers and dreamers: tales of the David Herman Theatre*, Hyland House, South Melbourne, 1998.

¹⁷ See G. Shimoni, 'From one frontier to another: Jewish identity and political organization in Lithuania and South Africa, 1890-1939', in *Jewries at the frontier: accommodation, identity, conflict*, eds S.L. Gilman & M. Shain, University of Illinois Press, 1999, pp. 129-154.

Yiddish theatre did not exist, even if its track record is somewhat patchy. This dissertation will investigate the nature of its manifestations and try to answer the question as to why at no stage in its lifespan did it ever put down permanent roots.

The structure of the dissertation was dictated by the history of Yiddish theatre in South Africa. It is divided chronologically into four main periods which are largely defined by Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe which has always been the lifeblood of Yiddish theatre. These periods are: 1896-1910; 1911-1930; 1931-1947 and 1947-1960. The first period begins with the first recorded performance of Yiddish theatre in South Africa in 1896 and ends with the failure of the first attempt to establish a permanent Yiddish theatre for Johannesburg. The second period begins with the departure of the Wallerstein Company and the establishment of the first Yiddish cultural society in Johannesburg and ends just before the Immigration Quota Act of 1930. The third period traces developments to the establishment of the first inter-provincial Yiddish organisation, the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* in June 1947. The final period begins with the establishment of the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* and ends with the disappearance of its Dramatic Section in 1960. The historical periods which encompass five chapters, are preceded by a very brief overview of the world history of Yiddish theatre to illustrate the historical context of events in South Africa.

In examining the four historical periods, this dissertation specifically seeks to disprove the claim made in 1960 by Richard Feldman, a well known South African Yiddish author. In Feldman's view Yiddish activity was at its lowest in the 1930s, due to 'the dark cloud of Hitlerism'¹⁸ This dissertation will illustrate that the very opposite was true and that the 1930's were in fact the most active for Yiddish theatre all over South Africa. In fact, the period between 1930 and 1947 is the period when circumstances in Johannesburg were ripe for the establishment of a permanent Yiddish theatre.

Literature survey and methodology.

This is the first attempt ever to research the history of Yiddish theatre in South Africa. Although there are various studies of South African Yiddish literature, Yiddish theatre has up to now been entirely absent from South African Jewish historiography. The only clues to its existence are brief references to the touring companies in the early years of the twentieth century by Dora Sowden¹⁹

¹⁸ R. Feldman, 'Yiddish in South Africa', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 15, no. 5, May 1960, p. 66.

¹⁹ D. Sowden, 'Transvaal Jewry, 1902-10' in *The Jews in South Africa: a history*, eds G. Saron & L. Hotz, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1955, p. 222.

and Jill Fletcher.²⁰ A slightly more detailed discussion of this period is contained in M.P. Grosman's doctoral thesis²¹ and in Bonnie Feldman's B.A. Honours dissertation.²² A fuller description of the early years is found in Leibl Feldman's section on *Yidish teater* in his book *Yidn in Yohanesburg biz yunyen*.²³ Feldman relates how Yiddish theatre first came to Johannesburg, listing the names of numerous productions, and citing reviews from Yiddish newspapers which are no longer in existence. The only comprehensive secondary source to be found is an article in two parts by the Yiddish actor, Hannan Hirsch, that appeared in the Yiddish journal, *Dorem Afrike* in 1928.²⁴

References to the history of community theatre are much more elusive. Looking for clues of its existence was like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. Nahma Sandrow's seminal *Vagabond stars: a world history of Yiddish theater*, has two very brief sections on Yiddish theatre in South Africa. The first describes the touring companies in the early years, and the second on the later period touches on community theatre.²⁵ Charles Press's *The Light of Israel: the story of the Paarl Jewish community* (1993) has a brief description of community Yiddish theatre in Paarl in the 1930s.²⁶ A description of an episode in community theatre in Johannesburg in the 1950s is contained in the Yiddish book, *Yankev Mansdorf in zayn dor*. Mansdorf, a giant of the Vilna Troupe in Poland spent almost two years in South Africa as a guest of the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* between 1953 and 1955, producing Yiddish theatre with the amateurs in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Port Elizabeth.²⁷ Two reference tools proved invaluable for this research. The first is Zalmen Zylbercweig's monumental *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, published in six volumes between 1931 and 1969.²⁸ No serious research into Yiddish theatre

²⁰ J. Fletcher, 'Johannesburg at leisure: Luscombe Searelle and Harry Stodel', in *Founders and followers: Johannesburg Jewry, 1887-1915*, eds M. Kaplan & M. Robertson, Vlaeberg, Cape Town, 1991, pp. 179-180.

²¹ M.P. Grosman, *A study of the trends and tendencies of Yiddish and Hebrew writings in South Africa to 1930*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1973, vol 1, pp. 211-214.

²² B.I. Feldman, *Social life of Cape Town Jewry, 1904-1914, with special reference to the Eastern European immigrant community*, B.A. Hons, University of Cape Town, 1984, pp. 19-20.

²³ L. Feldman, *Yidn in Yohanesburg biz Yunyen 31-tn May, 1910*, South African Yiddish Cultural Federation, Johannesburg, 1956, pp. 159-163.

²⁴ H. Hirsch, 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike', in *Dorem Afrike*, 1-ter yor, nom. 5, November 1928, pp. 22-24; 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike zint 1902', in *Dorem Afrike*, 1-ter yor, nom. 6, December 1928, pp. 10-13.

²⁵ N. Sandrow, *Vagabond stars: a world history of Yiddish theater*, 1st Syracuse University Press ed, Syracuse, New York, 1996, pp. 86-87, 372-373.

²⁶ C. Press, *Light of Israel: the story of the Paarl Jewish community*, Jubilee Publications, Paarl, 1993, pp. 74-75.

²⁷ D. Wolpe, 'Mansdorf oyf zayn letsten tur : Dorem Afrike', in *Yankev Mansdorf in zayn dor*, eds M. Dworczycki, M. Tsanin, R. Rubinstein, Yankev Mansdorf Fund, mit der mithelf fun der Kultur-Federatsye un Histadrut Ivrit, Johannesburg & Rhodesia: 19-?, pp. 125-139.

²⁸ Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, Farlag Elisheva, New York, 1931-1969, 6 v.

would be possible without it. The second is the author's own *Bibliography of South African Jewry*.²⁹

This dissertation was based on an extensive survey of South African Jewish journals and newspapers in English, Yiddish and Hebrew. The newspapers include the weeklies, the *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 1902-1958, the *Zionist Record*, 1915-1940, the *South African Jewish Times*, 1935-1950, the Yiddish weeklies, *Der Afrikaner*, 1911-1932 and the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 1931-1950. These were supplemented by the monthly periodicals, *Jewish Affairs*, 1946-2002, the Yiddish *Dorem Afrike*, 1928-1929, *Forois*, 1937-1938, and *Dorem Afrike*, 1947-1991, and the Hebrew *Barkai*, 1933-1960.

The weekly *South African Jewish Chronicle* was particularly helpful for the years 1902-1910, when it had a regular column devoted to *Stage Song & Show*, which reviewed the productions of the visiting companies. In addition the archival collections of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies in Johannesburg, and the Manuscripts and Archives Department at the University of Cape Town contain several collections relating to Yiddish theatre. Two scrapbooks were particularly helpful: the Rochel Turok album in the Manuscripts and Archives Department at the University of Cape Town,³⁰ and Max Raysman's private scrapbook.³¹ As the Turok album has no captions, I am indebted to Max Raysman, with whose help, I was able to identify most of the people in the photographs. I was also allowed access to Bertha Englander's, unpublished memoirs, where she describes her participation in the Dramatic Section of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* in Johannesburg in the 1930s and 1940s, and with the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* in the 1950s.³²

Various factors served to complicate this research. Firstly the number of surviving participants in Yiddish theatre today, is barely a handful. This is a tremendous drawback for a study which is necessarily heavily reliant on oral testimony, and without which tends to become little more than a catalogue. This problem was compounded by the poor quality of the theatre reviews which tended to do little more than summarise the plots and list the participants. The other drawback was the almost complete lack of scripts of locally written plays. Paradoxically the few local Yiddish plays that were published were not performed, and those that were performed were not published! In the twenty one years that I have worked with the Jewish Studies Collection at the

²⁹ Veronica Belling, *Bibliography of South African Jewry*. Jewish Publications - Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1997.

³⁰ Rochel Turok album, BCS 375, Manuscripts and Archives Department, University of Cape Town Libraries,.

³¹ Max Raysman collection, Jewish Studies Library, U.C.T. Libraries.

³² Bertha Englander, Unpublished memoirs.

University of Cape Town I have never come across these plays. Professor Joseph Sherman, formerly of the University of the Witwatersrand and presently at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, the expert in South African Yiddish literature, has confirmed this.

In addition this research was hampered by ideological issues. Yiddish has traditionally been associated with the Jewish Socialist movement, originating with the *Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln un Rusland* – the General Jewish Workers Union in Lithuania, Poland and Russia, which adopted Yiddish as the language of the Jewish masses, and sought to have it declared as the national language of the Jews. The Jewish Socialist groups espoused various forms of diaspora nationalism and opposed the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. As the Jewish community of South Africa unreservedly supported the Zionist movement, they tended to boycott any anti-Zionist groups, which for a long while were the leading producers of Yiddish community theatre, and thus their activities were not reported in the English Jewish press. Whilst the Yiddish press was also pro-Zionist, they at least reported the activities of the Workers organisations.³³

The scope of this research was dictated by the availability of press reports and focused mainly on Johannesburg and Cape Town, but also took in their neighbouring towns of Pretoria, Benoni, Klerksdorp, Krugersdorp, in the Transvaal and Paarl, Worcester, Stellenbosch and Ceres in the Cape. Durban, the most anglicised of South African towns was traditionally hostile to Yiddish, but one brief episode there is included. Kimberley in the Northern Cape gets a very brief mention as does the Orange Free State and East London. It is possible that more Yiddish theatre occurred in Port Elizabeth than was reported in the national Jewish press. Max Angorin, the Yiddish actor, who provided the information for Nahma Sandrow's *Vagabond stars*, seems to imply that this was the case. However if it was not reported in the Yiddish weekly *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, one can pretty much believe that it has been lost to history.

I am also conscious of the many items, which in the interests of narrative coherence, could not be incorporated. These are the variety concerts, the folk choirs, the many popular Jewish instrumentalists, the cantors who sang with the Municipal orchestras at the Russian Symphony concerts, the Russian orchestra that played at restaurants in Johannesburg, and much more. They all contributed to the ambience of Jewish Johannesburg. Some readers may find the excessive listing of names a bit tedious. However it is the people who made Yiddish theatre, and as this is the only comprehensive study of Yiddish theatre in South Africa ever attempted, their

³³ See J. Sherman, 'Between ideology and indifference: the destruction of Yidish in South Africa', in *Memories, realities and dreams: aspects of the South African Jewish experience*, eds M. Shain & R. Mendelsohn, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg & Cape Town, 2002, pp. 28-49.

names would otherwise be lost. On the other hand I apologise for any names that have been omitted.

All translation from the Yiddish is my own and the system of transliteration followed, unless the text is cited from a manuscript or published source, is that of the Library of Congress. The spelling of people's names was problematic particularly if the only source of the name was the Yiddish press. Even in the English press names were often spelled differently at different times and in different places. Finally I have provided four appendices. The first is a chronological list of visiting companies, artists and writers, and the second is a list of plays produced by the amateur groups. The list of the amateur productions includes the name of the play, the author, the director, the sponsoring organisation, and the venue, if those details were available. The list does not claim to be inclusive. It is possible that there were plays that were not reported in the press, or some that were missed during my examination of the newspapers. In addition I have compiled a chronological list of all South African Yiddish plays, whether they were performed or not. Original photographs of South African Yiddish theatre in performance or portraits of the actors are extremely rare. Thus I was often forced to scan images from old faded books and newspapers. In the final appendix I have listed the sources of all the illustrations.

CHAPTER 2. YIDDISH THEATRE : HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Theatre developed late in the history of the Jewish people. It has no precedent in the Hebrew Bible and we know that the ancient Jews shunned theatre because of its association with Greek paganism and idol worship. In the Middle ages it was associated with medieval Christian morality plays. The earliest form of Jewish theatre was the *Purimspiel* that developed in medieval Germany in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. At this time the Yiddish language, a fusion of Middle High German and Hebrew-Aramaic with elements of Romance languages, was absorbing Slavic elements as the Jews were gradually moving eastwards into southeast Germany and Poland. Whilst the theatrical tradition dates back to the early sixteenth century, the drama as a *genre* in Hebrew and Yiddish literature only developed in Germany in the late eighteenth century at the time of the Jewish Enlightenment, known in Hebrew as the *Haskalah*. The *Haskalah* introduced rationalism into Jewish life and thought, with the aim of integrating Jews into their host societies. To convey these new ideas to the Jewish masses, Jewish literature in Hebrew and Yiddish, adopted the forms of European literature, such as the drama and the novel.

As a modern *genre* Yiddish theatre has its roots in the Russian Pale of Settlement, the area where Jews were confined, that stretched from the Prussian border to the Black Sea on the southernmost border of Czarist Russia. At the end of the nineteenth century the Pale was the centre of the Jewish world with a population of approximately 5 million, about half of the Jewish people.¹ It was the cradle of twentieth century Jewish civilisation both religious and secular, including Rabbinitism and Hasidism, the new political ideologies of Zionism, Jewish Socialism, and Diaspora nationalism, and modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature. It was thus the natural birthplace of Yiddish theatre, which mirrors all these trends and ideologies.

Yiddish theatre grew out of the tradition of the *badkhen* (jester), the Broder singers,² and the *klezmerim*, (musicians), who earned a living wandering through the towns and villages in the Pale, entertaining at weddings, and in the taverns. Avrom Goldfaden (1840-1908), a Hebrew and Yiddish poet, song writer and journalist from Volynia in the Ukraine, was unique in that he was seemingly the first to recognise the possibilities of synthesising the secular traditions of the *badkhen*, the Broder singers and the *klezmerim*, together with

¹ E. Friesel, *Atlas of modern Jewish history*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990, p. 32.

the religious musical training of the *hazonim*, (cantors), and their *zingerlekh* (choir boys), in a modern format. Goldfaden produced his first 'show' at the Green Tree tavern in Jassy in Rumania in 1876,³ and early Yiddish theatre has since become synonymous with his name.

Goldfaden's sixty operettas were the staple of early Yiddish theatre. His plays captured the folk essence of the Jewish people, laughing at their idiosyncrasies and foibles, glorifying their history and expressing their innermost hopes and fears. His early productions were very simple encompassing no more than 'a jig, a song, a quarrel and a kiss' together with improvised dialogue, in the fashion of the *commedia del arte*. In the style of the *Haskalah* in his early works, such as *Shmendrik* and *Di Tsvey kuni-lemis* (The two *Kuni-lemis*), the villains are the pious, whilst the 'moderns' are the heroes. These names soon became the standard for certain Jewish types which are still used to this day.⁴ Goldfaden's most popular operettas, *Shulames* and *Bar Kokhba*, were inspired by the rise of the *Hibbat Zion* movement, particularly after the *pogroms*⁵ in Russia and Rumania which followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. *Shulames*, a pastorelle set in ancient Judea, depicts the love of Avshalom for *Shulames* and contains one of the most beloved songs in the Yiddish repertoire, *Rozhinkes mit mandln* (Raisins and almonds). *Bar Kokhba*, depicts the last desperate revolt against Roman oppression in 135 C.E. This operetta contains memorable scenes, such as 'the coronation of Bar Kokhba on Mount Moriah, his taming of a raging lion, and his bride Dina addressing the besieging army from the battlement of Caesarea, where she was held captive by the Romans, and then hurling herself down from the wall so that her compatriots should not be restrained from storming the fortress by fears of her safety.'⁶

Fearful that the Yiddish theatre was inciting revolution, a Russian edict issued in 1883 prohibited Yiddish theatre resulting in Yiddish actors joining the great Jewish migration to the West. They stopped off in the neighbouring countries, of Lemberg in Galicia, Vienna

² These singers took their name from the city of Brod on the border of Galicia and Russia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where the first wellknown singer of this type originated. N. Sandrow, *Vagabond stars*, 1996, p. 36.

³ N. Sandrow, *Vagabond stars*, 1996, p. 41.

⁴ A *shmendrik* is someone who is 'stupid but not vicious, gullible but not vengeful'. The original *kunilemi* was 'one-eyed, lame, stuttering,' thus the word is used to mean someone who is pathetic, crippled and ugly. S. Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish literature*. Jonathan David Publishers, New York, 1972, 1985, p. 75.

⁵ Pogrom is a Russian word meaning 'attack'. It is used in particular to designate those attacks that were perpetrated by the Christian population on the Jews, which were tolerated by the Russian authorities between 1881 and 1921. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1972, vol. 13, p. 694.

and Paris, on their way to London and New York, which by 1900 was home to close on a million Jewish immigrants, where Yiddish theatre found its second home. However the first Yiddish performance took place in New York in 1882, even before the Russian ban, and amongst the players was the legendary Boris Thomashefsky, a cigar worker and cantor's son.⁷

Out of Goldfaden's original troupe many troupes were born. In the early years the mark of pedigree of a Yiddish actor was having performed in one of the original Goldfaden troupes. The first Yiddish actor to arrive in South Africa was Yankl Rosenfeld, a Goldfaden disciple. One of Goldfaden's greatest rivals although of far less ability, was Joseph Lateiner (1853-1935). Lateiner's 200 plays tended to be sensational dramatisations of newspaper stories or sentimental representations of inexact Jewish history. After Goldfaden, Lateiner's plays were the most often performed on the Yiddish stage in the early period. The Yiddish word '*shund*', was an accusation levelled at productions such as those of Lateiner. The early Yiddish theatre had burgeoned to cater for the needs of the uncritical and uneducated masses. Plays were written overnight. Scripts were often borrowed, adapted, translated, given a Jewish twist, and thrown together or 'baked' as it was popularly termed. Most of these early plays were not of great literary quality. Weinreich's dictionary translates '*shund*' as 'literary trash.' However *shund* is really an umbrella term for Yiddish popular culture, which contains elements of folksiness, emotionalism and theatricality, which are not lacking in merit. *Shund* has in some ways a similar connotation to the modern day idea of 'kitch.'⁸

Ranking after Goldfaden, Jacob Gordin (1853-1909), a Yiddish playwright who emigrated to the United States in 1890, set about to raise the standard of the Jewish stage together with the actor, Jacob P. Adler, heralding a golden era in Yiddish theatre. Influenced by the works of Ibsen, Gordin brought realism to the Yiddish stage. What was even more revolutionary at that time, Gordin insisted that his actors stick to the script! His three most famous plays, *Mirele Efros*, a female version of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which examines the problem of ungrateful children, *Got, mentsh un tayvl* (God, man and the devil), which adapts the theme of greed of Goethe's *Faust*, and *Der Yidisher Kenig Lir* (The Jewish King Lear), became classics of the Yiddish stage. The importance of his plays lay in that they dealt with real life problems which, even if somewhat exaggerated, helped the immigrants to adapt to their new circumstances in America. Gordin paved the way of able

⁶ S. Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish literature*. Jonathan David Publishers, New York, 1972, 1985, p. 76.

⁷ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1972, vol. 15, pp. 1065-1066.

disciples, such as Leon Kobrin (1873-1946) and Zalmen Libin (1872-1955). Kobrin, who settled in the U.S. in 1892, followed Gordin in style, but 'moralised less and visualised more'. His dramatic ability reached its peak in *Yankl Boyle* (1908), the tragedy of a simple Russian Jewish youth who is driven to suicide through guilt at having married a Russian peasant girl. Kobrin's contemporary, Zalmen Libin, who characterises his tragic-comic muse as having been born 'in the dark tenement-graves' of New York, wrote about 50 plays depicting the life of the workers in the sweatshops.⁹ Together Gordin, Kobrin and Libin helped to raise the standard of the Yiddish stage. With the death of Gordin in 1909 a decline came over Yiddish theatre in America.

Just as Yiddish theatre was beginning its decline in the United States, it was experiencing a revival in Russia with the lifting of the ban on Yiddish productions in 1908. At the centre of this revival was Peretz Hirschbein (1880-1948), author of idyllic plays of rural life, such as *Grine felder* (Green fields), who organised the Hirschbein Troupe in Odessa in 1908 to present Yiddish dramas of high literary quality. Although his troupe lasted for only two years there is a direct line of succession from his troupe to that of the Vilna Yiddish Troupe in Poland founded in 1916, and the New York Yiddish Art Theatre of Maurice Schwartz founded in 1918. Whilst the Vilna Troupe also had a brief career, no more than five years before splitting into touring groups, it was there that the play that was to become the most famous in the Yiddish repertory, was first performed. This was the *Dybbuk* by Solomon Rappaport who wrote under the pseudonym of Shin Anski.¹⁰ An undiluted expression of Jewish folklore and mysticism, the *Dybbuk* tells the story of a young girl who is possessed by the spirit of her dead sweetheart - with whom unbeknown to her she had been betrothed at birth - when she is forced to marry a rich suitor. Even when his spirit is exorcised from her body it remains in her soul so that she joins him in death.

This same period saw the rise in Moscow of the Hebrew Habimah Company and of the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre founded in 1919. It was the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre that adapted Sholem Aleichem's *Dos Groyse gevins* (The Grand prize) into a musical called *200 000 [Tsvey hundert toysnt]*, which became one of the most popular plays on the international Yiddish stage.¹¹

⁸ See N. Sandrow, *Vagabond stars*, 1996, Chapter 5, 'Shund and the popular theater.'

⁹ S. Perlmutter, *Yidishe dramaturgn un teater kompozitors*, Ikuf, New York, 1952, p. 204.

¹⁰ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1972, vol. 15, p. 1066-1067.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1074-1075.

It has been said that the reason that Yiddish theatre never took root in South Africa is because so few Polish Jews came to South Africa. The spontaneous exuberance associated with the Polish Jew, which has its roots in the Hasidic movement of the eighteenth century, is contrasted to the sober emotional restraint, and cold intellectuality and scepticism of the *Litvak*, the archetypal *mitnaged*, who opposed the spread of Hasidism. In the 1930s the greatest centre of Yiddish theatre was in Poland when there were as many as twenty Yiddish companies active. The most important of them was the Vilna Troupe. Although Yiddish theatre in Poland was destroyed during the Holocaust, after the war the survivors immediately resumed activity, leading to the formation of the Jewish State Theatre working with a government subsidy under the direction of Ida Kaminska in 1950.¹²

Elsewhere by the 1950s Yiddish theatre was declining. The Moscow State Yiddish Theatre lasted only until 1949, when it fell victim to Stalin's purges.¹³ In the United States the decline was the result of the cessation of mass Jewish immigration at the outbreak of the First World War and the gradual transition of Americanised Jews to English as their daily language. Even though Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre, established in 1918, lasted for 40 years until 1958, his actors and audiences were steadily moving over to the English stage on Broadway and to the movies in Hollywood.¹⁴

South Africa's closest links with the overseas stage, have always been with London. London was one of the chief centres of Yiddish theatre during the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century when Yiddish theatre found a permanent home at the Pavilion Theatre in Whitechapel. Four actor-managers dominated the history of Yiddish theatre at the Pavilion. They were: Sigmund Feinman, Maurice Moscovitch, Joseph Kessler and Fanny Waxman. With the exception of Sigmund Feinman the remaining three all exerted an influence on the course of Yiddish theatre in South Africa.

Fanny Waxman and her brother, Moyshe Duvid, who came from Lodz to London as children, were among the first Yiddish actors to perform at the Standard Theatre and the Whitechapel Pavilion, in the late 1890s.¹⁵ Moyshe and Fanny Waxman's Yiddish theatre company was one of the earliest to tour South Africa and it was in their company that the

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 1071-1073.

¹³ G. Veidlinger, *The Moscow Yiddish State Theater: Yiddish culture on the Soviet stage*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2000, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1972, vol. 15, pp. 1067-1068.

¹⁵ D. Mazower, *Yiddish theatre in London*, Jewish Museum, London, 1996, pp. 17-21.

talent of Sarah Sylvia, who was to become South Africa's leading Yiddish actress, was first recognised. It was the Waxmans who first took her over to London.

Maurice Moscovitch, a star of the American Yiddish stage who had performed with Jacob Adler, first came to London just before the First World War. In 1915 he shared the management of the Pavilion with the popular comedian and operetta star, Joseph Sherman. Sherman produced the operettas and Moscovitch the dramatic classics. It was at that time that Sarah Sylvia joined his company. As her Yiddish was initially not that fluent, she began in the musical company, but was soon promoted to the dramatic company.¹⁶ Moscovitch eventually made his English language debut in 1919, playing Shylock in the production of the *The Merchant of Venice*. When Moscovitch left the Yiddish stage the American Yiddish actor Joseph Kessler took over the management of the Pavilion theatre. Sarah Sylvia joined him and she was his leading lady on his triumphant tour to South Africa in 1923. Amongst the regular actors at the Pavilion Theatre who at one time or another came out to South Africa, are the aforementioned Joseph Sherman and his wife, Jenny Kaiser, Becky Goldstein and her husband, the actor and playwright, Joseph Markowitz, and Harris Fineberg.¹⁷

Other prominent actor-managers of the 1930s who came to South Africa are Nathan Isaacovitch, Meier Tzelniker, and Mark Markov and Etta Topol. Nathan Isaacovitch, manager of the Grand Palais Theatre in London in the 1930s, first conceived of the idea of establishing a permanent Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg when he performed there with the Wallerstein company in 1909. In 1912 he tried to rally support for the idea in the South African Jewish press. In 1926 he brought his own company to South Africa for a six month season, when he unsuccessfully tried to persuade a group of businessmen to establish a permanent Yiddish theatre.

Tzelniker, a popular Yiddish character actor from Bessarabia who came to London in 1927, formed his own company in 1936. In 1938 Tzelniker led a company that toured South Africa for three months. In 1951 Tzelniker spent 6 months in South Africa at the invitation of the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* – the South African Yiddish Cultural Federation – giving recitals and producing plays, with a view to establishing a permanent Yiddish theatre for Johannesburg.

¹⁶ R. Zygielbaum, 'The Darling of the theatre: Sarah Sylvia', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 2, February 1978, p. 27.

¹⁷ D. Mazower, *Yiddish theatre in London*, 1996, pp. 21-22.

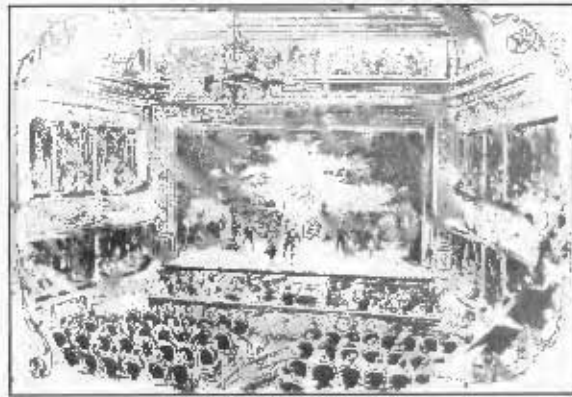
In 1939 Mark Markov and Etta Topel, who came to London as members of Maurice Schwartz's company, took over the Grand Palais company. When the blitz made it impossible to perform at the Grand Palais, Markov and Topel entertained Londoners in the air-raid shelters.¹⁸ In 1950 they led a company of actors who were brought out to South Africa by Sarah Sylvia. It was this company that brought the actress and singer, Chayele Rosenthal, who made a permanent home in Cape Town, to South Africa, whilst Markov and Topel settled in Bulawayo in the former Southern Rhodesia.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

THE GOLDEN YEARS
1896-1910



1. Sarah Sylvia



3. Gaiety Theatre



2. Hannan Hirsch



7. S. Wallerstein



4. Joseph Sacks



10. Morris Waxman



8. E. Wallerstein



5. House of Freedom, 1907.



11. Rosa Waxman



9. Bennie Wallerstein



6. Gaiety Theatre



12. Fanny Waxman

CHAPTER 3. THE GOLDEN YEARS, 1896-1910

Historical background

Whilst the history of Jewish settlement in South Africa begins in Cape Town, the history of Yiddish theatre in South Africa begins in Johannesburg. Besides the fact that the organisation of the first synagogue in Cape Town in 1841 predates the emergence of Yiddish theatre in Jassy in Rumania in 1876, the small group of Jews who constituted the Jewish community in the early Cape Colony were predominantly of English and German origin. Yiddish theatre, on the other hand as we have seen, was an East European phenomenon and its spread to the western world was an offshoot of the great migrations from Eastern Europe which took place after the pogroms of the 1880s in Russia and Rumania.

Between 1880 and 1911 approximately 40 000 Eastern European Jewish immigrants arrived in South Africa. These were only a small fraction of the approximately 3 million Jews who left Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1914, driven out by poverty and persecution. During this period the South African Jewish community increased from about 4 000 in 1880 to 49 926 in 1911 when the first census of the Union of South Africa was held.¹ South Africa's Eastern European diaspora is unique in its homogeneity. The Zionist historian, Nahum Sokolov, characterised it as 'a colony of Lithuania'. South African Jews are called *Litvaks*, a term used exclusively to refer to Jewish Lithuanians. The name has a geographical connotation which is broader than the boundaries of Lithuania, incorporating anywhere within the pre-1917 boundaries of the Czarist Russian provinces of Kovno, Vilna, Grodno and Northern Suwalki, which are Polish-Lithuanian in character, and Vitebsk, Minsk and Mogilev which are Bylo-Russian in character. Even within the Litvak orbit, the majority of the towns of origin of the immigrants, such as Rakishok, Poswohl, Ponevezh, Shavel and Kovno, are concentrated in the Kovno Province, accentuating even further the uniformity of South African Jewry. Only a small number of Polish Jews came to South Africa.²

Although communal conflict between the immigrants and the small established Anglo-German Jewish community, was evident in the early years, the community was united by a strong Zionist identity.³ The South African Zionist Federation, established in 1898, only

¹ G. Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism: the South African experience, 1910-1967*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1980, p. 5.

² Ibid.

³ See R. Krut, *Building a home and a society: Jews in Johannesburg, 1886-1914*, Thesis – Ph.D., London University, London, 1985.

a year after Herzl called the first Zionist Congress at Basle, was the first inter-provincial communal body, to represent the immigrants with the local authorities. By 1903 two governing bodies for the Cape and for the Transvaal and Natal, known as Boards of Deputies on the English model, had been created. However it was not until 1912 when these two bodies were united as the South African Jewish Board of Deputies that it took over from the Zionist Federation as the representative of South African Jewry.⁴ On the negative side, this clearly defined communal structure with its accompanying strong South African Jewish identity, based on common origins and on the Zionist ideology, did not allow for diversity.

The *Bund*, the Jewish Socialist movement in Lithuania, Poland and Russia, established in Vilna in 1897, had far less influence than the Zionist movement on those Lithuanian Jews who found their way to South Africa at the turn of the century. This was because the secular nature of *Bundist* ideology⁵ was anathema to Jews in the small Lithuanian towns and villages, where the *Hibbat Zion* movement was particularly strong, and where the Jews were still deeply rooted in religious tradition.⁶ The relatively rapid upward mobility of the immigrants in South Africa's pre-industrial and racially divided society, where unskilled and semi-skilled work was done by Blacks, also mitigated against the formation of a Jewish proletariat. Not many of the proletarian intelligentsia, who upheld Yiddish as the national language of the Jewish masses, came to South Africa in those early years.

Despite the fact that Yiddish was their mother tongue, the little education that the immigrants had received in Lithuania was restricted to the Hebrew religious texts taught in the *heder*, the religious elementary school. This immigration pre-dated the establishment of the Yiddish *folkshuls* so that the immigrants knew nothing of the development of the new Yiddish literature of the Enlightenment. The staunchly Zionist establishment firmly supported the Hebrew revival and the first organised Hebrew congregations inaugurated special part-time classes for their children to provide formal Hebrew and religious instruction.⁷ Thus the Yiddish language was accorded a very low status from the outset. Even though Yiddish theatre was extremely popular in the early years, it was dominated by roving artists and visiting professional companies, interspersed by performances by local amateurs. It never took root as it never enjoyed communal backing.

⁴ D.J. Elazar. & P. Medding, *Jewish communities in frontier societies: Argentina, Australia, and South Africa*, Holmes & Meier, London, 1983, p. 171.

⁵ See M. Greenbaum, *Jews of Lithuania*, Geffen, Tel Aviv, 1995, pp. 145-155.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 127-145.

⁷ L. Rabinowitz, 'The Transvaal congregations', in *The Jews in South Africa*, eds G. Saron & L. Hotz, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1955, p. 171.

Attracted by Johannesburg, the 'city of gold', the companies which toured during this period on occasion included the most popular performers on the international Yiddish stage, and some who went on to international stardom. The repertoire on the South African Yiddish stage during this period was identical to that which was being performed in the rest of the Yiddish speaking world. It was monopolised by Goldfaden's operettas, followed by the operettas and melodramas of playwrights such as Joseph Lateiner, Professor Hurvitz, Jacob Gordin, Sigmund Feinman, Isidore Zolotarevsky, Rudolf Marks, Moses Richter, Zalmen Libin, Nokhem Rokov, Shomer, etc⁸. Only one original play, reflecting South African Jewish life, was written and performed in Yiddish and in English translation in Johannesburg during this period.

Johannesburg, 1886-1902

The discovery of gold on the main Reef which led to the proclamation of Johannesburg as a city in 1886, was perfectly timed to make it an ideal destination for thousands of penniless Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, Latvia and Poland seeking to start new lives. Thus unlike the Cape Colony where Jews were a relatively late arrival, in Johannesburg Jews participated in its establishment, meaning that Jews and Jewish culture were part and parcel of the fabric of its society from its inception. In the ten years following the discovery of gold in 1886, the population of Johannesburg grew dramatically from a few hundred to approximately 120 000.⁹ By 1899 this number included between 10 000 and 12 000 Jews,¹⁰ more than half of whom were very poor immigrants from Lithuania and White Russia, who had arrived in the mid-1890s.¹¹

The recent immigrants congregated in Ferreirastown, a district of Johannesburg that was situated below Commissioner Street, from Sauer Street down to Fordsburg, and crosswise between Marshall and Market Streets.¹² Here they formed part of a cosmopolitan mining camp population of small tradesmen, storekeepers, liquor dealers, artisans, cab drivers, transport riders, prostitutes, entrepreneurs, entertainers, speculators and fortune hunters. As early as 1886 the relatively large number of Jews in this area had

⁸ See Chapter 2, 'World history of Yiddish theatre.'

⁹ G.A. Leyds, *A History of Johannesburg*, Nasionale Boekhandel, Cape Town, 1962, p. 26.

¹⁰ D.L. Sowden, 'In the Transvaal till 1899', in *The Jews in South Africa*, 1955, p. 150.

¹¹ C. Van Onselen, *Studies in the social and economic history of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1940*. Vol. 1. New Babylon, Longman, London, 1982, pp. 73-74.

¹² M. Sevitz, 'Fereyra' in *Forois*, yor 1, nom. 2, July 1937, p. 16.

resulted in it being called "The new Jerusalem".¹³ Commissioner Street in central Ferreirastown was a hive of immigrant activity, with the Palmerston, the *kosher* hotel, the Plungyaner Boarding House, the Minsk café, Kiselov's Drinkshop, Cohen's Restaurant, and Kavorsky's and Jaffe's Jewish bookshops.¹⁴ The spiritual life of Ferreirastown centred around the new *Besmedresh*, the Johannesburg Orthodox Hebrew Congregation, established by the Eastern European immigrants in Fox Street in 1893.¹⁵

Most of the Jewish immigrants in Ferreirastown were men who had left their families behind in Eastern Europe. Many lived in miserable conditions in corrugated iron shacks, situated around courtyards, the most famous being *Shames Yard*, located on Marshall Street, between Baker and West Street.¹⁶ There the immigrants struggled to eke out a living selling old clothes, furniture or whatever they could lay their hands on to earn money to bring out their wives and children. From the earliest days the immigrants banded together to form mutual aid societies, known as *landsmanschafts* or home town societies. These societies provided the immigrants with companionship, financial assistance or work, and occasionally also ventured into amateur Yiddish theatre. By 1918 there were between 30 and 40 societies.¹⁷

The cosmopolitan mining camp atmosphere encouraged the development of entertainment at a very early stage. The earliest entertainment consisted of light musical comedy and vaudeville, and the circus acts of the popular Fillis's circus. These were followed by classical music and opera, both light operettas and serious opera. Johannesburg was a musical city with full orchestras, chamber orchestras, theatre orchestras and choral societies proliferating.¹⁸ By 1890 Johannesburg had two wood-and-iron theatres, the Globe Theatre and the Theatre Royal of Luscombe Searelle, the pioneer

¹³ M. Robertson, 'Investing talent in the Witwatersrand: Jewish traders, craftsmen and small entrepreneurs' in *Founders and followers: Johannesburg Jewry, 1887-1915*, eds M. Kaplan & M. Robertson, Vlaeberg, Cape Town, 1991, p. 116.

¹⁴ M. Sevitz, 'Fereyra.' in *Foro's yor 1*, nom. 2, July 1937, pp 16-17.

¹⁵ L. Rabinowitz, 'The Transvaal congregations', in *The Jews in South Africa*, 1955, p. 169. The *Bes Medresh* was originally established in 1891. G. Saron, *The Jews in South Africa*, ed. N. Musiker, Scarecrow Books in association with the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, Johannesburg, 2001, p. 12.

¹⁶ L. Feldman, *Yidn in Yohanesburg biz Yunyen 31-tn Mey, 1910*, South African Yiddish Cultural Federation, Johannesburg, 1956, p. 58.

¹⁷ *Der Afrikaner*, 16 July 1918.

¹⁸ J.P. Malan, *South African music encyclopaedia*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1979-1986, vol. 3, pp. 10-18.

of theatre in Australia and South Africa, of Jewish extraction.¹⁹ In 1891 it also had the Standard Theatre, built in grand style, situated between Market and President Streets.²⁰

Johannesburg, with its racially mixed population, its corrugated iron buildings, and dusty wide open spaces, must have been amongst the most unlikely venues to find Yiddish theatre in those days. Yet Yiddish theatre reached Johannesburg extremely early, considering its distance from Eastern Europe. It was virtually contemporaneous with English theatre, although on a much smaller scale. However as the first English Jewish newspaper, the *South African Jewish Chronicle*, was only established in 1902, and the Yiddish newspapers that appeared intermittently during this period have not survived, knowledge of Yiddish theatre for 1895-1902, is reliant almost entirely on an article by Hannan Hirsch, the first South African East European immigrant to make a career in Yiddish theatre. Hirsch came to South Africa in 1902 at the age of 29, as a textile dealer. In Bialystok he had appeared on the amateur stage in Russian, but not in Yiddish. During his stay in Cape Town, he was so enchanted by the visiting Yiddish theatre company that he gave up his business and went along with them to Johannesburg.²¹

The first professional Yiddish actor to arrive in Johannesburg was Yankl Rosenfeld, a graduate of one of the famous Goldfaden Yiddish theatre companies.²² In the 1880s Yankl Rosenfeld organised Yiddish performances in Johannesburg with local amateurs.²³ In 1895 together with three other professional actors, A. Auerbach, and the actresses, Sarah Deyen and Annie Kaplanski, recently arrived from Eastern Europe via London and New York, he put on a concert of Yiddish songs and a one act vaudeville piece (presumably by Goldfaden) 'A Klap far a klap' (A Blow for a blow), at the Grand Hotel at the corner of President and Diagonal Streets.²⁴ This performance proved so successful that Yankl Rosenfeld began to put on two shows a week at the Baltic House Hall on the corner of Fox and Smal Street. As audiences grew the company moved to the Circus (presumably Fillis's circus), also known as the ampitheatre, on the corner of Jeppe and Loveday

¹⁹ J. Fletcher, 'Johannesburg at leisure: Luscombe Searelle and Harry Stodel', in *Founders and followers*, 1991, p. 177.

²⁰ C.A. Stoloff, 'The old theatres in Johannesburg', in *South African Architectural Record*, vol. 32, May 1947, p. 132.

²¹ D.L. Sowden, 'The end of an episode: Hannan Hirsch: Yiddish actor, 1873-1953' in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 2, February 1954, p. 32.

²² H. Hirsch, 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike' in *Dorem Afrike*, 1-ter yor, nom. 5, November 1928, p. 22.

²³ 'A Salute to Yiddish', South African Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg. Unpublished typescript, p. 14.

²⁴ H. Hirsch, 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike', in *Dorem Afrike*, 1-ter yor, nom. 5, November 1928, p. 23.

Streets, from there to the West End Hall and then to the Theatre Royal,²⁵ where they remained until shortly before the South African War which broke out in 1899. With the aid of a syndicate of Johannesburg businessmen the Rosenfeld Company was able to bring out more actors from America: the famous Jacob Katzman, the Wallersteins, Mr and Mrs Moyshe Silberman, Mr and Mrs Mandeltort, Mr Greenberg, Leibele Schwartz, and Feingold, who later became famous in America under the name of Schacht.²⁶ However they were all upstaged by a German actress by the name of Sauer, who quickly learnt Yiddish and became the star of the company.²⁷

Gustav Schacht (1875-1943), who acted under the name of Feingold, who was with the Rosenfeld Company between 1897 and 1899, was the subject of a written complaint about running a brothel to Lieutenant M.T. Murphy of the Morality Police by one S. Johnson of Germiston.²⁸ Schacht, a scion of a famous rabbinical family from Riga in Latvia, acted on the Yiddish stage in America, before he went to England. Hearing that there was a Yiddish Theatre Company in Johannesburg, in January 1897 he decided to try his luck there. In Johannesburg he also tried his hand at auctioneering, working for the rich Irish auctioneer, Richard Querry. He claims that with Querry's financial assistance he helped Isaac Berman to establish one of the earliest Yiddish weekly newspapers in Johannesburg, *Di Afrikanishe Idische Gazetn*.²⁹ It lasted from August 1897 until Berman's death in 1898.³⁰ Schacht also briefly tried his luck on the gold fields, but was forced to flee for his life after becoming involved with some ex-criminals from England.³¹ Just before the South African War the government of the Transvaal took severe punitive measures against pimps and prostitutes expelling scores of them.³² In any case with the outbreak of

²⁵ Here they performed *Di Muter libe* (Mother love) with Miss Sauer and Mrs Auerbach, *Bar Kokhba*, and *Don Yehudah Abarbanel* with Miss Sauer. *Di Afrikanishe Idische Gazeten*, 15 September 1897. African Jewish Gazette, August & Sept. 1897 collection, ARCH 915, S.A. Jewish Board of Deputies archives, Johannesburg.

²⁶ Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, Farlag Elisheva, New York, 1959, vol. 3, pp. 2219-2220.

²⁷ H. Hirsch, 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike', in *Dorem Afrike*, 1-ter yor, nom. 5, November 1928, p. 23; M.P. Grosman, *A Study of the trends and tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish writings in South Africa since their beginnings in the early nineties of the last century to 1930*, Ph. D, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1973, pp. 212-213.

²⁸ The original letter of complaint of 14.1.1899 is amongst the incoming correspondence of the Public Prosecutor in the collection of the Johannesburg Landrost in the National Archives in Pretoria, E-Mail from Charles Van Onselen, 8.2.2001.

²⁹ Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1959, vol. 3, pp. 2219-2220.

³⁰ M.P. Grosman, *A Study of the trends and tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish writings...*, 1973, vol. 1, pp. 148-151. Grosman makes no mention of any involvement of Schacht in this newspaper.

³¹ Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1959, vol. 3, pp. 2219-2220.

³² C. Van Onselen, *Studies in the social and economic history of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1940*, 1982, vol. 1, New Babylon, p. 135.

the War in 1899, Schacht left Johannesburg and went back to the United States,³³ where he must have become so successful and so respectable that he warranted a six page entry in Zylbercweig's *Leksikon fun Yidishn Teater!*³⁴

The connection of the early Yiddish theatre with prostitution, is not unknown. In Buenos Aires the money to establish the first Yiddish theatres came from the Jewish pimps and brothel keepers. It was not until 1926 that they were banned from the very theatres they had helped to establish.³⁵ The connection of certain individuals in Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg in the 1890s and early years of the twentieth century with prostitution, has had far less publicity, although it was a well known fact at the time. In an interview published in the *S.A. Jewish Times* in 1960, Sarah Sylvia, South Africa's leading Yiddish actress, mentions quite openly that the Jewish brothel keepers, referred to colloquially as the *chevreleit* (friends) or *tma'im* (impure), made substantial financial contributions to the Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg.³⁶ Another leading South African actor, Hannan Hirsch hints at it when he complains about bad elements amongst the actors.³⁷ The historian, Charles Van Onselen, uncovered a group of American Jewish gangsters, known as the American Club, who were amongst the most important groups controlling organised prostitution in Johannesburg in the 1890s.³⁸ The name of Samuel Wallerstein appears on a list of club members published in the *Standard and Diggers' news* of 7 February 1899.³⁹ However what the nature of his involvement was is unknown and at any rate he does not ever seem to have been in trouble with the police. This is confirmed by the fact that after the South African War in 1902 he returned with a full company of his own and remained in South Africa until 1910, when his attempt to establish a permanent theatre in Johannesburg ultimately folded.

However Yankl Rosenfeld's company was not the only group performing in Yiddish at that time. In April 1896, the first amateur Yiddish dramatic society is said to have been formed by one, Shmuel, who presented Goldfaden's *Bar-Kokhba*, followed by the comedy, *Di Dray yesoyimim fun Lodz* (The Three orphans of Lodz) in the Baltic House Hall on the

³³ Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1959, vol. 3, pp. 2219-2220.

³⁴ Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1959, vol. 3, pp. 2219-2225.

³⁵ V.A. Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930*, 1990, pp. 171-174; N. Glickman, & G.F. Waldman (eds), *Argentine Jewish Theatre: a critical anthology*. Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg, 1996, p. 9.

³⁶ B. Sachs, 'Sarah Sylvia: a life before the footlights', in *S.A. Jewish Times*, 18 March 1960, p. 17.

³⁷ Hannan Hirsch collection, ARCH 914, South African Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg.

³⁸ C. Van Onselen, *Studies in the social and economic history of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1940*, vol. 1, New Babylon, 1982, pp. 119-127.

corner of Fox and Smal Street to packed houses.⁴⁰ In addition an Anglo-German Jewish Amateur Dramatic and Operatic society also included Yiddish plays in its repertoire. *The Star* of 5 June 1896 advertised the success of the Yiddish play, *Mishki un Moshki*.⁴¹

At the beginning of 1897 the first overseas professional Yiddish theatre company arrived, the 'Oriental Opera Company of New York'. They performed Goldfaden's *Yehudah ha-Makabi* (Judah the Maccabee), *Shulames* and *Di Tsvey kuni-lemis* to packed houses.⁴² As Johannesburg was unable to sustain two competing companies at that stage, the local actors merged with them.⁴³ The combined 'Oriental Opera Company of New York' even travelled to Pretoria, a considerable distance on a dusty road by horse and cart in those days,⁴⁴ where they performed *Hayim in Amerike* with Jacob Katzman in the leading comic role.⁴⁵ Just before the war a couple by the name of Nathanson⁴⁶ (very possibly Charles Nathanson and his wife⁴⁷) arrived from London, and also began performing in Johannesburg.⁴⁸ The South African War, however, drove all the professional actors back to England, and a large number of the Jewish immigrants also left some for the Cape Colony and Durban, and others for overseas.

Johannesburg and Cape Town, 1902-1903.

After the South African War, between 1902 and 1910, Yiddish theatre in South Africa was monopolised by two rival overseas troupes sometimes performing together and at other times separately. Its leading members had performed in South Africa before the war and thus knew that they would find enthusiastic audiences awaiting them. The activities of these companies are documented in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* which was published in Cape Town until May 1905 when it moved to Johannesburg. The troupe centred around two couples: Morris and Rosa Waxman and Saul Wallerstein, referred to as Samuel, and Esther Wallerstein, sometimes referred to as Ella.⁴⁹ Samuel Wallerstein,

³⁹ *Ontuch Freemasonry, Standard and Diggers' News*, 7 February 1899.

⁴⁰ L. Feldman. *Yidn in Yohanesburg biz Yunyen 31-ten May, 1910*, 1955, p. 159.

⁴¹ J. Fletcher, 'Johannesburg at leisure: Luscombe Searelle and Harry Stodel', in *Founders and followers, 1887-1915*, 1991, p. 169.

⁴² L. Feldman. *Yidn in Yohanesburg biz Yunyen 31-tn May, 1910*, 1955, p. 159.

⁴³ N. Sandrow. *Vagabond stars*, 1996, p. 86.

⁴⁴ B. Sachs, Sarah Sylvia: a life under the footlights', in *S. A. Jewish Times*, 18 March 1960, p.17.

⁴⁵ *Di Afrikanische Idishe Gazeten*, 13 September 1897, ARCH 915.

⁴⁶ N. Sandrow, *Vagabond stars*, 1996, p. 86

⁴⁷ In the entry on Simche Bergman in Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1931, vol. 1, p. 199, he mentions the London Yiddish troupe of Charles Nathanson..

⁴⁸ H. Hiersch. 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike', in *Dorem Afrike*, 1-ter yor, nom. 5, November 1928, p. 23.

⁴⁹ Z. Zylbercweig (1931) lists two Wallerstein couples, Saul and Esther and Hymie and Ella, presumably brothers or cousins. It is not clear which couple came to South Africa. According

had come out with Katzman to South Africa before the war, but had returned to the United States and London where he met up with Morris Waxman. The Wallerstein and Waxman families were typical representatives of the travelling Yiddish theatre families of the turn of the century.

Samuel/Saul Wallerstein, was born in Kovno. At the age of 13 he emigrated to New York where he joined Goldfaden's drama school. He appeared in Rumania, London, Belgium, Leeds, and with Sigmund Feinman in Bucharest, before he travelled to South Africa. Here he remained for 8 years, directing his company together with Waxman and later on his own, bringing over actors from London and Galicia.⁵⁰ His wife and leading lady, Esther,⁵¹ was born in Grodne but emigrated to London where she met her husband. She played dramatic roles in London, Galicia, Rumania, France, Belgium, America, Argentina and in South Africa, where she was the first to appear in Gordin's⁵² repertoire.⁵³ Hyman Erlich, a well known South African Yiddish writer, remembers Esther Wallerstein as a talented dramatic actress, and Samuel Wallerstein as an outstanding comic.⁵⁴ When he played the part of *Tsingitang*, the comic servant in the operetta, *Shulames*, he used to throw in Zulu words, such as *Sake bone, fish!* (I see you, fish!) to greet his master, *Avshalom*.⁵⁵ The Wallersteins also had a son, Bennie, who played juvenile roles.⁵⁶

Morris [Moyshe Duvid] Waxman and his even more famous sister Fanny, were amongst the earliest professional Yiddish actors in London. Born in Lodz in Poland they emigrated to London, where their father was the *hazen* (cantor) of the Plotzker Synagogue for 25 years. Morris first performed in amateur theatre in London, Paris, and Antwerp. In New York in 1896 he appeared at the Thalia Theatre together with some of the alltime greats of the Yiddish stage, Sigmund Feinman, Selig Mogalescu and Bertha Kalich. He formed his own troupe in Philadelphia, with which he toured London and from there went on to South Africa.⁵⁷ Morris Waxman's Galician born wife, Rosa, was also his leading lady.⁵⁸ Before

to Zylbercweig's *Leksikon*, it was Saul and Esther, however, in the South African press reports Saul is referred to as Samuel and Esther is sometimes referred to as Ella. The only surviving pictures of the couple, in a programme from 1907, has the pictures of Hymie and Ella!. On the other hand an entry on Rabbi J.H. Hertz, the rabbi in Johannesburg at the time, in Zylbercweig's *Leksikon*, is signed by Esther Wallerstein. It is also possible that in the *Leksikon fun Yidishn Teater*, the photographs of Saul and Esther were mistakenly transposed with those of Hymie and Ella.

⁵⁰ Z. Zylbercweig. *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, New York: Elisheva, 1931, vol. 1, pp. 649-650.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 650.

⁵² See Chapter 2, 'Yiddish theatre: a historical overview.'

⁵³ Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1931, vol.1, p. 648.

⁵⁴ H. Erlich, 'A bintl zikroynes', in *Dorem Afrike*, 7-ter yorg., nom. 5, January 1955, p. 27.

⁵⁵ H. Erlich, 'A bintl zikroynes', in *Dorem Afrike*, 7-ter yorg., nom. 6, February 1955. p. 24.

⁵⁶ Z. Zylbercweig. *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1931, vol. 1, p. 648.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 660-661.

the South African War Rosa Waxman had appeared in South Africa as Mrs Mandeltort, but when Mandeltort died, Rosa married Morris Waxman. Listed only as Madame Waxman, her talents included the singing of light and heavy opera. Morris's sister, Fanny, had a beautiful soprano voice and was already a star before she came to South Africa, where she performed as a dramatic actress. Her husband Nathan Blumenthal was a partner in Waxman's company in South Africa for three years. Fanny returned to London in 1903.⁵⁹

The company also included Alexander Magidson and Max Marienhof,⁶⁰ veteran Yiddish actors, who had come to South Africa around 1901.⁶¹ Alexander Magidson was a Polish Yiddish actor who played for many years on the Yiddish stage in London, and also in South Africa and Argentina.⁶² Max Marienhof a Yiddish actor from Sitava, Koorland, emigrated to London in 1890. In 1895 he gave up the stage to start a footwear export business from England to Australia. When his business failed he decided to try his luck in Cape Town where he began performing in Yiddish theatre. When Morris Waxman formed his troupe in Johannesburg he went there to join them.⁶³

The Waxman-Wallerstein company first played for a short period in Cape Town and then moved to Johannesburg where they appeared at the Gaiety Theatre.⁶⁴ In the early twentieth century the Gaiety Theatre, a small two storey wood-and-iron structure at 3 Kort Street just off Market Street in the heart of Ferreirastown,⁶⁵ became the main home of Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg. It was built in 1893 and was housed in Metropole Buildings.⁶⁶ In 1895 it was opened by the well known Jewish entrepreneur, actor-manager and impresario, Harry Stodel.⁶⁷ The Yiddish writer, Leibl Feldman, writes that it was built by Levitan and Levy especially for Yiddish theatre.⁶⁸ However it was not until 1902 that one hears of Yiddish theatre being performed there regularly. The Gaiety contributed very largely to the great fortunes built up by Leonard Rayne, South Africa's leading actor-manager, and one of the earliest lessees of the Gaiety. Between 1902 and 1910 it was the

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 662.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 661.

⁶⁰ H. Hirsch, 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike zint 1902', 1-ter yor, nom. 6, December 1928, p. 10.

⁶¹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 2 February 1906.

⁶² Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*. New York, Elisheva, 1934, vol. 2, p. 1209.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 1256.

⁶⁴ H. Hirsch, 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike zint 1902', 1-ter yor, nom. 6, December 1928, p. 10.

⁶⁵ J. Fletcher, 'Johannesburg at leisure', in *Founders and followers*, 1991, p. 177.

⁶⁶ C.A. Stoloff, 'The old theatres in Johannesburg', in *South African Architectural Record*, vol. 32, May 1947, p. 132.

⁶⁷ J. Stodel, *The audience is waiting*. Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1962, p. 11.

hub of immigrant life in Ferreirastown, a place where the immigrants went to hear a *Yidish vort* (Yiddish word), to socialise, and to catch a glimpse of a pretty face in a community that was starved for female companionship.

The South African Yiddish authors of the time relate that the Lithuanian immigrants had never encountered Yiddish theatre before. They regarded it as a *Purimspiel* that they could watch almost any night of the week. They would save the few pennies that they earned to buy a ticket to watch a Yiddish play, which was food for the soul in a strange and foreign environment. If they displayed a poster in their shop window, they would receive two complementary tickets to a performance.⁶⁹ Performances were patronised by Jews and gentiles alike. For the Dutch speaking Boers and the German immigrants the Yiddish dialogue would have been quite easy to follow. A local German newspaper of the time commented on the unruly behaviour of the audiences, who behaved like badly brought up children. The reporter maintained that 'the restlessness, the whistling and shouting, and the occasional fist-fights, were really a disgrace.'⁷⁰ On one occasion a rude exclamation from the galleries, even caused the actor, Hannan Hirsch, to stop the play to admonish the culprits, calling out "Kaffereatnikkes!"⁷¹ in a thundering tone.⁷²

The Waxman-Wallerstein Company did not remain at the Gaiety Theatre for too long, as soon they split up. Wallerstein and his wife, together with Max Marienhoff and Alexander Magidson, went back to Cape Town. Here they were joined by Hyman Starr⁷³ and Albert Marchin from England, and by the local Cape Town actresses, Rachel Reingold (Mrs Gradner) and Dora Nathan, then only thirteen years old.⁷⁴ Thus in 1902 South Africa had two professional Yiddish theatre companies, one in Johannesburg and one in Cape Town.

In the middle of 1903, whilst Wallerstein was in Cape Town, Waxman went to Europe to recruit more actors and returned with some of the icons of the Yiddish stage at that time.

⁶⁸ L. Feldman, *Yidn in Yohanesburg biz Yunyen 31-tn May, 1910*, 1955, p. 159.

⁶⁹ R. Feldman, 'Portret fun an aktor: H. Hersch's 48 yor in dinst fun D.A. Yidishn teater', in *Dorem Afrike* 2-ter yorg., nom. 5, 1950, pp. 19-21.

⁷⁰ M.P. Grosman, *A Study of the trends and tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish writings in South Africa...*, 1973, vol. 1, p. 212.

⁷¹ "Kaffereatnikes" was the name for the Jewish immigrants, who were considered to be of the rawest types, who worked in the cant eens serving food to the Black mine workers in Johannesburg. See J. Sherman, 'Constructing Jewish immigrant identity: the "Kaffireatnik" in South African Yiddish literature', University of the Witwatersrand, Institute for Advanced Social Research, Braamfontein, 1997.

⁷² B. Sachs, 'Sarah Sylvia: a life before the footlights', in *S.A. Jewish Times*, 18 March 1960, p. 17.

⁷³ Starr later became famous as the great black artist Rameses the Great. Hirsch, H. 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike zint 1902', 1-ter yorg., nom. 6, December 1928, p. 10

⁷⁴ H. Hirsch, 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike zint 1902', 1-ter yorg., nom. 6, 1928, p. 10

They included Joseph Goldschmidt, Maurice Axelrad, Joseph Sherman, Harris Fineberg,⁷⁵ Sam Blum,⁷⁶ Simche Bergman,⁷⁷ Jennie Kaiser, and Becky Goldstein.⁷⁸ Joseph Goldschmidt and Joseph Sherman had started their acting careers with Abraham Goldfaden. Joseph Goldschmidt played the part of Eliezer at the premier of Goldfaden's *Bar Kokhba*.⁷⁹ Joseph Sherman (1875-1949), a permanent member of Moscovitch's company at the Pavilion Theatre, made his first appearance at the age of eight under the direction of Goldfaden in *Jassy in Rumania*.⁸⁰ Sherman was married to the beautiful, talented, and elegant Jenny Kaiser (1872-1940), a prominent member of the Pavilion Theatre company in the early twentieth century, with a devoted following among the Yiddish theatre public.⁸¹ Maurice (Meier) Axelrad (1879-1953), born in Jassy, Rumania, came to London in the 1890's, where he became one of the most popular comedians on the Yiddish stage, known in the East End as the 'Jewish Dan Leno'.⁸²

Between June and November 1903, Waxman's Yiddish American Art-Theatre-Company put on an average of three to four plays a month at the Gaiety Theatre, never repeating a single play. They included the typical fare of Goldfaden operettas, *Bar Kokhba*, *Shulames* and *Di Tsvey kunilem's*, Lateiner's historical dramas, *Yoysef mit zayne brider* (Joseph with his brothers) and *Goles Shpanye* (The Spanish expulsion), dramas based on contemporary historical events, such as *Kapitan Dreyfus*, and the perennial melodramas, *Dina, oder A Gast fun yener velt* (Dina, or A Guest from the other world) and *Di Farblondzete neshome* (The Lost soul).⁸³ On 14 July 1903, Waxman together with Leonard Rayne gave a "Kishineff Matinee" in aid of the Russian pogroms,⁸⁴ which was

⁷⁵ Harris Fineberg was a Yiddish actor from Poland, who had performed in London with Jacob P. Adler. He was described as a dramatic actor, who unfortunately strained his voice in his earlier career so that he was confined to playing elderly roles in later years. Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, Farlag Elisheva, Mexico City, 1969, vol. 6, pp. 5101-5102.

⁷⁶ Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1931, vol. 1, p. 177 lists a Sam Blum (1882-), a Yiddish actor from Galicia who emigrated to America in 1899. However it does not mention that he ever performed in South Africa.

⁷⁷ Simche Bergman (1881-) was a Yiddish actor from Odessa, who emigrated to London at the age of 12. In London he performed in the troupes of Charles Nathanson, Feinman, Adler and Goldfaden. He joined the Blumental-Waxman Company in South Africa between 1903 and 1905. Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1931, vol. 1, p. 199.

⁷⁸ Becky Goldstein (1877-1972) was a character actress from Poland, a member of the Pavilion Theatre. D. Mazower, *Yiddish theatre in London*, 1996, p. 82.

⁷⁹ Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1931, vol. 1, pp. 383-384.

⁸⁰ D. Mazower, *Yiddish theatre in London*, 1996, pp. 85-86.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁸³ L. Feldman, *Yidn in Yohanesburg: biz Union 31-tn May, 1910*, 1955, p. 160.

⁸⁴ Pogroms occurred during Passover in Kishinev in 1903 in reaction to revolutionary agitation. Forty-five Jews were murdered and hundreds were injured, 1500 Jewish shops and houses were looted. The pogrom angered public opinion throughout the world. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1972, vol. 13, p. 697.

attended by Prince Arthur of Connaught,⁸⁵ grandson of Queen Victoria. Waxman's company subsequently split up and Joseph Goldschmidt, Joseph Sherman, Sam Blum and Jenny Kaiser, went to Cape Town to join the Wallerstein Company at the Winter Gardens. Jealous of Wallerstein's success, Waxman also took his company down to Cape Town.

Cape Town, 1902-1904.

Unlike the Eastern European immigrants in Johannesburg, who participated in the city's establishment, the new immigrants at the Cape encountered an already established Jewish community of English and German Jews. By 1904 the Jewish population of the Cape Colony had increased to 19 315 of which more than half had been born in Russia.⁸⁶ Of this number 10 682 lived in the Cape Peninsula.⁸⁷ With the acceleration of Eastern European immigration a clear divide had developed between the older established Anglo-German Jewish population, who lived in the more prosperous areas of Gardens, Tamboerskloof and Oranjezicht, and the Yiddish speaking immigrants who were crowded into tenements in the multi-racial inner city area of District Six.⁸⁸ With the growing numbers of Eastern European immigrants feelings of anti-alienism were running particularly high in Cape society. By 1904 this hostility was being expressed regularly at public meetings, in the general press and in parliament.⁸⁹ For this reason the Anglo-Jewish establishment particularly opposed the Yiddish language and made every effort to teach the immigrants English as soon as possible. An editorial in the *S.A. Jewish Chronicle* of the time, maintained that 'anything which cultivates the art or practice of Yiddish speaking in a European colony is actually detrimental to the Jewish people and their cause'.⁹⁰ This antagonism was reinforced by the Zionist sympathies of the community. In the words of Max Geffen:

"Yiddish itself was treated with scant respect. The Zionists, fearing Yiddish as a serious obstacle to the revival of Hebrew, looked upon it as a jargon with a poor literature. The more Anglicised

⁸⁵ A. Shulman, 'From Yiddish theatre to English stage', *Zionist Record*, 21 November 1953. It is not clear if this was the son or the grandson. The son came out to South Africa in 1906, whilst the grandson fought in the South African War in 1901 and might still have been in South Africa in 1903. *Dictionary of South African biography*, Tafelberg, 1977, vol. 3, pp. 32-33.

⁸⁶ Cape of Good Hope, *Results of a census of the Cape Colony of the Cape of Good Hope as on the night of Sunday, the 17th of April 1904*, Cape Times Ltd, Government Printers, Cape Town, 1905, p. 136.

⁸⁷ M. Shain, *Jewry and Cape Society: the origins and activities of the Jewish Board of Deputies for the Cape Colony*, Historical Publication Society, Cape Town, 1983, p. 56.

⁸⁸ B. Feldman, *Social life of Cape Town Jewry, 1904-1914, with special reference to the Eastern European immigrant community*. B.A. (Hons) History - University of Cape Town, 1984, pp. 19-20.

⁸⁹ M. Shain, *Jewry and Cape Society*, 1983, pp. 20, 51.

⁹⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 3 June 1903.

members of the community considered it a nuisance and preferred to substitute a laboured and broken English in its stead, while still others regarded it as being the language of the agnostic "socialists" then very vociferous as street-corner orators. Few of the school-going children used it after acquiring a minimum of English.⁹¹

In 1902 Wallerstein was reported to be performing seven nights a week⁹² at the Winter Gardens, a hall in Ayre Street, just off Hanover Square in District Six.⁹³ Yiddish plays, such as *Bar Kokhba*, *Mirele Efros* and *Der Yidisher Kenig Lir*, were also performed by amateurs at the William Street Theatre on a Sunday night. Rachel Reingold (Mrs Gradner), who also acted with Wallerstein's company whilst he was in Cape Town, used to act there. The actors were paid from the takings, thirty shillings a week.⁹⁴ Benefit concerts in aid of poor immigrants and other worthy causes were often advertised. In July 1903 the company of Wallerstein and Magidson staged a Benefit at the Wynberg Town Hall, entitled *Kings Saul and David*, in aid of the victims of the Kishinev pogroms, which was patronised by the Mayor and Councillors of the Municipality.⁹⁵

When Waxman's company split up in Johannesburg, and Joseph Goldschmidt, Joseph Sherman, Sam Blum and Jenny Kaiser, went to Cape Town to join the Wallerstein Company at the Winter Gardens, Waxman followed them. Waxman's company played at the Oddfellows Hall. After much intrigue and competition, the Waxman and Wallerstein companies finally combined. Together they appeared at the Masonic Hall, but soon after went back to the Winter Gardens Hall.⁹⁶ It was with Waxman's company at the Oddfellows Hall that Sarah Sylvia, a twelve year old actress, first appeared, although she knew very little Yiddish at that time. Sarah Sylvia is undoubtedly the single most important personality in the history of Yiddish theatre in South Africa. She was born Serke Goldstein in London on 18 May 1893. Her father had been a chorister in Yiddish theatre in America before emigrating to London, where Serke was born, and later emigrated to Cape Town. There he worked first as a shoemaker, and later went off to try his luck on the diamond fields. Serke attended an English school, and played juvenile roles in the troupe of Waxman and Magidson in Cape Town,⁹⁷ supporting her family whilst her father was away.

⁹¹ M. Geffen, 'Cape Town Jewry, 1902-1910' in *The Jews in South Africa: a history*, eds G. Saron and L. Hotz, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1955, p. 56.

⁹² Hannan Hirsch collection, ARCH 914.

⁹³ Map, District Six Museum, Cape Town.

⁹⁴ P. Gordin in Purwitsky, Hilda, 'A chat with Cape Town's old timers', in the *Zionist Record Annual*, September 1952.

⁹⁵ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 17 July 1903.

⁹⁶ H. Hirsch, *Idish teater in Dorem Afrike zint 1902, Dorem Afrike*, 1-ter yorg., nom. 6, December 1928. p. 11.

⁹⁷ Z. Zylberweig. *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*. Vol. 2. Varshe: Farlag Elisheva, 1934, p. 1486.

The popular Yiddish theatre performances at the Winter Gardens Hall proved to be a catalyst for the tensions which existed between the new immigrants and the Anglicized Jews of Cape Town. The Yiddish theatre served as a social meeting place for the immigrants, akin to the *landmanshaftn*. At their own theatre in their own language they could relax and enjoy momentary relief from homesickness for the life in the old country. They arrived late, ate, cracked nuts, argued so loudly that the actors sometimes had to scream to make themselves heard above the din. Thus the anglicized Jews were not in favour of this gathering of Jews whose behaviour embarrassed them, and undermined their own status in Cape Colonial society. On one occasion one of the Anglo-German Jewish establishment even complained to the City Council about the Yiddish theatre performances. As a result a performance of the American Yiddish play, *Minna* (by Leon Kobrin), performed by Wallerstein's Oriental Theatre Company at the Winter Gardens Hall on a Saturday night, was paid a surprise visit by a Councillor Bartlett, who came to inspect the conduct of the 'Jewish plays'. However contrary to expectation, Bartlett thoroughly enjoyed himself and concluded that, "The plays were highly respectable and as for the conduct of the audiences, he could not help but congratulate the management."⁹⁸

A controversy developed around the question of Sunday performances. At this time Sunday was the most popular evening to stage Yiddish theatre both in Cape Town and in Johannesburg. It was often the only evening that the immigrant Jews could get away from their businesses to attend. Shops were open every evening and most of the immigrant Jews received their weekly wages on a Saturday night.⁹⁹ However according to the Sunday Observance Act of 1895, theatre performances were forbidden on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath.

In May 1904 in Cape Town the Wallerstein and Marienhoff "Oriental Theatrical Company" was fined the sum of ten pounds for contravening the Sunday Observance Act. The matter aroused considerable debate in the Jewish press both in defence of the Sunday performances on the one hand, and expressing concern at their aggravating the growing antisemitism, on the other. In court the argument centred around the religious content of the performances. The Jewish community maintained that the Yiddish theatrical performances had religious content and therefore were in no way desecrating the Christian Sabbath. Although the police witness, was himself a Jew, one Philip Daniels, his evidence did little to help the Jewish cause, in fact it did just the opposite!

⁹⁸ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 10 June 1904.

"Questioned by Mr Friedlander, who appeared for the defendants as to whether the play "God, Man and Satan" was a religious play founded on the Bible, our gallant guardian of the peace unfortunately a member of our community... proved his intelligence by replying that this particular play was not a religious play he could not say whether it was founded on the Bible, or otherwise— he never read the Bible."¹⁰⁰

However the City Council argued that as a commercial enterprise, the Yiddish theatrical productions could not qualify as 'a sacred performance'. It would seem, however, that antisemitism was at least partially behind the Council's attitude. Whilst they objected to the Yiddish theatre performances, they were quite willing to overlook similar 'non-sacred performances,' which were being held on Sundays both at the Good Hope Gardens and at the Pagoda in Camps Bay, for which entrance was also being charged¹⁰¹. Both fearful of the increasingly voluble antisemitic rhetoric, and embarrassed by the Yiddish theatre performances, several of the Anglo-Jewish community sided with the City Council. Maurice Eilenberg, one-time President of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, argued that the Jews of Cape Town should respect the Christian Sabbath since the Cape was a British Colony. He clearly wished to dissociate himself from the immigrants. As he put it, "there are many kinds of Jews, and the Jews of his class did not frequent places like the "Winter Gardens."¹⁰²

The defence for the Yiddish theatre was led by the well known Yiddish journalist and one time member of the Cape Jewish Board of Deputies, David Goldblatt. At a mass meeting in District Six a petition with close to a thousand signatures was signed which was submitted to the City Council. At the gathering it was maintained that, "it was far better for them [the immigrants] to attend a Jewish theatre, than yield to the immoral and evil temptations in the Yiddish neighbourhood of district No. 6. As it is, gambling saloons, Meshumad's meetings,¹⁰³ socialist gatherings, &c. (sic), are at present receiving far too much attention from our community on Sunday evenings..." However the petition was unsuccessful and the ban was upheld¹⁰⁴. It was a severe setback for Yiddish theatre in Cape Town, after which little is heard about Yiddish theatre at the Cape. Wallerstein in any case returned to Johannesburg.

⁹⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 17 June 1904.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *South African News*, 28 October 1904, in Book of Press Cuttings dealing with Mayor Hyman Liberman. Jewish Studies Library, University of Cape Town.

¹⁰³ *Meshumad* refers to Jewish converts to Christianity.

¹⁰⁴ *South African News*, 28 October 1904.

Waxman and Wallerstein in Johannesburg, 1904-1906.

Between 1904 and 1906 the Waxman and Wallerstein companies competed in Johannesburg, occasionally being persuaded to join forces. Initially it was the extremely enterprising Lithuanian immigrant, Joseph Sacks, a well known impresario and former manager of Fillis's circus, who formed a syndicate which invited Wallerstein to return to Johannesburg. Sacks opened music halls in Cape Town and is credited with the bringing out of the first overseas Yiddish theatre company in 1897. During the South African War he toured the country in ox-wagons, entertaining the troops, both Boers and Brits. After the war he headed the syndicate which managed the Palladium, a music hall, which later became a cinema, in Simmonds Street in Johannesburg. He went on to become one of the London West End's leading impresarios.¹⁰⁵

On hearing that Wallerstein was returning to Johannesburg, Waxman, who had been contemplating going back to London, decided instead to return to Johannesburg as well. Thus in 1904, Johannesburg again had two Yiddish theatre companies. Wallerstein's Hebrew Oriental Company, was reported to have come with outstanding artists, a large choir and a full orchestra. The Musical Director of Wallerstein's company was Professor Gustav Jaretzky, former music teacher and conductor of the choir of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation.¹⁰⁶ The company appeared at His Majesty's Theatre,¹⁰⁷ the first theatre of that name constructed in the Goldreich Buildings after the South African War. It was situated on Commissioner Street and was the largest theatre of the period which could seat 1 100 people,¹⁰⁸ indicative of the popularity of Yiddish theatre in those days.

Waxman's company consisted of 18 artists from America and Europe and was billed 'as the strongest combination ever known on the Yiddish stage.'¹⁰⁹ His Musical Director was Max Weinbrenn (1874-1954). Born in Latvia, Weinbrenn studied violin and conducting at the Warsaw Conservatoire, and was a member of the Warsaw Royal Opera House Orchestra for six years. Weinbrenn came to Johannesburg in 1896 to join his three musical brothers, Lazar, Mottel and Isaac, who maintained an ensemble for social occasions and advertised themselves as music teachers. By February 1897 Weinbrenn had formed an orchestra of fifty performers which bore his own name, and which gave regular Sunday night concerts at the Masonic Hall. Weinbrenn won recognition as violinist,

¹⁰⁵ P. Baneshik, 'Joseph Leopold Sacks', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol 36, no. 11, November 1981, pp. 58-60.

¹⁰⁶ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 2 December 1905.

¹⁰⁷ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 7 February 1904.

¹⁰⁸ C.A. Stoloff, 'The old theatres in Johannesburg', in *South African Architectural Record*, vol. 32, May 1947, p. 132.

conductor, teacher and orchestra leader, and played a leading role in the musical life of Johannesburg¹¹⁰. Waxman's company performed at the Gaiety Theatre for 6 months and was afforded high praise.

"It is remarkable what a hold Yiddish still has on the Jewish community of Johannesburg. The Yiddish plays are regularly patronised by numbers of people who have broken completely with their old Yiddish associations, and regard themselves as anglicised. Mr Waxman's acting is highly spoken of by competent critics, and there is no doubt that he has raised the Yiddish stage to the position of respectability, scarcely, if at all, below the level of the other dramatic performances which are thought good enough for the Johannesburg public."¹¹¹

However not every production was accepted without criticism. A review in *Ha-Kokhav* (The Star) on the 26th of February 1904, claimed that, "... if Mr Waxman were not in Johannesburg, he would not have allowed such actors to perform under his name." Whilst *Der Yidisher Advokat* accused Zolotarevsky's *Der Yeshive bokher, oder der Idisher Hamlet* (The Yeshive boy, or the Jewish Hamlet) of transforming Hamlet into, "a Hasidic rabbi who utters empty platitudes, which gives the whole piece a taste of *tsimes* with herring." This reviewer also belittled the actors, commenting that, "Our great actor Mr Starr. His jests and imitations were suited to a *Purim-shpiel* in a private house. And of Mr Magidson it was said that, "he dug the grave as if he were born to the work. He only made one mistake and that was climbing out of it."¹¹²

In 1905 Joseph Sacks persuaded the two old rivals, Waxman and Wallerstein, to combine to form the Hebrew Operatic and Dramatic Company. Together they performed at the Gaiety Theatre, with Joseph Sacks as their Managing Director.¹¹³ Inevitably they quarreled and Waxman moved his company to the Empire Theatre of Varieties in Ferreira Street, just over the road from the Gaiety. Between 1902 and 1906 it became an alternate venue for Yiddish theatre.¹¹⁴ Until 7 January 1906 Waxman's company appeared there regularly on Sunday nights.¹¹⁵ It was here on 24 September, 1905, that Sarah Sylvia played her first major role, as the heroine in Goldfaden's *Shulames*. She was only fifteen

¹⁰⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 8 April 1904.

¹¹⁰ J.P. Malan, *South African Music Encyclopaedia*, 1979-1986, vol. 4, p. 470-471.

¹¹¹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 6 August 1904.

¹¹² L. Feldman, *Yidn in Yohanesburg: biz Union 31-tn May, 1910*, 1956, pp. 161-162.

¹¹³ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 7 May 1905.

¹¹⁴ The Empire was originally the Globe Theatre, which had opened in 1889. However in 1892 it was rebuilt and renamed the 'Empire Palace of Varieties'. The Empire extended from Commissioner to Fox Street, also fronting on Ferreira Street, diagonally across the way from the Gaiety Theatre. In 1906 it was demolished and rebuilt on a much grander scale on the Corner of Commissioner and Kruis Streets. C.A. Stoloff, 'The old theatres in Johannesburg', in *South African Architectural Record*, vol. 32, May 1947, p. 132.

¹¹⁵ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 12 January, 1906.

years old at the time.¹¹⁶ Forced out by the competition Wallerstein's company toured to Bloemfontein and Oudtshoorn and then spent a couple of months in Cape Town.¹¹⁷

Amateur Yiddish theatre, 1906-1911

Between 1906 and 1908 the South African economy went into a depression.¹¹⁸ From June 1906 to September 1909 few advertisements or reports about Yiddish theatre appear in the *S.A. Jewish Chronicle*. On the 29th of June 1906 it was remarked 'that the general depression is having its effects on many of our places of entertainment'.¹¹⁹ During this period Hannan Hiersch also refers to problems with the Sunday Observance act, leaving Johannesburg without a professional Yiddish theatre company for two to three years.¹²⁰ This was probably the reason that Waxman returned to London in 1906, where he reopened the Pavilion Theatre, the home of Yiddish theatre in the Jewish area of Whitechapel.¹²¹ Thus during this period Johannesburg fell back on its own resources.

Hannan Hiersch relates that when the Wallerstein company disbanded in 1906, despite encouragement to go to the United States to further his career, he preferred to return to Johannesburg where he formed an amateur dramatic group. In 1906 Hiersch's Hebrew Dramatic Company performed Tschirikov's *Di Yidn* (The Jews), a play about the Jews in Russia, at His Majesty's Theatre, the largest theatre in Johannesburg in those days. The cast included the well known South African Zionist worker and journalist, Benzion Hersh and his wife, who apparently fainted on stage at the sight of the realistic *pogrom* scenes! Hiersch's company also staged Sholem Aleichem's *Tsuzeyt un tsushpreyt* (Scattered and dispersed),¹²² David Pinski's *Di Familye Tsvi* (The Family Tsvi), the whole Gordin repertoire, and others. When on occasion the cast included professional actors, he was able to put on plays such as Goldfaden's *Shulames* and *Bar Kokhba*. Hiersch also put on amateur productions in Benoni, a small town not far from Johannesburg which by 1911 had a Jewish population of 1 220. However most of these performances were in aid of charities, such as the *Keren Kayemet* or the *Hevre Kadishe*, and Hiersch was often not

¹¹⁶ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 22 September 1905.

¹¹⁷ D. Sowden, 'The end of an episode: Hannan Hiersch: Yiddish actor, 1873-1953', *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 2, February 1954, pp. 32-34.

¹¹⁸ C. Van Onselen, *Studies in the social and economic history of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1940*. Vol. 1. New Babylon, 1982, p. 143.

¹¹⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 29 June 1906.

¹²⁰ H. Hiersch, 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike zint 1902', 1-ter yor, nom. 6, December 1928, p. 11.

¹²¹ Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, vol. 1, pp. 660-661.

¹²² Cast included Dora Nathan, Mrs Frankel, Joseph, Miss B. Kinkel, Miss Slutsk, Mandelzweig, Levitas, Master Antonius, Schragger, Mrs Shanban, Goldberg, Miss E. Kinkel, Bansky, Frankel, Mrs Schmidt. Programme notes. Hannan Hiersch collection, ARCH 914, S. A. Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg.

paid. Thus in spite of his popularity and his love for the theatre, he was never happy. Yiddish actors were never able to make a living and had to undertake other jobs to support themselves. Hirsch also complained about bad elements amongst the actors.¹²³

Two small Bundist orientated societies emerged during this period which also promoted amateur Yiddish theatre, and which were essentially the forerunners of the later Yiddishist cultural societies and Workers' clubs. Both these societies mention Yiddish theatre as one of their activities, although no records of any of their performances are to be found. These were the Friends of Russian Freedom, 1905-1909, and the *Yidisher Sotsialistisher Fareyn* (Yiddish Socialist Society), 1909-1911.¹²⁴ The Friends of Russian Freedom was founded in Fordsburg in the middle of 1905 with the aim of raising money for the Jewish Self-Defence movement of the Bund in Russia. The English name came from a similar society which existed in England. However all the administration and activities were conducted in Yiddish. The society met at the Richmond Hotel in Commissioner Street opposite the well known *kosher* hotel, the Palmerston.¹²⁵ It had between 300 and 400 members, a library, a reading room and a hall where lectures, debates, concerts and from time to time Yiddish theatre performances were held. In 1907 it was closed down due to an internal disagreement over the establishment of an official branch of the Bund in South Africa.¹²⁶ In 1909 several former members of the Friends of Russian Freedom established the *Yidisher Sotsialistisher Fareyn* (Yiddish Socialist Society) which lasted from 1909 to 1911. The *Sotsialistisher Fareyn* met in Rosenbergs Arcade in Commissioner Street, where it had a large comfortable hall with a stage where they put on one act plays and even full-length concerts.¹²⁷

During this period the only original South African Yiddish play was written and produced. This was *Der Afrikaner Yudisher volontir* (The South African Jewish volunteer), a play about the South African war written by a local cab driver by the name of A.L. Joffe, Joffe was a well known personality in Ferreirastown, who was steeped in Yiddish, Russian, German and English literature, who could recite Hamlet off by heart. He is remembered as parking his cab next to Park Station where he would sit deeply absorbed in a book. A brilliant orator and member of the Friends of Russian Freedom, Joffe once

¹²³ Hannan Hirsch collection, ARCH 914.

¹²⁴ M.P. Grosman (1973, pp. 745-747) also regards the Friends of Russian Freedom as the forerunner of the *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatisher Fareyn*. However he does not seem to have known about its successor the *Yidisher Sotsialistisher Fareyn*.

¹²⁵ J.M. Sherman (1949, pp. 22-23) remembers its library as being situated in a backroom of the Palmerston, not the Richmond.

¹²⁶ L. Feldman, *Yidn in Yohanesburg: biz Union 31-tn May, 1910*, 1956, pp. 166-169.

led a strike of cab drivers and won. As a result the newspapers referred to him as the 'Little Napoleon'. He is also remembered as the only person who was able to refute the arguments of the Jewish missionary, a lapsed *yeshive bokher*, who used to stand on a street corner in Ferreirastown every Sunday, trying to convert the Jews to Christianity in a rich Yiddish interspersed with quotations from the Bible and Talmud. J.M. Sherman recalls meeting him in the first two months after he arrived in Johannesburg when he brought him the manuscript of *Der Yudisher voluntir*, which he copied out for him. Joffe later emigrated to the United States.¹²⁸

The play was produced by Wallerstein with amateurs at the Gaiety Theatre on Friday the 3rd of May 1907.¹²⁹ It is described as a domestic drama set in the Cape Colony. It is the story of a disappointed lover, who when his beloved gets married to another, joins the army on the side of the Boers. It was apparently partially based on the author's own experiences and also included battle scenes on stage. It was later reworked and translated into English under the title *Love in Africa*. It was performed in English by the Creagh Dramatic Company at the Gaiety theatre in 1910.¹³⁰ According to Hannan Hiersh, who played the villain of the piece, the English version of the play never drew as good audiences as the Yiddish version. Moreover apparently the season came to an abrupt end, when on the second night the manager made off with the takings and the actors never got paid!¹³¹

On 4 August 1907 a Benefit performance for Hannan Hiersch was produced by Samuel Wallerstein at the Gaiety Theatre¹³². The play chosen for this occasion was Moshe Richter's *Sholem bayis*, billed in English as *The House of Freedom*.¹³³

Wallerstein Operatic and Dramatic Company, 1909-1910.

Whilst in the earlier years the Yiddish theatre seasons of the visiting companies were intermittent, between September 1909 and June 1910, for the first time an attempt was

¹²⁷ H. Erlich, 'Der Yidisher Sotsialistisher Fareyn', *Dorem Afrike*, 8-ter yorg., nom. 7, 1956, pp. 24-26.

¹²⁸ J.M. Sherman, 'Fereyra', in *Dorem Afrike*, 2-ter yorg., nom. 2, October, 1949, pp. 22-23.

¹²⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 3 May 1907.

¹³⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 11 March 1910. J.M. Sherman writes that it was produced by the actor-director Leonard Rayne at the Standard Theatre. However both the *South African Jewish Chronicle* and Hannan Hiersch record that it was performed at the Gaiety theatre.

¹³¹ D. Sowden, 'The end of an episode: Hannan Hiersch: Yiddish actor' 1873-1953', vol. 9, no. 2, February 1954, p. 33.

¹³² *Ibid.*

made to establish a permanent Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg. On 17 September 1909 the new augmented Wallerstein Operatic and Dramatic Company returned to the Gaiety Theatre, which had been 'reconstructed and renovated' to serve as a permanent Yiddish theatre. The company came directly from the Pavilion Theatre in London, and included many famous Yiddish actors from America and from the Pavilion Theatre in London. The artists included some who had appeared previously, such as the Wallersteins, Becky Goldstein, who had performed with Waxman's company in 1904, and locals such as Dora Nathan, Hannan Hirsch and Sarah Sylvia, whilst Gustav Jaretsky was Musical Director.

New names included Samuel Goldenburg, a Yiddish actor from Poland, who later became very famous in the United States.¹³⁴ H. Erlich recalls Samuel Goldenburg as the most talented of all the actors, who really lived his roles. He also describes him as 'an intellectual, the very antithesis of many of the Yiddish actors of that time.'¹³⁵ Other new names are Max Gusofsky, 'a famous Jewish tenor, who is one of the leading figures of the Jewish stage today in both London and New York', Madame Kornfeld, 'the possessor of a beautiful soprano voice', and Nathan Isaacovitch, a permanent member of the Pavilion Theatre, who specialized in tragic roles.¹³⁶ Other new names were Sam Hirshman who specialized in 'paternal' roles,¹³⁷ and Joseph Markovitz, a comic actor, prolific dramatist, lyricist and passionate Communist. His drama, *The Jewish Revolutionist*, based on his own personal experiences during the Kishinev pogroms, was performed on two occasions at the Gaiety Theatre.¹³⁸ Markovitz was married to another member of the Wallerstein company, the actress, Becky Goldstein.¹³⁹

During this period the Wallerstein company averaged six to eight performances a week. They sometimes performed every night of the week, including Fridays (much to the consternation of the rabbis)¹⁴⁰ and including a matinee on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons. To avoid problems with the Sunday Observance Act, the Sunday performance was always billed as a 'Grand Sacred Concert'. Very often on one of the week nights the

¹³³ Cast: E. Wallerstein, Dora Nathan, Miss S. Weissman, H. Fineberg, S. Wallerstein, Hannan Hirsch, Lurie, S. Wilkomirsky, Fischer, Henry Berman, Masters Goldberg and B. Wallerstein. Programme notes. Hannan Hirsch collection, ARCH 914.

¹³⁴ Goldenburg was a Polish Yiddish actor who later became famous in the U.S. He originally went to London to escape the draft. His engagement by the Wallerstein company to go to South Africa was one of his first engagements in London. He was also a member of the Publication Committee of Zylbercweig's *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*. Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, vol. 1, 1931, pp. 271-272.

¹³⁵ H. Erlich, 'A bintl zikroynes', in *Dorem Afrike*, 7-ter yorg., nom. 5, January 1955, p. 27.

¹³⁶ D. Mazower. *Yiddish theatre in London*, 1996, p. 83.

¹³⁷ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 15 September 1909.

¹³⁸ D. Mazower. *Yiddish theatre in London*, 1996, p. 84.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

company performed outside of Johannesburg, travelling to Pretoria, Germiston, Benoni and Krugersdorp. The company performed a different play every night of the week. Their repertoire included all the popular operettas and melodramas, by the well known playwrights: Goldfaden, Joseph Lateiner, Professor Hurvitz, Jacob Gordin, Sigmund Feinman, Isidore Zolotarevsky's, Rudolf Marks, Moses Richter, Zalmen Libin, Nokhem Rokov, Shomer, etc. Typically the season opened with Goldfaden's *Bar-Kokhba*. After several weeks the theatre was well patronised. The audiences were passionately responsive and shouted their approval or disapproval of the action on the stage.¹⁴¹ Not all who came could understand Yiddish and a synopsis in English was on occasion provided with the program.¹⁴²

Both Rabbis in Johannesburg at the time, Dr. Joseph Hertz and Dr. Judah Leo Landau, were regular attendees at the Yiddish theatre productions. Both were admirers of Abraham Goldfaden with whom they had been personally acquainted. Landau met Goldfaden in his hometown of Lemberg in Galicia in 1890. He was particularly impressed by the fact that Goldfaden did not mix at all with his actors.¹⁴³ In those days the acting profession was not considered to be respectable as many of the early participants were lowlife, gamblers and card sharps, who frequented the taverns where these productions were often staged. Rabbi Hertz described Goldfaden as 'genial, witty, a Bohemian by nature'. At the time that he encountered him, Goldfaden was apparently contemplating a visit to South Africa¹⁴⁴, which never materialised. Rabbi Hertz was also a particular admirer of Jacob Gordin's work. He gave a lecture about Gordin, which was later published in three consecutive issues of the *South African Jewish Chronicle*¹⁴⁵. Hertz is listed in Zylbercweig's *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater* (New York, 1931) in an entry signed by Esther Wallerstein.¹⁴⁶

Rabbi Landau was himself a playwright, and is considered to be one of the fathers of the modern Hebrew drama. When he arrived in South Africa in 1903 he had already published four historical plays and one contemporary Hebrew play. He also enjoyed the unique distinction of being the first to have a Hebrew play performed on the amateur stage in

¹⁴⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 14 January 1910.

¹⁴¹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 8 April 1910.

¹⁴² *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 4 February 1910.

¹⁴³ Landau archives 4⁰798, 7, pp. 21-22, Manuscripts Department, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem.

¹⁴⁴ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 11 March 1910.

¹⁴⁵ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 11, 18, 25 March 1910.

¹⁴⁶ Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, vol. 1, 1931, pp. 636-637.

modern times.¹⁴⁷ Landau's first Hebrew historical drama *Bar-Kokhba* (1884), is not to be confused with Goldfaden's *Bar-Kokhba*. It was not Landau's but Goldfaden's *Bar-Kokhba*, that was performed in Johannesburg on numerous occasions.¹⁴⁸ However Rabbi Landau did translate his Hebrew historical melodrama, *Hordus* (Herod, 1887) into Yiddish. It was produced by Goldfaden in Lemberg in 1890, with the young actress, Bertha Kalich, who would later become famous in the United States, in the main part of Mariamne. Landau's *Kenig Hurdus* (King Herod) became part of Goldfaden's permanent repertoire.¹⁴⁹ In South Africa it was only staged once, by Wallerstein's company at the Gaiety Theatre on the 5th of January 1910. In the *S.A. Jewish Chronicle* of 7 January 1910, it was reviewed in these terms:

"There are plays which read better than heard; there are also plays which are better when heard than read; but to meet with a play that can give equal pleasure either when read or seen acted on the stage is a rare occurrence; this combination of qualities, however, is to be attributed to Dr Landau's admirable work."

At the end of October 1909, Wallerstein was once again charged for transgressing the Sunday Observance Act. A charge against him in 1907 had been dismissed and on the advice of the judge, Wallerstein had obtained a letter of authorisation for the Sunday performances from the office of the Attorney-General. However in October 1909 Rev. S. Manne of the Johannesburg Hebrew Congregation (Park Synagogue) was unable to convince the judge that *Der Held fun Yerushalayim* (The Hero of Jerusalem), a biblical historical play set in Jerusalem, should be considered to be a sacred concert. In court in his defence Wallerstein cited his letter of authorisation and maintained that had he known that Sunday performances were prohibited, he would never have come to South Africa. A fine of one pound sterling each was imposed on the lessees of the Gaiety, Samuel Wallerstein and Joseph Sacks, a sum considerably smaller than that imposed in Cape Town in 1904.¹⁵⁰ Unlike the similar incident in Cape Town, the court case in Johannesburg did not arouse the same emotional debate in the Jewish press, possibly due to the fact that the Jewish population of Johannesburg was not threatened by the antisemitic invective which had existed in Cape Town in 1904. Moreover the Sunday night concerts continued undeterred, the prohibition simply being evaded by changing the program from

¹⁴⁷ This was *Yesh tikvah* (There is hope) which was performed at a festival of the Zion Society in Brody in Galicia in 1893. Y. Oren, 'Yehudah Leib Landau u-mahazehu, "Yesh tikvah"', in J.L. Landau, *Rav, meshorer u-mahazai: Yehudah Leib Landau, Hotsa'at Sefarim a"sh* Y.L. Magnes, Ha-Universitah ha-Ivrit, Yerushalayim, 1989, pp. 71-82.

¹⁴⁸ J. Fletcher, 'Johannesburg at leisure', 1991, p. 180.

¹⁴⁹ Landau archives 4^o798, 7, pp. 21-22.

¹⁵⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 29 October 1909.

full length operettas and melodramas to excerpts of songs and recitations, which more closely approximated the format of a religious service.

Nonetheless by June 1910 the Wallerstein Company began to experience serious financial difficulties. A benefit performance was arranged and a special appeal was made to the Jewish public to come forward to save the Yiddish theatre. The play chosen for this important event, *Di Fargangenheyt* (The Past) by Zalmen Libin, was a human drama to suit the seriousness of the occasion. At the close of the performance Mr Wallerstein made an emotional appeal, in which he referred to the Yiddish theatre as "the nurtured child of his untiring, ceaseless work and efforts in the cause of providing the Jewish population of Johannesburg with a theatre worthy in every way of their support."¹⁵¹ Despite all his exhortations the response of the Jewish public was not sufficient to allow the theatre to continue.

The Jewish press of the time attributed the falling off in support of the Yiddish theatre solely to snobbishness. Having moved into the more prosperous suburbs, the immigrants were no longer prepared to visit the Gaiety Theatre which was situated in a poor area of Johannesburg. The press claimed that according to numbers the Yiddish speakers of Johannesburg should have been sufficient to support more than one theatre. Nor did the fault apparently lie with the relevance or the quality of the productions, which included such contemporary pieces as Gordin's *Di Varheyt* (The Truth) which examined the current trend of assimilation in Jewish life.¹⁵² Richard Feldman, writes that as the immigrants became assimilated they became embarrassed by Yiddish, the symbol of Jewish poverty.¹⁵³ The more prosperous English and German Jews and even the more anglicised Eastern European immigrants became patrons of the arts in Johannesburg and lost interest in their poor relation, the Yiddish theatre. It is also true that in 1910 silent movies were growing in popularity. In the final months of the Yiddish theatre, movies were advertised at the Gaiety at least once or twice a week. Both Wallerstein¹⁵⁴ and Hannan Hirsch¹⁵⁵ attributed the death of the permanent Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg to the rise of the cinema.

¹⁵¹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, June 1910.

¹⁵² *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 10 May, 1910.

¹⁵³ R. Feldman, 'Yiddish in South Africa, 1910-1960.' *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 15, no. 5, May 1960, p. 66.

¹⁵⁴ Z. Zylbercweig. *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1931. vol. 1, pp. 649-650.

¹⁵⁵ H. Hirsch, 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike zint 1902', *Dorem Afrike*, yor , nom. 1928, p. 12.

Conclusion

During this period Yiddish theatre, both professional and amateur, fared better in Johannesburg than in Cape Town, and this trend continued throughout its history. This was primarily due to numbers but also due to the fact that the Anglo-Jewish establishment in Cape Town was more resistant to Yiddish theatre. Cape Town Jewry was also more vulnerable to antisemitism than Johannesburg Jewry where Jews were more integrated and accepted in local society. Despite this in neither centre did Yiddish theatre take root, as Yiddish actors were unable to make a living and amateur theatre was not supported by any of the communal organisations. The strength of the Zionist movement in South Africa promoted the revival of Hebrew and mitigated against the development of a Yiddish theatre. This was reinforced by the low status of Yiddish as a result of the general ignorance and apathy towards Yiddish culture of the early immigrants.

The departure of the Waxman-Wallerstein company did not spell the end of visiting overseas professional Yiddish theatre companies to South Africa, but their visits became much more seldom. Nonetheless the Waxman-Wallerstein years provided an appetite and a momentum for Yiddish theatre in South Africa. The talents of locals, such as Hannan Hirsch, Sarah Sylvia, Dora Nathan, and others, had been nurtured by these companies, and they laid the foundation for amateur Yiddish theatre in South Africa. However as professional Yiddish theatre was never established, Sarah Sylvia sought fame and fortune in London, whilst Hannan Hirsch eventually found a job as a Yiddish interpreter for the courts. However he always retained his connection with Yiddish theatre, both directing and acting with amateur ensembles. He has been called the "Father of South African Yiddish theatre."¹⁵⁶

The close connection of South African Yiddish theatre, like South African English theatre, with that of the London Yiddish stage was established during this period. This link was forged by Sarah Sylvia who went over to London to join Moscovitch's company at the Pavilion theatre in Whitechapel in 1911. She became Moscovitch's leading lady and co-starred with such great names as Jacob Adler, Boris Thomashefsky, Menashe Skulnik and Joseph Buloff. By 1921 she began returning to South Africa, bringing out London companies and stars of the London Yiddish stage. She is undoubtedly the biggest star of the international Yiddish stage that South Africa ever produced and the pioneer of Yiddish theatre in South Africa.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ D.L. Sowden, 'The end of an episode: Hannan Hirsch: Yiddish actor, 1873-1953', 1954, pp. 32-34.

¹⁵⁷ R. Zygielbaum, 'The darling of the theatre: Sarah Sylvia', 1978, pp. 26-28.

The departure of the Waxman-Wallerstein companies also inspired the formation of amateur groups, which were promoted by various small Yiddish cultural societies that developed after 1912. However, despite much talk about the need to establish a local Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg that was reiterated at intervals, this was both the first and last attempt to create an independent professional Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg.

University of Cape Town

THE BARREN YEARS

1911-1930



1. Vera Kanevska & Paul Breitman



2. Paul Breitman, Vera Kanevska, Adolf Teffner



3. Nathan Brajzman



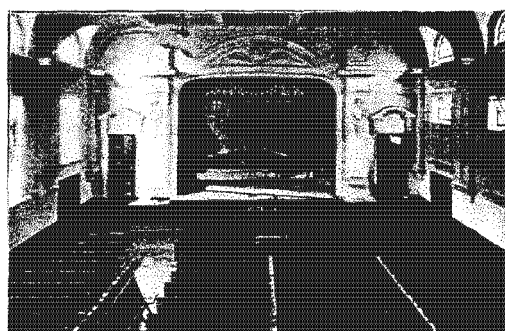
5. Der Bal Haloymes - The Dreamer, 1922



4. Mary Einhorn



**6. Railway Institute
Cape Town**



CHAPTER 4. THE BARREN YEARS, 1911-1930

The years 1911 to 1930 were by far the most barren years for Yiddish theatre in South Africa. In 1912 the communal structure of South African Jewry was entrenched with the establishment of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies through the amalgamation of the Transvaal and the Cape Jewish Boards of Deputies in 1912.¹ With the entrenchment of the communal structure also came the entrenchment of the negative attitudes toward Yiddish which had already revealed themselves during the previous period with the lack of support for the Yiddish theatre at the Gaiety. Thus although Yiddish was still very much a language spoken on the street, it was regarded even by the Yiddish speakers themselves as a *mamzer shprakh* – bastard language.² This type of negative stereotyping was reiterated whenever there was cause to criticise the Yiddish theatre. The phenomenal growth of support for the Zionist movement, especially after the 1917 Balfour Declaration, with its accompanying support of the revival of the Hebrew language, also served to reinforce the negative attitude to Yiddish.

The period opens with the final departure of the Wallerstein Company and the establishment of the first Yiddish cultural society, the *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn*, and ends just before the enactment of the Immigration Quota Act in 1930, which curtailed Eastern European Jewish immigration to South Africa. During the Great War (1914-1918) mass immigration ceased, South Africa was cut off from Eastern Europe and no visiting troupes arrived. However in the 1920s immigration was renewed, bringing with it a succession of visiting Yiddish theatre companies which attracted audiences of thousands, as evidenced by the long seasons and the large theatres. Nonetheless no opportunity presented itself for the establishment of a permanent Yiddish theatre. The idea was seriously considered in 1926 but nothing materialised. Moreover it was not until the late 1920s that the influence of the new immigrants, several of whom had participated in Yiddish theatre in Eastern Europe, was evident in the production of local amateur Yiddish theatre of a higher standard.

However the most significant development for the theatre industry in South Africa which was struggling to survive with the advent of the silent movies during this period, was the formation in 1913 of African Theatres Trust. This was the brainchild of two Jewish immigrants, Isidore William Schlesinger (1871-1949), a Hungarian Jewish immigrant from

¹ G. Saron, *The Jews of South Africa: an illustrated history to 1953*, ed. Naomi Musiker. Scarecrow Press in association with the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, Johannesburg, 2001, pp. 84-87.

New York,³ and Harry Stodel, the Jewish immigrant from the East End of London, who had been involved with the Gaiety Theatre in the 1890s, but who had moved to the Cape.⁴ Together they formed a formidable monopoly, known as African Consolidated Theatres, which provided a centralised organisation for the distribution of films and variety acts on a nation wide basis. This organisation exercised complete control of professional theatre activity in South Africa between the two World Wars. However their interest in theatre was primarily commercial. They were not concerned with artistic creativity or the development and support of indigenous theatre. They brought out dramatic musical and pantomime companies in English and Yiddish to tour the whole of the African Theatres circuit. These were the vintage years of the variety stage in South Africa.⁵

The repertoire during this period was simply a continuation of the musical comedies and melodramas of the previous, with Gordin's moralistic melodramas the most popular choice of the amateurs. Goldfaden's operettas, on the other hand, were performed more seldom as they required professional actors, large ensembles, choirs, and elaborate staging, and were thus less suitable for amateur companies. This period saw only the very occasional introduction of the new works by Sholem Aleichem, Peretz Hirschbein, David Pinski, Sholem Asch and classics such as Anski's *Dybbuk*. The popular *shund* productions in particular dominated the repertoire of the touring companies as they were more commercially viable. It was often never clear whether these productions with their convoluted plots and their lurid titles, such as *Di Vayse shklafn* (The White slaves) or *A Vayb on tsung* (A wife without a tongue), were intended to be comedies or tragedies. They were at times most comic when intended to be tragic and vice versa. It was unkindly suggested that this was because the Yiddish play had to satisfy the Jewish theatre-goer who, 'being an astute businessman, expects, for the price of his seat, a show which consists of a tragedy, a comedy and an opera all rolled into one.'⁶ Thus by the end of the period the repertoire on the Yiddish stage in South Africa was becoming stale, and was eliciting considerable criticism in the Jewish press.

Plays on South African themes were not performed during this period. Bibliographic records and references exist to several original South African Yiddish plays which were

² *Yudishe Fohn*, 16 January 1913, in L. Feldman, 'Yidishe nashyonale kultur in Dorem Afrike', in *Dorem Afrike*, 2-ter yorg., nom. 9, May, 1950, pp. 8-9.

³ *Dictionary of South African Biography*, Tafelberg Uitgewers, Cape Town, 1972, vol. 2, pp. 631-632.

⁴ J. Stodel, *The audience is waiting*. Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1962, pp. 11-12.

⁵ J. Fletcher, *The story of theatre in South Africa: a guide to its history from 1780-1930*, Vlaeberg, Cape Town, 1994, p. 130.

⁶ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 11 July 1930.

written.⁷ Unfortunately none of them reflect South African Jewish life, and not many of them were ever performed, the focus of this study. They include the one act plays, *A Tate* (A father) by G. Wallace published in the periodical, *Dos Naye vort*, in 1916,⁸ but never performed, *Di Hut* and *Der Shed* (The demon) by Y. Rutenberg which were performed at a literary evening in 1916,⁹ but were never published, nor have the manuscripts survived. Hersch Brill, a medical doctor from Pretoria, who immigrated to South Africa from Popilan in Lithuania around 1908,¹⁰ wrote several plays. These include *Baym grenets* (On the border), which was read at a literary evening in 1920,¹¹ *Horev* (Annihilated), a one act play set in post-war Europe, that was published in the periodical *Dorem Afrike* in December 1922,¹² and *Shaul* (Saul), a four act biblical play, which was published in Kovno in 1922.¹³ Brill also wrote three historical plays, two set in rabbinic times: *Oyfn shvel* (On the threshold),¹⁴ and *Di dray* (The three),¹⁵ and *Oyf der grenets* (On the border)¹⁶ set in Russia, which were published in one volume in Berlin in 1924.¹⁷ There is no record of any of Brill's plays being performed in South Africa, although some were performed in Vilna.¹⁸ Surprisingly the only local full length Yiddish play of the period, which was performed in a theatre and reviewed in at least two of the contemporary English Jewish newspapers, (although it was never published nor has the manuscript survived), was written and produced in the small Jewish community of Durban.¹⁹ Although this play is not about South African Jewish life, nonetheless it reflects the ideological concerns of South African Jewry.

⁷ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 1 October 1948.

⁸ M.P. Grosman, *A study of the trends and tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish writings...*, 1973, p. 597.

⁹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 1 October 1948.

¹⁰ M.P. Grosman, *A study of the trends and tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish writings...*, 1973, p. 993.

¹¹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 1 October 1948.

¹² M.P. Grosman, *A study of the trends and tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish writings...*, 1973, pp. 978-979.

¹³ H. Brill, *Shaul: biblishe drame in 4 akten*, Farlag Likht, Kovne, 1922. M.P. Grosman, *A study of the trends and tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish writings...*, 1973, pp. 987-993.

¹⁴ M.P. Grosman, *A study of the trends and tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish writings...*, 1973, *Ibid.*, p. 984.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 981-984.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 979-981.

¹⁷ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 1 October 1948.

¹⁸ M.P. Grosman, *A study of the trends and tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish writings...*, 1973, pp. 994.

¹⁹ This was Joseph Shapiro's *Der Bal haloymes* (The Dreamer), see p. 67-68.

Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg, 1911-1921.

Between 1911 and 1918 Jewish immigration to the Transvaal was considerably reduced and the population grew from 25 982 in 1911²⁰ to 29 300 in 1918.²¹ This is also the hardest period to reconstruct owing to the paucity of historical sources. It was served by the Johannesburg based English language weekly, the *South African Jewish Chronicle*, and the *Zionist Record*, which was only published monthly, neither of which were concerned with the type of low profile amateur Yiddish productions which were staged during this period. The *South African Jewish Chronicle*, which had reported extensively on the productions of the visiting professional companies in the previous period, has virtually no mention of Yiddish theatre during this period. The only source for Yiddish theatre therefore is the Yiddish weekly, *Der Afrikaner*, which was published in Johannesburg between 1911 and 1933, but whose coverage was hampered by limited financial resources.²² Previews or reviews are extremely rare, and biographical information about the actors is non-existent. Nonetheless the number of productions in this period varied from one or two to as many as nine or ten in one year, and possibly more, as they were not always reported.

Two distinct groups of amateurs emerge during this period. These are the 'gifted amateurs', or semi-professionals, who had either performed with the Waxman-Wallerstein companies or who sang with the local opera companies, on the one hand, and the rank amateurs on the other. In February 1911 several of the 'gifted amateurs' formed the supporting cast in a final farewell Benefit at the Gaiety Theatre for Esther Wallerstein.²³ The production was Zalmen Libin's *Dos Dorfs meyd*l (The Village maiden) and the Wallerstein family was supported by Sam Dyne, Henry Berman, who had acted in the 1907 Wallerstein Benefit for Hannan Hiersch, *House of freedom*,²⁴ Phil Schragger (Schragga), a popular comedian and singer who had performed in Hannan Hiersch's amateur dramatic company in 1906,²⁵ and a Miss Davidoff. Other 'gifted amateurs' familiar from the earlier period were Hannan Hiersch and Dora Nathan, who both acted and directed,²⁶ and Dora Nathan's husband, Jack Lurie. New names include Harris Sternson,

²⁰ Union of South Africa. *Census 1911*, Part 6, Religions of the people, Government Printing and Stationery Office, Pretoria, 1912, p. 930.

²¹ Union of South Africa. *Census of the Europeans or White races, 1918*, Part VI, Religions, Cape Times Ltd, Government Printer, Cape Town, 1920, p. 7.

²² G. Saron, *The Jews of South Africa: an illustrated history to 1953*, 2001, p. 93.

²³ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 10 February 1911.

²⁴ *House of freedom* programme notes, Hannan Hiersch collection, ARCH 914.

²⁵ *Tsuzeyt un tsushpreyt* programme notes, Hannan Hiersch collection, ARCH 914.

²⁶ The *S.A. Jewish Chronicle*, 30 September 1924, reports that Dora Nathan, South Africa's favourite Yiddish actress, produced the Yiddish play, *Every woman's desire*, at the Standard Theatre.

'the famous character comedian',²⁷ Sarah Sylvia's sister, Alice (Elise) Sylvia,²⁸ Tilly Feingold, a Mr Schneider,²⁹ and the opera singer, Joel Myerson. Myerson, an Eastern European immigrant who had studied and performed overseas,³⁰ had on occasion sung *Kol nidre* with the Durban orchestra.³¹ However he was also famed for his sense of the burlesque and is remembered for attempting to revive a 'dying heroine' with a bicycle pump instead of a stethoscope. He apparently succeeded so well that his patient burst out laughing on stage!³² Other singers included Sura Richter, Kate Nathan, Joel Bloom, and 'the famous tenor' Isidore Botovsky.³³ These performers appeared at various times as the Sura Richter company,³⁴ the Hebrew Operatic Company and the Hebrew Operatic and Dramatic Company. Between 1911 and 1923 they produced at least 14 productions, operettas and domestic melodramas. Although in 1911 and 1912 their productions were staged at the Gaiety Theatre,³⁵ after 1912 most of their productions were staged at the Palladium Theatre,³⁶ a new music hall in Simmonds Street, which opened in March 1913,³⁷ which could seat nearly a thousand people. Goldfaden's *Bar Kokhba* was staged there on three occasions, in 1916,³⁸ 1917³⁹ and 1923.⁴⁰ On two occasions Sura Richter sang the lead opposite Joel Myerson, and on the other opposite Isidore Botovsky.

The second group of amateurs, the rank amateurs, performed under the aegis of the *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn*, the first purely cultural Yiddish society which was established in November 1912. One of the main reasons for this as stated in *Der Afrikaner* of 18 October 1912 was the need to raise the level of Yiddish theatre, "because

²⁷ *Der Afrikaner*, 11 May 1922.

²⁸ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 30 June 1950.

²⁹ *Der Afrikaner*, 6 December 1917.

³⁰ *Der Afrikaner*, 6 March 1919.

³¹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 18 May 1923.

³² B. Sachs, 'Sarah Sylvia: a life before the footlights', in *Southern African Jewish Times*, 18 March 1960, p. 17.

³³ *Der Afrikaner*, 18 October 1917.

³⁴ *Der Afrikaner*, 8 June 1916.

³⁵ *Motye Meylekh der Stolier* (Motye Meylekh the carpenter) *Der Afrikaner* 24 November 1911; *Hanele di finisherin* (Anna the seamstress) *Der Afrikaner* 15 December 1911; Gordin's *Di Varheyit* (The Truth) *Der Afrikaner*, 22. March 1912; *Rokhel degel Mahaneh Yehudah* (Rachel the Standard of Judah) *Der Afrikaner* 9 August 1912; *Der Yidisher Kenig Lir* (The Jewish King Lear) *Der Afrikaner* 20 August 1912.

³⁶ These were: *Dos Yidische harts* (The Jewish Heart), *Der Afrikaner* 6 December 1917; Morris Gisnet's *Gelt* (Money), *Der Afrikaner* 27 December 1917; *Di Meydl fun der Vest* (The Girl from the West), *Hayim in Amerike*, *South African Jewish Chronicle* May 1919; Gordin's *Di Shehitah* (The Slaughter), *Der Afrikaner*, 9 January 1919; *Bas Yerushalayim* (Daughter of Jerusalem) *Der Afrikaner*, 15 May 1919.

³⁷ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 7 March 1913.

³⁸ *Der Afrikaner*, 8 June 1916.

³⁹ *Der Afrikaner*, 18 October 1917.

⁴⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, May 18 1923.

the audience was being fed with *Khinke Pinke* and other dramas of this sort."⁴¹ The establishment of the *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn* marks the beginning of the Yiddishist movement in South Africa, which although it was always very small - membership of the *Fareyn* never exceeded 250 - had a far larger following. The society aimed to spread and to promote Yiddish literature, theatre and song, through lectures, debates, performances, recitals, choirs, a library and a daily newspaper in Yiddish and English.⁴² The weekly Thursday night meetings of the *Fareyn* became a cultural institution in Johannesburg, and its library eventually included 1 500 of 'the latest Yiddish books.'⁴³ For short periods it published a literary journal, *Dos Naye vort* (1916), and *Dorem Afrike* in 1922/1923 and 1928/1929. Until 1923 the premises of the *Fareyn* were at 102 End Street in Doornfontein.⁴⁴ In December 1923 it was reported to have moved to spacious new premises in Heath's Hotel Building in Von Brandis Street.⁴⁵

Despite Feldman's claim that Rabbi Dr J.L. Landau, a committed Zionist and Hebraist, hated Yiddish and hindered the cause of Yiddish in South Africa, it was he who delivered the Inaugural lecture⁴⁶ of the *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn*.⁴⁷ He also delivered the address at the memorial to Sholem Aleichem, who died in 1916, demonstrating a deep knowledge and appreciation of his works.⁴⁸ Hyman Ehrlich, the Yiddish author and for many years the chairman of the *Fareyn* also denied that Landau hated Yiddish,⁴⁹ and we saw in the previous chapter that he was a devotee of the Yiddish theatre, and had translated one of his own Hebrew plays for the Yiddish stage. Although he apparently fought against the plan to publish a daily newspaper in Yiddish,⁵⁰ it is doubtful that such a newspaper would have lasted very long given the poverty of the Yiddish speaking community. Even the Yiddish weekly newspaper, *Der Afrikaner*, established in 1911, struggled to survive.

⁴¹ *Der Afrikaner*, 18 October 1912.

⁴² *Der Afrikaner*, 14 November 1912.

⁴³ L. Feldman, *Yidn in Yohanesburg biz Yunyen 31-tn Mey, 1910*, 1955, p. 271.

⁴⁴ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 2 April 1914.

⁴⁵ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 7 December 1923.

⁴⁶ L. Feldman (1955, pp 134-136) objected to the fact that Landau predicted that Yiddish would eventually die out through acculturation, and that Hebrew, the language favoured by the Zionist Movement, would take over as the Jewish language of the future.

⁴⁷ *Der Afrikaner*, 21 November 1912.

⁴⁸ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 2 June 1916.

⁴⁹ M.P. Grosman, *A study of the trends and tendencies in Hebrew and Yiddish writings...*, 1973, pp. 711-713.

⁵⁰ J. Sherman, 'From ideology to indifference: the case of Yiddish in South Africa', in *Memories, realities and dreams*, eds M. Shain & R. Mendelsohn, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg & Cape Town, 2002, p. 33.

In 1913 and 1914 the Dramatic Section of the *Fareyn* staged three Gordin plays:⁵¹ *Di Yesoyme* (The Orphan)⁵² and *Di Varheyt* (The Truth),⁵³ at the Palladium, and *Der Meturef* (The Wild man) at the Standard Theatre.⁵⁴ With the exception of Hannan Hiersch, Jack Lurie, the singers, Sura Richter, and Rebecca Reubin who sang an aria from *Cavilliera Rusticana* in the second act of *Di Varheyt*,⁵⁵ the cast were all rank amateurs. They included Ethel Kinkel and Mrs L. Shamban, who had also acted in Hannan Hiersch's amateur dramatic company in 1906,⁵⁶ and Miss A. Kaminer, Mrs Friedland, Miss Lissoos, Miss S. Michalski, J. Stutzin, M. Stone, Klotz, Trachtenberg, Rabinowitz,⁵⁷ Miss P. Reznick, A. Levy, S. Kroll, the Yiddish writer Hyman Ehrlich, Entin, Miss B. Finestein, Miss A. Guinsberg, and Miss S. Friedman.⁵⁸

With the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, between 1916 and 1917 another five Gordin plays⁵⁹ were produced to raise money for the Jewish War and Pogrom Victims Fund. Gordin's *Chasye di yesoyme* (Chasye the orphan), simply known as *Di Yesoyme*, was a particular favourite for such occasions. Although considered to be realistic in its day, by modern standards it is highly emotionally exaggerated. It is the story of Chasye, a poor orphan, who is sent away by her stepmother to live with her mother's sister's family in the city of Yekaterinoslav in the Ukraine. Here she is treated like a servant. On one occasion she is falsely accused of stealing her cousin's diamond brooch, and tied to a bedpost by her braids to force her to confess. When her first cousin marries her, he is cut off without a penny, and the couple are forced to live in poverty. With a baby to support her husband wants to return to his wealthy family, and to leave Chasye and the baby to return to the poverty stricken crowded home of her father. The climax of the play is the suicide scene in the final act. One can imagine that at the fundraiser at the Palladium in 1917, attended by the Governor General of the Union of South Africa and Lady Buxton, and the Administrator and Mrs Rissik,⁶⁰ there was most likely not a dry eye in the house. Chasye, who is about to take poison, addresses her baby with these words:

⁵¹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 7 March 1913.

⁵² *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 10 October 1913.

⁵³ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 3 December 1913, *Zionist Record*, 15 December 1913.

⁵⁴ *Der Afrikaner*, 10 June 1914.

⁵⁵ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 3 December 1913, *Zionist Record*, 15 December 1913.

⁵⁶ Programme notes *Tsuzeyt un tsushpreyt*, Hannan Hiersch collection, S.A. Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg.

⁵⁷ *Zionist Record*, 21 November 1953.

⁵⁸ *Der Afrikaner*, 10 June 1914.

⁵⁹ *Mirele Efros*, *Der Afrikaner* 1 June 1916; *Kreutzer Sonata*, *Der Afrikaner* 14 June 1917; *Di Yesoyme* (The Orphan), *Der Afrikaner* 5 July 1917; *Oyf der barg oder Di Grine in Amerike* (On the mountain, or the New immigrant in America), *Der Afrikaner* 26 July 1917; *Got mentsh un tayvel* (God, man and the devil), *Der Afrikaner*, 22 November 1917.

"Eti your mother is going away far away. She causes trouble for everyone, a misfortune. She is not needed. Unnecessary. Yes there are such wretched people, that are unwanted as children, and as adults are superfluous... A great big world and there is no place for them..."⁶¹

And if that was not enough to tear at the heartstrings, Chasye contemplates taking her baby's life as well, so that she should not grow up an unwanted orphan like herself.

"Etele I am not able to ask you, but believe me, I am doing you a favour... I already know only too well, how a poor orphan lives in this world... No, child, it will be better for you, to die together with me, with your unhappy mother... Yes, Eti, yes?... Oy they will bury us both in the same grave and on our grave a flower with two little twigs will grow, and they will call this flower "Chasye and Eti".⁶²

Gordin's *On a heym* (Homeless) was another popular favourite as it demonstrates how immigration destroys Jewish traditional family values, with a husband's abandonment of a plain and lowly wife for one who has become more sophisticated and educated in America.

The only overseas Yiddish performer on record during those years was Sam Stern who participated in the vaudeville line up at the Palladium in May 1913⁶³ and from January to April 1915⁶⁴ and in April 1919⁶⁵ at the Empire Theatre. Sam Stern was a veteran of the Yiddish stage who had performed with Jacob Adler in New York for over fifteen years.⁶⁶ At the Empire he was billed at the head of seven different acts and his Yiddish songs were a decided favourite with the audience. In July 1919 under the aegis of African Theatres Trust, he formed a company of amateurs, the Yiddish Comedy Dramatic Company, including most of the members of the Hebrew Operatic and Dramatic Company,⁶⁷ with Max Weinbrenn conducting the orchestra. They presented a season of Yiddish melodramas and musical comedies, much the same fare as the Waxman-Wallerstein

⁶⁰ *Der Afrikaner*, 5 July 1917.

⁶¹ J. Gordin, 'Chasye di yesoyme: drame in fir aktn', in J. Gordin. *Dray drames... redaktsiye Shmuel Rozshanski*, Literatur Gezelshaft baym Yivo in Argentine, Buenos Aires, 1973, pp. 105-106.

⁶² J. Gordin, 'Chasye di yesoyme: drame in fir aktn', in J. Gordin. *Dray drames...*, unter der redaktsiye fun Shmuel Rozshanski. Literatur Gezelshaft baym Yivo in Argentine, Buenos Aires, 1973, p. 107.

⁶³ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 2 May 1913.

⁶⁴ *Der Afrikaner*, 7 January 1915, 15 April 1915.

⁶⁵ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 17 April 1919.

⁶⁶ *Der Afrikaner*, 19 June 1919.

⁶⁷ According to an advert the company consisted of: Dora Nathan, Kate Nathan, Tibbie Gold, Henry Berman, Joel Myerson, Phillip Schragger, Hannan Hirsch, Leah Berman, Jack Lurie, Harris Sternson, Isidore Fine. *Der Afrikaner*, 10 July 1919.

companies, at the Standard Theatre from July to August⁶⁸ and again in October. Sam Stern also toured with his company to Cape Town, Oudtshoorn and Port Elizabeth.

In March 1921 the *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn* brought out the celebrated Yiddish producer, playwright, and world traveller, Peretz Hirschbein, on a lecture tour of South Africa.⁶⁹ Hirschbein, and his wife, the poetess, Esther Shumiatcher, were the first Yiddish literary personalities to visit South Africa and all their public appearances were packed out.⁷⁰ Hirschbein commented very favourably on the Jewish community in South Africa who were imbued with both Judaism and Zionism. Whilst previously he had wondered why Jews wanted to travel so far from Europe, he now asked himself, "Why were there only fifty thousand and not more?" Hirschbein, however, was extremely sensitive to the rapid acculturation of the second generation, who were quick to forsake their Yiddish and shed all ties with Eastern Europe. Unlike their parents, the locally born children regarded South Africa as home, London as the motherland, and went off to study in Edinburgh in Scotland.⁷¹

Visiting companies, 1921-1930

Between 1921 and 1930, a succession of overseas Yiddish theatre companies were brought out to South Africa by African Theatres Trust. They included the companies of Sarah Sylvia and Joseph Sherman in 1921, Esther Wallerstein in 1922, Joseph Kessler in 1923, Nathan Isaacovitch in 1926, Paul Breitman and Adolf Teffner in 1927, Henry Berman in 1928 and 1929 and Sh. Kupferberg in 1930.⁷² They came out for seasons that varied from 10 weeks to 6 months, although on average Johannesburg Jewry could not sustain a season longer than 3 months.⁷³ The problem was that the companies generally performed six nights a week. Thus they needed a huge repertoire to keep attracting new audiences, who tired of seeing the same old melodramas and musical comedies again and again. When after the 1921 extended season of Joseph Sherman and Sarah Sylvia, the Palladium, which could hold close to a thousand people, proved too large, all further seasons were held at the Standard Theatre.

⁶⁸ *Der Afrikaner*, 15 August 1919, 3 October 1919.

⁶⁹ See Chapter 2, 'Yiddish theatre: a historical overview.'

⁷⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 11 March 1921.

⁷¹ P. Hirschbein. *Felker un lender: rayze ayndrukn fun Nayzeland, Oystraiye, Dorem Afrike, 1920-1922*. B. Kletskin, Vilna, 1929, pp. 114, 119.

⁷² *Der Afrikaner*, 7 March 1930.

⁷³ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 27 July 1928.

At the same time the official attitude of the staunchly pro-Zionist Jewish establishment towards the Yiddish language, remained extremely negative,⁷⁴ and at the first sign of failure the English Jewish press was quick to denigrate Yiddish and to predict its imminent demise. This was the case when the Esther Wallerstein Company was forced to close down after only a week in July 1922, because of sparse attendances. An editorial headed, *The failure of Yiddish*, pronounced that the problem with the Yiddish plays was not the quality of the actors nor the productions, which had been successful in London and New York, nor the location of the theatre which was in the centre of the city. The root of the problem was that there was hardly any immigration and audiences in Johannesburg had outgrown Yiddish theatre.⁷⁵

More than by any other personality, the history of Yiddish theatre in South Africa was determined by the career of Sarah Sylvia. In the opinion of Hannan Hirsch, until her return at Passover 1921, there was no Yiddish theatre in South Africa, worthy of the name.⁷⁶ In 1912 Sarah Sylvia had joined Maurice Moscovitch's company at the Pavilion Theatre in London, where she had played soubrette roles opposite Ludwig Satz. In 1913 Sarah Sylvia travelled to Argentina with Moscovitch's company and performed as his leading lady. When Moscovitch left the Yiddish stage in 1919 she joined Joseph Kessler's company.⁷⁷ In August 1920 she came on a visit home to Johannesburg, and produced a number of Yiddish plays at the Palladium. These plays, popular domestic melodramas, *Dos lebn fun a froy* (A Woman's life), *Di Vayse shklofn* (The White slaves), and *Hantshe di sufragette* (Hantshe the suffragette),⁷⁸ were so successful, that African Theatres Trust was persuaded to sign a contract with her to bring out a Yiddish theatre company,⁷⁹ with a view to establishing a local Yiddish theatre.⁸⁰

Thus at Passover 1921 Sarah Sylvia arrived with a company led by herself and Joseph Sherman,⁸¹ and including the star of the Yiddish stage in Poland, London and Buenos Aires, Jacob Perelman (1879-1940),⁸² and Esta Stein,⁸³ an English actress. They were

⁷⁴ See J. Sherman, 'Between ideology and indifference', 2002, p. 3

⁷⁵ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 20 October 1922.

⁷⁶ Hirsch, H. 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike zint 1902', in *Dorem Afrike*, 1-ter yor, nom. 6, 1928, p. 12.

⁷⁷ Z. Zilbercwaig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1934, vol. 2, pp. 1486-1487.

⁷⁸ *Der Afrikaner*, 25 August 1920.

⁷⁹ H. Hirsch, 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike zint 1902', in *Dorem Afrike*, 1-ter yor, nom. 6, December 1928, p. 12.

⁸⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 22 July 1921.

⁸¹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 29 April 1921.

⁸² Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, Farlag Elisheva, New York, 1959, vol. 3, pp. 1835-1836.

joined by the local actors Hannan Hirsch, Henry Berman and Dora Nathan. Esta Stein remained in South Africa during the 1920s performing with all the visiting professional companies and with the local amateurs. Like Sarah Sylvia,⁸⁴ Esta's native language was English. She learnt to read and write Yiddish for the first time in Johannesburg as she had previously written out all her dialogue in English transliteration.⁸⁵ Despite her obvious talent on the English stage, Esta Stein, a sympathiser with the underdog and a committed Communist,⁸⁶ dedicated her career to the Yiddish stage out of choice. She only left the Yiddish stage for English theatre when she really had no option.⁸⁷ Esta Stein returned to England in 1930, where she became well known for her broadcasts on the only Yiddish broadcasting programme on the B.B.C, the *Chauve Souris* programme.⁸⁸ After three months, however, support for Sarah Sylvia's company was falling off. Complaints were voiced that performances were too long, that an English synopsis of the plot was not provided, and that the number of Yiddish speakers in Johannesburg was not enough to support a company that performed only in Yiddish.⁸⁹

On the other hand two years later the ten week season of Joseph Kessler from the Pavilion Theatre in Whitechapel, at the Standard Theatre, was a sellout. Kessler brought along a repertoire of 300 plays and a strong cast consisting of Sarah Sylvia, Joseph Sherman, Phillip and Anna Augenblick, Morris and Rosa Brown, Jacob Zanger, and Esta Stein.⁹⁰ A sad reflection on the other Yiddish theatre companies of the time, was the need to complement the Kessler company on the fact that performances began on time and the cast was word perfect! Kessler, billed as "The Great Tragedien", introduced Johannesburg audiences to Shakespeare in Yiddish, to *Hamlet*, a part for which he was famous, and to *Shylock*, an abbreviated version of *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare's tragedies were particular favourites on the Yiddish stage as they provided the actors with the strong heroic roles that they craved. Moreover performing Shakespeare gave the Yiddish actors, "a mark of legitimacy and a means of measuring their talent against that of actors

⁸³ H. Hirsch, 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike zint 1902', in *Dorem Afrike*, 1-ter yor, nom. 6, December 1928, p. 12.

⁸⁴ She was possibly a cousin of Sarah Sylvia. Interview with Bertha Englander, 3 November 1999.

⁸⁵ M. Tabatznik, 'Oyfn veg fun oremen Yidishn teater: tsum shloyshim fun Esta Stein', in *Dorem Afrike*, yorg. 11, nom. 5, 1958, p. 28.

⁸⁶ M. Shain et al., *Looking back: Jews in the struggle for democracy and human rights in South Africa*. University of Cape Town, Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, Cape Town, 2001, pp. 34-35.

⁸⁷ M. Tabatznik, 'Oyfn veg fun oremen Yidishn teater: tsum shloyshim fun Esther Stein', in *Dorem Afrike*, yorg. 11, nom. 5, 1958, p. 28.

⁸⁸ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 20 January 1950

⁸⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 24 June 1921.

⁹⁰ H. Hirsch, 'Idish teater in Dorem Afrike zint 1902', in *Dorem Afrike*, 1-ter yor, nom. 6, December 1928, p. 12.

performing in English...".⁹¹ Kessler also introduced Anski's great classic *The Dybbuk*.⁹² A particular favourite in his repertoire was *Dos Khupe Kleyd* (The Wedding Gown), a melodrama of Jewish family life in New York, chiefly remembered for its sentimental title song which opens with the words, "Oy oy oy dos hupe kleyd, di greste hofenung far a meyd" (Oy oy oy the bridal gown, a young girl's greatest hope). Another popular favourite was Kobrin's Zionist propaganda play, *Tsurik tsu mayn folk* (Back to his nation).⁹³ In this play the hero, a Polish Jewish immigrant in America who has married out of the faith and brought his children up as gentiles, returns to his people, when his son becomes an antisemite.⁹⁴

It was another two years before a visiting Yiddish theatre company was to tour South Africa again. This was the company of Nathan Isaacovitch, an actor not unknown to South African audiences, having performed with the Wallerstein company at the Gaiety in 1910. Moreover only two years before, in 1924, Isaacovitch had come out to South Africa as part of the supporting cast of *The Great Lover*, produced on the English stage by Maurice Moscovitch (1871-1940), in whose London Yiddish Company Sarah Sylvia had first achieved stardom.⁹⁵ In June 1926 Nathan Isaacovitch's company⁹⁶ performed at the Standard Theatre for a six month season, during which time they also toured to Pretoria, Benoni, Krugersdorp and Kimberley.⁹⁷ The season was so successful that Isaacovitch was approached by some Johannesburg businessmen to establish a permanent Yiddish theatre.⁹⁸ This was not the first time that Isaacovitch had entertained the idea of establishing a permanent Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg. The 1912 *South African Jewish Chronicle* had published a letter by him calling for support for this idea.⁹⁹ However nothing materialised then or in 1926.

Only three months later in March 1927, the three leading members of the Isaacovitch Company, Vera Kanevska, Isaacovitch's twenty eight year old leading lady, her husband, Paul Breitman, and Adolf Teffner, the eighteen year old matinee idol from Galicia,¹⁰⁰ returned with a company of Polish Yiddish actors to play for 12 weeks at the Standard

⁹¹ J. Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish stage*, Iowa University Press, Iowa City, 2002, p. 216.

⁹² See Chapter 2, 'Yiddish theatre: a historical overview.'

⁹³ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 1 June 1923.

⁹⁴ *S.A. Jewish Times* 17 September 1954.

⁹⁵ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 3 August 1923.

⁹⁶ *Ivri anochi*, 1 July, August 1926.

⁹⁷ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 15 October 1926.

⁹⁸ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 17 December 1926.

⁹⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 6 February 1912.

¹⁰⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 4, 18 March 1927.

Theatre.¹⁰¹ The company included Paul's brother, Nathan Brajtman, who acted under the name of B. Nathan.¹⁰² Vera Kanevskaja, from Chernigov in the Ukraine was already a star by the time she arrived in South Africa. She had a beautiful singing voice, played both male and female roles, and was described as a character actress of exceptional ability.¹⁰³ She began acting in a Yiddish troupe in Odessa, where she met her husband, and also performed in Kharkov, at the Scala in Lodz and toured all over Russia.¹⁰⁴ Her husband, the handsome Paul Breitman, who thrilled audiences with his fine baritone voice and wonderful stage presence, and his younger brother Nathan, began their singing career with Cantor Sirota in a Synagogue choir, and their stage career with the Kaminsky Yiddish Theatre Company in Warsaw. Paul, the more talented of the two brothers, joined a series of troupes in Lublin and was subsequently engaged by the Muranever Theatre in Warsaw.¹⁰⁵ Nathan made his debut on the professional stage in 1922 in Vienna after which he performed in Rumania for two years.¹⁰⁶ Life for the wandering Yiddish actors in Europe was extremely hard. Mark Brajtman, Nathan's son, relates that his father used to tell him how they were often forced to sleep on park benches at night.¹⁰⁷ In 1921 Vera and Paul left Russia to tour Europe, ending up in London, where they joined Isaacovitch's Company on its tour to South Africa.

The visiting companies of the 1920s not only helped to keep the spirit of Yiddish theatre alive, they also inspired several of their members to return to make South Africa their home thus enriching the local stage. Nathan Brajtman returned to South Africa to settle only two years later, nine years later Paul and Vera joined him. Another couple from the companies of the late 1920s who returned to settle in Johannesburg in 1929, were Mary Aingorn or Einhorn and her husband Boris Abramoff, or Abramov.¹⁰⁸ In the 1930s and 1940s the couple made a considerable contribution acting and producing Yiddish theatre. Mary Einhorn, a talented actress with a beautiful singing voice, who was orphaned in the Ukrainian pogroms, studied acting at the Kiev Stage School and joined a travelling Yiddish theatre troupe. In Johannesburg her first visit was to the Arcadia Jewish Orphanage to see the Ochberg orphans, a group of about seventy pogrom orphans, who were rescued

¹⁰¹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 6 May 1927.

¹⁰² In the newspaper his name appears as B. Cathan [sic], a misprint for B. Nathan. *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 4, 18 March 1927.

¹⁰³ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 12 November 1926.

¹⁰⁴ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 7 September 1945.

¹⁰⁵ Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1931, vol. 1, p. 244.

¹⁰⁶ Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, 1934, vol. 2, pp. 1396-1397.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Paul Brajtman and Hennie Bernstein, 27 November 2000.

¹⁰⁸ *Zionist Record*, 22 March 1929.

from the Ukraine by the Cape Town philanthropist Isaac Ochberg.¹⁰⁹ Mary's husband, Boris Abramoff, was a character comedian from Odessa, who had performed in Russian theatre in Nizhni Novgorod, before going over to Yiddish theatre. In 1927 he became the impresario for the Moscow *Yidish Kamer Teater*. In Johannesburg in 1932 he got a job with the weekly Johannesburg Yiddish newspaper, the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, selling advertising in the Cape and Natal.¹¹⁰

By 1929, however, support for the touring Yiddish companies was falling off. The reason given for the loss of interest was the outdated repertoire. It was suggested that if a small Yiddish company were to come for a short season and produce in a modern way they would find an enthusiastic public, but there would never be great financial gain. "The establishment, however, of a permanent Yiddish theatre in South Africa is hardly a likely proposition."¹¹¹

Amateur Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg, 1920s.

At the same time as the offerings of the visiting professional troupes were becoming increasingly mediocre, a definite change was taking place in amateur Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg, both with regard to the actors and to the repertoire. This was clearly the result of the new immigration of the 1920s which included several individuals who had participated in Yiddish theatre in Eastern Europe and who had attended Yiddish *Folkshuls*. It is from this time on that the call to establish a permanent Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg is repeated more and more frequently.

The new repertoire produced by the *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn*, included I.D. Berkowitz's prizewinning play *Untern tseylem* (Under the cross) or *Moshke hazer* (Moshke the pig), a double bill of Sholem Aleichem's *Menshn* and Der Tunkeler's *Der Hosen* (The Bridegroom), and Leon Kobrin's most famous play *Yankl Boyle*. *Moshke hazer* and *Yankl Boyle* are classics of Eastern European Jewish life, which deal with its greatest threats, apostasy and intermarriage. *Moshke hazer* is set against the background of the 1905 *pogroms* in Russia, and depicts the tragedy of the apostate Jew, Moyssei Perepontov, or *Moshke hazer* who meets his nemesis when his son takes part in a pogrom. *Yankl Boyle* marries a Russian peasant and fearing that the soul of his dead

¹⁰⁹ *Zionist Record*, 7 September 1928. For the story of the rescue of the Ukrainian orphans by Isaac Ochberg, see: B.I. Epstein. *This was a man*. The Author, St. James, Cape Province:1974, or J. Boiskin, 'The Ochberg orphans: an episode in the history of the Cape Jewish Orphanage', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 49, no. 2, 1994, pp. 21-27.

¹¹⁰ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 29 April 1932.

¹¹¹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 13 September 1929.

father will suffer in Hell for his sin, commits suicide. The play is steeped in Russian angst, replete with Russian words and curses, songs and dances, 'vivid, grotesque sensual.'¹¹² *Menshn* was always a popular choice in the Yiddish theatrical repertoire, as although it has a domestic setting, it conveys the universal socialistic message of the conflict between employers and workers.

Moshke Hazer and *Yankl Boyle* were produced by Hannan Hiersch, whilst *Menshn* was produced by a new immigrant from Mir, Mendl Tabatznik, who also played the part of Piatok the Priest in *Moshke Hazer* and starred in *Yankl Boyle*. *Moshke Hazer* and *Yankl Boyle* were produced at the Standard Theatre in November 1927 and February 1929 respectively in aid of the Jewish Colonisation Fund. In the late 1920s the Jewish Colonisation Fund, which aimed to settle Jews in the Crimea and the Ukraine in Russia as opposed to Palestine, attracted support from the Yiddish speaking Jews in particular, presenting South African Zionism with its greatest challenge.¹¹³ *Menshn* was produced at the Jewish Guild in 1928. All three plays were felt to augur a new era for Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg and that Tabatznik had laid the foundation for a local Yiddish theatre in South Africa.¹¹⁴

Mendl Tabatznik, (1894-1975) was born in Kletsk in the province of Minsk in White Russia. Possessed of a fine singing voice, he was attracted to Yiddish theatre from the first time that he saw Goldfaden's *Shulames* performed by a group of local amateurs in Kletsk.¹¹⁵ As a young boy when a Yiddish theatre troupe visited Kletsk, he helped back stage and sang in the chorus. His first opportunity to perform was in the part of Eliezer in Goldfaden's *Bar Kokhba*.¹¹⁶ In 1913 when he moved to Mir, he became the director of the local amateur Yiddish theatre group. After the October Revolution this group was mobilised by the Sixteenth Army to serve the Slutsk and Novgorod region as part of the Bolshevik's cultural programme.¹¹⁷

Tabatznik also studied to be a teacher and became principal of the *Mir Folkshul*. In 1927, shortly before his decision to emigrate to South Africa, Tabatznik was elected mayor of

¹¹² N. Sandrow, *Vagabond stars*, 1996, pp. 172-175.

¹¹³ G. Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*, 1980, pp. 56-57.

¹¹⁴ *Zionist Record*, 11 November 1927; M. Tabatznik, *Shtaplen in mayn lebensveg: zikhroynes*. Kayor, Johannesburg, 1973, vol. 2, pp. 39-42.

¹¹⁵ M. Tabatznik, *Shtaplen in mayn lebensveg: zikhroynes*. Johannesburg: Kayor, 1973, vol. 1, p. 106.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 112-115.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 145.

Mir. Despite the fact that for many years he had been a supporter of the Bund,¹¹⁸ when he decided to emigrate, his first choice was to go to Palestine. However he was unable to obtain an immigration certificate from the local Zionist Committee, which he attributed to the fact that he was an outspoken Yiddishist.¹¹⁹ In Johannesburg one of his first jobs was as spokesman for the Jewish Colonisation Fund, however by the early 1930s he was equally involved with the Zeire Zion. In his memoirs he expresses little political bias.¹²⁰ In 1929 in partnership with Mischa Szur, Tabatznik founded the first shortlived Yiddish *Folkshul* of the *Fareyn*, but later became a very successful businessman pursuing the trade of house painting which he had learnt in Kletsk. Tabatznik played a central role in Yiddish cultural life in Johannesburg, teaching, lecturing, organising folk choirs and producing and acting in Yiddish theatre. He also contributed stories and poems to the South African Yiddish press and after his retirement published six books.¹²¹

Two other members of Tabatznik's Yiddish theatre group in Mir who emigrated to Johannesburg in the late 1920s, were David Danzig and Chaim Portnoy. David Danzig played a leading role, founding and directing an amateur Yiddish theatre group in Benoni.¹²² Feigele Kopelowitz, who became a leading lady on the Yiddish stage in Johannesburg, playing with amateurs and with visiting troupes, was a pupil of Tabatznik's at the Mir *Folkshul*.¹²³ Other new names include the 'very talented' Liuba Shul, Clara Tannenbaum, a new immigrant from Pren, who married the Yiddish journalist, cultural worker and entrepreneur from Krakivova, Abel Shaban,¹²⁴ Masha Pincus a new immigrant from Shadova in Lithuania,¹²⁵ Joseph Fried, Lozer Freeman, and Baruch Carlin.¹²⁶ Another newcomer at this time was Shloyme Rubin, who had been the director of the amateur Dramatic Circle of the Yiddish organisation, *Kultur Lige*, in Rakishok in Lithuania.¹²⁷ In Johannesburg Rubin, who was also a committed Communist¹²⁸ and owned

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 250.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 253.

¹²⁰ E.A. Mantzaris (1995, p. 32) writes that Tabatznik's memoirs demonstrate the rift between the Bundists and the Zionists in Johannesburg. This is simply not correct as his memoirs are strictly apolitical focusing on the personal events of his life and in no way providing insight into internal Jewish politics in Johannesburg.

¹²¹ J. Sherman, ed. *In a land far off*. Jewish Publications, Cape Town, 1987, pp.160-161.

¹²² M. Tabatznik, *Shtaplen in mayn lebensveg: zikhroynes*. Johannesburg: Kayor, 1973, vol.

1, p. 137-139.

¹²³ Ibid, p. 143.

¹²⁴ A. Ben Shalom, *Portrait of a volkmensch*, Grosvenor Publishing, Johannesburg, 1974, p.

6.

¹²⁵ Interview Saul Ozynski, 9 July 2001.

¹²⁶ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 22 February 1929.

¹²⁷ S. Spivak. 'Fun der Rakishker "Kultur Lige": di tetikeyt fun der "Kultur Lige", 1919-1923', in *Yizkor-bukh fun Rakishok un umgegent*, redaktor Meilekh Bakalczuk-Felin. Rakishker Landmanshaft in Yohanesburg, Dorem Afrike, Yohanesburg, 1952, p. 225. Rubin became the

a ladies hairdresser shop in Plein Street,¹²⁹ acted and directed plays for various organisations.

The *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn* continued to exist until June 1932. In 1927 the *Fareyn* brought out Herz Grosbard, the famous Yiddish actor from the Vilna Troupe who created the part of Honon in *The Dybbuk*,¹³⁰ to do a series of recitals.¹³¹ In March 1929, however, it was reported that membership of the *Fareyn* was dwindling,¹³² and that it was making no effort to welcome the hundreds of new immigrants who were streaming into South Africa.¹³³ Despite the fact that the Zionists were in the majority on the first Executive of the *Literarisher Fareyn*, over time its orientation had shifted to the Soviet Union and to the radical cause in South Africa. In January 1929 the *Fareyn* established the first Yiddish *Folkshul* with Mischa Szur and Mendl Tabatznik as the teachers. However its avowedly secular and radical program, with the senior classes being instructed in the principles of socialism - 'the striving for a more just and ideal social order'¹³⁴ - met with hostility from the many Zionists who regarded it as a threat to the Hebrew *Talmud-Torah* school system. As a result the *Folkshul* never incorporated more than 60 children and two teachers.¹³⁵ In March 1931 after only two years, it was forced to close down owing to the departure of Mischa Szur and to a lack of funds.¹³⁶

According to Shimoni, the anti-Zionist stance of the *Fareyn* had caused it to move, "so far out of the mainstream of Jewish communal life that even the Yiddish-speaking population was alienated."¹³⁷ On the other hand the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, established in Johannesburg in 1929, was providing a counter attraction for radically inclined Yiddish speakers, and had taken over many of the social and cultural functions of the *Fareyn*.¹³⁸

Secretary of the Rakishker Landsmanschaft in Johannesburg and initiated the above mentioned *Yizker bukh*, one of only two *Yizker bikher* that were published in South Africa.

¹²⁸ M. Shain, et al., *Looking back*, 2001, pp. 34-35.

¹²⁹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 10 November 1933.

¹³⁰ See Chapter 2, *Yiddish theatre: a historical overview*.

¹³¹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 27 May 1927.

¹³² J.M. Sherman, 'Veg oder stezshke?', in *Dorem Afrike* yorg. 2, nom. 3, March 1929, pp. [1]-4.

¹³³ 'Der Fareyn: zayne tsiln un oyfgabn tsum hayntikn tog', in *Dorem Afrike* yorg. 2, nom. 3, March 1929, pp. 21-23.

¹³⁴ Flyer entitled *A Idishe shul* (A Yiddish school). Yiddish Literary and Dramatic Society archive, ARCH 915, S.A. Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg.

¹³⁵ G. Shimoni. *Jews and Zionism*, 1980, p. 56.

¹³⁶ Mendl Tabatznik, one of the two teachers, makes absolutely no mention of any problem with the Zionists with regard to the closing down of the *Folkshul*. He attributes this entirely to the departure of the teacher, Misza Szur, and to the apathy of the school management. M. Tabatznik, *Shtaplen in mayn lebnsveg*, 1973, vol.2, p. 83-84.

¹³⁷ G. Shimoni. *Jews and Zionism*, 1980, p. 56.

¹³⁸ M.P. Grosman, M. *A study of the trends and tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish writings...*, 1973, p. 749.

Ultimately, however, the closure of the *Fareyn* was due to lack of funds. As all its activities were free, it did not have a proper budget. It raised money to support schools in Poland and Lithuania, and to bring Peretz Hirschbein and Herz Grosbard to South Africa, but never to cover running costs.¹³⁹

Western Cape

Much more than in the Transvaal, in the 1910s anglicised Cape Town was preoccupied with the Great War of 1914-1918. Newspapers were full of patriotic propaganda and by 1915 more and more young men were enlisting. Fundraising became part of the fabric of life.¹⁴⁰ Whilst Capetonians raised money for the soldiers and their families, its Jewish community also collected funds for the Cape Relief Fund for Jewish War and Pogrom Victims established in 1914.¹⁴¹

Despite the fact that the Jewish population of Cape Town increased from 7 161 in 1911¹⁴² to 11 912 in 1926¹⁴³ it was still less than half of that in Johannesburg.¹⁴⁴ Yiddish cultural activity was always far less in Cape Town as the Jewish establishment was far more anglicised. Whereas amateur productions in Johannesburg during this period were staged at the Palladium, that could hold nearly a thousand people, in Cape Town in the 1910s and 1920s Yiddish plays were staged at the Railway Institute, a small hall at the bottom of Waterkant Street built in 1915.¹⁴⁵ Visiting companies performed at the Opera House,¹⁴⁶ but seldom stayed for longer than two weeks. Performances were no longer held on Sundays and in any case Yiddish theatre had become such a seldom occurrence that it no longer attracted the attention of the authorities.

¹³⁹ J.M. Sherman, J.M. 'Veg oder stezshke?' 2-ter yorg., nom. 3, March 1929, pp. [1]-4.

¹⁴⁰ V. Bickford-Smith, E. Van Heyningen, N. Worden, *Cape Town in the twentieth century: an illustrated social history*. David Philip, Cape Town, 1999, pp. 50-52.

¹⁴¹ Cape Relief Fund for Jewish War and Pogrom Victims, *Sixth report and financial statement... 1914 to... 1920*, The Fund, Cape Town, 1920.

¹⁴² Union of South Africa. *Census of the Europeans or White races*, 1918. Part 6, Religions.

Cape Times: Cape Times Ltd, Government Printer, 1920, pp. 19, 22, 23.

¹⁴³ Union of South Africa. Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria. *Fourth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 4th May, 1926*, Part 4, Nationality and parentage, Pretoria: Government Printer, 1929, pp. 64, 68, 69.

¹⁴⁴ In 1926 the Jewish population of Johannesburg was 25 774. Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, *Fourth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 4th May, 1926*, Part 8, 'Religions', Government Printer, Pretoria, 1929, p. 11.

¹⁴⁵ 'Cape Town's new Railway Institute', in S.A. Railways and Harbours Magazine, August 1915, pp. 709-711.

¹⁴⁶ In 1937 the Opera House was sold to the Government by I.W. Schlesinger for the erection of a new central post office. J.P. Malan, *South African music encyclopaedia*. Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1979-1986, vol. 4, p. 332.

Amateur Yiddish theatre was relatively scarce during this period, and as the main Jewish weeklies, the *South African Jewish Chronicle*,¹⁴⁷ the *Zionist Record*, and the Yiddish language, *Der Afrikaner*, were published in Johannesburg, very few reports of these performances have survived. Between 1916 and 1923 plays were staged by the *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatisher Fareyn* and by the Cape Town Jewish Dramatic society in aid of the Cape Relief Fund for Jewish War and Pogrom Victims. All these productions were packed out with people having to be turned away. The first was Sholem Aleichem's *Tsezeyt un tsheshpreyt* (Scattered and dispersed), a serious play which confronts the dilemma of Russian Jewry in transition, which was staged to commemorate his death in 1916.¹⁴⁸ In April 1917 a lighter program included his comedy *The Divorce*.¹⁴⁹ The cast included Mrs Frankel, Kagan, Mrs S. Zuckerman, Miss J. Oshry, I.B. Carlin, Miss Hirshovitz, Master H. Behr, Miss Glikman, Tafelstein, Miss Greenblo, Zabow, Glikman, and Bleden.¹⁵⁰

During the war the only groups not to support the war effort were the socialists and the pacifists.¹⁵¹ In Cape Town there was an 'ultra-left' revolutionary group known as the Industrial Socialist League, which seems to have been founded by Yiddish speaking Jews.¹⁵² Two Yiddish actors, S. Davidoff, a professional actor, anarchist and militant Communist, and Joe Pick, a tobacco worker, Zionist Socialist and member of *Poale Zion* were its leaders.¹⁵³ One suspects, however, that many of the other actors were probably also either members or sympathisers. Between 1918 and 1923 Davidoff directed and starred in several plays by Jacob Gordin for the *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatisher Fareyn* and for the Jewish Amateur Dramatic Society. These were *The Unknown*,¹⁵⁴ *The Dreamer*,¹⁵⁵ *Der Meturef* (The Madman),¹⁵⁶ *Got mentsh un tayvl* (God, man and the devil)¹⁵⁷ and *The True Force*. Participants included Joe Pick, Mrs Charney, Mrs L. Segal, Safro, Mrs Hurvitz, Miss B. Charney,¹⁵⁸ J. Kagan, C. Wheeler, Miss J. Beck, B. Segal,¹⁵⁹

¹⁴⁷ In 1927 the *South African Jewish Chronicle* moved to Cape Town.

¹⁴⁸ *Cape Times*, 7 July 1916.

¹⁴⁹ *Argus*, 11 April 1917.

¹⁵⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 21 July 1916.

¹⁵¹ V. Bickford-Smith, E. Van Heyningen, N. Worden, *Cape Town in the twentieth century: an illustrated social history*. David Philip, Cape Town, 1999, p. 57.

¹⁵² E.A. Mantzaris, *Labour struggles in South Africa: the forgotten pages, 1903-1921*, Collective Resources Publications, Windhoek, 1995, p. 1.

¹⁵³ E.A. Mantzaris, *Labour struggles in South Africa: the forgotten pages, 1903-1921*, Collective Resources Publications, Windhoek, 1995, p. 10.

¹⁵⁴ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 11 October 1918.

¹⁵⁵ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 9 April,

¹⁵⁶ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 30 April 1920.

¹⁵⁷ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, August 20 1920.

¹⁵⁸ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 7 May 1920.

¹⁵⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, August 20 1920.

J.M. Adler, M. Kowal, M. Goodman, L. Fisher, Ada and Annie Gamsu, Shuman and Centner.¹⁶⁰

Amateur theatre was also performed in the small Boland towns of Paarl and Worcester, near Cape Town, which had small Jewish populations. Between 1911 and 1921, the Jewish population of Worcester quintupled from 54 to 258.¹⁶¹ In 1921, a Jewish Literary Society was formed under the leadership of J. Rabinowitz. This society started a Jewish library which, at one stage, boasted a collection of over 250 books. It was also responsible for the production of a most successful play in Yiddish, Gordin's *Jewish King Lear*, which was also staged at Paarl and Robertson. This production raised 150 pounds, a considerable amount of money in those days, on behalf of the "Ukrainian Orphans Fund".¹⁶² Paarl had a very active amateur Yiddish Dramatic Society which started in the late 1920s. and continued into the early 1940s. However as most of its productions were staged in the 1930s, they will be discussed in the next chapter.

Between 1918 and 1929 the semi-professional artists from Johannesburg also occasionally toured to Cape Town. They included the Hebrew Operatic and Dramatic Company,¹⁶³ Joel Myerson, who produced Goldfaden's *Shulamites* at the Opera House,¹⁶⁴ Bert Herbert, who produced *Shir ha-Shirim* (Song of Songs) at the Railway Institute,¹⁶⁵ and Phil Schragger who produced *Madam Mirl from Odessa*, at the newly built Zionist Hall. In addition Schragger managed to secure a contract for occasional Yiddish performances at the New Pavilion in Muizenberg.¹⁶⁶

Overseas companies and visiting personalities

Cape Town also had its share of overseas visitors, who were always enthusiastically received. Sam Stern brought his Yiddish Comedy company to Cape Town in September 1919 to present a series of plays at the Tivoli Theatre.¹⁶⁷ He visited Cape Town again in 1921, when he offered to perform on behalf of the Ochberg Orphan Fund but for some

¹⁶⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 30 April 1920.

¹⁶¹ Union of South Africa, *Census of the Europeans or White races, 1918*, Part 6, Religions, p.

23.

¹⁶² *An outline of the history of the Worcester Jewish community*, Worcester collection, Manuscripts and Archives Department, University of Cape Town Libraries.

¹⁶³ They staged Gordin's *Di Yesoyme* (The Orphan), *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 27 March 1918, and *A Jewish soldier's honour*, *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 10 May 1918.

¹⁶⁴ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 24 April 1924.

¹⁶⁵ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 11 June 1926.

¹⁶⁶ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 13 December 1929.

¹⁶⁷ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 12 September 1919.

reason was refused.¹⁶⁸ Other visitors were, Peretz Hirschbein, whose reception and lecture at the Railway Institute in May 1921 was packed out,¹⁶⁹ and Herz Grosbard, who gave a series of recitals in Cape Town in May 1927.¹⁷⁰

Joseph Sherman and Sarah Sylvia presented a two week season at the Opera House at the end of July 1921. Sarah Sylvia's performances were highly acclaimed. Her acting was described as "realistically emotional acting tempered by the rare quality of restraint. It is barely necessary to understand Yiddish to appreciate this quality though it is a pity that the language necessarily restricts the audiences."¹⁷¹

In July and October 1923 Joseph Kessler's company presented a season at the Opera House.¹⁷² Ruth Schechter, Cape Town intellectual, daughter of the famous scholar, Solomon Schechter, and wife of the well known Cape Town parliamentarian and communal leader, Morris Alexander,¹⁷³ described their performance in these terms:

"Recently we have had a stock company here playing to full houses, putting on a show every evening, with two on matinee days. They played "Hamlet" and "Madame X," both in a convention entirely their own, but for the most part they played the rawest and frankest of melodrama, relieved by the broadest of farce, by violently interpolated interludes of singing and dancing, and also, it must be said, by frequent enough flashes of a mordant wit inseparable from the medium in which the pieces were played... Why the company recently here did not choose among the many finer pieces open to them is difficult to understand. The acting, too, is as a rule at an extremely high level of all-round competence. Even in the tawdry plays produced here this and last season, Madame Sylvia's acting, by its fire and intensity, was impressive."¹⁷⁴

Whilst in 1926 Isaacovitch's company did not manage to get a booking in Cape Town, his returning stars in the Breitman-Teffner Yiddish Theatre Company in 1927 were a great hit. When they were forced to move from the Opera House to the Railway Institute because of a prior booking at the Opera House, the Railway Institute proved much too small for the crowds who flocked to see them perform Ansel Shor's comic operetta, *Yankele goes to Shool*, and *Tsipke Fayer*, new to Cape Town audiences.¹⁷⁵ Their reception was so warm that Paul Breitman's brother, Nathan, was persuaded to return to settle in Cape Town only

¹⁶⁸ Oranja, Cape Jewish Orphanage Archive, BC 918, Manuscripts and Archives, University of Cape Town Libraries.

¹⁶⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 20 May 1921.

¹⁷⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 6 May 1927.

¹⁷¹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 5 August 1921.

¹⁷² *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 27 July, 1923.

¹⁷³ See B. Hirson, *The Cape Town intellectuals: Ruth Schechter and her circle, 1907-1934*, Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 2001.

¹⁷⁴ *Cape Times*, 11 August 1923.

¹⁷⁵ *Cape Times*, May 20 1927.

a year later. He was employed by a wellknown Jewish wholesale firm and did not participate much in Yiddish theatre any more.¹⁷⁶

However by 1930 Cape Town like Johannesburg audiences were tiring of the stale repertoire presented to them. Sh. Kupferberg's New Yiddish Company's season at the Railway Institute, which included *A Vayb on tsung* (A Wife without a tongue),¹⁷⁷ was scathingly ridiculed. Their plays were described as 'a travesty of art'.¹⁷⁸ The actors' performances were unfinished and amateurish, the women were described as 'buxom and badly in need of a reducing diet', their dancing as 'clumsy and elephantine', and their voices as 'the most shrill and unpleasant we have ever had occasion to listen to from the stage'.¹⁷⁹

Durban

It is an irony that the only original local play during this period, was written and produced in Durban, with its small anglicised Jewish population of only 1 708,¹⁸⁰ which was known for not being receptive to Yiddish theatre. Whilst more tolerant of their own very occasional amateur production,¹⁸¹ the presentations of the Johannesburg Hebrew Operatic and Dramatic Company,¹⁸² and the Original Yiddish Comedy company,¹⁸³ which came to Durban for a week in January 1921, met with a far less enthusiastic reception. Opening night was sparsely attended and the following night's performance was forced to close. The company decided to open only on the Thursday and the Saturday night. It was reported that:

"What possessed the Original Yiddish Comedy Company to engage the Theatre Royal for a week to present a series of Yiddish plays, no one knows. Someone said it was with a desire to educate our local Jews in enjoying dramas played in Yiddish. But to expect our very limited number of Yiddish speaking brethren to pay from 2/- in the Gallery to 6/- in the stalls,

¹⁷⁶ Interview Hennie Bernstein and Mark Brajtman, 27 November 2000.

¹⁷⁷ *Cape Times*, 23 June 1930, *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 27 June 1930.

¹⁷⁸ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 11 July 1930.

¹⁷⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 4 July 1930.

¹⁸⁰ Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, *Third census of the population of the Union of South Africa enumerated 3rd May 1921, Part 7, 'Religions'*, Government Printing and Stationery Office, Pretoria, 1923, p. 6.

¹⁸¹ On the 3rd of August 1920 the combined Zionist Committee of Durban presented the operetta, *Dos Pintele Yud*, at the Theatre Royal on behalf of the Palestine Restoration Fund. The producers were Phil Shragger and P. Bass.

¹⁸² In October 1921 when the Hebrew Operatic and Dramatic Company presented the comedy drama, *Der Amerikaner glik* (American luck), at the Theatre Royal, the hall was only partly full. *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 29 October 1920.

¹⁸³ The actors are the same as those of the Hebrew Operatic and Dramatic company. *Der Afrikaner*, 18 January 1923,

plus tax, for the purpose of obtaining such an education, was an impossible position. Vulgarly speaking, they were not taking any.”¹⁸⁴

Nonetheless in 1921 at a time when a large scale fund raising campaign was under way to bring 200 Ukrainian *pogrom* orphans to South Africa, Joseph Shapiro, a member of Durban’s Zionist Association, wrote an original Yiddish play, inspired by these events. Entitled, *Der Bal Haloymes* (The Dreamer), it was described as a propaganda piece on a Zionist theme. Like Sholem Aleichem’s *Tsezeyt un tshshpreyt* (Scattered and dispersed), it portrayed all the various ideological trends of contemporary Jewish life, including Zionists, Socialists, Revolutionists, and even a Jewish convert to Christianity. The hero, however, was the Zionist, ‘The Dreamer’. The play was produced by Hannan Hirsch for the Durban Zionist Association and the proceeds were in aid of the Keren Hayesod. It was performed at the Theatre Royal in Durban on the 5th of August 1922. In February 1923 Hannan Hirsch produced it again at the Palladium in Johannesburg in aid of the Ferreira Talmud Torah.¹⁸⁵ P. Bass played the part of the hero, the Dreamer, whilst Phil Schragga provided comic relief with the character of a *shadkhen* (matchmaker). The rest of the cast consisted of Hannan Hirsch, I Super, Mrs Fiddle, Miss G. Shapiro, Miss M. Shapiro, Mrs Goldberg, A. Cozinsky and M. Woolfson.¹⁸⁶

The play is set in Russia in 1903 where the Jewish youth is seeking a solution to the Jewish problem. Rochel and Gersuny, believe that the salvation of the Jews lies in Socialism, whilst Jacob the Dreamer, believes that Zionism is the only solution. Kadish Gedalyo, the son of the Gabba of the *shul*, converts to Christianity in order to study medicine. He is in love with Sheinke, who supports him while he is studying. When he qualifies he is unable to face his parents and goes to England. With the Russian Revolution of 1917 the oppressive Czarist regime is exchanged for the terrible *pogroms* at Pinsk, where Gersuny, the radical Socialist, is killed, and Pilsudski, a Polish commander, attempts to harm Rochel, who has been arrested for Zionist propaganda. He is only prevented by the timely entrance of Gedalyo, who is in Poland as a Lieutenant Colonel in the British Red Cross¹⁸⁷. All ends happily, however, with the heroes having emigrated to the Land of Israel and the final scene takes place in the colony of Petah Tikvah. Kadish Gedalyo marries Sheinke, and Jacob the Dreamer is united with Rochel, who has given up Socialism. True to the anglicized nature of Zionism in Durban, the stage was flanked both by the Zionist flag and by the Union Jack. At the end of the performance the

¹⁸⁴ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 17 January 1921.

¹⁸⁵ *Der Afrikaner*, 18 January 1923.

¹⁸⁶ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 18 August 1921.

¹⁸⁷ *Zionist Record*, 31 August 1922.

President of the Durban Zionist Association, Mr S.A. Nathanson, made an impassioned speech on behalf of Polish Jewry.¹⁸⁸

Conclusion

Between 1911 and 1930 although Yiddish theatre performances were intermittent, they continued to have a large following. However no opportunity arose for the establishment of a permanent Yiddish theatre. The *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn* was very small with very limited means. The activity of their Dramatic Section was limited by the fact that they had no full time director, and those capable of directing, such as Hannan Hirsch or the newly arrived Mendl Tabatznik, were too busy earning a living to do so more than occasionally. Another mitigating factor was the fact that the *Fareyn* was forced to hire very large and expensive venues, such as the Palladium or the Standard Theatre, for their productions. For a while the remnants of the Waxman-Wallerstein Company, tried to make a go of it as the Hebrew Operatic and Dramatic Company performing in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town, but they didn't last much longer than the mid 1920s. Although the amateurs and the local Jewish opera stars on occasion produced the classics, the visiting companies of the twenties had to make a profit, and as the years progressed their offerings became more and more commercial and tawdry. Plays by the great Yiddish writers, Asch, Hirschbein, Ansky and Pinski, were not being performed in South Africa, but rather plays such as *Di Rebitsin in Amerike* (The Rabbi's wife in America) or *Di Vayb on tsung* (The Wife without a tongue).¹⁸⁹

Yet despite this, according to Josephus, who wrote a regular column in the *South African Jewish Chronicle*, the attitudes of the youth towards Yiddish had improved. Yiddish was no longer taboo. Instead they had become proud of the little of it that they had picked up and treasured it as a valuable asset. This change in attitude was attributed to the brilliant oratory of a number of gifted Jewish speakers. However whilst the youth would willingly listen to a Yiddish lecture, they would not read a Yiddish book or watch a Yiddish play. It was suggested that this was because the Yiddish speaking public in South Africa was uneducated in Yiddish literature and was unable to differentiate between the crudest melodramas and those masterpieces of the Yiddish theatre which had conquered the European stage. It was suggested therefore that, considering the number of Jews who participated in the Johannesburg Repertory society,¹⁹⁰ that they also create a Jewish

¹⁸⁸ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 18 August 1921.

¹⁸⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 27 June 1930.

¹⁹⁰ For the history of the Johannesburg Repertory Society, whose founder, Muriel Alexander, was Jewish, see L. Sowden, *Both sides of the mask: the world of Muriel Alexander*, H. Timmins, Cape Town, 1964.

Repertory society for the production of Hebrew and Yiddish plays to educate the Jewish public in the richness of their cultural heritage.¹⁹¹

Nonetheless even if the attitude of the second generation immigrants had improved, the Anglo-Jewish establishment still regarded the need to perpetuate Yiddish in any form as tantamount to failure to acculturate. The Jewish press contains repeated protestations that the immigrants are quite capable of coping in the two official languages, English and Afrikaans, and do not require Yiddish any more. Hebrew was the language of the synagogue and the language of the future. Yiddish was simply unnecessary and impractical.¹⁹² Moreover Yiddish education was unashamedly secular and 'radical' thus being considered to be a dangerous influence on the youth. When an afternoon Yiddish *Folkshul* was finally established in Johannesburg in 1929, despite the hostility of the Zionists, it was barely supported, and soon folded. It is this ambivalence which contributed to the failure of the attempts to establish a permanent Yiddish theatre, attempts which would be put to the test on numerous occasions in the following period.

¹⁹¹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 27 June 1930.

¹⁹² *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 20 October 1922.



1. Simche Nathan



2. Jacob Waislitz



3. Faivl Zygiebaum



4. Ossip Runitch



6. *Hershele Ostropoler*, 1940. Director: Benny Ozynski

ZIONISTS, RADICALS & REFUGEES
COMMUNITY THEATRE IN THE
TRANSVAAL
1930-1947



5. *Gelt*, Yidisher Arbeter Klub, 1937

Director: Kurt Baum



7. *Der Atestat - The Matriculant*, 1939

Director: Ossip Runitch

CHAPTER 5. ZIONISTS, RADICALS AND REFUGEES: COMMUNITY THEATRE IN THE TRANSVAAL, 1930-1947

The period 1930 to 1947 is bordered by two significant events for the future of Yiddish theatre in South Africa. It begins with the Immigration Quota Act of 1930 and ends in 1947 just before the establishment of the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* – the South African Yiddish Cultural Federation. The Immigration Quota Act is significant because it virtually curtailed Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe, the lifeblood of Yiddish theatre, by dividing the world into unrestricted countries which included the United Kingdom, the United States and Western Europe, and restricted countries which included Eastern Europe. Only fifty immigrants per year were allowed from each restricted country with an additional allowance of 1000 per year.¹ To close a loophole in the law which classified Germany as an unrestricted country, the Alien's Act of 1937 served to stem the rising tide of Jewish immigration from Nazi Germany. The period closes just before the establishment in May 1947 of the *Dorem Afrikaner Kultur Federatsye*, which united the myriad of small Yiddish cultural societies which had multiplied in the 1930s, and for the first time incorporated them under the communal umbrella, thus ensuring their survival.

Between 1926 and 1936 the Jewish population of the Transvaal increased from 38 802 to 53 924,² an increase of just over 15 000 which was made up chiefly by immigrants from Eastern Europe who arrived before the Immigration Quota Act. The number of Yiddish speakers peaked during this period which was described as a time when Jewish life throbbed 'with a vitality that is seldom found outside Eastern Europe.'³ In 1936, the first time that home languages were surveyed in the census, 11 438, 21 percent of the total of 53 924 Jews in the Transvaal, gave Yiddish as their home language.⁴ It has been speculated that this number was far too low considering the large number of recent immigrants, and it is possible that many were too embarrassed to admit that Yiddish, because of its low status, was their home language. Nonetheless Yiddish emerged as the third largest language group, after English and Afrikaans, amongst the White population of the Transvaal.⁵

¹ E. Bradlow, *Immigration to the Union*, Thesis Ph.D., University of Cape Town, 1964, pp. 215-250.

² Union of South Africa, *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 6, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1941, p. 4.

³ Jacob Waislitz, Yiddish actor-director from the Vilna Troupe, quoted in the *Zionist Record*, 16 October 1936.

⁴ This is more than the 25% of Jews in the United States who gave Yiddish as their home language in the 1930 census in the United States. L. J. Epstein, *The haunted smile: the story of Jewish comedians in America*, Public Affairs, New York, 2001, p. 105.

⁵ Union of South Africa, *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 4, Languages, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1938, p. 62.

The immigrants of the late 1920s were better educated and more politically conscious than the immigrants of the early 1900s. Many were imbued with Zionism and Socialism, including many graduates of the new Lithuanian Hebrew schools as well as of the Yiddish *Folkshuls*, who had participated both in the Zionist movement and in the Bund. They were thus far more likely to have been exposed to the new Yiddish literature and to Yiddish theatre, and included several who had trained in the Yiddish theatre studios in Eastern Europe. They arrived at an auspicious moment in the history of South African theatre as with the advent of the talkies in the 1930s, African Consolidated Theatres were no longer bringing out overseas companies as they were no longer commercially viable.

However the most significant change in Jewish life in Johannesburg in the 1930s and 1940s, was the demographic shift of the immigrant precinct from Ferreirastown in the city centre, to the eastern suburbs of Doornfontein, Bertrams and Jeppe. A geographical breakdown of the occupational structure of the Jewish community of Doornfontein and the neighbouring Bertrams and Jeppe, confirms its working class immigrant status.⁶ By 1937 no trace remained of the centre of Jewish life in Ferreirastown. It was occupied by Indians, Coloureds, Blacks, Chinese, Poor Whites, and a few Jews. On 17 March 1931 the foundation stone of the new *Besmedresh* on the corner of Saratoga Avenue and Davis Street in Doornfontein was laid, which replaced the original *Besmedresh* established forty years earlier in Fox Street in Ferreirastown.⁷ In the 1930s and 1940s Doornfontein has been described as 'a slice of Eastern Europe in Johannesburg.' Old Doornfontein had many nicknames: Ormfontein, Little Lithuania, Texas, Schnorrerfontein, Yiddelfontein. Yiddish was spoken on every street corner, and not only by Jews but also by some non-Jews, Africans and Coloureds. Many shops had Yiddish signs on their windows. There were at least six or seven Shuls with excellent attendances on a Friday night. On occasion crowds would flock to the Alhambra Theatre to hear a politician from the Communist party.⁸

This was the heyday of the Yiddish talkies which were screened at large theatres in the city centre, such as the Standard, the City Hall, the Palladium, as well as at the Alhambra in Doornfontein. Jews flocked to see Maurice Schwartz in *Uncle Moses*, Molly Picon in

⁶ In 1935 the highest percentage of people engaged in manual labour was to be found there H. Sonnabend, *Statistical survey of Johannesburg's Jewish population 1935*, [s.n.], Johannesburg, [19-?], table XIX, p. 22.

⁷ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 31 March 1931.

⁸ L. Hill. 'Remembrance of a shtetl in Johannesburg', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 36, no. 12, December 1981, p. 24-27.

Yidl mitn fidl,⁹ the cantor with the golden voice, Moishe Oysher, in *Dem Hazens zundel* (The Cantor's son),¹⁰ and Samuel Goldenburg, familiar to Johannesburg audiences from his appearances with the Wallerstein company in 1909/1910, in *Shir ha-Shirim* (Song of Songs),¹¹ and many more. In June 1941 a Yiddish film week at the Standard Theatre featured a retrospective selection of Yiddish films,¹² and in September 1941 a Yiddish Film Festival was held at the Alhambra Theatre in Doornfontein.¹³

The 1930s were by far the most active years for amateur Yiddish theatre in South Africa with a record number of societies participating. Nor were the amateur groups confined to Johannesburg, they also flourished in the nearby towns of Pretoria, Benoni, Germiston, Brakpan, Krugerdorp and Klerksdorp. At this time Johannesburg had its best chance of establishing a permanent Yiddish theatre. On the one hand there was a core of committed and able amateurs, recent immigrants from Eastern Europe, who performed continuously. On the other, in addition to several talented local directors, three major overseas actor-directors: Simche Nathan and Yankev Waislitz from the Vilna Troupe, and Ossip Runitch, a Russian director of stage and screen, at different times tried to form a dramatic studio with a view to establishing a permanent theatre. However all their attempts eventually came to nothing. Part of the problem was the rivalries and the petty jealousies that existed between the various groups and their directors and actors. Although the core of the amateurs acted for all the various groups, somehow these groups could not overlook their petty animosities and combine.¹⁴ Nonetheless Yiddish theatre was a significant presence in Johannesburg in the 1930s, alongside English and Afrikaans theatre. Renowned German directors, such as Kurt Baum and Leo Kerz, on occasion directed innovative Yiddish productions.

Only two visiting companies toured during this period. The first was a company led by Vera Kanevska and Paul Breitman, familiar to Johannesburg audiences from their appearances with the Isaacowitz and with the Breitman-Teffner Company in the 1920s, which played for three weeks at the Standard Theatre in 1933,¹⁵ and the second was Meier Tzelniker's London Company, which was brought out by Sarah Sylvia in 1938.¹⁶ In 1937 Molly Picon, the darling of the American Yiddish stage, visited Johannesburg and

⁹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 4 February 1938.

¹⁰ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 24 March 1939.

¹¹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 23 May 1940, 28 June 1940.

¹² *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 7 June 1940.

¹³ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 19 September 1941.

¹⁴ See letter about Yiddish theatre in the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 17 September 1948.

¹⁵ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, *Erev Rosh ha-Shone* 1933-34.

¹⁶ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 15 June 1938.

headed the vaudeville line up at the Empire theatre.¹⁷ Just before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Sarah Sylvia brought out the stars of the American Yiddish stage, Miriam Kressyn and Hymie Jacobson, who put on a bumper season of Yiddish plays together with the local amateurs.¹⁸ Besides these occasional visitors, Yiddish theatre, like its English counterpart, had to fall back on its own resources.

Yiddish theatre, 1931-1934.

The immigration of the late 1920s spawned a record number of Yiddish cultural societies. Whereas in the period 1911 to 1930 the *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn*, was the only Yiddish cultural society producing amateur Yiddish theatre, now societies vied between each other to produce Yiddish plays. Even notwithstanding their professed ideal to revive the Hebrew language the *Zeire Zion*, patronised mainly by new immigrants, produced two Yiddish plays.¹⁹ The Polish Club, a *landsmanshaft* established in 1912, also participated.²⁰ Although it was primarily a social and sick benefit society rather than cultural, the *Yidisher Arbeter Ring* (The Workmen's Circle), active between 1931 and 1932 also managed to produce a Yiddish play.²¹

In 1932 the Jewish Guild, the most popular Jewish social club in Johannesburg, with a membership of over a thousand,²² decided to establish a Yiddish Dramatic Section to narrow the gap between the English and Yiddish speaking population, with a view to establishing a permanent Yiddish theatre. The Jewish Guild had an extremely successful English amateur Dramatic Section and Musical Art Section which produced up to 8 productions a year of a high standard. However almost without exception the dramas, operettas and musical revues produced by the Guild, were totally devoid of Jewish content, a fact which did not go unnoticed in the contemporary Jewish press.²³ Political and social commentary and the portrayal of Jewishness were thus relegated to the

¹⁷ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 19 March 1937.

¹⁸ Kressyn and Jacobson were supported by Vera Kanevska, Sarah Sylvia, Max Angorin, Eve Berkowitz, Leo Galvin, Mrs A. Metz, Inka Berman, Mrs A. Shapiro, Max Rosenthal and Bernard Berman. *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 9 June 1939.

¹⁹ These were Zolotarevsky's melodrama *Tsebrokhene lebn* (Shattered life) (*Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 20 November 1931) and Sholem Aleichem's one-act plays *Menshn* (People) and *Olam Hobo* (The world to come). *Zionist Record*, 8 July 1932, *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 8 July 1932.

²⁰ This was Gordin's *Der Vilder Mensh* produced by Adolf Yonker. *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 1 July 1932.

²¹ This was *Dos lid fun libe* at the Standard Theatre in November 1931. *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 13 November 1931.

²² *Zionist Record*, 19 February 1932.

²³ *Zionist Record*, 15 December, 1933, 16 February 1934.

province of the Yiddish theatre. However its Yiddish Dramatic Section was shortlived. By 1932 after two successful productions²⁴ it had disappeared.²⁵

A number of amateur directors are evident during this period. They include the veteran actor, Hannan Hirsch, Phil Schragger and Henry Berman active since the early 1900s,²⁶ and Mendl Tabatznik and Shloyme Rubin, who arrived in the late 1920s.²⁷ New names include Leo (Liovke) Galvin, a graduate of the Dnyepera Petroysker Theatre School in Russia,²⁸ and Adolf Yonker, described as a 'professional actor',²⁹ who is only heard of once.³⁰ On the musical side the name of Hirsch Ichilchik first appears as a composer and as the conductor of a small mandolin orchestra in Johannesburg. Ichilchik, who immigrated from Nova Alexandrosk in Lithuania, had the unique distinction of having been the orchestral conductor for the Tsarina's uncle, Prince Oldenburgski, in Gagry on the Black Sea for twenty years.³¹

Yiddish theatre at this time reflects the paradoxical admixture of affiliations which typified the immigrant community of the 1930s, which 'tended to combine a passionate devotion to the Soviet Union with Zionism.'³² Mendl Tabatznik, for example, was not averse to producing Peretz Hirschbein's classic, *Grine felder* (Green fields), for the Jewish Colonisation Fund,³³ and a year later producing two productions for the *Zeire Zion*.³⁴ Repertoire was random and reflects no particular trends. However Jacob Gordin's melodramas, the staple of the previous period, were now considered to be thoroughly out dated and unacceptable.³⁵ Popular productions included Zolotarevsky's *Tsebrokhene lebn* (Broken lives), Ossip Dymow's lighthearted piece, *Der Zinger fun zayn troyer* (The Singer

²⁴ The first production was *Yoshke Musikant* or *Der Zinger fun zayn troyer* (The singer of his sadness) by Ossip Dymow, directed by Henry Berman. *Zionist Record*, 12 August 1932. The second was *Di teg fun unser lebn* (The Days of our lives) by Leonid Andreyev produced by Leo Galvin. *Zionist Record*, 14 October 1932.

²⁵ Leo Galvin writes about the failure of our club, the *Fareyn* and the *Folkshul*. *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 11 August 1932, 21 October 1932.

²⁶ *Zionist Record*, 12 August 1932.

²⁷ 'Shloyme Rubin', in *Dorem Afrike*, 6-ter yorg., nom.11, July 1954, p. 32.

²⁸ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 7 October 1932.

²⁹ *Der Afrikaner*, 8 July 1932.

³⁰ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 1 July 1932.

³¹ B. Sachs, *South African personalities and places*. Kayor, Johannesburg, 1959, pp. 109-110. Dan Hill, the popular Johannesburg band leader, was his son.

³² J. Slovo, *Slovo: the unfinished autobiography*, Ravan Press, South Africa, 1995, p. 22.

³³ *Der Afrikaner*, 13 February 1931.

³⁴ These were Zolotarevsky's *Tsebrokhene lebn* (Shattered life) (*Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung* 20 November 1931) and Sholem Aleichem's one-act plays *Menshn* (People) and *Olam Hobo* (The world to come). *Zionist Record*, 8 July 1932, *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 8 July 1932.

³⁵ Gordin's *Der Vilder Mensh* produced by A. Yonker for the Polish Club at the Jewish Guild in July 1932 elicited criticism for being outdated, although Yonker's portrayal of the title role of

of his sadness) or *Yoshke Musikant* (Yoshke the musician), and Leonid Andreyev's depiction of student life in old Russia, *Di teg fun unser lebn* (The Days of our lives). Most of these productions were staged at the Jewish Guild Memorial Hall in Von Brandis Street. This hall, which could only seat between two and three hundred people, had a small sloping stage, a flat floor and small balcony,³⁶ and was not suitable for large productions. Occasionally large-scale performances were staged at the Standard or His Majesty's usually under the aegis of African Consolidated Theatres. Later productions were also staged at the Library Theatre of the Johannesburg Public Library which held 360 people,³⁷ and at the Coronation Hall.

Several original South African Yiddish plays were written and performed during this period. These plays reflect the life of the immigrants and the effects of their upward mobility. Abel Shaban, the editor of the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, who immigrated from Krakinova in Lithuania in 1928,³⁸ wrote the play, *Tsurik aheym* (Homeward bound), which was originally serialised in the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*.³⁹ The play contained a serious indictment of the behaviour of the Jewish immigrants, who having achieved some success, were embarrassed by and rejected their newly arrived relatives from Eastern Europe. It was first staged by Mendl Tabatznik at the Standard Theatre on *Motsa'ei Yom Kipur* (Night after the Day of Atonement) in 1932,⁴⁰ and subsequently travelled to Bulawayo and other centres.⁴¹ South Africa's foremost Yiddish poet, David Fram, who immigrated to South Africa from Lithuania in 1927,⁴² wrote two original plays that were performed at the Jewish Guild. The first of these was the operetta, *A Tsigayner fantazie – A Gypsy fantasy - with music* composed by Hirsch Ichilchik, which had no Jewish content.⁴³ The second was a satirical play of South African Jewish life, entitled *Fun Fordsburg biz Mayfair* (From Fordsburg to Mayfair) which was produced by Hannan Hirsch.⁴⁴ In this play Fram satirised the shallow lives of the Jewish immigrants who were moving from the working class immigrant environment of Fordsburg into the more upmarket suburb of Parktown, where the youth were obsessed with card playing and with

Lemakh was praised. It was felt that such talented amateurs could have done far better with a more modern play. *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 15 July 1932.

³⁶ A. & A.R. Hoffman, *They built a theatre: the history of the Johannesburg Repertory Players*. Ad. Donker, Johannesburg, 1980, p. 15.

³⁷ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 8 July 1938.

³⁸ A. Ben Shalom, *Portrait of a Volksmensch*, Grosvenor Publishing, Johannesburg, 1974, p. 6.

³⁹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 6, 13, 20, 27 May; 3, 9 June 1932.

⁴⁰ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 29 July 1932.

⁴¹ *Zionist Record*, 21 November, 1958.

⁴² I.M. Goodman, 'David Fram: a study in growth', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1949, pp. 28-29.

⁴³ Tilly Weinfeld played the main part of the gypsey girl. *Zionist Record*, 19 February, 1932.

⁴⁴ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 8 September 1933.

sport. The actors were praised, particularly the character of 'a native houseboy' who had a fine appreciation of Jewish food. However although the play was deemed to be a creditable first attempt, it was hoped that Fram would one day produce a more serious work on South African Jewish life.⁴⁵

During this period the call to establish a permanent Yiddish theatre for Johannesburg was reiterated at frequent intervals. After the failure of the attempt of the Jewish Guild, the most serious attempt to establish a permanent Yiddish dramatic studio for Johannesburg was made by Simche Nathan, a giant of the Vilna troupe, who had at one time been associated with the world-renowned German Jewish director, Max Reinhardt. Simche Nathan came to Johannesburg in September 1933 as part of a Yiddish troupe brought out by Vera Kanevska and Paul Breitman. The troupe also included Nathan's wife Naomi Levinthal, their daughter, Ida Hilda, leading lady of the Ludwig Satz Theatre, and Manashe Oppenheim of the *Azazel Kleynkunst Teater*.⁴⁶ Despite the fact that the plays received high praise, the three week season was a financial disaster, because of the expense of hiring the Standard Theatre.⁴⁷ Undeterred in November 1933 Simche Nathan decided to take up the challenge of establishing a permanent dramatic studio for Johannesburg.

Nathan aimed to introduce teachers of diction, phonetics, mime, music and painting into his studio to raise the standard of performance. The play he chose to launch the new experiment was extremely ambitious. It was I.L. Peretz's famous dramatic poem, *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* (By night in the old market place). This is a symbolic drama in which 'Peretz merges heaven and earth, the immortal and the mortal as the dead mingle with the living in a phantasmagoric vision, a "fevered dream" of despair in which all the major characters of his imagination, are animated to dramatize the nightmare of Polish Jewry.'⁴⁸ It was one of the classic productions of the Vilna Troupe. Characters include 'the pious and the unfaithful, the usurer and the saint, the middleman and the pogrom victim, the Socialist and the Zionist... .' As most of the mass scenes required over forty people, it

⁴⁵ *Zionist Record*, 28 July 1933.

⁴⁶ They were joined by the locals: Nathan Brajtman, (Paul Breitman's brother), Herman Kowarsky, a former actor from the Vilna Troupe who had settled in Cape Town, and the couple, Boris Abramov and Mary Einhorn who had settled in Johannesburg in the late 1920s. *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, Erev Rosh ho-Shone, 1933.

⁴⁷ *Zionist Record*, 27 October, 1933.

⁴⁸ R.R. Wisse, *I.L. Peretz and the making of modern Jewish culture*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1991, p. 105.

gave the members of the studio a good opportunity to display their talent without undue emphasis on starring roles.⁴⁹

The production, which was staged twice in January 1934 at the Jewish Guild, was acclaimed as 'one of the finest Yiddish productions witnessed in Johannesburg for many a year.' The actors were lauded for their polished performances. However despite the phenomenal success of this production and the high hopes that it had engendered, in less than a month it was announced that Simche Nathan and his family were 'arop fun mark' (off the marketplace) and returning to Europe. His experiment ended with this one and only production but no adequate explanation was published in the newspaper.⁵⁰

Pretoria, Benoni, Germiston, Brakpan, Krugersdorp and Klerksdorp.

During this period amateur dramatic societies were also formed in towns around Johannesburg, such as Pretoria, Benoni, Germiston, Brakpan, Krugersdorp and Klerksdorp. In Pretoria the second largest Jewish community in the Transvaal after Johannesburg, with a Jewish population of 2 866,⁵¹ an amateur dramatic society put on shows at the Pretoria Opera House. From 1935 the society had the advantage of working with Morris Blum, a talented musician and actor, who had trained at the Imperial Musical Institute in Kiev, and had acted on the Russian stage in Odessa and Tiflis before going over to the Yiddish stage.⁵²

Benoni, with the third biggest Jewish population of 1 409,⁵³ had a history of Yiddish amateur dramatics that dated back to before 1910. In 1929 David Danzig, who had acted with Mendl Tabatznik in Mir, settled in Benoni and founded a Yiddish Dramatic Circle there. At first the group met in private houses where they read short stories and sang Yiddish songs. The following of the literary evenings was so large that they decided to put on some Sholem Aleichem one-act plays in the Hebrew Hall. As the hall had no stage they laid out boards, hung a blue curtain on a rope, and seated their audiences on lemonade boxes. In this manner they presented Sholem Aleichem's *Agentn*, *A Doktor* and

⁴⁹ *Zionist Record*, 5 December 1933.

⁵⁰ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 16 February 1934; *Zionist Record* 5 January 1934. The names of Leo Galvin, Shloyme Rubin, Salman, Joseph Rais, Pinkus and Bernard Berman are associated with the studio, *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung* 2 November 1934. In 21 February 1936 it was still in existence, *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 21 February 1936.

⁵¹ Union of South Africa, *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 6, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1941, p. 28.

⁵² He joined Sabsai's troupe in Warsaw, formed his own troupe in Yugoslavia, and in 1934 joined the Minorities Theatre in Latvia. *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 28 July 1935.

⁵³ Union of South Africa, *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 6, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1941, p. 26.

Oylem ha-bo (The World to come). Later the community decided to build a stage in the hall. In October 1933 they produced Sholem Aleichem's *Shver tsu zayn a Yid*. It was a tremendous success, realising over fifty pounds in profit, a huge sum in those days.⁵⁴

In March 1932 David Danzig produced Goldfaden's *Di Kishufmakherin* in Germiston, Benoni, and at the Standard Theatre in Johannesburg for the Germiston Young Israel Society.⁵⁵ Israel Dunsky, an immigrant from Shavel, the moving force behind the Germiston Zionist Society and a member of the Zionist Executive of the Transvaal,⁵⁶ apparently stole the show with his humorous characterisation of Hotsmach, the unscrupulous pedlar.⁵⁷ In Brakpan, a small town with a Jewish population of 728⁵⁸ of which a third were native Yiddish speakers,⁵⁹ the enthusiastic Reverend A. Altshuler produced Yiddish plays with his congregants.⁶⁰ In 1933 Yiddish plays⁶¹ were also produced in Krugersdorp, with a Jewish population of 1 341⁶² and in Klerksdorp which had a Jewish population of only 274 souls.⁶³

The Yidisher Arbeter Klub, the Gezerd, and the Yidisher Kultur Fareyn.

Whilst the early thirties saw a proliferation of different societies producing Yiddish theatre, by the mid 1930s the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* established in Doornfontein in 1929, began to overshadow the other societies in the arena of Yiddish theatre. Theatre had long been a tradition of Leftist radical societies as evidenced by the vibrant Yiddish theatre of the studios of the Bund in Poland, and also in Artef the Jewish Workers' theatre group which existed in New York between 1925 and 1940.⁶⁴ The *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* continued the tradition of the earlier Bundist sympathising, Friends of Russian Freedom (1905-1909),

⁵⁴ 'Fun der D.A. Yidishe Kultur-Federatsye: Benoni.', in *Dorem Afrike*, 2-ter yorg. nom. 4, December 1949, p. 31.

⁵⁵ *Zionist Record*, 4 March, 1932.

⁵⁶ *Zionist Record*, 2 September 1932.

⁵⁷ Miss A. Schapkaitz played the main role of Bobbe Yakhne. *Zionist Record*, 15 April 1932.

⁵⁸ Union of South Africa, *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 6, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1941, p. 27.

⁵⁹ Union of South Africa. *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 4, Languages, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1938, p. 60.

⁶⁰ These were *Riverside Drive* in December 1933, *Zionist Record* December 1933; and *Tsuzeyt un tsushpreyt* in September 1934, *Zionist Record* 28 September 1934.

⁶¹ These were the one act plays *Menshn* by Sholem Aleichem and *Der Hosen* by *Der Tunkeler* in Krugersdorp *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 10 March 1933; and Sholem Aleichem's *Tsezeyt un tseshpreyt*. *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 4 August 1933.

⁶² Union of South Africa, *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 6, 'Religions', Government Printer, Pretoria, 1941, p. 27.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ See E. Nahshon, 'Art and politics: the case of the New York Artef Theatre, 1925-1940', in *The politics of Yiddish: studies in language literature and society*, ed. D-B Kerler, Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, 1998, pp. 133-146.

the *Yidisher Sotsialistisher Fareyn*, (1909-1911), and the Jewish Branch of the International Socialist League, promoting Yiddish culture in a Socialist framework.⁶⁵

During this period the political scene favoured the Leftist oriented Yiddish speakers. On a parliamentary level this was represented by the small multi-racial Communist Party of South Africa, which included a disproportionate number of Jewish members.⁶⁶ May Day was celebrated in grand style by White and Black workers, albeit separately.⁶⁷ English speaking liberal white South Africans lauded the Soviet Union and looked to it to save them from the threat of Fascism in Nazi Germany. Societies such as the South African Friends of the Soviet Union, and the Left Book Club were established and Medical Aid for Russia was regarded as a *cause celebre*. Once Russia entered the war on the side of the Allies, diplomatic ties were established and in 1942 a Russian Consulate was dispatched to Pretoria.⁶⁸

The *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* was Marxist, Yiddishist, anti-religious and anti-Zionist in orientation. Yet despite its political affiliation, its primary function was social serving the same purpose as the *Landsmanschafts*. It was a place where its members could relax, converse in their own language, read Socialist Yiddish (American) papers. Its activities included regular lecture series, debates and discussions on Leftist topics, table tennis, chess, a gymnastics club, dances and picnics.⁶⁹ However one of its most popular activities was the Yiddish Dramatic section, which produced plays of social significance with a Leftist slant. For these productions the club could utilise its impressive choir, conducted by Nathan Bell (Natie Belyeikin), choir master of the Berea Synagogue and militant atheist,⁷⁰ and Shlomo Mandel, the popular *chazen*, would also participate on occasion. At a May Day meeting held under the auspices of the Friends of the Soviet Union, the choir gave a creditable rendering of the *International* and *We are builders* in Yiddish. It was also once heard singing the Red Flag in Yiddish on the South African Broadcasting Corporation.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Taffy Adler regards the Jewish Branch of the International Socialist League as the forerunner of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*. This is true from a political standpoint, but I have not come across Yiddish theatre performed by the Jewish Branch. T. Adler, 'History of Jewish Workers' clubs, in: University of the Witwatersrand and African Studies Institute. *Papers presented at the African Studies Seminar*, 1977, p. 8.

⁶⁶ See M. Israel and S. Adams, 'That spells trouble': Jews and the Communist Party of South Africa' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 26, no.1, March 2000, pp. 145-162.

⁶⁷ L. Bernstein, *Memory against forgetting: memoirs of a life in South African politics, 1938-1964*, Viking, London, 1999, p. 115.

⁶⁸ See K.M. Campbell, *Soviet Policy towards South Africa*, British Library, Document Supply Centre, Boston Spa., 1984, p. 124.

⁶⁹ T. Adler, 'Lithuania's diaspora', p. 77.

⁷⁰ J. Slovo, *Slovo: the unfinished autobiography*. South Africa: Ravan Press, 1995, p. 21.

The *Arbeter Klub* dominated the political, social and cultural life of Doornfontein, and its surroundings for two decades. However as the Anglo-Jewish press virtually boycotted all anti-Zionist organisations this period in Johannesburg social and cultural history is virtually absent from the record.⁷² From 5 March 1932 the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* had its premises at 44 Von Brandis Street on the corner of Commissioner Street.⁷³ The members used to walk the fifteen blocks from Doornfontein to Von Brandis Street.⁷⁴ Although at its height there were only 300 paid up members, the influence of the club extended to all sections of the Jewish immigrant population.⁷⁵ Adler's claim that the club reached its peak in 1935 after which it participated in the campaigns of other organisations,⁷⁶ is certainly not born out by an examination of its cultural and social activities. Judging by the announcements in the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung* the club continued to be very active until 1948. In 1944 a large celebration to mark its fifteenth anniversary was attended by the Consul General of the Soviet Union,⁷⁷ in 1946 a new hall was built at its premises at 15 Upper Ross Street,⁷⁸ in 1947 a childrens' choir in addition to its very popular adult choir, was initiated,⁷⁹ and in 1948 and 1949 the Dramatic section was still active.⁸⁰ With the rise of the South African Nationalist government in 1948, however, Communist sympathising organisations became increasingly threatened. On 8 October 1948 the premises of the *Arbeter Klub* were burnt down together with all its documents and membership lists, in what seemed to have been a deliberate attempt to destroy all incriminating traces of its activities.⁸¹ However even after its premises were burnt down the club did not immediately cease to exist but moved to temporary premises. As late as 1950 there are still occasional notices of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* in the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*.

Closely connected with the *Arbeter Klub* was the *Afrikaner Gezerd*, the South African Branch of the Russian *Gezelshaft far Erd Arbet* (Land settlement society), which was established at a conference of the Jewish Colonisation Fund in 1931. Its aim was to settle Jews on the land in the Soviet Union, rather than in Palestine. The Jewish Colonisation Fund had already managed to cause a stir in the staunchly Zionist South African Jewish

⁷¹ T. Adler, 'Lithuania's diaspora', 1979, pp. 77-78.

⁷² The exception are the two articles by T. Adler, 'The history of Johannesburg Jewish workers clubs', 1977, and 'Lithuania's diaspora', 1979. However these articles focus on the political rather than the cultural and social aspects of the club.

⁷³ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 26 February 1932.

⁷⁴ Interview with Bertha Englander, November 1999.

⁷⁵ T. Adler, 'Lithuania's diaspora', 1979, pp. 77-78.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁷⁷ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 21 July 1944.

⁷⁸ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 22 March 1946.

⁷⁹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 14 February 1947

⁸⁰ This was Gershon Fine's original work, *Der Profeshyonel* in 1948 and *Der Dorfsyung* in 1949.

community when in 1928 Reuben Brainin, the Hebrew author, had come out to raise money on its behalf, with Abel Shaban, the Jewish journalist and author of the play, *Tsurik aheym*, mentioned earlier in this chapter, acting as his secretary.⁸² One of the first jobs of Mendl Tabatznik, another prominent personality in Yiddish theatre, was as its spokesman. In 1931 the Jewish Colonisation Fund circulated two silent propaganda movies throughout the main centres and the small towns in South Africa.⁸³ These were the movies *Idishe glikn* (Jewish luck) and *Yidn oyf der erd* (Jews on the land). *Idishe glikn* satirises Russian Jewry using Sholem Aleichem's character, Menachem Mendl, the archetypal *luftmentsh*, who dreams of becoming the king of the *shadchans* (matchmakers) in America. A famous scene shows Jewish brides being hoisted on to a ship and being transported in containers to America. In contrast to the negative image of the *luftmentsh*, *Yidn oyf der erd* shows Jews productively employed working the land in the Crimea.⁸⁴

However even more effective than the aforementioned campaigns was that of Gina Medem, the widow of the famous leader of the Bund in Russia and Poland, Vladimir Medem. A powerful Communist sympathiser and a dynamic speaker, Gina Medem came to South Africa in October 1932 and stayed for a year and a half raising funds on behalf of the *Gezerd*. Her visit attracted a huge following. It included members of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* and Jewish members of the South African Communist Party and at its height, the *Gezerd* had a far larger following than that of the *Arbeter Klub*, of about 1200.⁸⁵ Like the *Arbeter Klub* the *Gezerd* also had a Dramatic Section. The *Gezerd* reached its peak in 1934 with the proclamation of Birobidjan as a Jewish Autonomous Region by the U.S.S.R.⁸⁶ By 1939 with the signing of the non-Aggression Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union it had virtually disappeared.

In May 1935 with the enhanced Yiddish cultural activity inspired by the *Gezerd*, the defunct *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatisher Fareyn*, was revived in the form of the *Yidisher Kultur Fareyn* (Yiddish Cultural Association).⁸⁷ The *Yidisher Kultur Fareyn* and the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* were by far the most active Yiddish organisations in the 1930s and 1940s. The moving force behind the *Fareyn* was Yitskhok Charlash, who came out from Poland in 1935 as a Yiddish cultural emissary, to raise funds for the Tsisho network of Yiddish day schools in Poland. Charlash dominated the *Fareyn* until his departure from

⁸¹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 8 October 1948.

⁸² A. Ben Shalom, *Portrait of a Volksmensch*, 1974, p. 6.

⁸³ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 1 May 1931.

⁸⁴ *Der Afrikaner*, 6 February 1931.

⁸⁵ T. Adler, 'Lithuania's diaspora', 1979, p. 80.

⁸⁶ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 18 May 1934.

South Africa in 1948.⁸⁸ He initiated a 'Humanistic College' which conducted regular lecture series and re-established the Yiddish *Folkshul*. The *Fareyn* also had a Dramatic Section conducted by two experienced amateur artists which staged plays and taught theatre craft.⁸⁹

Whilst the two organisations, the *Fareyn* and the *Arbeter Klub*, should have been natural allies, instead they seemed to have become rivals, a phenomenon which first manifested itself when the members of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* refused to attend the reception for Yitskhok Charlash.⁹⁰ The Dramatic Section of the *Fareyn* was never able to compete with that of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* and there was continual tension between the two groups. This rivalry was partially related to politics as although the *Fareyn* also had a pronounced Leftist slant, Charlash was a *Bundist*⁹¹ whilst the *Arbeter Klub* were Communist sympathisers.⁹² It was most likely also rooted in personal jealousy centred around Yitskhok Charlash and his inner circle. Judging by the amount of space allocated to the reporting of his lectures in the weekly *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, Charlash, a cultural elitist and purist, had tremendous influence over Yiddish speaking Johannesburg.⁹³ Unfortunately his elitist attitudes were not always in the interests of Yiddish theatre which needed to balance the profound with the popular in order to survive. This was clearly demonstrated when Charlash and the *Fareyn* criticised the popular productions, of *Di Berditshever mahetonim* (The In-laws of Berdichev) and *A Hasene in Moshav Zekenim* (A wedding in an Old Age Home) of Meier Tzelniker's London Yiddish Company.⁹⁴ A letter to the press, however, pointed out that Charlash had no right to be so snobbish as whilst the theatrical productions of the *Kultur Fareyn* were driving people away, Tzelniker and Co. were bringing them back!⁹⁵ Their 28 performances at the Standard Theatre were seen by over 20 000 people.⁹⁶

⁸⁷ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 31 May 1935.

⁸⁸ Z. Tabachovitch, 'Yitskhok Charlash iz shoy'n nito?', in *Dorem Afrike* 25-ter yorg., nom. 8, March/April, 1973, pp. 22-23.

⁸⁹ 'Yidisher Kultur Fareyn: barg-aruf', in *Forois* 1-ter yorg., nom. 1, June 1937, p. 22. From the 1st of May the *Fareyn* was located in an apartment at 50/51 Walter Wise's Buildings, 50 Joubert Street, Johannesburg. In the apartment were the offices of the Secretariat, the Editor of *Forois*, a Reading room, the Humanistic College and the Dramatic section.

⁹⁰ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 2 August 1935.

⁹¹ The Bund represented Jewish Socialism and was thus Nationalist in tendency as against the Communists who are universalists.

⁹² W. Levick, 'Afterword: Yiddish in limbo: a personal view', in *From a land far off: South African stories in English translation*, ed. J. Sherman, Jewish Publications, Cape Town, 1987, p. 194.

⁹³ Interview with Julia Eppel, 5 February 2001.

⁹⁴ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 15 June 1938.

⁹⁵ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 16 September 1938

Dramatic Section of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*.

The amateurs of the Dramatic Section of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* constituted the central core of Yiddish actors in Johannesburg who participated in almost all of the productions of the various organisations and of the visiting artists. However they were much more than an amateur dramatic society but "a very close group of friends who helped one another in every capacity".⁹⁷ Members included: Nathan Bell, Bernard and Inka Berman, Bloch, Baruch Carlin, Bertha Chait (Englander), Tony Englander, Moishe Fish, Ira Glaser, Flink, Grinka Grunt, Miss N. Grunt, Mrs Hurwitz, Max Itzler, Feigele Kopelowitz, A. Katz, Abe Krasnowsky, Julius Lazarus, Berl Lozdan, Sidney Marks, Sh. Miedzinsky, Moishe Miller, Dora Morris, Benny Ozynski, Masha Pincus (Itzler), Matye Pincus (Ozynski), Sonia Portnoy, Joseph Rais, Shloyme and Genya Rubin, Eli Sament, Issy Sandler, A. Shmuckler, David Upin, Faivke Varonov, Nechame Yachas, Muli Zimmerman, Yisroel Zygielbaum, and many others.⁹⁸ Mrs Skikne, the mother of the famous filmstar, Lawrence Harvey, was also a regular performer on the stage and also in the choir.⁹⁹

The repertoire of the Dramatic Section of the *Arbeter Klub* reflects its close identification with political and social conditions in the Soviet Union. The plays emphasize Marxist ideology, denigrating capitalism, religion and Fascism. One of the earliest productions of the *Arbeter Klub* was the play, *Shop*, by H. Leivick, the famous Yiddish poet and dramatist, who spent many years imprisoned by the Czarist regime in Siberia for revolutionary activity, before he managed to emigrate to the United States. The play, which was put on at the Jewish Guild in May 1932,¹⁰⁰ is set in a sweatshop on the Lower East Side of New York, and depicts Jewish factory workers, recent immigrants from Eastern Europe, in the New York garment industry.¹⁰¹ Other plays include Anatolii Glebov's *Der Shnips* (The necktie), an amusing play about Jewish life in Russia not long before the Revolution,¹⁰² Avraham Vieviorka's *Af der grenets* (On the border) a 'gay Soviet comedy' which pokes fun at the religious Jews,¹⁰³ and the Soviet play, *Ver es arbet nit, der est nit* (If one doesn't work, one doesn't eat).¹⁰⁴

⁹⁶ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 12 August 1938.

⁹⁷ Interview with Bertha Englander, 3 November 1999.

⁹⁸ Names compiled from reviews and programme notes of the productions of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*.

⁹⁹ B. Englander, Unpublished memoirs.

¹⁰⁰ *Der Afrikaner*, 8 April 1932.

¹⁰¹ See H. Leivick, 'Shop', in *God, man, and the devil: Yiddish plays in translation*, transl. & ed. N. Sandrow, Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1999, pp. 16-20, 139-183.

¹⁰² *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 27 July 1934.

¹⁰³ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 21 December 1934.

¹⁰⁴ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 24 May 1935.

With the move of the *Arbeter Klub* in December 1935 to 141 Main Street which had a hall and a stage the Dramatic Section began staging a series of full-length productions, which were directed by Benny Ozynski. Benny was born in 1910 in the small town of Svencionys (Svencionys) not far from Vilna in Lithuania. He studied dramatic art in Vilna under Naftoli Wainik and had intended making acting his career, only circumstances prevented him from doing so.¹⁰⁵ Benny originally came to Cape Town in 1926. A committed Socialist, Benny worked as a bus driver and participated in the *Arbeter Klub* in Cape Town. In about 1935 he went to live in Johannesburg where he joined the local *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, and became the chairman of the Dramatic Section. Benny was married to Matye Pinkus, whose sister Masha married Max Itzler, a talented gymnast, and the organiser of the Gymnastics section of the *Arbeter Klub*. Max and Masha were amongst the stars of the Dramatic Section until Max's death in 1946.¹⁰⁶ Benny Ozynski died in 1971 and until shortly before his death was involved in bringing out visiting Yiddish artists from Israel.¹⁰⁷

The first of the full-length plays was *Luft parnoses*, a play adapted from a number of Sholem Aleichem stories centered around his hero Menahem Mendl.¹⁰⁸ Members of the cast included Sidney Marks, active in the Bakers' Union,¹⁰⁹ who also acted on the English stage and was not a native Yiddish speaker, Eli Sament, active in the Garment Workers' Union,¹¹⁰ and Faivke Varonov, a Communist Party member who was later banned and went to live in Israel.¹¹¹ The only member of the cast who was still alive at the time of the writing of this dissertation, was Bertha Englander (Chait). Born in 1915 in Dusat (Dusetos) a small village in Lithuania, in 1928 Bertha followed her brothers to Johannesburg. She married Tony Englander, another Lithuanian immigrant, who introduced her to the *Arbeter Klub*. From the age of 17 for thirty years Bertha was included in every play that was performed by the *Klub* becoming a leading lady of the Johannesburg Yiddish stage.¹¹²

However the play that made the greatest impression on Johannesburg Jewry in July 1936 with the deteriorating situation of the Jews in Nazi Germany, and with the Greyshirts, a

¹⁰⁵ *Merchant of Venice*, programme notes, Bertha Englander Yiddish theatre collection, ARCH 914, S. A. Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg.

¹⁰⁶ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 5 April 1946.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Saul Ozynski, 30 October 2000.

¹⁰⁸ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 9 April 1936. Programme notes, Bertha Englander Yiddish theatre collection, ARCH 914.

¹⁰⁹ M. Israel and S. Adams, "That spells trouble": Jews and the Communist Party of South Africa' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 26, no.1, March 2000, p. 150.

¹¹⁰ M. Shain, et al. *Looking back*, 2002, p. 34.

¹¹¹ Interview with Saul Ozynski, 30 October 2000.

¹¹² Interview with Bertha Englander, 3 November 1999.

group of Nazi sympathisers active in Johannesburg from 1933,¹¹³ was *Professor Mamlock*, also known as *Di Gele late* (The Yellow patch), referring to the yellow patch that Jews were forced to wear in Nazi Germany. The author of the play, Friedrich Wolf, was a German Jewish playwright and member of the Communist Party. Written in 1935 it was immediately published in English translation and widely circulated among exiled democrats and underground resistance workers. The play depicts the Nazi persecution of the Jewish professional intelligentsia in Germany. It is set in a hospital where the director, Professor Mamlock, an assimilated Jew's position is made untenable, when one of his subordinates is placed in charge of the hospital. He eventually breaks down and commits suicide. The inhuman cruelty of the Nazis is accentuated by the fact that the persecutors are medical doctors. The play is extremely challenging which made it very difficult to portray successfully on a small stage and with amateurs. Joseph Rais was singled out for praise for his characterisation of Professor Mamlock, whilst Bertha Chait (Englander), as his daughter, Ruth, excelled in the third act when she was hounded out of school with a yellow patch stuck to her clothes.¹¹⁴

Professor Mamlock was followed in March 1937 by the anti-Nazi propaganda piece by the American playwright, Clifford Odets - *Till the day I die - Bizn tog fun mayn toyt*, which deals with underground Communist activity in Nazi Germany and the interrogation of the Gestapo. Max Itzler, who was described as impressive, played the main role of the Communist opposite his wife, Masha, who took the part of Tilly his bride.¹¹⁵

Guest directors: Yankev Waislitz, Kurt Baum and Leo Kerz, 1936-1938

Between 1935 and 1936 Johannesburg enjoyed a feast of Yiddish theatre. In 1935 alone at least eleven different Yiddish theatre productions were staged. Sarah Sylvia returned from an eight year stint in Argentina, and between July 1935 and March 1936,¹¹⁶ put on a highly successful season of plays which had been hits in Argentina, at His Majesty's Theatre. Between July and November 1936 Phil Schragger put on three operettas¹¹⁷ and Mary Einhorn and Boris Abramov staged *Di Getsfungene kale* (The Coerced bride) at the Jewish Guild.¹¹⁸ All these productions showcased the talent of the Yiddish actors in

¹¹³ M. Shain, 'South Africa', in Wyman, D.S. ed. *The world reacts to the Holocaust*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 673.

¹¹⁴ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 24 July 1936.

¹¹⁵ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 23 March 1937.

¹¹⁶ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 19 July 1935, 14 February 1936.

¹¹⁷ These were Z. Kornblit's *A Mames shild* (A mother's guilt), Anshel Shur's *Shir ha-Shirim* (Song of Songs), and *A Meydl fun der Vest*. *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 19 June, 28 August, 13 November 1936.

¹¹⁸ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 6 June 1935,

Johannesburg, and convinced the Jewish public of the need to establish a permanent Yiddish theatre.

In April 1936 the *Yidisher Kultur Fareyn*, the *Gezerd*, the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, the Bundist Group, the *Yugnt Gezerd* (Youth Gezerd) the United Latvian Society,¹¹⁹ later joined by the Polish Club and by the Vilna Society.¹²⁰ formed the *Fareynikter Yidisher Kultur Front* (United Yiddish Culture Front) to fight against fascism and to promote Yiddish culture. In October 1936 the *Fareynikter Yidisher Kultur Front* invited the celebrated Polish Yiddish Theatre Director, Yankev Waislitz, a former member of the Vilna Troupe, to give a series of performances and recitals in South Africa, with a view to establishing a permanent Yiddish theatre.¹²¹ The Yiddish literary historian, Zalmen Rejzen, described Waislitz as “the greatest living artistic interpreter of Yiddish literature”.¹²² In Johannesburg Waislitz formed an experimental theatrical studio which between December 1936 and May 1937 staged four productions, representative of the finest of contemporary Yiddish theatre from Russia and the United States. These included the classic, *200 000* [Tsvey hundert toysent] adapted from the Sholem Aleichem play, *Dos groyse gevins* (The great windfall), *Dos lebn ruft* (Life is calling), a drama of modern life in Soviet Russia by Belatserkovsky, *Tog un nakht* (Day and night),¹²³ a tragedy rooted in Eastern European Jewish mysticism by the author of the *Dybbuk*, Sh. Anski, and *Parnose* (A Living), a comedy of modern American Jewish life. The presence of a director of Waislitz’s stature was sufficient to bring Sarah Sylvia out from Argentina to play opposite him.

200 000 was staged at His Majesty’s Theatre in December 1936. The three performances were attended by 2 500 people.¹²⁴ The second production, *Dos lebn ruft* (Life is calling), at the Jewish Guild, was the Johannesburg debut on the Yiddish stage of Faivl Zygielbaum, who emigrated to Johannesburg in December 1936 to join his brother Israel who arrived in 1934.¹²⁵ Faivl Zygielbaum had been a leading performer in the Warsaw *Yung Teater*, the experimental Yiddish Art theatre directed by Dr Michael Weichert, a former member of the Vilna Troupe. Zygielbaum, who had studied at the Government Producing School in

¹¹⁹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 19 April 1936.

¹²⁰ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 5 June 1936.

¹²¹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 11 September 1936.

¹²² *Zionist Record*, 18 September 1936.

¹²³ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 28 May 1937.

¹²⁴ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 8 October 1936, 29 January 1937.

¹²⁵ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 22 December 1936.

Warsaw,¹²⁶ was a tremendous asset to Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg, as he promoted the talents of the amateurs,¹²⁷ and on occasion directed English plays as well.

Zygielbaum was born into a family of ten, seven brothers and three sisters, in the small *shtetl* of Krasnystaw near Chelm in Poland. All seven brothers were Yiddish theatre enthusiasts. They say that they were inspired by their mother, who used to sing Yiddish songs as she sat at her sewing machine. When a theatre troupe would come to Chelm all the brothers would go to see them. They helped backstage, acted as prompt, and thus graduated to acting parts. When Ida Kaminska, the daughter of Esther Rochel Kaminska, the leading figure in Yiddish theatre in Poland, was in Chelm she tapped the Zygielbaum theatrical talents. When the family moved to Warsaw Faivl joined the *Yung-Teater*.¹²⁸ Zygielbaum also wrote two plays. These are *In Poyln*, written in 1944, and *Getograd*, published in Johannesburg in 1946, which was dedicated to the memory of his brother, Shmuel Mordkhe - Arthur. Shmuel Zygielbaum, the representative of the Bund in the Polish government-in-exile in London, made world headlines, when in May 1943 he 'shot himself' to protest against the passivity of the world towards the fate of the Jews of Europe. His last words were: "to express the strongest protest against the passivity with which the world looked on and neglected the rescue of the Jewish people. My friends in the Warsaw ghetto were killed with guns in hand and in the last heroic fight. I was not fated to die like them, together with them. But I belong to them and their mass graves."¹²⁹ Zygielbaum emigrated to Israel in 1967, where he continued to write and publish. He died in 1994.

In *Dos lebn ruft* Zygielbaum played the part of the Soviet hero, Pavel Kashirin, a part which he had played with the *Yung Teater* in Warsaw. Unfortunately despite the outstanding performances of the five-member cast of Waislitz, Leo Galvin, Feigele Kopelowitz, Mendl Tabatznik and Faivl Zygielbaum, this was the least successful of the four productions because of its propagandistic nature. Sadly the last production, the

¹²⁶ *Merchant of Venice*, programme notes, August 1951. S. A. Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg.

¹²⁷ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 20 April 1937.

¹²⁸ His brother Abraham joined the studio of Jacob Rotbaum in Warsaw. During the Holocaust, Abraham went to America. Pinye, who was said to be the most talented of all the brothers, was killed in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Z. Levi, 'Avrom un zayne brider' in *Dorem Afrike*, yorg. 12, nom. 9, September 1959, pp. 28-29. Another brother, Reuben, came to Johannesburg in 1953. Reuben gave recitals and lectures and contributed to the South African Jewish press in Yiddish and English. Elvey, 'Fun Krasnitsov biz Yohanesburg', in *Dorem Afrike*, yorg. 25, nom. 8, March/April 1973, p. 25.

¹²⁹ Z. Levi, 'Avrom un zayne brider' in *Dorem Afrike*, yorg. 12, nom. 9, September 1959, pp. 28-29. In reality he committed suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills, but the myth of his shooting himself was perpetuated as being more 'dramatic' and 'romantic'.

lighthearted American comedy, *Parnose (A Living)*,¹³⁰ brought Waislitz into conflict with Charlash of the *Kultur Fareyn*, and thus ended his Johannesburg career. A cultural snob, Charlash could not abide the lighthearted musical comedies which were essential for the survival of Yiddish theatre. Thus when it was reported in the *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung* that Waislitz was more interested in making money than in producing good theatre,¹³¹ it would seem that Charlash was deliberately trying to get rid of the highly cultured Waislitz, whom he regarded as a personal threat to his own position in the community. Thus South Africa's loss was Australia's gain as Waislitz went on to settle in Melbourne in Australia, where he became co-director of the David Herman Yiddish Theatre in Melbourne, which lasted until as late as 1992.¹³²

After Waislitz's departure, the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* had the opportunity of working with two refugee directors from Hitler's Germany, Kurt Baum and Leo Kerz. Kurt Baum, a student of Max Reinhardt, established an Art Theatre in Johannesburg which enjoyed a brief existence in the 1930s.¹³³ Leo Kerz founded the Pioneer Theatre Group in Johannesburg.¹³⁴ Baum directed a production of *Gelt* (Money) the Yiddish adaptation of Ben Jonson's *Volpone* which was performed on the club premises in October and November 1937.¹³⁵ In the true anti-capitalist tradition of the club, *Volpone* is a study of the destructive power that money has on men's lives. It is the story of an old miser whose servants are all attempting to curry favour with him in their desire to inherit his money. Each character is an embodiment of an animal or bird of prey and in the European tradition the actors wore masks, which were designed by Rene Shapshak who also designed the sets.¹³⁶ Shapshak, a wellknown French-Jewish sculptor and painter, came to South Africa from France via London in the early 1930s.¹³⁷ Shapshak viewed the artist as a servant of society whose duty it was to teach humanity the worth of man and human co-operation. As a Socialist he believed that an artist must be free of all material concerns to

¹³⁰ *Parnose* was produced at the Standard Theatre in May 1937. Waislitz and Sarah Sylvia starred together with Hannan Hirsch, and the Dramatic Section of the *Kultur Fareyn*.

Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung, 7, 11, 14, 28, May 1937.

¹³¹ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 24 August 1938.

¹³² See A. Zable. *Wanderers and dreamers: tales of the David Herman Theatre*, Hyland House, South Melbourne, 1998.

¹³³ His best production was Clifford Odets' *Love on the dole*. In July 1932 he produced Ibsen's *Ghosts* with the Dramatic Section of the Jewish Guild. *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung* 22 July 1932. His career was spectacular but he disappeared from the Group Theatre Movement in Johannesburg when war broke out. *S.A. Jewish Times*. 50th Anniversary issue, June 1986.

¹³⁴ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 21 April 1938.

¹³⁵ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 29 October 1937

¹³⁶ 'Gelt' in *Yidishn Arbeter-Klub*, *Forois*, 1-ter yorg., nom. 6, November 1937, p. 18.

¹³⁷ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 22 August 1947.

be able to achieve his true potential. Shapshak was the driving force behind the attempt to rescue Jewish artists from Nazi Europe.¹³⁸

In 1938 Leo Kerz produced Irwin Shaw's powerful anti-war play, *Bury the dead*, in Yiddish translation as *Bagrobt di toyte*.¹³⁹ This is a surrealist play about soldiers who are killed in war but who refuse to be buried. The authorities call on the families to appeal to the soldiers to allow themselves to be buried. The stage was built like a platform and only the heads of the soldiers could be seen. This play included a total innovation for Yiddish theatre in South Africa, a film of marching feet. Bertha Englander recalls how a number of members of the club gathered on Beit Street one Sunday morning and started walking whilst Kerz lay on the ground, filming their feet.¹⁴⁰

Two more attempts to create a permanent Yiddish theatre, 1939-1940: *Di Yidishe Teater Gezelshaft* and Ossip Runitch's Yiddish Art Theatre.

In January 1939 the Dramatic Sections of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* and the *Yidisher Kultur Fareyn* amalgamated to form the *Yidishe Teater Gezelshaft* – Yiddish Theatre Company - which aimed to produce Yiddish theatre of a more serious nature.¹⁴¹ This amalgamation was brought about by the South African Section of the *Yidisher Kultur Farband* (YKUF), a Communist-oriented U.S. Association for preserving and developing Yiddish culture which was formed in 1938.¹⁴² However it does not seem to have been a very balanced amalgamation and throughout its brief existence the *Yidisher Teater Gezelshaft* was in effect synonymous with the Dramatic Section of the *Arbeter Klub*. In fact as the initial attempts of the Dramatic Section of the *Kultur Fareyn* were not very successful, one suspects that they must have pushed for this amalgamation.¹⁴³

Between January 1939 and June 1940 three productions were produced under its name. These were *Der Dorfsyng* and *Hershele Ostropolyer*, produced by Benny Ozynski, and

¹³⁸ J. Sachs, 'Rene Shapshak' in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 5, May 1947, p. 32-33.

¹³⁹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 21 April 1938.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Bertha Englander, November 1999.

¹⁴¹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 19 August 1938, 13 January 1939.

¹⁴² *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Keter, Jerusalem, 1972, vol. 16, p. 788.

¹⁴³ In 1937 two cabaret evenings of the *Fareyn* were ridiculed. Two sketches *Boksers* and *Jabotinsky's marsh* were described as farcical. They were meant to depict Jewish bravery and martyrdom, and were particularly embarrassing as a true Jewish hero and martyr, Sholem Schwartzbard, the assassin of the Ukrainian Nationalist leader, Simon Petliura, in Paris in 1926, was in the audience. *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 17 September 1937. Leo Galvin's novel interpretation of Sholem Asch's play, *Motke ganef*, (Motke the thief) was also ridiculed. Hyman Erlich wrote that Galvin's characterisation of Motke, which accentuated the social background bringing out the humane and tragic elements, was more suited to that of the lost souls in Peretz's *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* than to Asch's *Motke ganef* which portrays the Jewish underworld. *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 10 December 1937.

Shvartsbart or *Velt gevisn* produced by Yankev Waislitz together with Leo Galvin and Max Itzler. *Der Dorfsyung* had a mixed reception. Ten years after it was first produced in Johannesburg, the locally born Jews could not understand the Russian words or the Hebrew verses. In addition they were offended by the cursing, the double meanings and the direct vulgar jokes, and felt that the Company should have begun with something more modern.¹⁴⁴

The manuscript of Alter Kacyzne's play, *Shvartsbard*, or *Velt gevisn* was brought to Johannesburg in March 1939 by Yankev Waislitz¹⁴⁵ who stopped over in South Africa on his way to Australia.¹⁴⁶ Sholem Schwartzbard was the celebrated assassin of the Ukrainian pogrom leader, Simon Petlyura in Paris in 1926, who was acquitted in a sensational trial that made world headlines.¹⁴⁷ In September 1937 he had come to South Africa on behalf of the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research to promote the recently published *Algemejne Yidische entsiklopedye* – Universal Yiddish Encyclopaedia. He travelled all over the Union arriving in Cape Town at the beginning of March 1938 where three weeks later he suddenly died. He was buried in Cape Town at one of the biggest funerals Cape Town Jewry has ever known.¹⁴⁸ Staging the play seemed like the ideal way to mark the anniversary of his death. After his departure in April, Waislitz appointed Leo Galvin from the *Kultur Fareyn* and Max Itzler from the *Arbeter Klub* to direct the play, which was staged at the Jewish Guild in June. The lead roles were played by Leo Galvin and Miss H. Kisch of the *Fareyn*.¹⁴⁹

The last production of the *Yidische Teater Gezelshaft* was the famous folk comedy, *Hershele Ostropoler*, which has a universal social message representing the poor and the suffering in juxtaposition to the 'rich exploiters and communal bloodsuckers'. It was one of three plays that the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* had received as a gift from the Moscow Yiddish Art theatre in July 1939.¹⁵⁰ It was produced by Benny Ozynski in June 1940 together with the members of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, a choir conducted by Nathan Bell, sets by the

¹⁴⁴ 'Teater, kunst, literatur: "Der Dorfsyung"', in *Forois*, 3-ter yorg., nom. 3, March 1939, p 22..

¹⁴⁵ Waislitz had already workshoped the play with the amateurs in Johannesburg in November 1936. *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 24 November 1936.

¹⁴⁶ He had workshoped it on his previous visit in 1936. *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung* 24 November 1936.

¹⁴⁷ J. Nedava, 'Some aspects of individual terrorism: a case study of the Schwartzbard affair', in *Terrorism: an international journal*, vol. 3, no. 1-2, 1979, pp. 69-80.

¹⁴⁸ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 4, 11, 18 March 1938.

¹⁴⁹ 'Far der oyfirung fun "Sholem Shvartsbard"', in *Forois*, 3-ter yorg., nom. 6, June 1939, p.

18.

¹⁵⁰ The other plays were *Tevye der Milkhiker* (Tevye the Dairyman), and *Di Mishpokhe Ovadis* (The Ovadis family). *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 28 July 1939.

famous artist, Leo Kaiser and music especially composed by Hirsch Ichilchik.¹⁵¹ Benny Ozynski, scored a hit as Hershele, and the production, which was declared 'a welcome antidote to the news posters of this time', was so successful that five months later three more performances were presented at the Standard Theatre by Sarah Sylvia under the auspices of African Consolidated Theatres.¹⁵²

1939 saw a second attempt to establish a permanent Yiddish theatre for Johannesburg with the arrival of Ossip Runitch (1889-1947), a refugee from Nazi Europe, who established a Yiddish Art Theatre in Johannesburg in August 1939. He was accompanied by his wife, the ballerina, Nina Parnel, a former Prima Ballerina of the Ballet de Monte Carlo. Ossip Runitch was a famous Russian film star and director, who had been a member of the Moscow State Theatre and was one of the founders of the Russian cinema. In 1919 he left Russia for Italy and then for Berlin where he remained for nine years, working for the famous German film company, UFA. When Hitler came to power he left for Riga where he first performed with Russian Theatre and then went over to the Yiddish stage, although he originally knew no Yiddish. He worked with the Yiddish Minorities Theatre in Latvia and appeared on the Yiddish stage in Kovno, Prague, Warsaw, and Bucharest.¹⁵³ In Johannesburg he was admired both for his great acting talent and for his 'charming, courtly' demeanour, and his 'rare dignity of manner'.¹⁵⁴

Between August and December 1939 Runitch's Yiddish Art Theatre produced five plays at the Coronation Hall which was completely renovated for this purpose. He used members of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, the *Kultur Fareyn*, as well as Olga Ryss, a leading local opera singer whose first appearance it was on the Yiddish stage, and Hedy Haas, a famous Austrian chanson singer who fled her native Austria in August 1939,¹⁵⁵ Sadie Melamed, an actress on the English stage, Max Angorin, a professional actor who seems to have come out with the Breitman-Teffner Company in 1927,¹⁵⁶ and had been active in Yiddish theatre in East London, and others. Runitch's European repertoire, which was new to South African audiences, included *David Golder*, a realistic drama about an assimilated Jewish family by the French Yiddish writer, I. Nemerovsky,¹⁵⁷ *Der Atestat*,¹⁵⁸ Fodor's tragi-comedy about the problems of relationships between young girls and their

¹⁵¹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 17 May, 21 June 1940.

¹⁵² *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 20 September 1940.

¹⁵³ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 9 June 1939.

¹⁵⁴ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 10 April 1947.

¹⁵⁵ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 11 August 1939.

¹⁵⁶ *Der Afrikaner*, 23 December 1927.

¹⁵⁷ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 28 July 1939.

¹⁵⁸ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 17 November 1939.

teachers in a gymnasium,¹⁵⁹ L. Hirschfeld's light European comedy, *Friling in September* (Spring in September),¹⁶⁰ Kalmanowitch's melodrama, *Der Tiger*,¹⁶¹ and an original play by Dr Wulf Sachs, a local psychoanalyst and author, entitled *Dos Idishe erd* (This Jewish earth) which dealt with life in the Land of Israel.

David Golder was too serious for Johannesburg audiences who preferred the lighter fare, of *Der Atestat* or *Friling in September*. The only failure was the local play, *Dos Yidishe erd*, which dealt with the conflict between the colonists of the older generation and the organised workers of the younger generation in Palestine. Despite the fact that the play included many songs sung by a large choir and dances by Runitch's wife, Nina Parnel,¹⁶² it lacked dramatic tension, the characters were not true to life and the dialogue lacked everyday simplicity. In short it was not deemed to be a suitable play for an Art Theatre or for actors of that calibre.¹⁶³ After this Runitch seems to have discontinued his work with his Art Theatre until 1942 when he became the Yiddish theatre director for the *Idisher Forum*.

Yiddish theatre in the 1940s

In 1940 ten years had passed since the Quota Act, the immigrants were becoming increasingly acculturated and Yiddish theatre performances became more infrequent. Whilst between 1931 and 1940 the number of Yiddish productions per year varied between approximately 5 and 11, between 1941 and 1947 they averaged between 1 and 3. Yiddish was not being transmitted to the second generation as the Yiddish *Folkshul* in Doornfontein was barely supported. Although 200 pupils were registered at one time or another between 1937 and 1942, only 60 attended for a year or more.¹⁶⁴ In 1942 the S.A. Board of Jewish Education declined to participate in the school's fifth anniversary celebrations¹⁶⁵ and a questionnaire that was sent out to all Jewish pupils by the Jewish Board of Deputies as part of a campaign to raise funds and to promote consciousness of Hebrew education did not even refer to the existence of Yiddish education.¹⁶⁶ The attitude to the *Folkshul* of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies was contained in the words of Rabbi Kossowsky, the head of the Beth Din, who maintained that, "although he was one hundred percent in favour of Yiddish he was one hundred percent against the Folk

¹⁵⁹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 25 August 1939.

¹⁶⁰ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 27 September 1939.

¹⁶¹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 17 November 1939.

¹⁶² *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 24 November 1939.

¹⁶³ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung* 8 December 1939

¹⁶⁴ *Yidishe Folkshul in Yohanesburg finf yor, 1937 - September - 1942, Yidishe Folkshul un kindergorten baym Yidishn Kultur Fareyn*, Johannesburg, 1937, pp. 3-5.

¹⁶⁵ M. Katz, *The history of Jewish education in South Africa, 1841-1980*, Ph.D. Thesis, 1980, vol. 2, p. 621.

¹⁶⁶ See letters to the editor in *S.A. Jewish Times*, 20 November, 11 December 1942.

School. It was anti-religious. A school that did not teach religion was against religion. It was anti-national because it neglected the Bible."¹⁶⁷ It was not until 1949 when the *Folkshul* was finally recognised by the S.A. Board of Jewish Education that it received any type of communal support.¹⁶⁸

On the other hand the 1940s witnessed the gradual thawing of the standoff between the Zionists and the Socialist and Communist sympathisers of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* no doubt influenced by the situation of the Jews in Nazi Germany. In 1943 for the first time the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* celebrated May Day together with the Zionist Socialists professing the common interests of the Jewish working classes in the Diaspora and in Palestine.¹⁶⁹ After the war when the extent of the devastation of the Nazi Holocaust was realised, on 10 July 1946, a mass rally to express solidarity with the six million murdered Jews, was organised at the City Hall by the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*. This rally was a milestone in the history of Johannesburg Jewry as for the very first time a function of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* was given the blessing of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies with an address by Advocate Louis Pincus, member of the Board and prominent Zionist, and Rabbi J.L. Zlotnik of the South African Jewish Board of Education.¹⁷⁰ It was this gradual drawing together of the conflicting ideological streams in the community which facilitated the formation of the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* in June 1947.

The Yiddish actors also contributed to the celebration of Russian culture which flourished in the 1940s under the auspices of the Friends of the Soviet Union, spurred on by the newly established diplomatic ties between South Africa and the Soviet Union. Ossip Runitch even directed and starred in a Russian play, *The Soviet woman*, together with his wife Nina, Nadia Lurie, Leo Galvin, and Rosita Bautser.¹⁷¹ It was produced at the Standard Theatre in October 1943 in aid of the Stalingrad Reconstruction Fund, sponsored by the South African Society for Cultural Relations with the Soviet Union, under the patronage of General Smuts. Although an English translation was provided in between acts, it was reported that it was clear from audience reactions that a large section must have understood Russian.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ S.A. *Jewish Times*, 2 July 1943.

¹⁶⁸ M. Katz, *The history of Jewish education in South Africa, 1841-1980*, p. 621.

¹⁶⁹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 7 May 1943.

¹⁷⁰ Programme notes, Saul Ozynski private collection. Saul's father, Benny, told him to treasure this programme as it marked a historical occasion for Johannesburg Jewry.

¹⁷¹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 17 September 1943

¹⁷² *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 8 October 1943.

During this period the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* remained by far the most active organisation in the field of Yiddish theatre, with five plays produced by Benny Ozynski. Amongst Benny Ozynski's productions was a repeat performance of *Professor Mamlock* at the Standard Theatre in September 1941.¹⁷³ Despite the fact that in the interim the play had become very well known both on stage and in film,¹⁷⁴ events in Nazi Germany and the Greyshirt Movement in South Africa at that time gave the play added impact. Bertha Englander, relates that when as Mamlock's daughter, Ruth, she had to run through the auditorium on to the stage chased by Nazis, some of the audience became terrified thinking that it was real. Moreover during the performance, when Dr Helpach was abusing the Professor someone in the audience jumped up and shouted, "Foetzak, you bloody Nazi."¹⁷⁵ Ozynski also produced the original South African production, *Der Dybbuk oyfn linkn zayt*, (The Dybbuk on the Left) a musical parody of Anski's *Dybbuk* which he wrote together with Hyman Erlich and staged at the Library Theatre in 1944.¹⁷⁶

In February 1942 a new organisation to promote Yiddish literature, theatre and music was founded by the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung* and its editor Boris Gershman. It was known as the *Idisher Forum* – Yiddish Forum. Its purpose was lofty - to acquaint the locals with the best original and translated works of Yiddish literature, to establish a Yiddish theatre; and to promote Jewish music and art -. but like all the other Yiddish organisations of this time it was plagued by dissension and enjoyed a very short lifespan. The Music section was headed by the well-known conductor and composer, Jerry Idelsohn, who had conducted a folk choir in Johannesburg since 1931, whilst Ossip Runitch directed the Theatre Section. The literary consultant was Yitskhok Charlash of the *Fareyn*.¹⁷⁷

The highpoint of the *Idisher Forum* was a musical concert at the University Hall in Milner Park, on 25 April 1942, in aid of the Relief Fund for the Refugees in Mauritius and Medical Aid for Russia,¹⁷⁸ which was attended by just under a thousand people.¹⁷⁹ The concert included the original one act play by Ossip Runitch himself, entitled *Di Maske fun soten* (The Mask of Satan), which was described as 'a sketch that sparkles with

¹⁷³ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 22 August 1941.

¹⁷⁴ *Professor Mamlock* was screened at the Empire in January 1940, *S.A. Jewish Times*, 19 January 1940.

¹⁷⁵ Bertha Englander, Unpublished memoirs. It is not clear whether this incident occurred at this performance or at the earlier performances of *Professor Mamlock* on the club premises in 1936.

¹⁷⁶ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 22 September, 13 October 1944.

¹⁷⁷ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 6 February 1942.

¹⁷⁸ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 1 April 1942.

¹⁷⁹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 1 May 1942.

humour.¹⁸⁰ However the concert seems to have aroused some controversy.¹⁸¹ As a result Jerry Idelsohn, the musical director, and a group of his choristers resigned, ostensibly because of the singing of *Hatikvah* to which Idelsohn objected on the grounds of partisanship and Zionism.¹⁸²

Runitch produced another two full-length productions for the *Idisher Forum*. These were Schwarkin's Soviet comedy, *Dos Fremde kind*, a play about an unborn child which illustrates how despite the revolution, Soviet society struggles to accept the concept of the absolute equality of women.¹⁸³ It played for week at the Library Theatre¹⁸⁴ and was viewed by 4 000 people.¹⁸⁵ The other production, Gordin's *Kreutzer sonata*, was the last production of the *Idisher Forum*. It was staged at the Standard Theatre in November 1943 under the auspices of African Consolidated Theatres.¹⁸⁶ In March 1943 Runitch was invited by John Connell, the Musical Director of the Johannesburg Opera, to produce the new opera season.¹⁸⁷ Runitch subsequently became involved with Afrikaans theatre for which he developed a passion, regarding the Afrikaners as 'natural actors'.¹⁸⁸ In 1945 he directed the play, *Die Skoonheid's doctor* (The Beauty doctor), which he translated from Hungarian.¹⁸⁹ In his obituary it was stated that his great talent was given greater scope in his Afrikaans productions than in his Yiddish productions.¹⁹⁰ Unfortunately Runitch's involvement with Afrikaans theatre was never documented and his name is not even mentioned in the standard histories of Afrikaans theatre by F.C.L. Bosman¹⁹¹ and L.W.B. Binge.¹⁹² Runitch's career was tragically cut short when he died on 6 April 1947.¹⁹³ At his funeral he was memorialised by amongst others, the Afrikaans actor, Gideon Roos, who described him as 'one of God's gentlemen'.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁰ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 10 April 1942.

¹⁸¹ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 1 May 1942.

¹⁸² *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 5 June 1942.

¹⁸³ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 31 July 1942; *S.A. Jewish Times*, 28 August 1942.

¹⁸⁴ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 11 September 1942.

¹⁸⁵ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 4 September 1942.

¹⁸⁶ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 5 & 12 November 1943, 3 December 1943.

¹⁸⁷ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 5 March 1943.

¹⁸⁸ J.P. Malan (ed), *South African Music Encyclopedia*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1979-1986, vol. 4, p. 201.

¹⁸⁹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 2 February 1945.

¹⁹⁰ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 10 April 1947.

¹⁹¹ F.C.L. Bosman, *Drama en toneel in Suid-Afrika*. 2nd ed., Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1969.

¹⁹² L.W.B. Binge, *Ontwikkeling van die Afrikaanse toneel, 1832-1955*, Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1969.

¹⁹³ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 10 April 1947.

¹⁹⁴ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 10 April 1947. Apparently Runitch committed suicide. Interview with Max Raysman 3 September 2002.

Other memorable plays during this period were produced by Faivl Zygielbaum. These were *A Goldfaden Spektakel* or *Trupe Tanentsap*, which was produced at the Library Theatre in February 1943 to raise funds for Medical Aid for Russia,¹⁹⁵ and Sholem Aleichem's classic comedy, *Gold greber* (Gold diggers),¹⁹⁶ which was produced at the Standard Theatre in November 1946 as the crowning event in a week of celebrations to commemorate the 30th anniversary of his death.¹⁹⁷ *Trupe Tanentsap* was created by Michael Weichert, Director of the *Yung Teater*, who wrote the libretto. It tells the story of a group of Jewish minstrels who are performing the Goldfaden operetta, *Di Tsvey Kunilems* (The Two Simpletons) in a Polish village, and contains a unique depiction of Yiddish theatre at the turn of the century. The production was declared to be a milestone in local Yiddish theatre and Faivl Zygielbaum was praised for his versatile and polished performance as Tanentsap.¹⁹⁸

The last play worthy of mention during this period is *Hurbn* (Holocaust), a play about South African Jewish life during the Second World War,¹⁹⁹ which was written by Y.L. Segal of Pretoria²⁰⁰ and produced there in aid of the Jewish War Appeal by Y. Movson. Although set against the background of the Second World War, like the earlier South African plays it focuses on the effects of acculturation and moving up in the world on immigrant behaviour. It tells the story of Max Cohen, one of the typical struggling immigrants in the clothing manufacturing business, "that live in Doornfontein but who is mentally alive and rooted in Lithuania." During the war his business prospers and he becomes rich. On the other hand his only son, motivated to avenge his people, joins up and is killed. At this news Max Cohen loses interest in his business and in public life and reverts to his former self, content just to vegetate. Although artistically flawed with characters that are not fully developed, the play was judged to be a true reflection of South African Jewish life during the Holocaust and it caused somewhat of a sensation amongst Johannesburg Jewry. It was produced a second time in Johannesburg by the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*.²⁰¹ In 1945 the wellknown Yiddish writer, Richard Feldman,

¹⁹⁵ *A Goldfaden spektakel* programme notes, Yiddish Literary and Dramatic Society archive, ARCH 915, S.A. Jewish Board of Deputies archives, Johannesburg.

¹⁹⁶ The story of the play originated in a legend about thirteen ducats of gold that Napoleon buried in an old graveyard in a *shtetl* in Poland before his invasion of Russia in 1812, which causes havoc when the whole *shtetl*, Jews and non-Jews, turn out to search for it.

¹⁹⁷ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 8 November 1946.

¹⁹⁸ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 19 February 1943.

¹⁹⁹ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 24 May 1946.

²⁰⁰ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 26 July 1946.

²⁰¹ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 23 August 1946.

published the play, *Trayers* (Triers), about struggling Jewish immigrants in Johannesburg. However as it was not performed at this time, it falls outside the scope of this research.²⁰²

Conclusion.

In conclusion one has to ask why despite the tremendous flurry of activity was a permanent Yiddish theatre never established during the years 1930 to 1947. At least six separate attempts can be identified: 1) the Jewish Guild Yiddish Dramatic Section in 1932; 2) the Yiddish Dramatic Studio of Simche Nathan in 1933; 3) Yankev Waislitz in 1936/37; 4) *Di Yidishe Teater Gezelshaft* and 5) Ossip Runitch's Yiddish Art Theatre in 1939; 6) *The Idisher Forum* in 1942/43. None of these attempts succeeded and no adequate explanation is provided as to what went wrong. The problem is obscured by the paucity of sources for Yiddish theatre during this period. The main English language Jewish newspaper in the Transvaal, the *Zionist Record*, totally ignores the existence of the anti-Zionist *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* and the *South African Jewish Times* was only established in July 1936. The only comprehensive source for Yiddish theatre during this period therefore is the Yiddish weekly, *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung* established in 1931. However both in the *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung* and in the *S.A. Jewish Times* the reviews are uncritical and noncommittal providing a summary of the plot, a list of characters and remarks such as, 'X performed well, very appropriately, very much in character'. This is the case not only with amateur productions but with touring professional companies, which makes it virtually impossible to reconstruct the nature of the performance or the events around it. One can therefore only speculate.

It is most likely that the Yiddish Dramatic Section of the Jewish Guild, an Anglo-Jewish creation, did not attract the immigrant population in the way of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, the *Yidisher Kultur Fareyn* or the Polish Club, and its Yiddish section seems to have been a somewhat artificial creation. In the case of Simche Nathan it is doubtful that he and his family ever intended to stay in Johannesburg permanently. In the case of Jacob Waislitz, it seems to have been primarily a case of a clash with Charlash of the *Yidisher Kultur Fareyn*, who would not tolerate the more popular musical comedies that drew the crowds, and who regarded Waislitz as a threat. Ossip Runitch, a major talent with wide European experience, was soon drawn away from the more limited arena of Yiddish theatre into the wider cultural world of Johannesburg.

²⁰² R. Feldman, *Trayers un dray dertseylungen*, Johannesburg, 1945.

Faivl Zygielbaum, the veteran Yiddish actor, attributes the problems of Yiddish theatre in South Africa to the lack of a large Yiddish speaking proletariat as existed in New York or Buenos Aires. As there was no grass roots support for Yiddish theatre, it had to be promoted from above, by the *intelligentsia* and by the rich Jews. However although the rich Jews enjoyed Yiddish theatre, they were quite happy to live without it and were loathe to invest money in it. Nor did Yiddish theatre enjoy communal support and was seldom even mentioned in minutes or proceedings. Reviews were noncommittal and uncritical and potential audiences were not being educated. Visiting companies and actor-directors, such as Simche Nathan and Yankev Waislitz, soon sensed the indifference, quickly staged their best pieces and left. Yet despite this the four essential ingredients for establishing a Yiddish theatre were present in Johannesburg. These were talented Yiddish actors, directors who created productions which on occasion equalled those in Warsaw and Vilna, audiences as warm and enthusiastic as anywhere in the world, and local Yiddish authors who had already written several South African plays. However the fifth element, that of financial backing, was lacking and as a result there was no suitable venue for Yiddish theatre.²⁰³

Whilst these were the immediate reasons, deeper factors were at work. Firstly the Yiddish theatre enthusiasts of the late 1920s and 1930s, encountered a community with a robust Jewish identity formulated in its formative years between 1890 and 1914. This identity included Judaism and Zionism whilst Yiddish culture was discarded and marginalised at a very early stage. It was not within the capabilities of this relatively small and economically weak group of newcomers to change the values of the establishment. Moreover the small Yiddish cultural organisations of the time were allied with leftist politics and were anti-Zionist, which was anathema to the Anglo-Jewish establishment and to the majority of East Europeans. Secondly by 1947 17 years had gone by without any sizable immigration from Eastern Europe to keep the Yiddish language alive and to replenish the fervour for Yiddish theatre. The Quota Act of 1930 had considerably slowed down the pace of immigration and the Aliens Act of 1937 had virtually stopped it altogether. Already by 1936 it was estimated that over 78% of all Jews under thirty years of age were South African born.²⁰⁴ The Yiddish *Folkshul* in Doornfontein was barely supported and Yiddish was not being transmitted to the second generation.

²⁰³ F. Zygielbaum, 'Vegn Yidishn teater in Dorem Afrike', in *Dorem-Afrikaner zamlbukh*, Literarishn Krayz, Johannesburg, 1945, pp. 96-98.

²⁰⁴ G. Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*, 1980, p. 59.

The most significant contribution to Yiddish theatre during this period was made by the members of the Dramatic Section of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, whether acting under their own name, under the name of the *Yidishe Teater Gezelshaft* or with independent directors. In 1949 it staged its last production under its own name. This consisted of 6 performances of Leon Kobrin's *Der Dorfsyung*, produced by Hannan Hirsch at Ginsburg's Hall.²⁰⁵ Even after the club ceased to exist, its actors continued to be the mainstay of the productions of the visiting actor-directors who arrived in the late 1940s until the mid 1950s after which Yiddish theatre became an increasingly rare occurrence.

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²⁰⁵ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 19 August 1949.

**COMMUNITY THEATRE
AT THE CAPE
1930-1947**



2. *Oyfn Grenets*, Yidisher Arbeter Klub, 1935



1. *Moshke Hazer*. Director: Herman Kowarsky, 1933



3. *Di Gele Late*. Director: Jacob Waislitz, 1937.



4.



6. *Der Yidisher Kenig Lir*, Paarl, 1933



5. *Dos Pintele Yid*, Paarl, 1932

7. *Programmes*, Paarl



CHAPTER 6. COMMUNITY THEATRE AT THE CAPE, 1930-1947

Historical background

Between 1926 and 1936 the Jewish population of Cape Town grew substantially from 11 910¹ to 16 486,² an increase of 34 percent, due to the increase in Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. In 1936 the number of native Yiddish speakers in Cape Town was recorded as 3 518,³ 21 percent of the total Jewish population at the time. From a demographic point of view the focus of Jewish immigrant life in Cape Town had moved up from District Six in the city centre into Gardens and Vredehoek. In 1939 the Beth Hamidrash Hachadash, consecrated in 1897 in Constitution Street in District Six, was transferred to Vredehoek Avenue, and in 1940 the Ponevezh Shul, established in 1902 in Vanderleur Street in District Six, moved to Maynard Street.⁴ However the centre of Jewish communal life in those days was the new Zionist Hall in Hope Street in Gardens, which was completed in 1927. The new Zionist Hall was a far superior communal building to any that existed in Johannesburg at that time, where the larger Jewish community, had to make do with a number of much smaller communal halls. The Zionist Hall could seat a total of 893 people, 740 downstairs and 153 in the gallery, making it a suitable venue for both amateur and professional Yiddish theatre performances. Its dimensions of 75 by 54 feet made it quite a bit larger than the Railway Institute (72/40 feet), a popular venue for Yiddish theatre in the previous period.⁵

However during the summer months, December to February, only 24 kilometres outside Cape Town in the small seaside town of Muizenberg, with its wonderful white beaches and warm Indian Ocean, Jews would gather from all over South Africa and from the former Southern Rhodesia. From the early twentieth century Muizenberg had been a popular seaside retreat for the mining magnates of the Transvaal, many of whom were Jewish. They built themselves magnificent mansions at Muizenberg and along the coast

¹ Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, *Fourth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 4th May, 1926*, Part 8, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1929, pp. 14, 16, 17 (Includes Cape Town, Wynberg and Simonstown).

² Union of South Africa. *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1941, vol. 6, Religions, pp. 15-16, 19, 21. (Includes Cape Town, Wynberg, Belleville, Simonstown).

³ Union of South Africa, *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 4. Languages, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1938, p. 44, 50, 52. (Includes Cape Town, Wynberg, Belleville, Simonstown).

⁴ I. Berelowitz, 'The Jews and District Six.' in *World of South African Jewry*, no. 2, October 1988, p. 10.

⁵ *Zionist Record*, 8 September 1926, 23 March 1928.

of St James.⁶ Nicknamed 'Jewsenberg', already in the 1910s and 1920s Muizenberg was a favourite Jewish holiday spot with kosher hotels and boarding houses, where Jewish families from Cape Town and further afield would come to celebrate the week of the festival of Passover.⁷ In February 1933 the first permanent minister was appointed to the Muizenberg and Kalk Bay Hebrew Congregation,⁸ and in June the new Talmud Torah was officially opened.⁹ Regular Friday night and weekly events for the visitors were held, and in February 1941 a Zionist Propaganda office was opened where the visitors could buy Jewish books and newspapers and obtain information about upcoming events.¹⁰

From the 1930s Jewish entertainers would appear at the Muizenberg Pavilion which opened in the late 1920s. The Bnoth Zion, the Ladies Zionist Association, held its annual carnival there, and Yiddish theatre performances were staged there. The latest Yiddish talkies were screened at His Majesty's Bioscope in Muizenberg. Hirsh Shisler, a popular South African Yiddish humorist, describes Muizenberg in the season in these terms:

"The Muizenberg beach looks like a market place in the old country. Here people come from the four corners of South Africa. Even from far off Rhodesia. And just about every one, *on eyn hora*, are our brethren, the children of Israel - Jews, right and left. And most whom one meets here are more left than right...

Here one meets rabbis, *chazonim*, holier than thou, artisans, and Jewish businessmen - 'prayed up' Jews... there is no "Apartheid". On the beach and in the sea you mix with freethinkers and moreover one mixes with the fair sex. It is terribly crowded on the beach and the noise is even louder. The famous "Snake-Park" is packed with young and old, absolutely one on top of each other like plaited *chales*..."¹¹

Visiting artists

Visiting Yiddish troupes were extremely rare in the early 1930s and the newly arrived immigrants had to make do with the local entertainment. Adverts for the Cape Town Municipal Orchestra and for the visiting London Society of Seven famous West End Variety artistes¹² were printed regularly in Yiddish only in the English weekly *South African Jewish Chronicle*, indicating both the high and low brow cultural preferences of the immigrants. In April 1933 the first Yiddish talkie, Sholem Asch's *Uncle Moses*, was screened at the Opera House.¹³ Yiddish movies were on occasion screened at the

⁶ See R. Mendelsohn, 'A mining magnate at Muizenberg: Sammy Marks and the Cape Town property market, 1881-1919.' *Cabo*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1987, pp. 26-31.

⁷ This is evident from the many adverts in the *S.A. Jewish Chronicle* in the 1930s encouraging Jews to spend Passover at the many kosher hotels in Muizenberg.

⁸ *Zionist Record*, 3 February 1933.

⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 9 June 1933.

¹⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 7 February 1941.

¹¹ H. Shisler, *Mit a shmeykhel oyf der erd*, Yom-tov bleter, Johannesburg, 1963, pp. 89-90.

¹² *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 1 January 1932.

¹³ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 14 July 1933.

Majestic and the Alhambra bioscopes in Cape Town, the Regal in Wynberg, the Marine in Sea Point, His Majesty's in Muizenberg and the Palladium in Paarl.

One of only two overseas troupes to visit during this period was the company of Vera Kanevskaya and Paul Breitman. In August 1933 when Yiddish artists in Germany were being persecuted, Jewish books were being burned, and Jewish actors were being hounded off the stage, the Jewish public of Cape Town was urgently exhorted to forgo their snobbish prejudices and to support their own culture. However it had been four years since a Yiddish professional company had visited Cape Town, and the Jewish public needed little encouragement. Hundreds of people packed the Zionist Hall and many had to be turned away. Jews streamed in from Cape Town and from the outlying towns to watch operettas and melodramas, such as *Di Freylekhe veratshke* (A World of love) by Paul Breitman, *Di Amerikaner khasene* (The American wedding), *Dos Pension meyd* (The College girl), *Di Eybige mame* (The Eternal mother), and Sholem Asch's controversial *Got fun nekome* (God of Vengeance). The newspaper reported that the Yiddish theatre had 'national appeal'.¹⁴ Jews and gentiles attended and enthusiastic reviews appeared in the local English press as well.¹⁵

In 1934 David Vardi and Eva Yoalit, two actors from the Habimah Theatre in Israel, toured all over the Cape performing in Yiddish and Hebrew to great acclaim.¹⁶ In April 1937 Molly Picon appeared at the Alhambra Theatre and at the City Hall. The *South African Jewish Chronicle* pronounced her 'one of the most brilliant character artists who has ever visited Cape Town... she is second to none in her faithful portrayal of various types and her mime and gesture have the touch of genius.'¹⁷ In December 1938 Sarah Sylvia brought Meier Tzelniker's London National Company to Cape Town for the summer season after a bumper two month season at the Standard Theatre in Johannesburg.¹⁸ They performed to packed houses at the Muizenberg Pavilion and at the Zionist Hall in Cape Town.¹⁹

The following summer Sarah Sylvia returned with a local Yiddish company made up of the refugee artists, the Russian star of stage and cinema, Ossip Runitch, his wife the

¹⁴ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 25 August 1933.

¹⁵ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 1 September 1933.

¹⁶ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 7, 14, 21, 28 September 1934; *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung* 7 September 1934.

¹⁷ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, April 1937

¹⁸ The English actors were accompanied by Faivl and Israel Zygelbaum from Johannesburg, and Miss A. Radowsky and Nathan Wollach from Cape Town. *S.A. Jewish Chronicle*, 16, 30 December 1938.

ballerina, Nina Parnel, and the *chanteuse*, Hedy Haas, together with the character comedian, Max Shadovich, whose real name was Max Angorin,²⁰ and who seems to have originally come out with the Breitman-Teffner Troupe in 1927 as mentioned earlier.²¹ The company also included Sara Sylvia's son Alfred Herbert, and Benny Ozynski and Isidore Finstone from Johannesburg.²² During this period Hedy Haas, the refugee singer and character actress, from Austria, who has been compared to Molly Picon, also made frequent appearances at the City Hall with the Cape Town Municipal Orchestra,²³ at the Muizenberg Pavilion,²⁴ and at the Zionist Hall.²⁵ She also broadcast in Yiddish for the Cape Town Broadcasting Station on several occasions.²⁶

Amateur theatre, 1931-1935

The first half of the 1930s in Cape Town and in the surrounding towns, was the most active for amateur Yiddish theatre. This was a direct outcome of the rise in Eastern European immigration in the 1920s and the resultant increase in the proportion of native Yiddish speakers. During this period this activity was clearly divided between the Zionist societies who produced Yiddish theatre both in Cape Town and in the Boland towns of Paarl, Stellenbosch, and Ceres, and the Socialist sympathising *Gezerd* and *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, whose activities were confined to Cape Town. This was no coincidence as the defiant anti-religious attitudes of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* and the *Gezerd*, such as the holding of picnics on *Yom Kippur*, were anathema to the extremely traditional Jews in the Boland towns.

Between 1931 and 1933 Herman Kowarsky,²⁷ a former actor from the Vilna Troupe who had settled in Cape Town, produced three full length productions with the amateurs of the Cape Town Zionist Society at the Zionist Hall. These were Leon Kobrin's famous drama of American Jewish life, *Riverside Drive*, which was produced twice,²⁸ and I.D. Berkowitz's prizewinning drama, *Moshke hazer*,²⁹ which was produced in July 1933, at a time when with Hitler's rise to power, the tragedy of Moshke, the apostate Jew, was a particularly pertinent topic. Participants included Alec and Jo Natas, Miss Y. Levin, D. Feinstein, P.

¹⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 6 January 1939.

²⁰ Interview with Max Raysman, 3 September 2002.

²¹ *Der Afrikaner*, 23 December 1927.

²² *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 15 December 1939.

²³ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 23 February 1940.

²⁴ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 14 February 1947, 26 January 1945, 21 December 1945, 4 January 1946.

²⁵ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 13 April 1945.

²⁶ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 23 February 1940.

²⁷ Kowarsky does not seem to be listed in Zylbercweig's *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*.

²⁸ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 29 May 1931, 28 October 1932.

Dubowitz, Bella Gammerman, Vera Rosin, Lily Jaffe, Miss R. Tuch Miss S. Kott, Morris Losman, Miss A. Radowsky, S. Kotlowitz, Issy Swiel and Pesah Barsky. Pesah Barsky, who immigrated to Cape Town in the late 1920s contributed stories and sketches to the South African Yiddish press, as well as acting and producing Yiddish plays. Barsky, who had a dairy in Mill Street in Cape Town, later left the Zionists to join the *Gezerd*. He represented the Friends of Birobidjan, an offshoot of the *Gezerd*, at the founding conference of the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* in June 1947.³⁰

During this period Herman Kowarsky also produced plays for a Yiddish amateur dramatic group in Paarl, a small town 75 kilometres from Cape Town, in the Berg River valley in the heart of the Cape winelands. Paarl had the largest Jewish community in a district that included the small Jewish communities of Stellenbosch, Somerset West, Wellington, Robertson, Worcester, and Ceres. A Jewish congregation was established in Paarl in 1893,³¹ and by 1910 the community numbered 250 persons.³² With the influx of the eastern European immigrants, by 1926 this number had tripled to 745.³³ Paarl had a particularly warm and cohesive Litvak community, the majority having originated from the adjacent towns of Birzh and Plungyan in Lithuania, and from smaller towns round about.³⁴

Paarl was a stronghold of Afrikaans culture and nationalism, the home of the Du Toit family, pioneers of the Afrikaans language.³⁵ Similarly the Jews in Paarl were strongly traditional and nationalistic. What distinguished the Paarl amateurs from their counterparts in Cape Town, was the fact that the majority were second generation immigrants who had grown up trilingual. They spoke Yiddish at home, Afrikaans on the street, and were sent to the English stream of Paarl's dual medium high schools, identifying with the majority of their co-religionists in the city. However Yiddish the language of the home and of their parents, symbolised what to them was epitomally Jewish. This strong religious and nationalist identity contributed to the success of the Paarl Yiddish Dramatic Society.³⁶

²⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 28 July 1933.

³⁰ A. Rubinstein, 'Pesah Barsky', in *Dorem-Afrike*, 17-ter yorg., nom. 2, March-April 1964, p. 29.

³¹ C. Press, *Light of Israel: the story of the Paarl Jewish community*, Jubilee Publications, Paarl, 1993, pp. 11-13.

³² C. Press, *Light of Israel*, 1993, p. 42.

³³ Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, *Fourth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 4th May, 1926*, Part 8, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1929, p. 15.

³⁴ C. Press, *Light of Israel*, 1993, p. 42.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁶ The writer's mother grew up in Paarl and participated in Yiddish theatre there.

Between 1932 and 1934 the Paarl amateurs performed four classics of the Yiddish stage to raise money for the Paarl Jewish Library and for Kapay, the Palestine Workers' Fund. The plays were Sholem Aleichem's *Dos Groyse gevins*, Thomashefsky's *Dos Pintele Yid* and Gordin's *Der Yidisher Kenig Lir* and *Der Fremder* (The Stranger), which were also performed in the neighbouring towns as well as at the Muizenberg Pavilion and at the Zionist Hall in Cape Town. Participants included Issy Swiel, Sarah Rabinowitz, Milly Klitzner, Joseph Bach, Philip Katz, Leah Geffen, Sarah Katz, Mr Smith, Mr Maisel, Lulu Rabinowitz, Mr Anolick, Gerald Rabinowitz, Ida Mofson, Barney and Yeina Berman, Esther Jacobson, Jacob Valerstein, Frieda. Lipschitz, Dina Faktor, Chaim Jacobson, M. Lazar, J. Shneider, Alec Natas, Evelyn Green and Froyem and Jacob Levinsohn.³⁷ Jacob Levinsohn, who immigrated to South Africa in 1927 at the age of 27, from the small village of Goldingen (Kuldiga) in Latvia, also produced Yiddish plays. In Latvia he had been an active member of the local Zionist society, Maccabi.³⁸ In August 1933 he produced Lateiner's *Dos Yidische harts* (The Jewish heart) at the Opera House in Cape Town for the Stellenbosch Young Israel Society, with a large cast, many of whom had never spoken Yiddish before.³⁹

In 1932 and 1933 Yiddish plays were even produced in Ceres, a hamlet 160 kilometres from Cape Town, with a Jewish population of only 91,⁴⁰ by the Reverend Hersh Natas and his family.⁴¹ Reverend Natas immigrated to South Africa in 1926 from Pashvitin near Shavel in Lithuania. The plays were produced for the Young Israel society⁴² and for the opening of the newly built Talmud Torah and Communal Hall.⁴³

Yidisher Arbeter Klub and the Gezerd

A branch of the *Gezerd* was established in Cape Town in January 1932.⁴⁴ It was the first Workers' organisation in Cape Town, preceding the founding of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*. The *Gezerd* attracted a huge following particularly after Gina Medem's visit to raise funds

³⁷ *Zionist Record*, 9 September 1932; *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 9 December 1932; Programme notes: *Der Yidisher Kenig Lir* and *Der Fremder*, Milly Penkin private collection.

³⁸ Interview with Hershel Scholnik, 25 August 2002.

³⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 25 August 1933, 1 September 1933. Stellenbosch had a Jewish population of 618. Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, *Fourth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 4th May, 1926*, Part 8, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1929, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Union of South Africa, *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, Vol. 6, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1941, p. 44.

⁴¹ The participants included Reverend Natas's daughter Rose, his sons Moische and his wife, and Alec from Cape Town, Miss H. Friedman, S. Stern, W. Metter, S. Fish, and P. Gittel. *Zionist Record*, 29 December 1933.

⁴² *Zionist Record*, 4 November 1932.

⁴³ *Zionist Record*, 3 November 1933.

⁴⁴ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 22 January 1932.

for Birobidzhan in October 1932. By February 1933 it was reported that it had 817 members and at least another 2000 sympathisers.⁴⁵ It was said that before the establishment of the *Gezerd*, Yiddish cultural activity was conducted by the *Kadimah* Zionist organisation, but after its establishment, the *Gezerd* took over.⁴⁶ The Secretary of the Dramatic Section of the *Gezerd* was Issy Schwalb.⁴⁷

The *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* was only established in August 1933.⁴⁸ Unlike its counterpart in Johannesburg it had a very limited following. According to Chaim Klein, one of its earliest members, the *Arbeter Klub* lasted for about ten years when it disintegrated on account of an attempt to expel the Trotskyites.⁴⁹ It held regular Saturday night lectures and its Secretary was P. Soloveitchik.⁵⁰ When the *Gezerd* disbanded, some of its former members in Cape Town formed the Friends of Birobidjan.⁵¹ After the founding of the *Kultur Federatsye* they were the only group to break away to form their own *Yidische Volksgezelschaft*. Unfortunately we have very few written reports of these organisations. This is because the Cape Town based *South African Jewish Chronicle*, like the *Zionist Record* in Johannesburg, tended to ignore all activities which emanated from anti-Zionist groups, and the only Yiddish weekly, the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, was published in Johannesburg. This is a pity as it would seem that there was once a radical element in amongst Cape Town Jewry which has never been fully explored. A branch of the *Yidisher Kultur Fareyn* was established in 1937.⁵²

The anti-Zionist *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* and the *Gezerd* were prevented from using the Zionist Hall for their amateur theatre productions and they had to struggle to find alternative venues. Similarly when Gina Medem visited Paarl on behalf of the *Gezerd* in November 1932, she was refused the use of the Talmud Torah Hall and had to use the Palladium Bioscope instead.⁵³ In 1934, the year that Birobidjan was declared a Jewish Autonomous Region by the U.S.S.R. and the *Gezerd* was at its peak, the Oddfellows Hall at 47 Hope Street⁵⁴ was the venue for a number of productions of the *Yidisher Arbeter*

⁴⁵ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 3 February 1933.

⁴⁶ A. Rubinstein, 'Pesah Barsky', in *Dorem-Afrike*, 17-ter yorg., nom. 2, March-April 1964, p. 29.

⁴⁷ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 5 October 1934.

⁴⁸ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 25 August 1933.

⁴⁹ Interview with Chaim Klein, 21 November 2000.

⁵⁰ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 17 August 1934.

⁵¹ A. Rubinstein, 'Pesah Barsky', in *Dorem-Afrike*, 17-ter yorg., nom. 2, March-April 1964, p. 29.

⁵² *Forois* 1937.

⁵³ C. Press, *Light of Israel*, 1993, pp. 70-71.

⁵⁴ Invitation of the *Gezerd*, Gershon Ginsburg collection, Jewish Studies Library, U.C.T. Libraries.

Klub and of the *Gezerd*. In August the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* celebrated their second anniversary there with a programme which included the one-act play *Briders* (Brothers) by Sam Liptzin.⁵⁵ In October the hall was filled to overflowing for the *Gezerd's* production of *Motye Meylekh der Stolier* (Motye Meylekh the carpenter). Benny Ozynski, who became the mainstay of the Dramatic section of the *Arbeter Club* in Johannesburg a couple of years later, excelled in the part of the father, whilst Frume Kolevson, who immigrated to Cape Town from Ponevezh in 1923,⁵⁶ played the part of the mother, and Miss Radowsky played the part of the daughter.⁵⁷ In December the Dramatic Section of the *Gezerd* staged *Tsvishn flamen* (In flames) at the Oddfellows Hall.⁵⁸ In May 1939 the *Gezerd* celebrated the 80th Jubilee of Sholem Aleichem, with a performance of *Lakhn iz gezunt* (Laughing is healthy), at the Oddfellows Hall.⁵⁹

Whilst these early productions at the Oddfellows Hall, reported in the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, have been lost to history, a production of the Soviet comedy, *Oyfn Grenets* (On the border) by A. Vieviorka, was recorded for posterity in a picture which has become part of an exhibition on *Jews in the Struggle for Democracy and Human Rights in South Africa*, which was mounted in 1998 by the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research. *Oyfn grenets* was produced by Chaim Klein for the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* on 2 June 1935 in the Hotel Edward, where the Gardens Centre now stands, in a big ballroom with a stage. A report in the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung* apologised to all those who were unable to obtain tickets as the hall was extremely small.⁶⁰ *Oyfn grenets* had been produced previously by the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* in Johannesburg in 1934. Chaim Klein, a product of a Bundist *Folkshul* in Plungyan in Lithuania and a Communist sympathiser, who came to Cape Town in 1929, was attracted by the play's distinctly satirical anti-religious bias. The plot hinged on the smuggling of diamonds and gold contained in *tefillin* to help the Jews in Russia. Klein also produced the play, *The life of Galileo*, in Yiddish translation, because of its sceptical anti-religious bias.⁶¹ The cast included Nathan Wollach, P. Sher, Solly Factor, Sandler, Max Raysman, Berl Margolis, Stern, Frume Kolevson, Esther Jacobson, Marx, Jack Chanarin.⁶² P. Soloveitchik, the Secretary of the club, and Belitzky⁶³ helped

⁵⁵ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 17 August 1934.

⁵⁶ Interview with Morris Kolevson, 10 July 2002.

⁵⁷ The other parts were played by Sandler, Druker, Shumacher, and Marks. *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 5 October 1934.

⁵⁸ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 7 December 1934.

⁵⁹ Invitation, Gershon Ginsburg collection, Jewish Studies Library, U.C.T. Libraries.

⁶⁰ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 25 July 1935.

⁶¹ Interview with Chaim Klein, 21 November 2000.

⁶² Names identified from photograph.

⁶³ Belitzky, a hairdresser by profession, was the father of Abe Belitzky, who became well known on the Cape Town English stage as Alec Bell,

backstage. The play was such a success that according to Esther Wilkin (Jacobson) it gave impetus to the amateur actors to continue.

“We thought we must carry on and we called the group the *Yiddishe Dramatishe Krayz*, the Yiddish Dramatic Circle. Whole families were involved in the productions and behind scene activities – even the children were roped in to number the tickets by hand. The plays were put on with great enthusiasm, but everything was done cheaply, while some were put together quickly... We finished with one and we put on the other and you never had a chance to study – we weren't professional actors so we just ad-libbed... We all relied on Gordon Ichlov our prompter... The musical arrangements were in the hands of the Koorland brothers, Ralph and Aaron, and Minnie Koorland was our champion ticket seller.”⁶⁴

Thus from 1935 a new group of amateur actors emerged in Cape Town who styled themselves as the Cape Town Jewish Dramatic Circle. Although no longer affiliated to the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* or the *Gezerd*, they remained on the whole Leftist orientated. They included Jack Chanarin, Pesah Barsky, Matle. Zavadsky, Annie Toyk, Max Raysman, Nathan Wollach, J. Herison, M. Kretzmar, M. Himmelsztejn, Miss A. Radowsky, Esther Jacobson, N. Chien and Hirsch and Rochel Turok. Max Raysman, who came to Cape Town from Kovno in Lithuania in 1929 at the age of 16, was the only one of the actors still alive at the time of writing. It was his amazing memory at 89 years old, and his scrapbook, that helped to reconstruct these events. Hirsch and Rochel Turok, immigrants from Latvia who came to Cape Town in the early 1930s, had been active in the Dramatic section of the *Arbeter Fareyn* (Workers' Association) in Libau.⁶⁵ Rochel, an extremely talented amateur actress, who loved to sing revolutionary songs, to paint and to write poetry⁶⁶ became the leading lady on the Yiddish stage in Cape Town. Nathan or Notche Wollach was more often than not her leading man. According to Lozer Karabelnik, a leading Cape Town Yiddishist, Notche Wollach, was a highly talented actor, who could easily have made it on the professional Yiddish stage had he had the opportunity.⁶⁷

Visiting actor-directors, 1935-1939

Between 1935 and 1938 four overseas actor-directors: Sarah Sylvia, Jacob Waislitz, Vera Kanevskaya and Paul Breitman, came to Cape Town to produce plays with the amateurs. In 1935 Sarah Sylvia produced Leon Kobrin's *Ir Erwakhung* (Her Awakening) with the

⁶⁴ Interview with Esther Wilkin, 16 February 1996 in G. Schrire, 'Abiding Yiddishkayt: remembering Rochel Turok.', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 51, no. 4, Summer 1996, p. 45.

⁶⁵ G. Schrire, 'Abiding Yiddishkayt: remembering Rochel Turok.', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 51, no. 4, Summer 1996, p. 43.

⁶⁶ Her poems were published by Kayor in Johannesburg in 1984.

⁶⁷ Interview with Lozer Karabelnik, 31 July 2002.

members of the Zionist society.⁶⁸ In 1937 Yankev Waislitz produced the Sholem Aleichem comedy, *200,000* or *Dos Groyse gevins* (The Great win)⁶⁹ which he had produced in Johannesburg, and the anti-Nazi play, *Professor Mamlock* by Friedrich Wolf, with the Jewish Dramatic Circle.⁷⁰ *Professor Mamlock* had originally been produced by Benny Ozynski for the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* in Johannesburg in 1936. Esther Wilkin (born Jacobson) said that 'with Jacob Waislitz as a producer, the Yiddish Dramatic Circle was put on a very high plane because we now had a professional producer teaching us – we used to ham and improvise, but he was an outstanding teacher.'⁷¹

Between July and November 1938 Vera Kanevska and Paul Breitman produced a series of plays with the Cape Jewish Dramatic Society⁷² These included an evening of humorous one-acters - *Sosl-vert-a-kale* (Sosl becomes a bride), and *Der oppenarter man*, and the full-length productions: *Di Fargesene mame* (The forgotten mother), *Unzer rebele* (Our Rabbi), *Rochel's kinder* (Rachel's children), *A Khasene in Moshav Zekenim* (A Marriage in an old age home) and Gordin's *Mirele Efros*. Max Shadovich (Angorin) and Paul Breitman's brother Nathan, who had settled in Cape Town, also took part. Kanevska and Breitman always took the leads with Max Shadovich, in a supporting role. According to Esther Wilkin, Breitman was not that much of an actor, 'real ham', said she, but he had a magnificent singing voice and his wife inserted many songs into her plays for him.⁷³

As the situation for the Jews in Europe was deteriorating rapidly, Paul Breitman and Vera Kanevska decided to join Paul's brother, Nathan, and to make a permanent home in South Africa. Paul with his wonderful singing voice studied *hazones* with M. Himmelsztein, a local choir master, originally from Warsaw.⁷⁴ The couple moved to Johannesburg where Paul was employed at the Pine Street Synagogue.⁷⁵ In May 1939 Vera Kanevska returned to Cape Town with two more plays, *A Mother's heart* and Gordin's *Kreutzer sonata*. This

⁶⁸ Cast included the actor-director, Herman Kowarsky, Vera Rosen, Miss Zarinasaad, the Dibowitz brothers (M. and P.), and Nathan Brajtman, Paul Breitman's brother who settled in Cape Town in the late 1920's. *South African Jewish Chronicle* June 1935.

⁶⁹ Programme notes, Max Raysman Yiddish theatre collection.

⁷⁰ Programme notes, Max Raysman Yiddish theatre collection.

⁷¹ Esther Wilkin, in G. Schrire, 'Abiding *Yiddishkayt*: remembering Rochel Turok', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 50, no. 4, Summer 1996, pp. 45-46.

⁷² Members included Miss A. Radowsky, R. Slome, B. Nathan (Nathan Brajtman), Rochel Turok, Annie Toyk, S. Rechtenberg, Nathan Wollach, Max Raysman, Jack Chanarin, Jack Isaacson, J. Leibowitz, Hersh Turok, J. Bloch and Henny Breitman, Nathan Breitman's baby daughter. *South African Jewish Chronicle* 6 May- 11 November 1938.

⁷³ Esther Wilkin in, G. Schrire, 'Abiding *Yiddishkayt*: remembering Rochel Turok.', vol. 51, no. 4, *Jewish Affairs*, Summer 1996, p. 45.

⁷⁴ Interview with Max Raysman, 29 August 2002.

⁷⁵ Interview with Mark Brajtman and Hennie Bernstein, 27 November 2000.

time she was not accompanied by her husband and Paul's brother, Nathan, played opposite her.⁷⁶

Although Vera Kanevska and Paul Breitman originally settled in Johannesburg, their story has become part of Cape Town Jewish mythology. This is because of Vera's untimely death in Cape Town in June 1945. In January 1945 Paul and Vera visited Cape Town when they gave what was to be their final concert of Yiddish song.⁷⁷ In April it was announced that Paul had been appointed to the post of *chazen* at the Roeland Street Shul in Cape Town.⁷⁸ He started in May and at the end of June, barely two months later, Vera suddenly fell ill and died. She was only 45 years old. She was buried in the Pinelands Jewish cemetery in Cape Town. Paul Breitman remained on at the Roeland Street Synagogue for another two and a half years, until October 1947,⁷⁹ when he resigned and moved back to Johannesburg.

Amateur theatre, 1940-1947

In the 1940s during World War II and directly after, Yiddish theatre in Cape Town as in Johannesburg, became increasingly scarce, seldom averaging more than one production a year. Ten years had gone by since the Quota Act, and with minimal immigration, by 1946 the proportion of native Yiddish speakers had decreased dramatically to 1 801,⁸⁰ only 9 percent of the total Jewish population of 19 589.⁸¹

During this period plays were produced both by the Paarl Dramatic Society and by the Cape Town Jewish Dramatic Circle to raise money for charity. True to form the Paarl players supported Zionist causes, whilst the more left orientated Jewish Dramatic Circle supported Medical Aid for Russia and later raised money for the victims of the Holocaust. The Paarl Dramatic Society produced three domestic melodramas directed by M. Himmelsztejn. In 1939 *Der Blinder mahler* played to capacity houses in Paarl, Worcester,

⁷⁶ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 2, 7 June 1939.

⁷⁷ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 12 January 1945, *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 26 January 1945.

⁷⁸ Minutes of the Beth Hamidrash Hechadash, Hebrew Congregation, Roeland Street, 21 October 1945. BC 798, A Minutes 1945-1954, Manuscripts and Archives, U.C.T. Libraries.

⁷⁹ Minutes of the Beth Hamidrash Hechadash, Hebrew Congregation, Roeland Street, 28 October 1947. BC 798, A Minutes 1945-1954, Manuscripts and Archives Dept., U.C.T. Libraries.

⁸⁰ Union of South Africa, *Census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 7th May 1946*, vol. 4, 'Languages and literacy', Government Printer, Pretoria, 1953, p. 61.

⁸¹ Union of South Africa. *Population census, 8th May, 1951*, vol. 3, Religions of the White population of the Union of South Africa, together with 1946 census figures for all races of the population. Pretoria: Government Printer, 1954, p. 27.

Ceres, as well as at the Muizenberg Pavilion and the Zionist Hall in Cape Town.⁸² *Di Fartribene tokhter* (The cast out daughter) in 1940⁸³ and *Mayn Yidishe mame* in 1945⁸⁴ were staged at the Zionist Hall in Cape Town exclusively. Participants included Ida Shoolman, Jacob Levinsohn, Mrs E. Jacobson, Frieda and Max Lipschitz, Miriam Esterman, Mrs M. Krawchuk, Issy Swiel, Morris Pernick, Jossie Klitzner, Eileen Cywes, Miss L. Abrahams, Mr Cywes, Bella Katz, and Flower Brauer.

The Jewish Dramatic Circle produced four productions. Two of these, Gotesfeld's *Parnose* (A Living), directed by M. Himmelsztejn in 1941,⁸⁵ and Gordin's *Chasse the Orphan*, directed by Gotkin in April 1943,⁸⁶ were in aid of Medical Aid for Russia. A new name amongst the cast members is that of Aaron Drabkin.⁸⁷ Drabkin, who would seem to have arrived in Cape Town in the late 1930s, styled himself as a poet and actor from the Moscow Art Theatre.⁸⁸ He had a tobacco shop in Long Street in Cape Town,⁸⁹ and also advertised private lessons in Russian language and literature, dramatic art and elocution.⁹⁰ However compared to Ossip Runitch, who performed with the Moscow Art Theatre and who is remembered as one of the greats of the Russian cinema, Drabkin was more of a recitationist than an actor.⁹¹ This would seem to have been the only time that he participated in local Yiddish theatre. In 1941 he was one of a group of performers who accompanied the Cape Town Municipal Orchestra's *A Night with the Russians*,⁹² as well as at the screening of the first movie about life in the Soviet Union, *A Day in Soviet Russia*, at his Majesty's Theatre in Muizenberg.⁹³

After news of the Holocaust reached Cape Town, a concert including the play *Der Khosn* (The Bridegroom) by Der Tunkeler, was held at the Muizenberg Pavilion in January 1946 to raise money for the victims.⁹⁴ In June the proceeds of Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye der Milkhiker* (Tevye the Dairyman), a blockbuster produced to celebrate the 30th anniversary of his death, were also dedicated to the Jewish War Victims. *Tevye der Milkhiker* was

⁸² *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 23 September 1939.

⁸³ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 20 December 1940.

⁸⁴ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 26 October 1945.

⁸⁵ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 12 December 1941.

⁸⁶ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 30 April 1943.

⁸⁷ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 12 December 1941.

⁸⁸ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 8 August 1941.

⁸⁹ Interview with Max Raysman, 29 August 2002.

⁹⁰ Programme notes of *Chasse the orphan*. Max Raysman Yiddish theatre collection.

⁹¹ Interview with Max Raysman, 29 August 2002.

⁹² *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 8 August 1941.

⁹³ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 12 December 1941.

⁹⁴ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 10 January 1946.

produced by Joseph Lazar at the Zionist Hall with Notsche Wollach who gave an outstanding performance as Tevye opposite Rochel Turok's Golde.⁹⁵

A new name as a director, that appears for the first time in January 1947 is that of Berl Padovich (1899-1972), who produced the play *Der Landsman* for a concert of the Zionist Socialist society in Muizenberg in January 1947. Padovich immigrated to Cape Town from Ponevyz in Lithuania via Palestine in 1927. He played a leading role in both Zionist and Yiddish cultural life. Padovich inherited the first Jewish bookstore in Cape Town, Beinkinstadt, established in Canterbury Street in District Six in 1903,⁹⁶ from his father-in-law. It was a regular meeting place for Yiddish speaking intellectuals for many years.⁹⁷

Eastern Cape

Unlike its northern neighbour, Durban, the Eastern Cape towns of Port Elizabeth and East London, were not at all averse to Yiddish. In the early 1930s the effects of the Jewish immigration of the late 1920s was felt particularly in Port Elizabeth. Between 1926 and 1936 the Jewish population of Port Elizabeth, grew from 1 504⁹⁸ to 2 063,⁹⁹ whilst East London grew from 710¹⁰⁰ to 790.¹⁰¹ Max Angorin, the Yiddish actor who also acted under the name of Max Shadovich, seems to have been the initiator of these groups and did much to promote Yiddish theatre in both towns.

A Yiddish Cultural Society was formed in Port Elizabeth in 1931 to provide an environment where the new immigrants could feel at home.¹⁰² According to Sandrow in the 1930s this society imported a guest almost every year to direct the Drama Circle. In addition Max Angorin formed an amateur group to play the smaller cities, where it didn't pay the professionals to visit.¹⁰³ Whilst there is no record of this in Port Elizabeth, in the neighbouring town of East London in 1932 a series of Yiddish plays were produced by

⁹⁵ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 26 July 1946.

⁹⁶ J. Boiskin, 'Benkinstadt's [sic], 1903-1993.', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol., 48, no. 3, 1993, pp. 39-42.

⁹⁷ Interview with Michael Padovich and Leah Jacobson (Padovich), January 2000.

⁹⁸ Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, *Fourth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 4th May, 1926*, Part 8, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1929, p. 15.

⁹⁹ Union of South Africa, *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 6, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1941, p. 19.

¹⁰⁰ Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, *Fourth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 4th May, 1926*, Part 8, Religions, p. 14.

¹⁰¹ Union of South Africa, *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 6, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1941, p. 16.

¹⁰² L. Leibowitz, '25 yor Yidisher Kultur-Klub in Port-Elizabeth', in *Dorem Afrike*, yorg. 9, nom. 2, October 1956, pp. 27-28.

¹⁰³ N. Sandrow, *Vagabond stars*, 1996, pp. 372-373.

Max Angorin for the Jewish Dramatic Circle. These were Sholem Aleichem's *Dos Groyse gevins*,¹⁰⁴ Abel Shaban's *Tsurik aheym* (Back home),¹⁰⁵ and *Dos Yidishe harts* (The Jewish heart).¹⁰⁶ The Chairman of the Jewish Circle was the Reverend A. Altshuler who on occasion provided the music for the plays.¹⁰⁷

According to L. Leibowitz, from Port Elizabeth, in the early days the Port Elizabeth Yiddish Cultural Society was plagued by rivalries between the leftwing and the more traditional Jews and by the end of the 1930's it was no longer active.¹⁰⁸ However with the outbreak of the Second World War and its disastrous outcome for World Jewry, the old rivalries seemed irrelevant and in 1943 the club was revived. The new club undertook to travel to the remote villages in the Platteland, to present a Yiddish programme, and they became known as the *Purim-shpielers*.¹⁰⁹ This could have been the group to which Max Angorin was referring.¹¹⁰ In 1944 after a period of inactivity Max Angorin produced Zolotarevsky's *Shliomke un Rikl* in East London.¹¹¹ In August 1945 it was also performed at the Port Elizabeth City Hall which was packed for the event.¹¹²

Northern Cape

In 1926 Kimberley in the Northern Cape had one of the larger Jewish communities in South Africa outside the main urban centres, numbering 812 souls.¹¹³ Although Kimberley is more known for the forays into amateur dramatics of one of its most famous Jewish sons, the mining magnate, Barney Barnato,¹¹⁴ in 1932 Yiddish plays were on occasion performed there, produced by Ch. Kramer for the Young Israel society.¹¹⁵ A production of Gordin's *Der Yidisher Kenig Lir*, was produced at the Dean's Hall on 8 November 1932.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁴ *Zionist Record*, 29 January 1932.

¹⁰⁵ *Zionist Record*, 12 August 1932.

¹⁰⁶ *Zionist Record*, 25 November 1932.

¹⁰⁷ *Zionist Record*, 29 January 1932.

¹⁰⁸ L. Leibowitz, '25 yor Yidisher Kultur-Klub in Port-Elizabeth', in *Dorem Afrike*, yorg. 9, nom. 2, October 1956, p. 27-28; *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung* 22 December 1944.

¹⁰⁹ L. Leibowitz, 'On the "Yiddishe Kultur" wagon', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 11, November 1948, pp. 14-15.

¹¹⁰ N. Sandrow, *Vagabond stars*, 1996, pp. 372-373.

¹¹¹ *South African Jewish Times*, 27 October 1944.

¹¹² *South African Jewish Times*, 31 August 1945.

¹¹³ Union of South Africa, Office of Census and Statistics, Pretoria, *Fourth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 4th May, 1926*, Part 8, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1929, p. 14.

¹¹⁴ J. Fletcher, *The story of theatre in South Africa: a guide to its history from 1780-1930*, Vlaeberg, Cape Town, 1994, p. 101.

¹¹⁵ *Oykh a khasene* was presented by the Young Israel Society, as part of a Hebrew School concert at the Zionist Hall on the 5th of August 1932. *Zionist Record*, 5 August 1932.

¹¹⁶ *Zionist Record*, 11 November 1932.

Conclusion

The Cape Yiddish speaking community never had the same aspirations to establish a Yiddish theatre as the community in the Transvaal. In the Cape the amateur Yiddish plays served more as an expression of Jewish nationalism and pride, rather than as a serious attempt to create a theatre. The first and last time the idea of creating a permanent Yiddish theatre was expressed in the Jewish press, was after the production of *Tevye der Milkhiker* in July 1946.¹¹⁷ However one must put this down to wishful thinking. Cape Town simply never had that broad a base of Yiddish speakers, and being more anglicised, suffered even more from prejudice to the Yiddish language. Also with one or two exceptions, Cape Town never had the depth of talent, in the field of acting or direction as their colleagues further north, where a number of the actor-directors had Eastern European background, training and experience in Yiddish theatre. Nonetheless what they lacked in numbers and talent they made up for in enthusiasm, and the Dramatic Circle was one of only four surviving Yiddish cultural societies in Cape Town to send delegates to the founding conference of the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* in June 1947.

¹¹⁷ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 26 July 1946.



1. Meier Tzelniker & Bertha Englander
The Merchant of Venice, 1951



2.



3. Benny Ozynski, Faivl Zygielbaum, Hannan Hirsch, Meier Tzelniker, 1951



4. Max Perlman, Gurta Galina & Co., Israel Zygielbaum, Anna Rappel, Sarah Sylvia, Aaron Alexandrov, Bertha Englander

Sitting: Yosef Cherniavsky, Benny Ozynski, Masha Pincus, Shmuel Zilberberg. 1948



5. Njusia Gold



6. Benny Ozynski & Max Perlman



7. Commemorative album:

Draysik yor teater-gang fun Yankev Mansdorf Yankev Mansdorf's thirty years on the stage, 1954



8. Njusia Gold & Yankev Mansdorf in *Tevye der Milkhiker - Tevye the Dairyman*

Yidisher Folks-Teater, 1954

A SHORT LIVED REVIVAL

CAPE TOWN

1947-1960



1. Michael Kretzmar & Rochel Turok

Riverside Drive, 1951

2. Avrom Rubinstein, Nathan Wollach, Rochel Turok & Director, Yankev Mansdorf

Der Nayer Burgermayster - The New Mayor, 1954

3. Yankev Mansdorf

& the

Cape Town Jewish Dramatic Society, 1954



Small text at the bottom of the group photo, likely a list of names or a dedication, which is mostly illegible due to the image quality.

CHAPTER 7. A SHORT LIVED REVIVAL, 1947-1960

The major influence on Yiddish theatre worldwide during this period were the aftereffects of the Holocaust. The Holocaust wiped out the majority of Yiddish speakers in Europe, destroyed its Yiddish theatre and most of the Eastern European Yiddish actors. Those that survived travelled the world in search of a stage. Paradoxically the newly established State of Israel was not supportive of Yiddish theatre, still regarding the large number of Yiddish speakers as a threat to Hebrew the official language of the State. In addition even in the United States Yiddish theatre audiences were waning owing to assimilation. As a result during the 1950s a record number of Yiddish actor-directors reached South African shores to perform and to direct the local amateurs. Thus despite the succession of failures in the previous period, hopes to establish an independent South African Yiddish theatre would not die. However as Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe had been reduced to a mere trickle, South African Yiddish was growing stale, and the number of native Yiddish speakers was dwindling. Whilst in 1936, the number of Yiddish speakers was recorded as 17 687,¹ representing 20 percent of the community, by 1951 this number had almost been halved to 9 970² and represented only 9 percent of the community. With Yiddish education, in Johannesburg, catering for very small numbers, and in Cape Town to a mere handful, the language was not being transferred to the next generation.

Transvaal

From a social and demographic point of view the Eastern European Jewish immigrants and their locally born children had prospered. In Johannesburg they gradually spread out of the immigrant precincts of Doornfontein, Jeppe and Fordsburg, into the northern suburbs of Cyrildene, Yeoville and Houghton.³ The famous Yiddish writer and traveller, Henry Shoshkes, visited South Africa in 1947 on behalf of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). In his description of his travels *Mayn rayze arum der velt* (My journey around the world) he describes "Prenova,"⁴ the palatial home of Abel Shaban, who came to South Africa as a penniless immigrant from Lithuania in 1927. With heavy irony he refers to the fountains, the long tables set for the honoured guests 'groaning with the abundance of Africa's earth', the dozen Black waiters who included a Zulu who spoke Yiddish, the Chagall painting and the antiques that adorned the house. On the other hand, the rich

¹ Union of South Africa. *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 4, Languages, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1938, p. 68.

² Union of South Africa. *Population census, 8th May, 1951*, vol. 6, Languages and literacy, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1958, p. 87.

³ T. Adler, *History of Jewish Workers' clubs*, 1977, p. 47.

Jews of Johannesburg did not support the Yiddish *Folkshul*, in Doornfontein, which had barely 60 pupils and was struggling to exist.⁵

However the most important event for the history of Yiddish theatre during this period was the establishment of the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* – the South African Yiddish Cultural Federation - at a national conference which took place in Johannesburg in June 1947. The *Kultur Federatsye*, as it was commonly referred to, served to create an alliance between the many societies and institutions which had an interest in preserving and promoting Yiddish culture. From Johannesburg these included the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, the Cultural Department of the Zionist Socialist Party, the Yiddish *Folkshul*, the Humanistic College, the Literary Circle, the Federation of Lithuanian Jews, the Polish Club, the Vilna Society, Ort Oze, the S.A. Jewish Historical and Sociological Society, "Ophir",⁶ the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung* (African Jewish newspaper). From Cape Town they included the Jewish Cultural Circle, the Jewish Dramatic Circle, the Friends of Birobidjan and the Cultural Section of the Zionist Socialist Party. Delegates were also sent from Yiddish Cultural Circles in Port Elizabeth and East London, the Jewish Educational Council in Durban, Bloemfontein, Pretoria, Vereeniging, Benoni, Brits and Bulawayo.⁷

The idea of convening a national conference was the brainchild of the Port Elizabeth Yiddish Culture Club.⁸ However the influence of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* in the arrangements was evident in that the conference was originally scheduled to take place on the eve and the day of the Jewish festival of *Shavuot* in the hall of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* at 45 Upper Meyer Street in Doornfontein. To avoid antagonising the community the members of the club were prevailed upon to postpone the date to the eve of 31 May and day of 1 June 1947 to avoid the Jewish holiday.⁹ The Federation aimed to incorporate all the Yiddish cultural societies of all political shades, within a strictly cultural non-politically affiliated federation. The small Leftist Yiddish societies had in any case been doomed by the overriding Zionist sentiments of the vast majority of South African Jewry and by the

⁴ The name "Prenova" was created from the synthesis of the names of the villages of Pren and Krakinova, in Lithuania, the villages that Shaban and his wife came from.

⁵ H. Shoshkes, *Mayn rayze arum der velt*, Unzer Bukh, Buenos Aires, 1951, pp. 260-264.

⁶ 'Ophir', the Jewish Arts Association of South Africa, was a society for the promotion of the Jewish contribution to all branches of the arts in South Africa. It was founded in Johannesburg in 1945 at the instigation of Faivl Zygielbaum. Although most of its participants seem to have been Yiddish speaking immigrants, the society was not dedicated exclusively to Yiddish culture. *S.A. Jewish Times and Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 23 February 1945.

⁷ M. Szur, 'Why Yiddish should be kept alive in South Africa', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 7, July 1947, pp. 34-35.

⁸ L. Leibowitz, '25 yor Yidisher Kultur-Klub in Port-Elizabeth', in *Dorem Afrike* 9-ter yorg., nom. 2, October 1956, pp. 27-28.

⁹ *S.A. Jewish Times* 16 May 1947.

rapid upward mobility of their members most of whom could no longer be classified as workers. Thus the newly formed South African Yiddish Cultural Federation was no longer anti-Zionist and anti-religious in character. Indeed its founding conference voted to include the teaching of Hebrew as a subject in the *Folkshul*. In any case in January 1948 the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* officially reversed its anti-Zionist stance taking a decision to support the Jewish State.¹⁰ Indeed after Stalin's purges of the Yiddish writers in 1952 many former anti-Zionists became staunch supporters of the Jewish state.¹¹

The birth of the *Kultur Federatsye* heralded a period of flowering of Yiddish cultural activities, including lecture series and reading groups, which were patronised by far larger numbers than the previous small radical groups. Besides the main centres of Johannesburg and Cape Town, the *Kultur Federatsye* had active groups in many of the smaller towns around Johannesburg, such as Boksburg, Benoni, Witbank, Klerksdorp, Krugersdorp, Germiston and Vereeniging, in Durban in Natal, Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State, and Port Elizabeth and East London in the Eastern Cape. For the first time a Yiddish cultural organisation received a subsidy from the United Communal Fund.¹² In September 1948 the *Kultur Federatsye* began publishing a monthly journal, *Dorem Afrike*, which lasted until 1991, providing a forum for South African Yiddish literature and also attracting many contributions from abroad. In 1949 a Yiddish publishing house, Kayor, was established by Nathan Berger and Joseph Borwein, which between 1949 and 1962, published six collections of essays and short stories, six volumes of poetry and one novel.¹³

Yiddish theatre remained high on the agenda of the *Kultur Federatsye* and a concerted effort was made to unite all the various dramatic groups and talents in Johannesburg. Remarkably at a meeting of all the Yiddish actors in Johannesburg, on the 13th of July 1950, all the ideological conflicts of the previous period were set aside, and members of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, agreed to unite under the umbrella of the *Yidische Kultur Federatsye*.¹⁴ The meeting was chaired by Benny Ozynski, the chairman of the Dramatic

¹⁰ S.A. *Jewish Times* 30 January 1948.

¹¹ Saul Ozynski relates that after his father, Benny, Chairman of the Dramatic Section of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, heard of Stalin's murder of the Jewish intellectuals, he became a staunch Zionist and his dream, unfortunately never realised, was to settle in Israel. Interview with Saul Ozynski, 13 October 2001.

¹² An initial amount of 10 000 pounds was allocated for the initial work and a sum of 2 500 pounds was allocated for administrative and organisational work. S.A. *Jewish Times*, 6 June 1947.

¹³ J. Sherman, 'Literature: Yiddish and Hebrew', in *South African Jewry: a contemporary survey*, ed. M. Arkin, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1984, p. 154.

¹⁴ 'Kultur khronik: a dramatishe krayz', in *Dorem Afrike* 2-ter yorg., nom. 11, July 1950, pp. 27-28.

Section of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, with Faivl Zygielbaum, R. Shalit, a local Hebrew teacher with an interest in Yiddish,¹⁵ and Niusia Gold, a Yiddish actress, who arrived in Johannesburg in December 1949, who played a central role in Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg between 1950 and 1955.¹⁶ Niusia Gold began performing in Yiddish theatre at the time of the Russian revolution when her family moved to Constantinople. She performed in troupes in Greece, Rumania and Poland and in 1936 went over to the *kleynkunst* (cabaret) stage. She survived internment in a concentration camp and after the war she helped in the establishment of the Yiddish Art Theatre in Paris, gave solo concerts in France, England, Switzerland and Scandinavia, and in the D.P. camps. She acted in the film, *Undzere kinder*, about the fate of the children in the Holocaust. She was invited to South Africa by the Jewish Musical Institute.¹⁷

The new Dramatic Section of the *Kultur Federatsye* resolved: to direct two plays at a time; to organise *kleynkunst* evenings and recitals, to build a theatre and to bring out a Yiddish artist from overseas to organise and direct the local amateurs.¹⁸ The two biggest obstacles in the way of establishing a Yiddish theatre for Johannesburg, were the lack of a suitable theatre and the lack of a suitable director. The commercial theatres were too large and too expensive to hire, whilst the available halls were grossly inadequate. Thus the question of building a theatre loomed large on the agenda of the *Kultur Federatsye* during this period. In April 1950 a grandiose plan was revealed to build a permanent Yiddish theatre of 10 000 square feet on a corner of a Johannesburg city street, with the idea of staging Jewish theatre, concerts and films in Yiddish, English and Afrikaans with local and overseas talent.¹⁹ However nothing materialised and in 1952 the intention to build a theatre was again announced in the Jewish press.²⁰ A resolution to build a theatre was passed unanimously at the Second National conference of the *Yidishe Kultur Federatsye*. However at the Third National Conference in September 1954 nothing had yet been done.²¹

A number of actor-directors were brought out during this period, with the aim of securing a permanent Yiddish theatre director. The visitors included Tamara Samsonov from

¹⁵ Gideon Shimoni remembers participating in a Yiddish play produced by R. Shalit, who was his Hebrew teacher. Interview, March 2000.

¹⁶ "Folks teater" tetikeyt', in *Dorem Afrike*, 6-ter yorg., nom. 6, February 1954, p. 31.

¹⁷ 'Vort konsert fun Niusia Gold', in *Dorem Afrike*, 2-ter yorg., nom. 4, December 1949, p. 29.

¹⁸ 'Kultur khronik: a dramatishe krayz', in *Dorem Afrike*, 2-ter yorg., nom. 11, July 1950, p. 28.

¹⁹ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 25 April 1950.

²⁰ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 23 May 1952.

²¹ '3-te Land Konferents fun der D.A. Yidishe Kultur Federatsye', in *Dorem Afrike*, 7-tr yorg., nom. 2, October 1954, p. 31.

Habimah in Israel in 1949, Meier Tzelniker from London in 1951, Yankev Mansdorf from Israel between 1953 and 1955 and Diana Blumenfeld and Jonas Turkow from New York in 1956. However even when in 1954 Yankev Mansdorf was prepared to act as Organising Secretary of the *Kultur Federatsye*, so that he could continue his dramatic work, it did not materialise and no clear explanation was provided.

The postwar years are the best documented period in the history of Yiddish theatre in South Africa. They were served by four English Jewish weeklies: the *Zionist Record*, the *S.A. Jewish Times*, and the *Jewish Herald* in Johannesburg, and the *S.A. Jewish Chronicle* in Cape Town, the Yiddish weekly, *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, in Johannesburg, and by two new monthly journals, the Yiddish, *Dorem Afrike*, and the English, *Jewish Affairs*, with the talented Dora Sowden, as theatre critic. On occasion Yiddish theatre even aroused considerable attention in the general press. Nonetheless Yiddish life during this period lacks the vibrancy and the authenticity of the previous. This is because of the lack of immigration combined with the accelerating acculturation. Whilst in 1936 the number of native Yiddish speakers in the Transvaal, had numbered 11 528²² or 21 percent²³ by 1951 the number had been reduced to 6 932²⁴ or 10 percent,²⁵ and by 1960 to 3 468²⁶ or 5 percent.²⁷ Moreover as Yiddish life in the diaspora had lost its Eastern European centre, the source of its inspiration and nourishment, the visiting artists, who included several Holocaust survivors, appear as ships that have been cut adrift that have lost their focus.

Repertoire was entirely dependent on the whims of the visiting artists. Thus although Yiddish theatre was plentiful it appears somewhat artificial rather than spontaneous. It varied between stale versions of Goldfaden and Gordin, and more modern ambitious plays, such as Hayim Sloves' *Nekome nemer* (The Avenger) or Fodor's *Yugnt ruft* (The call of youth). Often the modern plays were not really appreciated by South African

²² Union of South Africa, *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 4. 'Languages', Government Printer, Pretoria, 1938, p. 62.

²³ 53 924 Jews in the Transvaal. Union of South Africa. *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 6, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1941, p. 29.

²⁴ Union of South Africa, *Population census, 8th May, 195*, vol. 6, Languages and literacy, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1958, p. 85.

²⁵ 68 962 Jews in the Transvaal. Union of South Africa, *Population census, 8th May, 1951*, vol. 3, Religions of the White population of the Union of South Africa, together with 1946 census figures for all races of the population, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1956, p. 22.

²⁶ Republic of South Africa, *Population census, 6th September, 1960*, vol. 7, no. 1, Characteristics of the population in each magisterial district and economic region, age, marital status and home language, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1968, p. 135.

²⁷ 74 221 Jews in the Transvaal. South Africa, Bureau of Statistics. *Statistical Year Book 1964*, compiled by the Bureau of Statistics, Pretoria. Bureau of Statistics, Pretoria, 1963, p. A-28.

audiences whose Yiddish was growing stale. For them the classics, such as Sholem Aleichem's *200 000*, or Max Perlman's light musical comedies, were much more accessible and enjoyable. Only one original play about South African Jewish life was written and produced during this period. This was Gershon Fine's *Der Profeshyonal* (the Professional) a satire about parents, 'allrightniks' (wealthy Jews) who are looking for a husband who is a 'professional' for their daughter to marry.²⁸ It was produced by the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* in 1948,²⁹ and in English translation at the Jewish Guild in 1950.³⁰ In October 1949 Richard Feldman's original play, *Trayers* (Triers), was read at a play reading evening organised by Faivl Zygielbaum.³¹ Whilst the directors during this period were mainly visiting artists, the group of actors remained virtually unchanged, the majority being the members of the Dramatic Section of the former *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*.

South Africa's pioneer Yiddish actor, Hannan Hirsch, gave his swansong during this period in a performance of Fishl Birnko's play *Dembes* (Oak trees)³² directed by Faivl Zygielbaum at the Technical college in Eloff Street in March 1950. Hirsch died in 1953.³³ Sarah Sylvia, the Grande Dame of South African Yiddish theatre, launched into a belated career on the South African English stage with an impressive performance in *Death of a Salesman* opposite the famous visiting American Yiddish actor, Jacob Ben Ami. However she too gave her swansong on the Yiddish stage at the age of seventy with a performance of Gordin's *Mirele Efros* in 1960. It is during this period that the works of Sholem Aleichem took to the boards of the English stage. Needless to say the Yiddish actors were first in line to bring his immortal characters alive in English translation on the South African stage.

²⁸ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung* 17 March 1950.

²⁹ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung* 12 March 1948.

³⁰ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung* 17 March 1950.

³¹ *S.A. Jewish Times* 18 November 1949.

³² *Dembes* is set in an isolated Eastern European village. It is the story of a father and son who fall in love with the same woman, the beautiful daughter of the village shopkeeper, who is taken into their home when the wife and mother of the family falls ill. The young girl has a love affair with the son but when the wife dies, marries the father. The strained relations between father and son, creates an atmosphere of vengeance and inescapable dread, which fills the action with tension, right to the final scene of the play. Programme notes, Yiddish theatre programmes donated by Ben Moshe, ARCH 914, S.A. Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg.

³³ F. Zygielbaum, 'Baym frishn keyver fun a Yidishn artist', in *Dorem Afrike* 6-ter yorg., nom. 1, September 1953, pp. 27-28; D. Sowden, 'The end of an episode: Hannan Hirsch: Yiddish actor, 1873-1953,' in *Jewish Affairs* vol. 9, no. 2, 1954, p. 34.

Visiting companies, solo artists, writers.

This period is characterised by a record number of visiting companies and solo artists. They included Molly Picon and her husband Jacob Kalisch who performed at the Standard theatre in 1947,³⁴ Max Perlman and Guita Galina and company, brought out by Sarah Sylvia from Argentina in 1948, 1949³⁵ and 1953.³⁶ Perlman, a consummate entertainer, comedian, singer, dancer and song writer, delighted South African audiences and had the whole community humming his tunes. In 1948 his first musical revue played for eight weeks at His Majesty's Theatre and drew record attendances. In the first two weeks 20 000 Jews attended his show, exploding the myth that South African audiences were so anglicised that they did not appreciate Yiddish.³⁷ Perlman's light hearted style alienated the Yiddish intellectual elite, the *faynshmekers* (super-purists), and divided the community into three groups:

"First the so-called common man who goes to see light comedy because he likes light comedy, wants an evening's entertainment- and gets it. Secondly the group of *kulturmenschen* who go to see these light comedies in order to sneer and deride. They speak nostalgically about Great Yiddish Drama and sneak back again to gather more material for derision.

The third group are the Super-Purists who have refrained from attending any of these performances, but loudly voice their disapproval. This, they say, is not Yiddish theatre."³⁸

In 1949 Johannesburg audiences thrilled to the voice of the world renowned cantor, Moishe Oysher, well known from his records and from his movie, *Dem hazens zundl*. In 1950 Sarah Sylvia brought over Mark Markov and Etta Topol from London with a company assembled in France.³⁹ In 1950 and 1951 respectively, the celebrated Yiddish poets, Avrom Sutzkever⁴⁰ and Yosef Papiernikov,⁴¹ visited South Africa from Israel. A volume of Papiernikov's poems, *Frukht fun vint*, was published by the *Kultur Federatsye* in Johannesburg.⁴² In 1952 the Israeli artists, Meir Margalit and Fela Feld visited South

³⁴ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 18 July 1947.

³⁵ *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 4, 17 February 1949.

³⁶ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 30 January 1953; *Jewish Herald* 20 February 1953.

³⁷ Ben Shmaryahu, 'Mahapekhah mamash', in *Barkai*, shanah 17, gilayon 143, October 1948, p. 12. In 1948 the local actors: Max Angorin, Benny Ozynski, Israel Zygielbaum, Bertha Englander, and Masha Pincus performed with them.

³⁸ A. Misheiker, 'The Yiddish theatre causes a stir', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 12, December 1948, pp. 28-29.

³⁹ The cast included R. Abramowitz, Harry Ariel and three South Africans: Sarah Sylvia, her sister, Elise Sylvia, and Max Angorin. It also included Chayele Rosenthal who later settled in Cape Town. After their season in South Africa, Markov was offered a job in a clothing factory in Bulawayo in Zimbabwe, where he and his wife settled. In Bulawayo Markov, a staunch Revisionist and long time friend of Israel's Revisionist leader, Menachem Begin, ran the Betar movement. In the seventies he finally went on *aliyah* to Israel. Interview with Arthur Kaplan, editor of the Zimbabwean Jewish journal, *Central African Digest*, 25 May 2000.

⁴⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 17 November 1950.

⁴¹ E. Winik, 'Y. Papyernikov kumt oyf a bazukh keyn Dorem Afrike', in *Dorem Afrike*, 4-ter yorg., nom. 3, 1951, p. 29.

⁴² Y Papiernikov, *Frukht fun vint*, Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye, Johannesburg, 1952.

Africa.⁴³ In 1954 Johannesburg had the opportunity to see the great Maurice Schwartz together with his legendary Yiddish Art Theatre from New York, in a season of seven plays which included his most famous role, Yoshe Kalb.⁴⁴

In 1955 Chayele Grober from Montreal, one of the founding members of the Hebrew Habimah Theatre in Russia, gave solo concerts in Hebrew and Yiddish,⁴⁵ Benzion Vitler and Shifra Lerer with a troupe from Argentina, presented a light musical comedy at the Technical College in Eloff Street,⁴⁶ and the famous Joseph Buloff, veteran of the Vilna Troupe and of Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater, who had gone over to the English stage to act and direct on Broadway,⁴⁷ gave a recital at the Brian Brookes Theatre. In the second half of the programme, he produced Chekov's *Di Makhashefe* (The Witch), together with Bertha Englander and Sidney Marks. In January 1956 he presented the comedy *Der Kibitser* with the S.A. Jewish Theatre and a cast from South America.⁴⁸ In 1956 Shmuel Rozshansky, Professor of Yiddish language and literature at the Teacher's Training College in Buenos Aires, and the editor of the *Musterverk fun Yidisher literatur* series, a selection of the greatest Yiddish literary works, came out to promote Dubnov's newly published ten volume history of the Jews, and also gave a series of lectures.⁴⁹ In 1957 Herz Grosbard paid a return visit after thirty years and gave some memorable Yiddish recitals.⁵⁰ All these performances in relatively quick succession were thrilling for South African audiences at the time: however these visits also had a hollow ring auguring the future decline. The doyen of stage and cinema, Charles Stodel's remarks after the highly successful season of Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre captures the ambivalence when he says:

"...the Maurice Schwartz season has not been the fantastic success it would have been 25 years ago. By this I mean that it was a success not because it drew large audiences – which it did – but because it drew the audiences in quite an extraordinary way. The middle-age Jewish theatregoer came again and again...

... whether it pays to bring out so large a company is another matter. Putting on a Yiddish show that will draw is as expensive as putting on a pantomime. Plays like the Sholem

⁴³ 'An emotsyoneler kleynkunst-ovent: a vort vegn Fela Feld', in *Dorem Afrike*, 4-ter yorg., nom. 11, July 1952, p. 28

⁴⁴ D. Sowden, 'Yiddish theatre in South Africa', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 9, 1954, p. 44.

⁴⁵ 'Le-vo'a shel Chayele Grober', in *Barkai*, shanah 22, gilayon 179, June 1955, p. 18.

⁴⁶ 'Hazlahat ha-lehakah ha-Yehudit', in *Barkai*, shanah 22, gilayon 179, June 1955, p. 20.

⁴⁷ On Broadway he directed *Mr McThing*, appeared in John Hersey's *The Wall*, (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1972, vol 4, p. 1497), created role of Ali Hakim in *Oklahoma*, also appeared in films such as *Silk Stockings*, etc.

⁴⁸ Dav, "'Der Kibitser" mit Yoysef Bulov', in *Dorem Afrike*, 8-ter yorg., nom. 5, January, 1956, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Z. Plong, 'Shmuel Rozshansky: mentsh un gloyber'; Ben Shlomo, 'Kaboles ponim far Shmuel Rozshansky' in *Dorem Afrike*, 9-ter yorg., nom. 4, December, 1956, pp. 55, 62.

⁵⁰ D.L. Sowden, 'A lean year in the arts for S.A. Jewry' in *The South African Jewish Year Book, 1957-58*, Fieldhill Publishing, Johannesburg, 1958, p. 52.

Aleichem comedies are static and do not require much staging. But panoramic plays like *Brothers Ashkenazi*, *Yoshe Kalb* and *Family Carnovsky* needed a small army of back-stage staff. It becomes prohibitive unless you think of the season as a prestige point. We are expected to bring such companies and we do it.

Is there a future for such large-scale Yiddish productions? The answer is no. The contemporary age does not understand Yiddish. Perhaps there is room for the Jewish musical which does not require such thorough knowledge of the language...

Strolling players, in the troubedour sense – people who act in Yiddish for the love of it and travel around the world just making their way and not on a salary basis – can perhaps succeed in carrying on. But even they will find that their audiences have dwindled in 10 years' time...

We have practical proof of this with Yiddish films. Before the war, a good Yiddish film could do business at one of the smaller cinema houses. Today it is difficult to make it go even when the film is bubbling over with talent."⁵¹

Amateur theatre.

Tamara Samsonov from the Habimah Theatre in Israel and a graduate of the Royal Academy in London,⁵² was the first guest artist to be brought out by the *Kultur Federatsye* to direct the Dramatic Section which consisted of 30 members. Samsonov was already familiar to Johannesburg audiences, having come to South Africa in August 1942, to raise money for the newly founded Habimah in Palestine, performing in Hebrew and English.⁵³ In January 1949 she chose the extremely serious and intellectual play, *Di Nekome nemer* (The avenger) by Dr Hayim Sloves, which dealt with the subject of the anti-Facist Resistance movement in France, in which Sloves had participated. It is part of a trilogy, consisting of *Oyf di vegn fun Frankraykh* (On the roads of France) and *Di Gele late* (The Yellow spot) and is dedicated to the memory of Sloves' family who were murdered in Treblinka and Maidanek. However it was considered by some to be too ambitious a choice as the first production of the *Kultur Federatsye* as it is built around the individual characters on whose performances the play is entirely dependent for its success.⁵⁴

Besides rehearsals, the members of the Dramatic Section were given a course in theatre studies, stagecraft, and rhetoric. The demanding lead role of Victor, the leader of the Partisan group, was the first appearance on the Yiddish stage, of Fred Bachmeyer, a veteran of the Reps and the Playmakers, who was praised for his 'sensitive, controlled and sympathetic performance'. Rachel Rappaport, who played the part of the announcer, was also singled out for her fine diction and enunciation. Tamara Samsonov, herself

⁵¹ D. Sowden, 'Yiddish theatre in South Africa', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 9, September 1954, p. 44.

⁵² *Nekome nemer* programme notes, Bertha Englander Yiddish theatre collection, ARCH 914, S. A. Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg.

⁵³ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 28 August 1942. She married Nathan Melmed, the Chairman of the Port Elizabeth Zionist Society, *S.A. Jewish Times*, 21 March 1945.

⁵⁴ See letter to the editor in the *Afrikaner Idishe Tsaytung*, 11 February 1949.

played the small part of Martha.⁵⁵ Rene Shapshak designed the sets and the costumes. The performances in Benoni and at the Coronation Hall in Johannesburg in February 1949,⁵⁶ were enthusiastically received.⁵⁷

In a lighter vein in 1949 Esta Stein, the English Yiddish actress, familiar to South African audiences from the 1920s, returned to Johannesburg with her partner, Joseph Greenspun, to produce plays with the local amateurs. These plays were staged at Ginsburg's Hall, the home of the South African Jewish Musical Institute which had been decorated by Rene Shapshak with motifs from Sholem Aleichem. Their first play *The Streets talk* by the Yiddish playwright J. Markovitz, proved to be so popular that it was hoped that the company, which included many familiar names from the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, would form the basis of a permanent Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg.⁵⁸ The group began rehearsing a second play, *The Devil's kiss*, after which unfortunately nothing much is heard of them again.

Guest directors: Meier Tzelniker and the *Yidisher Afrikaner Teater* (YA" T)

In June 1951 the *Kultur Federatsye* invited the Yiddish actor-director Meier Tzelniker out from London for a period of six months, to produce a number of plays with a view to establishing a permanent Yiddish theatre for Johannesburg. Tzelniker the popular English Yiddish actor, was not unknown to Johannesburg audiences having performed in the London Company, brought out by Sarah Sylvia in 1938. Tzelniker formed a company with the local amateurs under the name of YA" T *Yidisher Afrikaner Teater*. He produced three plays in all but by far his most ambitious production, which attracted the most attention because its content if not its language was accessible to the general public, was Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*.

It is ironic that Shakespeare's one play, which depicts the Jew in the most deplorable light, describing his 'extreme cruelty... in cutting a just pound of his flesh',⁵⁹ should be one of those that enjoyed the greatest popularity on the Yiddish stage. The Yiddish version, however, is an adaptation rather than a verbatim translation, which focuses on the character of Shylock with the aim of redeeming him. It was generally somewhat

⁵⁵ S.A. *Jewish Times*, 11 February 1949.

⁵⁶ 'Fun der D.A. Yidishe Kultur-Federatsye: forshtelungen fun "Nekome-nemer" in Yohanesburg un in Provints', in *Dorem Afrike* 1-ter yorg., nom. 6, February 1949, p. 29.

⁵⁷ S.A. *Jewish Times*, 11 February 1949.

⁵⁸ S.A. *Jewish Times*, 20 May 1949.

⁵⁹ Gross, John. *Shylock: four hundred years in the life of a legend*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1992, p. 1.

abbreviated - Tzelniker's version contained only 13 of the original 18 scenes⁶⁰ – and ended with the resolution of the court case, leaving out the fifth act altogether.⁶¹ The production aroused a huge controversy in the local press. Strangely the strongest objections were raised by the Anglo-Jewish press, whilst the English and Afrikaans presses were quite enchanted by what they declared to be 'the kind of experiment by which the theatre ultimately lives', pronouncing 'Tzeniker's Shylock... [to be] essentially true to Shakespeare's delineation – a vengeful Shylock, perhaps a cruel Shylock, but at the same time a proud Shylock, always human and, throughout, less wrong than wronged.'⁶² Whilst *Die Transvaler* declared that, "n splinternuwe koopman van Venisie is gister aand aan toneelgangers voorgestel deur die Joodse teatergroep...";⁶³ and *The Star* of August 23, commended the show as,

"... a stage production in the grand style which every lover of Shakespeare and the theatre should go to see, if only in the interests of dramatic truth, justice and fair play. That the performance is in Yiddish may seem to make it difficult to follow for those who have little or nothing of that tongue. But for anyone with even the merest nodding acquaintance with the play – and what theatre-lover falls below that minimum standard? – the acting, the mime and the passionate, swift sequence of event make the performance easy to follow; although, of course, most of Shakespeare's art of poetry is lost in the translation..."

The *Rand Daily Mail* even printed a letter to the editor:

"Sir, - Having seen the Afrikaans version of "Macbeth", I was curious to see what "The Merchant of Venice", presented by the Yiddish Company, would be like and especially the interpretation of Shylock. I therefore went along the other evening in a most critical manner, and was pleasantly surprised – in fact, "thrilled" would be a better word – when I saw Mr Tzelniker's presentation of Shylock. I have only just arrived in this country and have seen many Shakespearean companies, including, of course, the renowned Laurence Olivier and Donald Wolfit in England, but I must confess that I found this new Shylock a most interesting and unique portrayal. Although not understanding a word of Yiddish, I could clearly follow the story, especially in the court scene where Shylock and Portia come to grips. The whole performance only confirms what I have always thought – that Shakespeare can be portrayed and is entertaining in any language. – Lancelot St. John-Edwards."⁶⁴

The Yiddish monthly, *Dorem Afrike*, agreed with the *Rand Daily Mail* and *The Star*, and it is possible that the review was written by one and the same person.⁶⁵ The Yiddish reviewer felt that Tzelniker's characterisation was 'honest and sincere. His Shylock was a stern, calculated, avaricious, and vengeful person, but one who was driven to this by a

⁶⁰ *Merchant of Venice* programme notes. Bertha Englander Yiddish theatre collection, ARCH 914, S.A. Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg.

⁶¹ See J. Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the Yiddish stage*, Iowa: Iowa University Press, 2002, Chapter 5, 'A true Jewish Jew: a Shylock quartet.'

⁶² *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 August 1951.

⁶³ *Die Transvaler*, 23 August 1951.

⁶⁴ *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 August 1951.

band of unsuccessful unashamed Christian noblemen (exactly as calculated and petty as the Jew himself)... However he was a proud Shylock, who was able to confront the ruler of Venice with dignity at a time when Venice ruled the Adriatic Sea...⁶⁶

On the other hand the Anglo-Jewish press adopted a fundamentalist approach, comparing Shakespeare's text to that of the Hebrew Bible and objecting to any liberties whatsoever being taken with it.

"For Torah is Torah and you can't go leaving Leviticus out of the Pentateuch because the idea of animal sacrifices upsets you. And Shakespeare is dramatic Torah. You can't chop and change Hamlet because you want the Prince less indecisive, or the Merchant because you want Shylock more humane and "nice." Mr Tzelniker however thought he could."⁶⁷

They charged that *The Merchant of Venice* was conceived as a comedy and that it was never Shakespeare's intention to present Shylock as a tragic hero. Because 'Shakespeare was concerned with drama and character not with arguing causes – racial, political or moral' He would never have 'changed his approach in order to argue a case for a Jewry of which there were no members in England at the time and to pronounce judgement on the laws of Venice.'⁶⁸

Morover no less a personage than Chief Rabbi Rabinowitz, publicly denounced Tzelniker's Shylock as 'A distortion of Jewish ethics and a disservice to Yiddish culture.' Whilst admiring Tzelniker, the actor, Rabinowitz objected to his transformation of Shylock into a 'respectable Jewish character since Shakespeare so cleverly drew him as 'powerful, stern, avaricious, a money-lender, a Jew who hates a Christian gentleman and would take his life.' Two factors in Tzelniker's manipulation of the text particularly incensed the Rabbi. The first was Tzelniker's justification of Shylock's desire to demand his pound of flesh on the grounds of his daughter's elopement with a gentile and her stealing of his jewels, when in the original text, Shylock had determined to have his revenge on the Merchant even before.⁶⁹ The second factor was Tzelniker's alteration of the original ending. It was not so much the abrupt ending of the play at the end of the court scene to which he objected, but its complete reversal. Whereas in the original, Shylock accepts the retention

⁶⁵ The review is signed Lamed Samekh – L. S., the initials of Lewis Sowden, sometime reviewer for the English press.

⁶⁶ Lamed Samekh. 'Di oyffirung fun "Der Soykher fun Venedig", in *Dorem Afrike* 4-ter yorg, nom. 1, September 1951, p. 26.

⁶⁷ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 31 August 1951.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ In Act 3, Scene 2, lines 285-289, Jessica states that she has heard him swear "That he would rather have Antonio's flesh than twenty times the value of the sum that he did owe him;" 'The Merchant of Venice', in William Shakespeare, *The complete works*, Oxford University Press, London, 1891, p. 237.

of half of his fortune in return for adopting Christianity, in Tzelniker's version he accepts, but then infuriated by a rude gesture made by Gratiano, he turns back and defiantly declares, "Apostasise? Who I? Shylock." Rabbi Rabinowitz maintained that excusing Shylock's initial ruthless desire to harm the Merchant simply on the grounds of his refusal to apostasise, was a disgrace and a distortion of Jewish ethics.⁷⁰

It is difficult to understand the inflexible approach of the Anglo-Jewish press. It was not as if the transformation of Shylock into a tragic hero was a Yiddish innovation. It dated back to the eighteenth century interpretations on the English stage of Edmund Kean and Henry Irving.⁷¹ One suspects therefore that the English speaking Jews were fearful that Tzelniker's Yiddish interpretation, made them a laughing stock in the eyes of the gentiles and they sought to deny it as vigorously as possible.

Where the English, Afrikaans, Anglo-Jewish and Yiddish presses agreed was in attributing all the acting laurels to Tzelniker's Shylock, with the other characters acting as foils. The *Dorem Afrike* went as far as to describe the efforts of the supporting cast as mere 'attempts' although 'praiseworthy'. However the Yiddish critic also blamed the lacklustre performances on Tzelniker's poor direction. He was so focused on his own role that he failed to give his actors sufficient guidance in interpreting theirs.⁷² Both the *Dorem Afrike* and the *Rand Daily Mail* felt that the only member of the supporting cast 'who ever looks like being a match for Shylock', was Faivl Zygielbaum's Merchant.⁷³ In addition Bertha Englander, who felt that she had reached the pinnacle of her career when she was chosen to play the part of Portia,⁷⁴ was praised for her 'presence and assurance' and Fred Bachmeyer for playing Bassanio 'with a fair show of gallantry'.⁷⁵

The Anglo-Jewish press on the other hand was hypercritical. Although praising Fred Bachmeyer's Bassanio, Benny Ozynski's Old Gobbo and Israel Zygielbaum's Launcelot, they had reservations about certain aspects of Tzelniker's Shylock, and far from praising Faivl Zygielbaum's characterisation of the Merchant, described his portrayal as 'more like a Market Street Landsman than a Christian Merchant of Venice.' The unkindest cut of all, however, was their ridicule of Izzy Glazer's Lorenzo, who elopes with Shylock's daughter,

⁷⁰ 'Chief Rabbi Rabinowitz attacks Tzelniker's Shylock: "A debasement of Jewish ethics and a disservice to Yiddish culture', in *S.A. Jewish Times*, 7 September 1951.

⁷¹ J. Gross, *Shylock*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1992, pp. 108-113, 127-145.

⁷² Lamed Samekh. 'Di oyffirung fun "Der Soykher fun Venedig", in *Dorem Afrike*, 4-ter yorg., nom. 1, September 1951, p. 26.

⁷³ *Ibid.*; *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 August 1951.

⁷⁴ Interview with Bertha Englander, November 1999.

⁷⁵ *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 August 1951.

Jessica, with the comment: "As far as Izzy Glazer's Lorenzo, we certainly couldn't imagine any girl, much less the charming Jessica, eloping with anything so unromantic."⁷⁶ Unbeknown to the critics, Jessica was played by Izzy Glaser's real life wife, Ira! Other participants included Sydney Marks who played Gratiano, Jack Tobias who played the Prince of Morocco, Meilikh Pasklinsky who played Balthasar, Fira Gordon who played Nerissa, and Joe Podbrey who played Salanio.⁷⁷

Between May and November 1951 Tzelniker produced another two plays, Sholem Aleichem's *Dos Groyse gevins* (The Great win),⁷⁸ and Goldfaden's *Di Kishufmakherin* (The Witch). The production of Goldfaden's *Di Kishufmakherin* (The Witch), in which Tzelniker himself played both the main parts of Bobbe Yachne and Hotsmach, as one of the actors pulled out at the last minute,⁷⁹ was felt to be dated. This production also aroused some debate as to the relative merits of performing Yiddish translations from world literature versus authentically Jewish creations. One reader maintained that even if *The Merchant of Venice* had reached greater heights of artistry, the audience had clapped more heartily for the familiar melodies of *Di Kishufmakherin* even if they were old fashioned.⁸⁰

Tzelniker only returned to London in January 1952,⁸¹ however his *Yidisher Afrikaner Teater* did not outlast him. Even during his visit his efforts were being sabotaged by a rival group, the Yiddish Theatre Group founded by Nusia Gold. Whilst there can be no doubt that Nusia was a Yiddish actress of exceptional ability, and her characterisation of *Mirele Efros* which she produced in April just before Tzelniker's visit was highly acclaimed,⁸² on the other hand, she was determined to keep the spotlight solely on herself. In July 1951 at the same time as Tzelniker's *Yidisher Afrikaner Teater* was performing *Di Kishufmakherin*, she decided to mount a production of Gordin's *Di Shevu'e* (The Oath).⁸³ In fact one of her performances clashed with one of Tzelniker's, until she was persuaded to reschedule. An article in the *S.A. Jewish Times* entitled 'Division in Yiddish theatre' maintained that with

⁷⁶ "Bernie and Jack", 'The Jew that Shakespeare never drew: a review of Mr Tzelniker's "Merchant of Venice"', in *S.A. Jewish Times*, 31 August 1951.

⁷⁷ *The Merchant of Venice* programme notes, Bertha Englander Yiddish theatre collection, ARCH 914, S.A. Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg.

⁷⁸ 'Di oyffirung fun "Dos groyse gevins"', in *Dorem Afrike*, 3-ter yorg., nom. 10, June, 1951, p. 27.

⁷⁹ Mendl Tabatznik was supposed to play the part of Hotsmach but pulled out. Interview with Joe Podbrey, 13 October 2002.

⁸⁰ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 21 September 1951.

⁸¹ 'Fun der Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye: oyftritn fun "YAT", unter der rezshi fun Meir Tzelniker', in *Dorem Afrike*, 4-ter yorg., nom. 6, February, 1952, p. 29.

⁸² *Der oyffirung fun Mirele Efros*, *Dorem Afrike*, 3-ter yorg., nom. 5, May 1951, p. 27.

⁸³ *Dorem Afrike*, July 1951.

limited audiences and limited talent Johannesburg could hardly afford to support one Yiddish theatre group, never mind two, and that the present rivalries and divisions were set to jeopardize the future of Yiddish theatre. The writer appealed to the *Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* to heal the breach and to bring about a merger between the two groups.⁸⁴ Unfortunately this never happened and in October of the same year Nusia Gold produced *Riverside Drive*, with her Yiddish Theatre Group, now styling itself as the *Yidisher Folks-Teater*.⁸⁵ The *Yidisher Folks-Teater* was affiliated with the *Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* and effectively replaced YA”T as the dramatic arm of the *Kultur Federatsye*.

Guest directors: Yankev Mansdorf and the *Yidisher Folks-Teater*.

A whole year and a half passed by before the *Yidisher Folks-Teater*, under Nusia Gold, managed to secure another actor-director. This time they brought out the veteran Yiddish actor-director and monologist, Yankev Mansdorf from Israel, to direct the *Folks-Teater* for an extended period. Yankev Mansdorf was not only a highly talented actor-director, but also a highly cultured man. He brought with him the wealth of the Yiddish theatre tradition of the 1920s, the heyday of Yiddish theatre. He had begun his career with David Herman in the Vilna Troupe, performed with Zygmunt Turkow in the Warsaw Art Theatre, with the experimental *Yung Teater* in Warsaw, and with Moshe Broderson in the social-satirical Azazel Theatre.

If ever a visit augured the establishment of a permanent Yiddish theatre for Johannesburg, it was that of Yankev Mansdorf. He arrived in Johannesburg on 2 June 1953, and his wife, Marisa, followed a couple of weeks later. As he set foot in the airport he announced to his welcoming committee that “Yiddish culture and Yiddish theatre must be cultivated everywhere. He hoped that his arrival would help to contribute to the creation of an artistic theatre, which will enhance the local Jewish community.”⁸⁶ In Johannesburg he began by performing “Word concerts” alone and together with Nusia Gold at the Reps Theatre and at the Selbourne Hall. He performed excerpts from Mendele Mocher Seforim, Shakespeare’s Shylock and Chekov. Dora Sowden writes of Yankev Mansdorf that,

“...he is not only a visiting artist. He is a symbol of our way of life. There was something significant too, in the fact that Jacob Mansdorf’s most effective presentations... were not those of classical themes but of modern pieces from Israel - pieces in which the new State shows its links with the old world and displays its own brand of

⁸⁴ S.A. *Jewish Times* 21 September 1951.

⁸⁵ S.A. *Jewish Times*, 19 October 1951.

⁸⁶ D. Wolpe, ‘Mansdorf oyf zayn letsten tur – Dorem Afrike’, in *Yankev Mansdorf in zayn dor*, eds. M. Dworzecki, M. Tsanin, R. Rubinstein, Johannesburg: *Yankev Mansdorf Fund, mit der mithelf fun der Kultur-Federatsye un Histadrut Ivrit*, Johannesburg, Rhodesia: 19-?, p. 126.

humour. Most moving was the poem about the *Chelmer Melamed* who brought little birds from his "home town" with him to Israel so that they should not pine for little Jewish children. Most amusing was a burlesque on the types who come to the Knesset gallery to watch the proceedings of their very own parliament.

Jacob Mansdorf is an actor of the grand manner which is now part of a past or disappearing tradition. But true to the Jewish tradition for adaptability, he brings with him a sense of the new values which are being created for us in the melting pot of the Jewish State. He is at his best not in the tear-stained memories of what was gone but in the uproarious humour of what is now and what is still to come."⁸⁷

However Mansdorf's Johannesburg career was to be characterised by as much high melodrama off stage as it was on stage. On 17 July 1953 Mansdorf directed and starred in the musical comedy, *Shayke Letz* by L. Katsovitz with the *Yiddish Folks-Teater* at the Reps Theatre in Johannesburg.⁸⁸ *Shayke Letz* is a folk comedy centred around the character of *Shayke*, a prankster or joker, a type of *badkhen* (entertainer), a familiar character in the *shtetl*. Opening night was a huge success but after the final curtain Mansdorf collapsed of a heart attack. He was forced to spend six weeks in hospital followed by a period of convalescence at the farm of the wellknown Yiddish writer, Leibl Feldman, at Margate in Natal.

Thus it was not until April of the following year that he was able to produce another play with the *Folks-Teater* in Johannesburg. This was Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye der Milkhiker* (Tevye the Dairyman), which ran for an extended period at the Reps Theatre with great success and Mansdorf also toured with it to the neighbouring towns and to Durban. David Wolpe, the Yiddish writer, felt that "the great Sholem Aleichem himself could not have wished for a better and more authentic Tevye than Mansdorf."⁸⁹ Although praising the production, Dora Sowden, the well-known theatre critic, felt that the company had transformed Sholem Aleichem's moving story into high melodrama, which she did not feel was true to the original work. She commented that:

"Perhaps it was partly Jacob Mansdorf's fault. His personality was so strong and his acting so positive that it may have been difficult for the others not to be attracted away from naturalism... There may be some excuse for Tevie's mannerisms, intonations and postures. There is no reason why his daughters should not be near-modern girls of the might-be-you types.

The cast at the Reps Theatre, however, except for the brief, honest characterisation of Perchik, brought all the ammunition that has been the stock-in-trade of the Yiddish Theatre for far too long. You cannot keep the Yiddish play alive with the technique that pleased your grandmother.

⁸⁷ D. Sowden, 'Hebrew-Yiddish actor', in *Jewish Affairs* vol. 8, no. 7, July 1953, p. 34.

⁸⁸ 'Shaik Letz with Jacob Mansdorf and company', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 8, August 1953, pp. 49-50.

⁸⁹ D. Wolpe, "'Yankev Mansdorf als Tevye der Milkhiker'", in *Dorem Afrike*, 6-ter yorg., nom. 7, May 1954, p. 27.

And Sholem Aleichem does not need overemphasis. His simple-subtle lines carry their own drama."⁹⁰

On 13 June 1954, just a year after his arrival, a huge banquet was held at the Carlton Hotel to celebrate Yankev Mansdorf's thirty years in the theatre. Over 800 people attended and all the Jewish organisations participated. A special album was printed commemorating his career which contained tributes from Yiddish and Hebrew writers in Israel, South Africa and elsewhere.⁹¹ The Chairman of the evening, Abel Shaban emphasized the irony of fate that brought an actor of Mansdorf's calibre and experience to celebrate his thirtieth jubilee in a faraway city, such as Johannesburg, instead of the formerly great Jewish centre of Warsaw, destroyed in the Holocaust. Virtually every speaker that evening stressed the absolute necessity of doing everything possible to enable Mansdorf to remain in South Africa, as he was an invaluable cultural asset. At the Third National Conference of the *Kultur Federatsye*, which was held in September, Mansdorf gave the keynote address.

In October 1954 Mansdorf produced Sholem Aleichem's *Stempenyu* with the *Yidisher Folks-Teater* at the Repts Theatre. *Stempenyu*, based on one of Sholem Aleichem's early novels, is the story of a gifted musician, who falls in love with a beautiful young girl who is already married. His playing bewitches her and she is torn between committing a sin and escaping a life of boredom. He succeeds in persuading her to meet him, but she is overcome by her feelings of piety and modesty and runs back to her husband, leaving *Stempenyu* dejected and forlorn.⁹² Whilst the reporter in the Yiddish monthly *Dorem Afrike* felt that unlike *Tevye*, which had been an unqualified triumph, *Stempenyu* had not succeeded mainly owing to the weaknesses of the story itself,⁹³ Dora Sowden on the other hand felt that:

"Jacob Mansdorf, adapting the story and producing the play, succeeded in capturing the spirit of fantasy and in creating a sense of ensemble which made this his most notable piece of direction to date; but though he acted well he was not really well cast as the musician about whose charms legend had grown.

Niusia Gold, as the neglected young wife, who found the answer to her dreams in *Stempenu* but was kept in thrall by convention, needed a more artless touch to her gaiety and less melodramatic voice in her sorrow. This gentle little maid should not remind us of "La dame aux camelias." Simpler costumes might have helped.

⁹⁰ D.L. Sowden, 'South African Jewish Folk Theatre', in *Jewish Affairs* vol. 9, no. 5, May 1954, pp. 43-44.

⁹¹ *Draysik yor teater-gang fun Yankev Mansdorf, Dorem Afrikaner Yidische Kultur Federatsye*, Johannesburg, 1954.

⁹² *Stempenyu* programme notes. Bertha Englander Yiddish theatre collection, ARCH 914, S. A. Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg.

⁹³ 'Vegn di tsvey oyffirungen fun Yidishn Folks-Teater', in *Dorem Afrike* 7-ter yorg., nom. 2, October 1954, p. 26.

Yet this was an attractive presentation, worthwhile from every point of view. The 21 members of the cast – mostly familiar figures of the amateur Yiddish stage – have never acted better. They dragged out their lines, but they differentiated between mannerism and style.”⁹⁴

By April 1955 Mansdorf’s South African visa was running out. It had already been extended, but without a job the South African Immigration Department in Pretoria was unwilling to extend it further. It had been suggested that he be engaged as the Organising Secretary of the *Kultur Federatsye* but the suggestion was not followed through and no decision was taken. Thus in April 1955 the Mansdorfs had no option but to summarily leave South Africa for neighbouring Rhodesia, for Bulawayo, and to wait there until the *Kultur Federatsye* could figure out a way of getting them back again. An unsubstantiated rumour attributes the failure of the *Kultur Federatsye* to employ Mansdorf and his very sudden departure to the intervention of Nusia Gold, who was insanely jealous of Mansdorf’s popularity in the community. Although this rumour is unconfirmed it is a fact that after Mansdorf’s departure, the members of the *Yidisher Folks-Teater* refused to act with Gold and the *Folks-Teater* disappeared from the local scene.⁹⁵

In Bulawayo with a community of 800 Jewish families, Mansdorf immediately embarked on his cultural work together with the local *Yidisher Kultur Fareyn* and a Yiddish Drama Group conducted by Mark Markov, the Yiddish actor-director who had settled there after his tour of South Africa in 1950. Mansdorf also gave recitals and produced *Tevye der Milkhiker* with the local amateurs. However in less than three months, on the Sabbath of 9 July, he very suddenly passed away. He was buried on 11 July at the largest funeral Bulawayo Jewry had ever known. The *Kultur Federatsye* in Johannesburg sent a delegation consisting of Leibl Feldman, Ira Glaser and Bertha Englander. Amongst the many tributes at the funeral was one by Mark Markov⁹⁶ and also by Bertha Englander. After the funeral Mansdorf’s wife, Marisa, accompanied Bertha Englander back to Johannesburg, where she stayed until she finally returned to Israel.⁹⁷

Guest directors: Diana Blumenfeld and Jonas Turkow.

The following year the *Kultur Federatsye* brought out Jonas Turkow, the famous Yiddish actor-director, and his wife, Diana Blumenfeld, the great Yiddish actress and exponent of Yiddish song, to tour South Africa. Turkow and Blumenfeld were involved in Yiddish

⁹⁴ D.L. Sowden, 'Yiddish Folk Theatre: Mansdorf in Shalom Aleichem "Stempenyu"', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 10, October 1954, p. 50.

⁹⁵ A rumour exists that Nusia Gold somehow got word to the Department of Immigration that Mansdorf was a Communist and therefore they were unwilling to extend his visa. Interview with Joe Podbrey, 13 October, 2002.

⁹⁶ S. Gotz, 'Di letste teg fun zayn lebn', in *Yankev Mansdorf in zayn dor*, 19-?, pp. 142-145.

⁹⁷ Interview with Bertha Englander, 3 November 1999.

theatre in Poland between the two world wars. Jonas Turkow, a brother of the famous Polish theatre director, Zygmunt Turkow, started his career with the Kaminska Theatre in Warsaw, managed theatres in Vilna, Warsaw and Cracow, and took part in several Yiddish films. He was in charge of theatrical entertainment in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. Turkow and his wife were in the Warsaw ghetto until 1943 and were the only actors to come out alive. After the war they toured the Displaced persons camps. In 1947 they settled in New York where Turkow became archivist for the Theatre Department of Yivo in 1958. They came to South Africa from France and Scandinavia after a two year tour through the entire Yiddish world. In South Africa they gave recitals in different cities and also produced two plays, translated by Diana Blumenfeld, neither of which were on Jewish themes.⁹⁸ These were A. Benedetti's comedy *Ver iz er?* (Who is he?), at the YMCA Hall on 19 May 1956,⁹⁹ and L. Fodor's *Yugnt ruft* (The Call of youth), which was presented at the Windmill Theatre on 22 July 1956 together with the newly formed Sholem Aleichem Theatre Group, a reincarnation of the *Folks-Teater*, but minus its founder, Nusia Gold.¹⁰⁰

Yugnt ruft (The Call of youth) is the same play that was produced by Ossip Runitch's Yiddish Art Theatre in 1939, under the name of *Der Atestat* (The Matriculant). It is set in a girls' school with male teachers and a male principal. The story revolves around a love letter, composed by a senior pupil at the school, which is discovered by one of the teachers a few weeks prior to graduation exams. Diana Blumenfeld gave an outstanding performance as the frustrated bigoted old teacher. It was said that her fine flair for comedy often saved the production from becoming drenched in sentimentality. Israel Zygielbaum was also praised for a wonderfully warm and sympathetic performance as Tshibola, the old professor, who is accused of having a love affair and who is expelled from the school. The rest of the cast consisted of Joe Podbrey, who was praised for a fine performance as the stern mathematics teacher, Ira Glaser, Bertha Englander and Sarah Abrahamson, the only locally born actress. The review stated that the performance had shown what a wealth of talent there existed among Yiddish amateurs in Johannesburg. The only criticisms related to the sets and to the hall, a chronic problem, which was so dull and miserable that it was said to put one off going to the theatre.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ 'Diana Blumenfeld un Yonas Turkov in Yohanesburg', in *Dorem Afrike*, 8-ter yorg., nom. 9, May 1956, pp. 28-29.

⁹⁹ "'Ver iz er?': derfolgraykhe forshtelung', in *Dorem Afrike*, 8-ter yorg., nom. 11, July 1956, p. 29.

¹⁰⁰ 'Diana Blumenfeld un Yonas Turkov in Yohanesburg', in *Dorem Afrike*, 8-ter yorg., nom. 9, May 1956, pp. 28-29.

¹⁰¹ *S.A. Jewish Times*, 29 June 1956; "'Yugnt ruft" nay oyf undzer bine', in *Dorem Afrike*, 8-ter yorg., nom. 11, July 1956, p. 29.

However clearly Diana Blumenfeld and Jonas Turkow, despite their long pedigree in Yiddish theatre, did not capture the hearts of the South African Jewish community in the way that Yankev Mansdorf had. At their Johannesburg farewell it was said that the community had not really exploited their talents sufficiently. They had fallen victim to the cold '*mitnagdism*'¹⁰² of the South African *Litvaks*. The Sholem Aleichem Theatre Group had not cooperated with them sufficiently. In truth the Jewish community of Johannesburg was not interested in serious translations of European drama. They preferred the Yiddish classics and Max Perlman's frothy humour.¹⁰³ Nonetheless these productions again raised hopes for the establishment of a permanent Yiddish theatre in South Africa.¹⁰⁴ The July 1956 issue of *Dorem Afrike* opens with the article, *A Yidish Folks-Teater in Dorem Afrike*, viewing the prospect optimistically notwithstanding all the previous failures.¹⁰⁵ However 1957 saw the onset of a barren period for Yiddish theatre. In 1958 Nusia Gold left for Israel.¹⁰⁶ It is appropriate, however, that the last four years in the final chapter of the history of Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg, belong to South Africa's first lady of the Yiddish stage, Sarah Sylvia, ending with the celebration of her seventieth birthday.

Sarah Sylvia

There can be no doubt that of all the Yiddish actors Sarah Sylvia made the largest contribution to the continued existence of Yiddish theatre in South Africa both as actor-director and impresario. During these last four years she furthered her career on the English stage with amongst others a performance in *The World of Sholem Aleichem* together with the visiting actor, David Kossoff in 1957.¹⁰⁷ She continued to produce Yiddish plays and in April 1959, produced two acts from the plays, *Oylem ha-bo* and *Gimnasye* by Sholem Aleichem, under the joint auspices of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies and the *Yidishe Kultur Federatsye*, at the Zionist Centre, to mark the 100th anniversary of his birth.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² The *Mitnagdim* (literally the opposers), was the name given to the Lithuanian Jews who opposed the Hasidic movement which arose in the Ukraine and in Poland in the eighteenth century. The Hasidim approached prayer with exuberance and warmth seeking a union with God, whilst the *Mitnagdim*'s approached it through the study of the sources. Theirs was considered to be a cold rationalist approach.

¹⁰³ Interview with Reuben Zygielbaum, 30 March 2003.

¹⁰⁴ 'Fun der D.A. Yidishe Kultur-Federatsye: Yohanesburg: opsheyd-ovent far Diana Blumenfeld un Yonas Turkov', in 9-ter yorg., nom. 1, *Dorem Afrike*, September, 1956, p. 30.

¹⁰⁵ L. Godman, 'A Yidish Folks-Teater in Dorem Afrike', in *Dorem-Afrike* 8-ter yorg., nom. 11, July 1956, pp. [1]-2.

¹⁰⁶ D. Sowden, 'Jewish participation in the arts in S. Africa during 1958', in *The South African Jewish Year Book* 1959/5719, Fieldhill Publishing, Johannesburg, 1959, pp. 51-54.

¹⁰⁷ D.L. Sowden, 'A lean year in the arts for S.A. Jewry', in *The South African Jewish Year Book*, 1957-58, Fieldhill Publishing, Johannesburg, 1958, p. 51.

¹⁰⁸ *Zionist Record* 10 April 1959.

In 1960 her seventieth birthday was celebrated with a performance of *The Majority of one*, a play with Jewish characters, brought to Johannesburg by Leonard Schach of Cape Town and staged at the Playhouse. Her performance was described as measuring up in every way with the portrayal given in the same role by Molly Picon in London. Yiddish plays were also especially presented in her honour in which she took part. In *The Doctor takes a wife*, presented at the Jewish Guild, she was the life and soul of the piece. It was said that, "In her seventieth birthday celebrations [Sarah Sylvia] showed a vitality that younger actors may envy and cannot hope to equal." At her seventieth birthday celebrations at the *Yidische Kultur Federatsye* on 2 July 1960, the second act of *Mirele Efros* was presented with Sarah Sylvia herself in the lead role.¹⁰⁹ Sowden commented that "South Africa had not made sufficient use of the talents of this wonderful trouper. If more producers, English or Yiddish, had the sense to give her the scope and direction she got in "Death of a Salesman," our theatre might have been the better for it."¹¹⁰

Cape Town

Despite initial friction between the four constituent organisations - the Friends of Birobidjan, the Zionist Socialist Party, the Yiddish Cultural Circle and the Dramatic Circle - resulting in the temporary breakaway of the former 'Friends of Birobidjan'¹¹¹ to form the *Yidische Volksgezelshaft*,¹¹² - the establishment of the *Yidische Kultur Federatsye* heralded a considerable revival of interest in Yiddish culture in Cape Town. Regular weekly meetings were held, often with visiting lecturers from Johannesburg. The focus of Yiddish life remained Vredehoek and Oranjezicht, still centred around the Zionist Hall and the Talmud Torah in Hope Street which now also housed the recently established Jewish Day School *Herzlia*. The Labia Theatre in Orange Street in the Gardens became the most popular venue for visiting artists during this period. However by the mid 1950s Yiddish performances were also on occasion staged at the Weizmann Hall in Sea Point, the suburb built along the sea front which was becoming a magnet for Jews. In the summer months, however, Muizenberg still ruled supreme, hosting meetings and receptions of Yiddish enthusiasts from all over South Africa and Rhodesia.

¹⁰⁹ 'Fun der D.A. Yidische Kultur-Federatsye: Yohanesburg: Sera Silvye yuviley-fayerung', in *Dorem Afrike* 13-ter yorg., nom. 7-8, July/Aug. 1960, p. 30.

¹¹⁰ D. Sowden, 'South African Jews in the Arts during 1960', in *the South African Jewish Year Book, 1960/61*, Fieldhill Publishing, Johannesburg, 1961, p. 41.

¹¹¹ The Society, 'Friends of Birobidjan', was an offshoot of the *Gezerd*.

¹¹² 'Fun der D.A. Yidische Kultur-Federatsye: Keypton: fun der Folk-gezelshaft', in *Dorem Afrike* 3-ter yorg., nom. 11, July 1951, p. 31; 4-ter yorg., nom. 1, September 1951, pp. 29-30.

On 10 October 1948 for the first time a Yiddish *Folkshul* was opened in Cape Town. In 1953 it was located at 6 Vredehoek Avenue and was open daily in the afternoons from 3-5.30 p.m., and on Sundays from 10-12 a.m.¹¹³ In January 1956 it moved to 19 Breda Street, Gardens.¹¹⁴ Its significance, however, should not be overestimated as it is doubtful if more than 20 pupils were ever enrolled at any one time and by June 1958 it had ceased to exist.¹¹⁵ From December 1949 an annual camp of the combined Yiddish *Folkshuls* of Cape Town and Johannesburg was held in Muizenberg.¹¹⁶ Thus other than the summer months Yiddish life in Cape Town remained a pale imitation of Johannesburg. Without Eastern European immigration the percentage of native Yiddish speakers in Cape Town had been reduced from 3 418¹¹⁷ or 21 percent in 1936,¹¹⁸ to 1 697¹¹⁹ or 8 percent in 1951¹²⁰ to only 836¹²¹ or 4 percent in 1960.¹²²

Visiting companies, artistes, writers

All the aforementioned visiting companies, solo artists, and writers, included Cape Town in their itinerary particularly during the summer months but their programme was always more limited. Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre, for instance, staged only three¹²³ of the seven plays that had been presented in Johannesburg, during the week that he played

It seems to have lasted until July 1954. 'Fun der D.A. Yidishe Kultur-Federatsye: Keypton:Folks-Gezelshaft', in *Dorem Afrike*, 6-ter yorg., nom. 11, July 1954, p. 32.

¹¹³ Flyer, *Yidishe folkshul*: Yiddish Folkschool. Gershon Ginsberg collection, Jewish Studies Library, University of Cape Town Libraries.

¹¹⁴ *South African Jewish Chronicle* 18 May 1956.

¹¹⁵ B. Padovich, 'Fareynikte koykhes far a Yidish lebn', in *Dorem Afrike* 11-ter torg., nom. 6, June 1958, p. 5.

¹¹⁶ 'Fun der D.A. Yidishe Kultur-Federatsye. Yohanesburg: Di Yidishe Folkshul', in *Dorem Afrike* February 1950, p. 27.

¹¹⁷ Including Cape Town, Wynberg, Belleville, Simonstown. Union of South Africa, *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 4, Languages, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1938, pp. 44, 50, 52.

¹¹⁸ Population of Cape Town, Wynberg, Belleville, Simonstown was 16 486. Union of South Africa. *Sixth census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 5th May 1936*, vol. 6, Religions, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1941, pp. 15, 16, 19, 21.

¹¹⁹ Including Cape Town, Wynberg, Belleville, Simonstown. Union of South Africa. *Population census, 8th May, 1951*, vol. 6, Languages and literacy, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1958, pp. 67, 71, 73, 74.

¹²⁰ Total Jewish population of Cape Town, Wynberg, Belville, and Simonstown was 20 652 Union of South Africa. *Population census, 8th May, 1951*. Pretoria: Government Printer, 1956, vol. 3. 'Religions of the White population of the Union of South Africa, together with 1946 census figures for all races of the population', pp. 8, 10, 12, 14.

¹²¹ Republic of South Africa. *Population census, 6th September, 1960*, vol. 7, no. 1.

'Characteristics of the population in each magisterial district and economic region, age, marital status and home language', Government Printer, Pretoria, 1968, pp. 112.

¹²² Total Jewish population of the Cape Town Metropolitan area (Cape Town, Wynberg, Belleville, Simonstown) was 23 864. South Africa, Bureau of Statistics, *Population census 1960: sample tabulation no. 6. Religion: all races*, The Bureau, Pretoria, 1963, pp. 5.

¹²³ These were Sholem Aleichem's *Shver tsu zayn a Yid* (Hard to be a Jew), *Yoshe Kalb*, Gershon Ginsburg collection, U.C.T. Libraries, and *My dear children*, *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 3 September 1954.

at the Alhambra Theatre in Cape Town. Benzion Vitler and Shifra Lerer's Company, on the other hand, played at the Labia for three weeks in September 1955.¹²⁴ Shifra remembers that they were begged to extend their tour to Muizenberg but unfortunately they had to continue to their next engagement.¹²⁵

Cape Town rather than Johannesburg witnessed Sarah Sylvia's debut on the English stage in *Death of a salesman*, opposite the famous American Yiddish actor, Jacob Ben Ami, produced by Leon Gluckman, which was rehearsed in Cape Town and premiered at the Labia Theatre in November 1951.¹²⁶ Molly Seftel, the well known South African actress, who acted together with Sarah Sylvia in *Death of a Salesman*, remembers her as a dedicated professional who had a distinct theatrical presence, evident as soon as she entered a room. Her spoken English contained the cadences of Yiddish, its inflections and rhythms, and on stage she conveyed a quality of warmth and motherliness. Whilst her performance on the Yiddish stage was much broader, as was the style of Yiddish theatre, Seftel characterises her performance as Willy Loman's wife, in *Death of Salesman*, under the direction of Leon Gluckman, as far more controlled, possessing an almost mystical quality. Her last words at the end of the play when she tells Willy that she has paid off the last installment of their mortgage was heartbreakingly poignant.¹²⁷

Cape Town could also boast its own professional Yiddish actress. This was Chayele Rosenthal, who came to settle in Cape Town in 1951. Chayele began her career during the Second World War when she became known as the wonder child of the Vilna Ghetto. After the liberation she appeared in Poland and France as an actress in various Yiddish plays and also toured the D. P. camps entertaining the refugees. In Paris she was the first singer of Jewish songs to appear on French television and broadcast widely over the French Radio Nationale. Many of her songs were recorded under the "Polyglotte" label and she even won herself an entry in the French Theatrical Encyclopaedia.¹²⁸ She gave recitals at concerts in various capitals of Europe and in Israel.

In 1950 she came to South Africa along with Mark Markov and Etta Topol and a group of Yiddish actors from France, who were invited by Sarah Sylvia to perform for African Consolidated Theatres. At that time it was predicted that Chayele would be one of the

¹²⁴ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 26 August 1955.

¹²⁵ Interview with Shifra Lerer, Uriel Weinreich Yiddish Summer Program, Columbia University, New York, July 1998.

¹²⁶ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 16 November 1951.

¹²⁷ Interview with Molly Seftel, 29 July 2002.

¹²⁸ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 17 October 1952.

future big names of Yiddish theatre and she was regarded as the most likely aspirant to step into the shoes of Molly Picon.¹²⁹ However Chayele turned her back on the international stage to settle down and to raise a family in Cape Town. As a seasoned professional she did not throw in her lot with the local amateurs but performed solo, in Yiddish comedies and one woman shows in the 1950s and 1960s in Muizenberg, Cape Town and Johannesburg. Numerous Jewish organizations benefited by Chayele's participation in charity galas and shows and her Yiddish songs and topical humour made her acting memorable.¹³⁰ In 1959 Chayele Rosenthal produced a Stage Show L.P., recorded by Gallotone. It included two songs, *Vos iz geven iz geven* (What was was) and *Shalom* (Peace), a delightful portrayal of an American tourist in Israel describing her reaction to the sights and to the people, followed by a group of Israeli songs. On the second side were several traditional songs as well as a moving Friday night ballad.¹³¹

In March 1957 *The World of Sholem Aleichem* was produced at the Hofmeyr Theatre. It included stories by Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz, dramatized in English by Arnold Perl. The cast was headed by Sarah Sylvia and John Barrard, radio, stage and T.V. actor originally from Cape Town, who was brought out from London for this production. Alec Bell, the well known actor, whose father Belitzky had been active with the amateurs of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* in Cape Town in 1935, played Mendele, the bookseller, the character who links all three stories.¹³² In August Alec Bell presented Sholem Aleichem in English to the Union of Jewish Woman, at the Communal Hall in Rondebosch, which was repeated at the Talmud Torah Hall in Muizenberg. A volume of his adapted stories was later published by Howard Timmins in Cape Town.¹³³

Amateur theatre

Unfortunately amateur Yiddish theatre did not benefit that much from the general revival of Yiddish culture in Cape Town. Like Johannesburg the Yiddish Dramatic Society in Cape Town had also hoped to obtain the services of a Director to activate their dramatic talents.¹³⁴ However the visiting actor-directors, other than Yankev Mansdorf, did not produce plays with the local amateurs in Cape Town. Whether this was because of lack of time, talent, or simply the smaller Jewish population of Cape Town, is not clear. But the

¹²⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 18 August 1950.

¹³⁰ Xavier Piat, 'Chayele Rosenthal' in the *S.A. Jewish Times* 20 May 1983.

¹³¹ *Zionist Record*, 10 July 1959.

¹³² *S.A. Jewish Chronicle*, 20 March 1957.

¹³³ *14 stories from Sholem Aleichem as told by Alec Bell*, Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1970.

¹³⁴ 'Fun der D.A. Yidishe Kultur Federatsye. Keypton', in *Dorem Afrike* 1-ter yorg., nom. 3, November 1948, pp. 28-29.

amateurs were forced to continue under their own steam much as before, seldom managing much more than a few one act plays and sketches. During this period the first original local Yiddish play was written and performed in the Cape. This was a two-act play entitled *A Tumel in shtotgorten* (Tumult in the avenue) written by Gershon Laden assisted by Benzion Mirvish. Laden was the Secretary of the Cape Town Talmud Torah who frequently wrote humorous articles for the Yiddish press.¹³⁵ The play was a skit on local affairs, satirizing modern education, committees and chairmen, *chazonim* (cantors) and the Zionist political scene. It was produced by Alfred Faclier at the Zionist Hall on 28 October 1947.¹³⁶

The Paarl amateurs seem to have disbanded during this period, with various of their members moving to Cape Town, and Mr Himmelsztejn relocating to Johannesburg.¹³⁷ Thus only four full length productions were staged during this period. Two were staged at the Muizenberg Pavilion in January 1948 and 1951. These were a repeat performance of the very successful *Tevye der Milkhiker* produced by Jacob Lazar, and the well known drama of American Jewish life, *Riverside Drive*, produced by Pesah Barsky.¹³⁸ In December 1954 Yankev Mansdorf came to Cape Town and produced *Der Nayer burgermayster* (The New Mayor) a delightful comedy about present day life in Israel by Yehoshua Bar Yosef, with the local amateurs at the Labia Theatre,¹³⁹ and at the Muizenberg Pavilion.¹⁴⁰

No description of Yiddish theatre in Cape Town would be complete without including the recitals of Avrom Rubinstein. A lapsed *Yeshive bokher* from Kelme in Lithuania, Avrom Rubinstein came to South Africa in 1928 at the age of 20.¹⁴¹ Whilst quiet and shy in everyday life, Avrom would come alive during his *deklamatsyes* (recitations) from Yiddish literature, such as Manger's *Di pave* or Boraishe's *Der Gayer*, which he performed regularly at functions and for which he became well known. His passion for Yiddish literature was combined with a wonderful sense of sound and rhythm and an incredible memory.¹⁴² His *Der Gayer*, which he recited entirely off by heart lasted for half an hour!¹⁴³

¹³⁵ 'Gershon Laden', in *Dorem Afrike*, 7-ter yorg., nom. 8, April, 1955, p. 27.

¹³⁶ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 7 November 1947.

¹³⁷ Interview with Max Raysman, 29 August 2002.

¹³⁸ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 12 January 1951.

¹³⁹ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 19 November 1954.

¹⁴⁰ *South African Jewish Chronicle*, 7 January 1955.

¹⁴¹ A. Rubinstein, 'Ikh bin a Kelemer Yid', in *Dorem Afrike* 25-ter yorg., nom. 12, Nov./Dec. 1973, pp. 7-8.

¹⁴² Interview with Lozer Karabelnik, 31.7.2002.

¹⁴³ Elvey, 'Avrom Rubinshtayn: a zeltene geshtalt', in *Dorem Afrike*, 21-ter yorg., nom. 1, Jan./Feb. 1968, p. 68.

The last play during this period was produced by Herman Scherzer, who came to South Africa with Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre, and settled in Cape Town.¹⁴⁴ In 1959 he produced Sholem Aleichem's *Menshn* (People) with the local amateurs at the Major Zionist Hall to commemorate the centenary of his birth.¹⁴⁵ Unfortunately Herman Scherzer did not continue to occupy himself with Yiddish theatre. In 1960 he gave his swansong in the form of a Variety concert at the Labia Theatre.¹⁴⁶

Port Elizabeth

The Yiddish cultural society that had first been established in Port Elizabeth in 1931, but which had faded out in the late 1930s, was revived in 1943. This despite the fact that in the census of 1946 Port Elizabeth had only 173 native Yiddish speakers.¹⁴⁷ It was in Port Elizabeth that on 2 January 1947, at an unofficial meeting that included representatives of Yiddish cultural societies from Cape Town, Bloemfontein and Johannesburg, that the idea of establishing a South African Yiddish Cultural Federation was born.¹⁴⁸ However the initiative was immediately passed over to Johannesburg.

After the establishment of the *Kultur Federatsye* in June 1947, the Dramatic Circle of the Port Elizabeth Yiddish Culture Club was the first to get going, with the staging of Leon Kobrin's *Riverside Drive*.¹⁴⁹ In 1950 they staged Sholem Aleichem's *Tsvey hundert toysent*.¹⁵⁰ In February 1954 Yankev Mansdorf came to Port Elizabeth and produced *Der Nayer burgermayster* at the Port Elizabeth City Hall with the local amateurs.¹⁵¹ In 1956 Jonas Turkow and Diana Blumenfeld produced *Di Yugent ruft* with the local amateurs.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Max Raysman, 3 September 2002.

¹⁴⁵ *Menshn* programme notes, Gershon Ginsburg collection, Jewish Studies Library, U.C.T. Libraries.

¹⁴⁶ Included the one-act play *Baym doktor* (A visit to the doctor) by Der Tunkeler, with Hilda Hayman, 16 July 1960, Programme notes, Gershon Ginsburg collection, Jewish Studies Library, U.C.T. Libraries.

¹⁴⁷ Union of South Africa. *Census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 7th May 1946*, vol. 4, Languages and literacy, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1953, p. 63.

¹⁴⁸ L. Leibowitz, '25 yor Yidisher Kultur-Klub in Port-Elizabeth', in *Dorem Afrike* 9-ter yorg., nom. 2, October 1956, pp. 27-28.

¹⁴⁹ 'Fun der D.A. Yidishe Kultur Federatsye: Der Kultur Klub in Port Elizabeth', in *Dorem Afrike* 1-ter yorg., nom. 3, November 1948, p. 29.

¹⁵⁰ *Afrikaner Idische Tsaytung*, 17 February 1950.

¹⁵¹ L. Leibowitz, 'Mansdorf in Port Elizabeth', in *Yankev Mansdorf in zayn dor*, 19-?, pp. 140-141; 'Fun der D.A. Yidishe Kultur Federatsye: Port-Elizabeth', in *Dorem Afrike*, 7-ter yorg., nom. 6, February 1955, p. 32.

¹⁵² 'Fun der D.A. Yidishe Kultur Federatsye: Diana Blumenfeld un Yonas Turkow in Mizrekh-Keyp', in *Dorem Afrike*, 9-ter yorg., nom. 2, October 1956, p. 32.

Bloemfontein

In the 1946 census 231 Jews in Bloemfontein gave Yiddish as their home language.¹⁵³ Bloemfontein had an active branch of the *Kultur Federatsye*, inspired by Nehemiah Levinsky, the Yiddish writer, and his brother, Berl. A Yiddish dramatic group was formed in November 1949. David Kramer was elected chairman and Ada Lapinsky, a Director on the English stage, was elected vice-chairman.¹⁵⁴ At the *Simhat Torah* concert of the *Kultur Federatsye* in November they performed the one act play, *Yener velt*, directed by E. Lapinsky, with ten participants. In 1952 at a Third Seder concert in Bloemfontein two plays were performed: Shalom Aleichem's *Pesah tsum seder* and Noah Davidovitz's one act comedy, *Ekspropri'atsye*. They were directed by David Kramer.¹⁵⁵

Conclusion

The establishment of the *Kultur Federatsye* in June 1947 heralded a remarkable revival of interest in Yiddish culture which made it available to a much wider audience. This revival lasted well into the 1960s and early 1970s. Whilst the *Kultur Federatsye* lasted till the early 1990s, its vision to establish a local Yiddish theatre in South Africa, did not outlive the 1950s and by 1960 its Dramatic Section had ceased to exist. During this period as during the previous, a number of attempts were made to establish a permanent Yiddish theatre for Johannesburg. The most notable of these were those of Meier Tzelniker and his *Yidisher Afrikaner Teater* which lasted for six months in 1951, and that of Niusia Gold's *Yidisher Folks-Teater*, which lasted from 1951 to 1955 and which was associated with the visiting actor-director, Yankev Mansdorf. However when in 1955, despite the great enthusiasm induced by the presence of Yankev Mansdorf, a giant of the Yiddish stage and a *kultur mentsh* per excellence, the *Kultur Federatsye* was unable to retain him, the dream of a Yiddish theatre for Johannesburg was effectively extinguished, and the *Yidisher Folks-Teater* ceased to exist. Although Mansdorf was followed by Diana Blumenfeld and Jonas Turkow in 1956, and the formation of the Sholem Aleichem Theatre Group, the actors did not take to them and they soon departed.

It not difficult to understand why these attempts failed. The essential features characterising the South African Jewish community, as laid down in the previous chapter,

¹⁵³ Union of South Africa, *Census of the population of the Union of South Africa, enumerated 7th May 1946*, vol. 4, Languages and literacy, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1953, p. 77.

¹⁵⁴ 'Fun der D.A. Yidishe Kultur Federatsye: Bloemfontein', in *Dorem Afrike 2-ter yorg.*, nom. 5, January 1950, p. 28.

¹⁵⁵ 'Fun der D.A. Yidishe Kultur Federatsye: Bloemfontein.', in *Dorem Afrike 4-ter yorg.*, nom. 10, June 1952, pp. 29-30.

had not changed. Without a renewal of immigration from Eastern Europe it was hardly likely. The community was indifferent, nobody was prepared to invest money in the building of a theatre and the number of native speakers was decreasing steadily. In addition even when the opportunity arose to create a permanent theatre group, as was the case with Meier Tzelniker's *Yidisher Afrikaner Teater*, the small number of Yiddish actors were unable to set aside their petty rivalries and to combine forces. The lack of a communal infrastructure to employ a Yiddish theatre director, was an insurmountable problem during the previous period. However even though the *Kultur Federatsye* enjoyed a measure of communal support, it was unwilling or unable for whatever reason, to employ Yankev Mansdorf, who would have been the ideal candidate. Ultimately the high hopes for establishing a Yiddish theatre for Johannesburg with the dazzling array of visiting artists in the 1950s were artificial. The impetus was external and could not be maintained once the visitors had departed.

Although not within the scope of this study, even after 1960 when the vision of establishing a Yiddish theatre was finally extinguished, Yiddish artists and writers still managed to find their way to South Africa, well known for its enthusiastic *Litvak* audiences. In 1962 Chaim Grade, the famous Yiddish novelist, whose descriptions of life in Lithuania made him a favourite with South African Yiddish readers, came on a six week visit to South Africa.¹⁵⁶ South African audiences also benefitted from the Yiddish theatre revival in Israel and were able to enjoy Max Perلمان and Company in 1961 and 1971,¹⁵⁷ Anya Liton and Company in 1966,¹⁵⁸ the entire Israeli cast of *The Megile of Itzik Manger*,¹⁵⁹ Henry Denker and Devorah Windler in 1969,¹⁶⁰ Henry Gerro and Rosita Londner in 1973,¹⁶¹ and Mary Soriano in 1974.¹⁶² Nusia Gold now living in Israel was still active behind the scenes acting as an impresario bringing out some of the visiting artists. In 1962¹⁶³ and 1963¹⁶⁴ and again in 1981¹⁶⁵ and 1982¹⁶⁶ she came out to South Africa and

¹⁵⁶ 'Chaim Grade in Yohanesburg' in *Dorem Afrike* yorg. 15, nom. 6, Nov./Dec. 1962, pp. 29-30.

¹⁵⁷ Programme notes, Gershon Ginsburg collection, Jewish Studies Library, U.C.T. Libraries.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ *The Megile of Itzik Manger* is a modern adaptation of a *Purimspiel*. It was brought out to Johannesburg by the impresario, Hymie Udwin. It was staged at the Brian Brooke Theatre in 1969 and starred Mike Burstein. Jewish theatre and theatre personalities: newspaper cuttings, ARCH 968A, S. A. Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg.

¹⁶⁰ B.L., 'Kleynkunst in shtile tener', in *Dorem Afrike*, yorg. 22, nom. 5, Sept./Oct. 1969, p. 29.

¹⁶¹ Programme notes, Gershon Ginsburg collection, Jewish Studies Library, U.C.T. Libraries.

¹⁶² A. Retsenz, 'Yidish teater: Mary Sorianos oyftritn', in *Dorem Afrike*, yorg. 26, nom. 5, Sept./Oct. 1974, p. 28.

¹⁶³ *Tsurik tsu mayn folk*, (Back to my people), programme notes, Gershon Ginsburg collection, Jewish Studies Library, U.C.T. Libraries.

¹⁶⁴ Elvitz, 'Di klasiker oyf der bine: a vokh fun Yidish teater gegeben durkh Nusia Gold in Tekniki Koledzsh', in *Dorem Afrike*, 16-ter yorg., nom. 3, May/June 1963, p. 28.

produced plays with the local amateurs in Johannesburg and Cape Town. These were probably the last amateur Yiddish performances ever performed in South Africa. Nusia Gold died in Israel in 1991.¹⁶⁷

Sholem Aleichem continued to be performed on the English stage. In 1966 *Tevye's daughters* with Alec Bell and Sadie Festenstein, and *The Big win*, a translation of Sholem Aleichem's *Dos Groyse gevins*, were presented by Taube Kushlick and Brian Brooke at the Brooke Theatre. In 1967 *The Dybbuk* was first presented in English translation by the RAPS¹⁶⁸ at the Library Theatre.¹⁶⁹ Finally in 1969 after a five year struggle Taube Kushlick managed to win the rights to produce *Fiddler on the roof*, which has become one of the most popular musicals to be performed on the South African stage. Shimon Israeli and Lya Dulizkaya from Israel played the parts of Tevye and Golde,¹⁷⁰ whilst the local Yiddish actor, Max Angorin, played the part of the Rabbi. In Cape Town in 1979, even when she was already critically ill, Chayele Rosenthal performed admirably in the part of Golde in Capab's production of *Fiddler on the Roof*.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ *Di hilzerne shisl* (The Wooden bowl) programme notes, Gershon Ginsburg collection, Manuscripts and Archives Department, U.C.T. Libraries.

¹⁶⁶ *Jewish Herald*, 9 March 1982.

¹⁶⁷ D. Morris, 'Nusia Gold avek in der eybikeyt' in *Dorem Afrike*, July-Sept 1991, p. 31.

¹⁶⁸ RAPS is the acronym of the Reps Amateur Players Society. P. Tucker, *Just the ticket: my fifty years in show business*, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1997, p. 206.

¹⁶⁹ 'The Dybbuk' in English', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 22, no. 6, June 1967, p. 25.

¹⁷⁰ P. Tucker, *Just the ticket: my fifty years in show business*, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1997, p. 253.

¹⁷¹ Xavier Piat, 'Chayele Rosenthal', in *S.A. Jewish Times*, 20 May 1983.

CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION

This dissertation has tried *inter alia* to answer the question as to why a permanent Yiddish theatre was never established in South Africa. Outside of Eastern Europe the survival of Yiddish theatre was contingent on the survival of the Yiddish language, from which its history cannot be separated. The persistence of Yiddish theatre was entirely dependent on the transmission of the language to the second generation. Thus any investigation into its existence has to examine the factors which favoured or mitigated against its survival.

Nowhere outside of Eastern Europe was the Yiddish language successfully transferred to the second generation. Even in Montreal with its unique Yiddish-Hebrew ideological construct and extensive network of Yiddish institutions, Roskies admits that the spoken language was not transmitted to the second generation.¹ Once mass immigration to the United States ceased, the language also declined as did the attendance at the Yiddish theatres. The disappearance of Yiddish theatre was simply delayed with each successive wave of immigration, as was the case in Australia, particularly in Melbourne, where the David Herman Yiddish theatre survived until as late as 1992. Similarly in Montreal a Yiddish theatre established as a result of post Second World War immigration in 1956, just as Yiddish theatre was disappearing in the rest of the world, was still in existence in 1996.²

What is unique in the South African situation is the particularly derogatory and indifferent attitude to Yiddish that was entrenched right from the outset. Despite the fact that Yiddish was the mother tongue of the majority of the South African Jewish immigrants, it simply never featured in the construction of South African Jewish identity. Yiddish education was only introduced on a permanent basis in 1937 and even then was not supported by the communal bodies until the establishment of the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidisher Kultur Federatsye* in 1947. Yiddish was effectively invisible, and there was a total lack of awareness of the Yiddish language as a cultural transmitter of Jewish values and Jewish heritage. With these types of attitudes it is surprising that Yiddish theatre ever existed at all.

¹ D. Roskies, 'Yiddish in Montreal: a utopian experiment' in *An everyday miracle. Jewish culture in Montreal* eds I. Robinson, P. Anctil, & M. Butovsky, Montreal: Vehicule Press, Montreal, 1996, p.32.

² Z.M. Baker. 'Montreal of yesterday: a snapshot of Jewish life in Montreal during the era of mass immigration', in *An everyday miracle: Jewish culture in Montreal*, 1996, p. 50.

The problem with Yiddish in South Africa, as we have seen, was the early timing of the main wave of immigration, between 1890 and 1914, a period which preceded the establishment of the Yiddish *Folkshuls*, and the extreme poverty, both economic and cultural, of the early immigrants. This was compounded by the communal ascendance of Zionism, which supported the Hebrew revival and denigrated Yiddish. The few intellectuals who reached South African shores were traditional and Zionistically orientated. Very few of the *Bundist* intelligentsia came to South Africa and the relatively rapid upward mobility of the immigrants in South Africa's racially divided society mitigated against the formation of a Jewish proletariat. Any form of Yiddishism or Bundism, because of its secularist and anti-Zionist nature, was considered to be beyond the pale. Zionism was regarded as the holy grail and anything that even vaguely smacked of Yiddishism was immediately pounced upon and attacked.

Once the first attempt to establish a permanent theatre for Johannesburg failed in 1910, it is possible that Yiddish theatre would have faded out completely if not for the new wave of immigration in the 1920's. However even though the immigrants of the 1920's were politically and ideologically predisposed to Yiddish theatre, they could not prevail over the already entrenched Anglo-German Jewish establishment. The immigrants were poor, and whilst upward mobility was relatively rapid in South Africa, it was not until the war years, 1939-1945, that they really began to prosper.³ Thus as we have seen in the 1930's, those who were most enthusiastic about Yiddish theatre could not afford to invest in it, and those who could, were indifferent to it. The communal bodies ignored it. The Communist sympathising anti-Zionist, anti-religious, *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, was boycotted by the establishment and its activities including its Yiddish theatrical productions, are barely reported in the English press.

Other reasons put forward for the lack of a Yiddish theatre in South Africa is the sober emotional restraint, scepticism and hard headed business sense of the *Litvaks*, who valued education but were totally lacking in a romantic spirit. Yiddish theatre saw its greatest flowering in Poland between the two World wars, but not many Polish Jews came to South Africa. Lozer Karabelnik, a well known Cape Town Yiddishist, pointed out that of the handful of movers and shakers in the field of Yiddish theatre in South Africa, not one came from independent Lithuania between the two World Wars, that is from Kovno. Hannan Hirsch, the Zygielbam brothers and Paul Breitman came from Poland, Benny Ozynski, came from Polish Vilna. Leo Galvin, Vera Kanevska, Mary Einhorn and Boris

³ T. Adler, *A history of Jewish Workers' Clubs*, 1977 p. 47

Abramov came from the Ukraine, Mendl Tabatznik and David Danzig came from Belarus. In the Cape Herman Kowarsky and Chayele Rosenthal came from Polish Vilna, Mr Himmelsztejn came from Warsaw, the Turoks and Jacob Levinsohn came from Latvia. One exception to this rule in Johannesburg, is Shloyme Rubin, who came from Rakishok in the Kovno District, where two Yiddish theatres were active in its capital, Kovno, between the two World Wars.⁴ Besides, almost all of the participants in Yiddish theatre came from the Kovno District, as did the greater proportion of South African Jewry. It is much more likely that the early timing of the formative immigration, rather than the places of origin, which in any case are all very near to each other and interconnected, is at the root of the problem.

Yet this dissertation has shown that contrary to the opinion of the South African Yiddish writer, Richard Feldman, that the thirties was the quietest period for Yiddish cultural activity in Johannesburg,⁵ exactly the opposite was the case. Although it is true that eventually the Immigration Quota Act of 1930 and the Aliens Act of 1937 spelt the death knell for Yiddish theatre, the lull did not occur until the 1940s. The 1930s were by far the most active years for Yiddish theatre, when it was promoted by a record number of Jewish organisations, and by a number of visiting actor-directors. The 'dark cloud of Hitlerism' rather than having a negative effect on Yiddish theatre, instead brought several refugee actor-directors to South Africa and inspired repertoire that was new and contemporary, reflecting current events. On the other hand although a record number of attempts were made to establish a permanent Yiddish theatre for Johannesburg, the immigrant group, economically disadvantaged and ideologically alienated from the Anglo-Jewish establishment, could not prevail. The visiting actor-directors of the 1930s sensed the indifference of the community, staged their best productions and left. Those that stayed, had to earn a living and generally did not engage in Yiddish theatre for very long.

The largest number of original plays reflecting South African Jewish life were written and produced during this period. Although sadly the manuscripts have not survived, the reviews reveal that the immigrants were most concerned with the effects of acculturation and how moving up in the world influenced immigrant behaviour. In general a very negative image is created of immigrants who are social climbers, who are embarrassed by and neglect their newly arrived brethren, and who take on decadent habits such as card playing.

⁴ A. Misheiker, 'The Yiddish theatre causes a stir' in *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 12, December 1948, p. 29.

⁵ R. Feldman, 'Yiddish in South Africa', in *Jewish Affairs*, vol.15, no. 5, 1960, p. 66.

With the final disappearance of the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, as a result of the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950, Yiddish theatre lost much of its grassroots inspiration and support. Although the members of its Dramatic Section continued to form the backbone of all the productions of the late 1940s and 1950s, without the infrastructure of lectures and activities they had lost their ideological base. Thus the frenetic revival that occurred in Yiddish theatre in the 1950s, the result of the Holocaust and the establishment of the *Dorem Afrikaner Yidishe Kultur Federatsye*, was largely artificial, the creation of outside artists, without whom it could not survive.

On the one hand one cannot deny the contribution made by Nusia Gold to Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg in the 1950s with the creation of the *Yidisher Folks-Teater*. It was thanks to her that Yankev Mansdorf came to Johannesburg. However in the end it would seem that their combination was to prove fatal to Mansdorf's chances of staying permanently in South Africa. With Yankev Mansdorf, despite his illness, the community for the first time had the opportunity of obtaining a world class Yiddish theatre director in search of a stage. Yet they did not avail themselves of this opportunity and none of the published reports give a satisfactory explanation as to why or as to why his visa could not have been extended. It would seem that Nusia Gold must have had a hand in it as she was apparently extremely jealous of Mansdorf, who had usurped her position in the community. At any rate after Mansdorf's departure, the members of the Dramatic Section refused to act with her and the *Yidisher Folks Teater* was not heard of again.⁶ It is most probable that the truth behind this vexed episode has gone to the grave with the members of the Executive of the *Yidishe Kultur Federatsye* of the time, and will remain a mystery. However in effect it sounded the death knell for Yiddish theatre in Johannesburg. On the other hand realistically speaking by 1960 the percentage of Yiddish speakers in the community had shrunk to approximately 5 percent, the language was not being transferred to the second generation, and the interest in Yiddish theatre was waning worldwide. By 1960 the Dramatic Section of the *Kultur Federatsye* had disappeared.

⁶ Interview with Jo Podbrey, 13 October 2002.

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APPENDIX I

VISITING YIDDISH THEATRE COMPANIES, ACTORS AND WRITERS

- 1896 Yankl Rosenfeld, actor.
- 1897-99 Hebrew Operatic and Dramatic Company
- 1899 Nathanson couple, actors
- 1902-5 Waxman-Wallerstein's Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1907 Wallerstein's Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1909-10 Wallerstein's Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1913 Sam Stern, actor
- 1915 Sam Stern, actor
- 1919 Sam Stern, actor
- 1920 Sarah Sylvia, actress-impresario
- 1921 Sarah Sylvia and Joseph Sherman's Yiddish Theatre Company
Peretz Hirschbein, dramatist, writer, traveller.
- 1922 Esther Wallerstein's Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1923 Joseph Kessler's Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1923-24 Maurice Moscovitch, actor-director
- 1926 Isaacovitch's Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1927 Breitman-Teffner Yiddish Theatre Company
Herz Grosbard, actor
- 1928 Henry Berman's Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1929 Henry Berman's Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1930 Sh. Kupferberg's New Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1931 Meilekh Ravitch, writer.
- 1933 Breitman-Kanevska Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1934-35 David Vardi and Eva Yoalit, actors.
- 1936-37 Jacob Waislitz, actor-director.
- 1937 Molly Picon and Jacob Kalich, actors
- 1938 Meier Tzelniker's Yiddish Theatre Company
Vera Kanevska and Paul Breitman, actor-directors
- 1939 Miriam Kressyn and Hymie Jacobson, actor-directors
- 1942 Tamara Samsonov, actress-director
- 1947 Molly Picon and Jacob Kalich, actors
Henry Shoshkes, writer, traveller
- 1948 Max Perlman's Yiddish Theatre Company

- 1949 Max Perlman's Yiddish Theatre Company
 Tamara Samsonov, actor-director
 Esta Stein and Joseph Greenspun, actor-directors
 Moishe Oysher, cantor, actor
 Niusia Gold, actress-director
- 1950 Mark Markov and Etta Topol's Yiddish Theatre Company
 Avrom Sutzkever, poet
- 1951 Meier Tzelniker, actor-director
 Jacob Ben-Ami, actor
 Yosef Papiernikov, poet
- 1952 Meir Margalit, actor
 Fela Feld, actress
 Sidor Belarsky, singer.
- 1953 Max Perlman's Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1953-55 Yankev Mansdorf, actor-director
- 1954 Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre Company
- 1955 Chayele Grober, actress
 Benzion Vitler and Shifra Lerer's Yiddish Theatre Company
 Pesah Burstein and Lilian Lux, actors
- 1956 Jonas Turkow and Diana Blumenfeld, actor-directors
 Henry Gerro and Rosita Londner's Yiddish Theatre Company
 Joseph Buloff, actor
 Moishe Oysher, cantor.
- 1956-57 Shmuel Rozhanski, teacher, editor, writer
- 1957 Herz Grosbard, actor
- 1961 Max Perlman's Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1962 Chaim Grade, writer
- 1962-63 Niusia Gold, actor-director
- 1966 Anya Liton's Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1969 Mike Burstein's *Megile of Itzik Manger*
 Henry Denker and Devorah Windler's Yiddish Theatre Company.
- 1971 Max Perlman's Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1973 Henry Gerro and Rosita Londner Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1974 Mary Soriano's Yiddish Theatre Company
- 1982-83 Niusia Gold, actor-director.

APPENDIX II
AMATEUR YIDDISH THEATRE: CHRONOLOGICAL LIST
TRANSVAAL, WESTERN, EASTERN & NORTHERN CAPE, DURBAN & ORANGE FREE STATE

1. TRANSVAAL

YEAR	NAME OF PLAY	AUTHOR	DIRECTOR	ORGANISATION	THEATRE
1906	<i>Tsuzay un tsushpreyt</i> (Scattered & dispersed)	Sholem Aleichem	Hannan Hiersch	Hebrew Dramatic company	Gaiety
	<i>Di Yidn</i> (The Jews)	Tchirikov	Hannan Hiersch	Hebrew Dramatic company	His Majesty's
1907	<i>Di Yudishe voluntir</i>	A.L. Joffee	S. Wallerstein		Gaiety
1911	<i>Dos Dorfsmeydl</i> (The Village maiden)	Zalmen Libin	E. Wallerstein		Gaiety
	<i>Motye Melikh der stolier</i> Motye Melikh the carpenter				Gaiety
	<i>Hanele di finisherin</i> (Anna the seamstress)				Gaiety
1912	<i>Di Varheynt</i> (The Truth)	Jacob Gordin			Gaiety
	<i>Rokhl degel Mahaneh Yehudah</i> (Rachel the Standard of Judah)				Gaiety
	<i>Der Yidisher Kenig Lir</i> (The Jewish King Lear)	Jacob Gordin			Gaiety
1913	<i>Di Yesoyme</i> (The Orphan)	Jacob Gordin			Palladium
	<i>Di Varheynt</i> (The Truth)	Jacob Gordin		<i>Yidisher Literasher. un Dramatischer Fareyn</i>	Palladium
1914	<i>Der Meturef</i> (The Madman)	Jacob Gordin			Standard
1916	<i>On a heym</i> (Homeless)	Jacob Gordin			Palladium
	<i>Mirele Efros</i>	Jacob Gordin			Vaudette Krugersdorp
	<i>Bar Kokhba</i>	Avrom Goldfaden	Sura Richter	Sura Richter Company	Palladium
1917	<i>Dem Shadkhan's tokhter</i> (The Matchmaker's daughter)			<i>Yidisher Literarisher. un Dramatischer. Fareyn</i>	Orpheum
	<i>Kreutzer sonata</i>	Jacob Gordin		Jewish War Victims Fund	Palladium
	<i>Di Yesoyme</i> (The Orphan)	Jacob Gordin		Hebrew Operatic Company	Palladium
	<i>Oyf der berg</i> (On the mountain)	Jacob Gordin			Vaudette Krugersdorp
	<i>Kreutzer sonata</i>	Jacob Gordin		<i>Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn</i>	Vaudette Krugersdorp
	<i>Bar Kokhba</i>	Avrom Goldfaden		Hebrew Operatic company	Palladium
	<i>Got mentsh un tayvl</i> (God man and the devil)	Jacob Gordin		<i>Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn</i>	Palladium
	<i>Der Yidisher Kenig Lir</i> (Jewish King Lear)	Jacob Gordin		Hebrew Operatic Company	Palladium
	<i>Dos Yidische harts</i> (The Jewish heart)	Joseph Lateiner		Hebrew Operatic Company	Palladium
1918	<i>Gelt</i> (Money)	Morris Gisnet		Hebrew Operatic Company	Palladium
1919	<i>Di Shehitah</i> (The Slaughter)	Jacob Gordin		Hebrew Operatic Company	Palladium
	<i>Bas Yerushalayim</i> (Daughter of Jerusalem)	Avrom Goldfaden		Hebrew Operatic Company	Palladium

	<i>On a heym</i> (Homeless)	Jacob Gordin		Standard
	<i>Hanele di finisherin</i> (Anna the seamstress)		Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Standard
	<i>Homen der tsveyter</i> (Haman the Second)		Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Standard
	<i>Di farblondzete neshome</i> (The lost soul)		Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Standard
	<i>Bar Kokhba</i>	Avrom Goldfaden	Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Standard
	<i>Dovid's fidele</i> (David's harp)	Selig Mogilescu	Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Standard
	<i>Di Yesoyme</i> (The Orphan)	Jacob Gordin	Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Standard
	<i>Kol Nidre</i>	Anshel Shur	Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Standard
	<i>Bas Yerushalayim</i> (Daughter of Jerusalem)	Avrom Goldfaden	Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Standard
	<i>Shulames</i>	Avrom Goldfaden	Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Standard
	<i>Bobo Yakhne</i>	Avrom Goldfaden	Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Palladium
	<i>Hayim in Amerike</i>		Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Palladium
	<i>Der Yeshive bokher</i> (The Yeshive boy)	I. Zolotarevsky	Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Palladium
	<i>Di Goldene medine</i> (The Golden land)		Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Palladium
	<i>Akeydes Yitschak</i> (Sacrifice of Isaac)	Avrom Goldfaden	Sam Stern	Jewish Comedy Dramatic Company Palladium
1920	<i>Hamele di finisherin</i> Anna the seamstress			Benoni Amateur Dramatic Society Vaudette Germiston Palladium
	<i>Di Vayse shklafen</i> (The white slaves)		Sarah Sylvia	Palladium
	<i>Kishuf</i> (Magic)		Sarah Sylvia	Palladium
	<i>Dos lebn fun a froy</i> (The life of a woman)		Sarah Sylvia	Palladium
	<i>Di genarte mener</i> (The Disappointed men)		Sarah Sylvia	Palladium
	<i>Hantshe di sufradjetke</i> (Hantshe the suffragette)		Sarah Sylvia	Palladium
	<i>A Yidishe harts</i> (A Jewish heart)			Hebrew Operatic Company Palladium
	<i>Got mentsh un tayvl</i> (God man and the devil)	Jacob Gordin		Hebrew Operatic Company Palladium
	<i>A Mentsh zol zayn</i> (Be a mentsh)			Hebrew Operatic Company Palladium
1921	<i>Yankl der shmidt</i> (Yankl the Blacksmith)	David Pinski		Hebrew Operatic Company Palladium
1922	<i>Got fun nekome</i> (God of vengeance)	Sholem Asch		Hebrew Operatic Company Palladium
	<i>Dos Pintele Yid</i> (The Quintessential Jew)	Boris Thomashefsky		Hebrew Operatic Company Palladium
	<i>Der Shturem foygl</i> (The Storm bird)	Leon Kobrin		Palladium
	<i>On a heym</i> (Homeless)	Jacob Gordin		Jewish Help Reconstruction And Orphan's Fund Vaudette Krugersdorp
1923	<i>Got mentsh un tayvl</i> (God man and the devil)	Jacob Gordin	Y. Blum	Pretoria Amateur Dramatic society Palladium
	<i>Der Bal haloymes</i> (The Dreamer)	Joseph Shapiro	Hannan Hiersch	In aid of the Ferreira Talmud Torah Palladium

	<i>Di Mishpokhe</i> (The family)	H.D. Nomberg	Hannan Hiersch	<i>Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn</i>	Palladium
	<i>On a heym</i> (Homeless)	Jacob Gordin		Krugersdorp Amateur Dramatic Society	Palladium
1924	<i>Di Mishpokhe</i> (The Family)	H.D. Nomberg	Hannan Hiersch	<i>Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn</i>	Palladium
	<i>Bobe Yakhne</i>	Avrom Goldfaden		<i>Fordsburg un Mayfair Idisher Dramatischer Fareyn</i>	Standard
	<i>Yede froy's farlang</i> (Every woman's desire)		Dora Nathan		
1925	<i>Di Grinhorns</i> (The Greenhorns)	Joseph Lateiner	Dora Nathan		Standard
	<i>Di Lebedike yesoymim</i> (The Lively orphans)	I. Zolotarevsky	Hannan Hiersch		Standard
	200 000	Sholom Aleichem	Hannan Hiersch	<i>Zeire Zion</i>	Standard Jewish Guild
1926	<i>Ana</i>	B. Arzshansky		<i>Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn</i>	Jewish Guild
1927	<i>Menshn (People) & Der Hosen</i> (The Bridegroom)	Sholem Aleichem	Mendel Tabatznik	<i>Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn</i>	Jewish Guild
	<i>Moshke Hazer</i> (Moshke the pig)	I.D. Berkowitz	Hannan Hiersch	<i>Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn</i>	Standard
1928	<i>Mirele Efros</i>	Jacob Gordin			Standard
1929	<i>Der Dorfsyung</i> (The Village youth)	Leon Kobrin	Hannan Hiersch	<i>Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn</i>	Standard
1931	<i>Yankl der shmId</i> (Yankl the Blacksmith)	David Pinski		<i>Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn</i>	
	<i>Grine felder</i> (Green fields)	Peretz Hirschbein	Mendel Tabatznik	<i>Dramatishn Kuns-Krayz</i>	
	<i>Di Farlorene hofenung</i> (The Lost hope)	Herman Heyerman	Shloyme Rubin	<i>Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn</i>	Jewish Guild
	<i>Dos Tsebrokhene lebn</i> (The Shattered life)	I. Zolotarevsky	Mendel Tabatznik	<i>Zeire Zion</i>	Standard
	<i>Dos lid fun libe</i> (The Song of love)			<i>Arbeter Ring</i>	Standard
1932	A Tsigayner fantaziye (A Gypsey fantasy)	David Fram			Jewish Guild
	<i>Di Kishumakherin</i> (The Witch)	Avrom Goldfaden	David Danzig	Germiston Young Israel Society.	Standard
	<i>In shop</i> (In the sweat shop)	H. Leivick		<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	Jewish Guild
	<i>Menshn (People), Oylem ha-bo</i> (World to come)	Sholem Aleichem	Mendel Tabatznik	<i>Zeire Zion</i>	Jewish Guild
	<i>Der Vilder mentsh</i> (The Wild man)	Jacob Gordin	Adolf Yonker	Polish Club	Jewish Guild
	<i>Yoshke Muzikant</i> (Yoshke the musician)	Ossip Dymow	Shloyme Rubin	Yiddish Dramatic Section Jewish Guild	Jewish Guild
	<i>Tsurik aheym</i> (Homeward bound)	Abel Shaban	Mendel Tabatznik		Standard
	<i>Di teg fun unzer lebn</i> (The Days of our lives)	Leonid Andreyev	Leo Galvin	Yiddish Dramatic Section Jewish Guild	Jewish Guild
	Chanele	Sigmund Feinman		Pretoria Amateur Dramatic Society	Pretoria Opera House
1933	<i>Ibern okean</i> (Over the ocean)	Jacob Gordin	Hannan Hiersch		Jewish Guild
	200 000	Sholem Aleichem		<i>Zeire Zion</i>	Jewish Guild
	<i>Menshn (People) & Der Hosen</i> (The Bridegroom)	Sholem Aleichem	Mendel. Tabatznik	Krugersdorp CultureClub	Yiddish Krugersdorp City Hall
	<i>Funem fayer</i> (From the fire)	Sh. Deyskal	M. Zimmerman & Weis	<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	Selbourne Hall

	<i>Fun Fordsburg biz Mayfair</i> (From Fordsburg to Mayfair) <i>A gast in shtetl</i> A Visitor in the shtetl <i>Tsezayt un tseshpreyt</i> (Scattered and dispersed) <i>Shver tsu zany a Yid</i> (Hard to be a Jew) <i>Riverside Drive</i>	David Fram Sholem Aleichem Sholem Aleichem Leon Kobrin	Hannan Hiersch B.M.Remen David Danzig Rev. A. Altshuler	 <i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i> Klerksdorp Dramatic Circle Benoni Jewish Dramatic Circle Brakpan Yiddish Dramatic Circle	Jewish Guild Hebrew Hall, Benoni Brakpan
1934	<i>Bay nakht oyfn altn mark</i> (By night in the old market) <i>Der Shnips</i> (The necktie) <i>Der Meshugener Poet</i> (The Crazy poet) & <i>Di Nekome</i> (The Revenge) <i>Tsezayt un tseshpreyt</i> (Scattered and dispersed) <i>Oyf der grenets</i> (On the border)	I.L. Peretz Anatolii Glebov Sholem Aleichem A. Vieviorka	Simche Nathan David Danzig & Leo Galvin Rev. A. Altshuler	Yiddish Art Theatre <i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i> Benoni Jewish Dramatic Circle Brakpan Yiddish Dramatic Society <i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	Jewish Guild Jewish Guild Benoni Brakpan Jewish Guild
1935	<i>In opgrunt</i> (In the abyss) <i>Vi es arbet nit der est nit</i> (If one doesn't work one doesn't eat) <i>Di Getsfungene kale</i> (The Pregnant bride) <i>Froyen fun der nakht</i> (Night birds) <i>A harts vos benkt</i> (Aching heart) <i>Di Royte blum,</i> (The Red flower) <i>Got fun frase,</i> (God of cliché) <i>Slushay</i> <i>Dos kurtser glik, Biznes, Di Zenzur in kik</i> (Brief happiness, Business, Censor in the kitchen) <i>Di Importirter vayb</i> (The imported wife) <i>In a velt fun zind</i> (In a world of sin) <i>Erikh batsolt</i> (Erich pays) <i>Neshomes tsu farkoyfn</i> (Souls for sale) <i>Farvos froyen getn zikh</i> (Why women divorce)	Maxim Gorky I. Zolotarevsky D. Kalmanowitch William Segal William Segal D. Kalmanowitch	Kurt Baum Mary Einhorn & Boris Abramov Sarah Sylvia Sarah Sylvia Morris Blum Sarah Sylvia Sarah Sylvia Sarah Sylvia Sarah Sylvia	<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i> <i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i> African Consolidated Theatres African Consolidated Theatres <i>Gezerd</i> Pretoria <i>Yidisher Dramatisher Fareyn</i> African Consolidated Theatres African Consolidated Theatres African Consolidated Theatres African Consolidated Theatres	Jewish Guild His Majesty's His Majesty's Jewish Guild City Hall, Pretoria His Majesty's His Majesty's His Majesty's His Majesty's His Majesty's
1936	<i>Vayse shklatn</i> (White slaves) <i>Luft pamoses</i> <i>A Mames shild</i> (A Mother's fault) <i>Shir ha-shirim</i> (Song of songs) <i>Professor Mamlock</i> <i>Di Meydl fun der Vest</i> (The Girl from the West) <i>Funem fayer</i> (From the fire) <i>Mazel tov,</i> & <i>Der letster korbh</i> (The Last sacrifice) <i>200 000</i>	 Z. Kornblit Anshul Shur Friedrich Wolf Sholem Aleichem S.A. Deyskal S. Olgin Sholem Aleichem	 Sarah Sylvia Benny Ozynski Phil Schragger Phil Schragger Benny Ozynski Phil Schragger Yankev Waislitz	 African Consolidated Theatres <i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i> Phil Schragger <i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i> <i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i> <i>Fareynikte Yidisher Kultur Front</i>	His Majesty's 141 Main Street Jewish Guild Jewish Guild 141 Main Street Jewish Guild 141 Main Street His Majesty's

1937	<i>Dos lebn ruft</i> (Life is calling)	B. Belatserkovsky	Yankev Waislitz	<i>Fareynikte Yidisher Kultur Front</i>	Jewish Guild
	<i>Bizn tog fun mayn</i> (Till the day I die)	Ctlifford Odets	Benny Ozynski	<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	141 Main Street
	<i>Tog un nakht</i> (Day and night)	Sh. Anski	Yankev Waislitz	<i>Fareynikter Yidisher Kultur Front</i>	Standard
	<i>Der veg tsum lebn</i> (The way to life)			<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	Library Theatre
	<i>Parnose (A living)</i>	Ch. Gottesfeld	Yankev Waislitz	<i>Yidisher Kultur Fareyn</i>	Standard
	<i>Der broyt mil</i> (The Flour mill)	David Bergelson	F. Zygielbaum	<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	Jewish Guild
	<i>Dray shvester</i> (Three sisters)	Leon Kobrin	Sarah Sylvia	African Consolidated Theatres	Standard
	<i>Gelt (Volpone)</i>	Ben Jonson	Kurt Baum	<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	141 Main Street
	<i>Motke ganef</i> (Motke the thief)	Sholem Asch	Leo Galvin	<i>Yidisher Kultur Fareyn</i>	Jewish Guild
	1938	<i>A froy on a harts</i> (A woman without a heart)	J. Markowitz	Sarah Sylvia	African Consolidated Theatres
<i>Paris bay nakht</i> (Paris by night)		J. Markowitz	Sarah Sylvia	African Consolidated Theatres	Standard
<i>Di Yorshim</i> (The heirs)		Sholem Asch	Leo Galvin	<i>Yidisher Kultur Fareyn</i>	Jewish Guild
<i>Bagrobt di toyte</i> (Bury the dead)		Irwin Shaw	Leo Kerz	<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	141 Main Street
<i>Shulames</i>		Avrom Goldfaden	Boris Abramov		Standard
<i>Rokhl's kinder</i> (Rokhl's children)		D. Kalmanowitch	Vera Kanevska	African Consolidated Theatres	Standard
<i>Di farlibte mishpokhe</i> (Family in love)			Boris Abramov		Library theatre
<i>Gevald ven shtarbt er</i> (Gevald he's dying)		Ch. Gottesfeld	Benny Ozynski	<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	
<i>Der letster tants</i> (The last dance)		Olshensky	Vera Kanevska	African Consolidated Theatres	Standard
1939		<i>Kol Nidre</i>	Anshel Shur	Vera Kanevska	African Consolidated Theatres
	<i>A dank fun Kinder</i> (Thanks to children)		Joel Myerson & Vera Kanevska	African Consolidated Theatres	Standard
	<i>Der dorfsyung</i> (The Village boy)	Leon Kobrin	Benny Ozynski	<i>Yidische Teater Gezelshaft</i>	
	<i>Shvartsbard</i>	Alter Kacyzna	Yankev Waislitz, Leo Galvin, Max Itzler	<i>Yidische Teater Gezelshaft</i>	Jewish Guild
	<i>Der Amerikaner Litvak</i> (The American Litvak)		M. Kressyn & H. Jacobson	African Consolidated Theatres	Standard
	<i>Motke fun Slobodke</i>		M. Kressyn & H. Jacobson	African Consolidated Theatres	Standard
	<i>Der Leydikgeyer</i> (The Idler)		M. Kressyn & H. Jacobson	African Consolidated Theatres	Standard
1939	<i>Meydlekh in gefar</i> (Maidins in danger)		M. Kressyn & H. Jacobson	African Consolidated Theatres	Standard
	<i>Artistn</i> (Artists)		M. Kressyn & H. Jacobson	African Consolidated Theatres	Standard
	<i>David Golder</i>	I. Nemerovsky	Ossip Runitch	Yiddish Art Theatre	Coronation Hall
	<i>Der Atestat</i> (The Matriculant)	Ladislaus Fodor	Ossip Runitch	Yiddish Art Theatre	Coronation Hall
	<i>Friling in September</i> (Spring in September)	L. Hirschfeld	Ossip Runitch	Yiddish Art Theatre	Coronation Hall
	<i>Der Tiger</i> (The Tiger)	D. Kalmanowitch	Ossip Runitch	Yiddish Art Theatre	Coronation Hall

	<i>Dos Idische erd</i> (The Jewish earth)	Wulf Sachs	Ossip Runitch	Yiddish Art Theatre	Coronation Hal
1940	<i>Ershte pasient, (First patient) Erets Yisroel (Land of Israel)</i> <i>Hands up</i> <i>Yoshke Muzikant</i> <i>Geft, libe un shande</i> (Money love & shame) <i>Hershel Ostropoler</i>	SholemAleichem Der Tunkeler Chashmal Ossip Dymow	Benny Ozynski Leo Galvin Sarah Sylvia	<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i> <i>Yidisher Kultur Fareyn</i> African Consolidated Theatre	Library Theatre Standard
	<i>Der Vilder mensh</i> (The Wild man) <i>Got mentsh un tayvl</i> (God man & the devil)	Jacob Gordin Jacob Gordin	H. Hiersch Shloyme Rubin	<i>Yidische Teater Gezelshaft & African Consolidated Theatres</i> Polish Club Medical Aid for Russia	Jewish Guild Coronation Hall
1941	<i>Professor Mamlock</i> <i>Got mensh un tayvl</i> (God man & the devil)	Friedrich Wolf Jacob Gordin	Benny Ozynski David Danzig	African Consolidated Theatres Benoni Yiddish Dramatic Society	Standard Benoni Town Hall
1942	<i>Di Maske fun soten</i> (The Mask of satan) <i>Dos Fremde kind</i> (The Strange child)	Ossip Runitch V. Shwarkin	Ossip Runitch Ossip Runitch	<i>Idisher Forum</i> <i>Idisher Forum & African Consolidated Theatres</i>	University Hall, Milner Park Standard
1943	<i>Goldfaden spektakel</i> (Goldfaden spectacle) <i>Kreutzer Sonata</i>	Michael Weichart Jacob Gordin	F. Zygielbaum Ossip Runitch	Jewish Dramatic Circle <i>Idisher Forum & African Consolidated Theatres</i>	Library Theatre Standard
1944	<i>Partizaner</i> <i>Der Dybbuk oyfn linkn zayt</i> (The Dybbuk on the Left)	A. Karneitshik Hyman Erlich	Leo Galvin Benny Ozynski	Medical Aid for Russia <i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	Library Theatre Library Theatre
1945	<i>Der hosen (The Bridegroom)</i> <i>A shtikl radio nokh havdole</i> (A radio play before Havdole) <i>Yoshke muzikant</i> (Yoshke the musician) <i>Mazeltoiv, Oylem ha-bo</i> (The next world), <i>Hands up</i>	Der Tunkeler Ossip Dymow Sholem Aleichem Chashmal	Y. Movson Leo Galvin Benny Ozynski	<i>Idisher Kultur Fareyn, Pretoria</i> <i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i> <i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	Coronation Hall
1946	<i>Hurbn (Holocaust)</i> <i>Gold grebers (Gold diggers)</i>	Y.L. Segal Sholem Aleichem	Y. Movson F. Zygielbaum	<i>Idisher Kultur Fareyn Pretoria</i> African Consolidated Theatres	Standard
1947	<i>Riverside Drive</i>	Leon Kobrin		Brakpan Yiddish DramaticCircle	Germiston City Hall
1948	<i>Der Profeshyonel</i> <i>200 000</i>	Gershon Fine Sholem Aleichem	I. Zygielbaum David Danzig	<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i> Benoni Dramatic Circle	Benoni Town Hall

1949	<i>Nekome nemer</i> (The Avenger)	Chaim. Sloves	T. Samsonov	Dramatic Section, <i>Yidisher Kultur Federatsye</i>	Benoni Town Hall
	<i>Der Dorfsyung</i> (The Village lad)	Leon Kobrin	Hannan Hiersch	<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	Coronation Hall
	<i>The Street talks</i>	J. Markowitz	Esta Stein	Jewish Musical Institute	Ginsburg's Hall
	<i>Di Kishufmakherin</i> (The Witch)	Avrom Goldfaden	J. Greenspun		Ginsburg's Hall
	<i>Riverside Drive</i>	Leon Kobrin	David Danzig	Benoni Dramatic Circle	Benoni Town Hall
	<i>Motye Meylekh der stolier</i> (Motye Meylekh the carpenter)		Y. Movsen	Pretoria Dramatic Circle	
			Y. Movsen	Pretoria Dramatic Circle	
1950	<i>Dembes</i> (Oak trees)	Fishl Bymko	F. Zygielbaum		Technical College
	<i>Tevye der Milkhiker</i> (Tevye the Dairyman)	Sholem Aleichem	J. Heifer	Vereeniging Yiddish Dramatic Society	
1951	<i>Mirele Efros</i>	Jacob Gordin	Nusia Gold	Yiddish Theatre Group	Technical College
	<i>200 000</i>	Sholem Aleichem	Meyer Tzelniker	<i>Yidisher Afrikaner Teater</i>	Empire
	<i>Di Kishufmakherin</i> (The Witch)	Avrom Goldfaden	Meyer Tzelniker	<i>Yidisher Afrikaner Teater</i>	Technical College
	<i>Di Shevu'e</i> (The Oath)	Jacob Gordin	Nusia Gold	Yiddish Theatre Group	Library Theatre
	<i>Der Soykher fun Venetsye</i> (The Merchant of Venice)	W. Shakespeare Trans. A. Maisels	Meyer Tzelniker	<i>Yidisher Afrikaner Teater</i>	Empire
	<i>Riverside Drive</i>	Leon Kobrin	Nusia Gold	<i>Yidisher Folks-Teater</i>	Technical College
	<i>Oylem ha-bo</i> (The Next world)	Sholem Aleichem	David Danzig	Benoni Yiddish Theatre Society	Benoni Town Hall
	<i>Mentshn</i> (People)				
1952	<i>Got mentsh un tayvl</i> (God man & the devil)	Jacob Gordin	Nusia Gold	<i>Yidisher Folks-Teater</i>	Technical College
	<i>Dos Meserl</i> (The little knife)	Sholem Aleichem	Mendel Tabatznik	<i>Yidisher Folkshul Concert</i>	
1953	<i>Shayke Lets</i> (Shayke the clown)	L. Katsovitz	Y. Mansdorf & Nusia Gold	<i>Yidisher Folks-Teater</i>	Reps Theatre
1954	<i>Tevye der Milkhiker</i> (Tevye the Dairyman)	Sholem Aleichem	Y. Mansdorf & Nusia Gold	<i>Yidisher Folks-Teater</i>	Reps Theatre
	<i>Stempenyu</i>	Sholem Aleichem	Y. Mansdorf & Nusia Gold	<i>Yidisher Folks-Teater</i>	Reps Theatre
	<i>Der Nayer Burgermayster</i> (The New Mayor)	Y. Bar Yosef	Y. Mansdorf & Nusia Gold	<i>Yidisher Folks-Teater</i>	Reps Theatre
1955	<i>Der Arender</i>	I.L. Peretz	Mendl Tabatznik	<i>Yidisher Folkshul</i>	Technical College
1956	<i>Ver iz er</i> (Where is he)	Benedetti	D. Blumenfeld	Sholem Aleichem Group	Y.M.C.A. Hall
	<i>Di Puste kretsme</i> (The Haunted inn)	P. Hirschbein	Nusia Gold		Y.M.C.A. Hall
	<i>Yugnt ruft</i> (The Call of youth)	L. Fodor	D. Blumenfeld & Jonas Turkow	Sholem Aleichem Group	Windmill Theatre
1959	<i>Two acts from:</i> <i>Oylem ha-bo</i> (The Next world) <i>Gimnasye</i>	Sholem Aleichem	Sarah Sylvia	S.A. Jewish Board of Deputies & <i>Yidisher Kultur Federatsye</i>	Zionist Centre
1960	<i>The Doctor takes a wife</i>		Sarah Sylvia	<i>Yidisher Kultur Federatsye</i>	Jewish Guild
	<i>Mirele Efros Act 2.</i>	Jacob Gordin	Sarah Sylvia	<i>Yidisher Kultur Federatsye</i>	

2. WESTERN CAPE

1916	<i>Tsuzayt un tsushpreyt</i> (Scattered and dispersed)	Sholem Aleichem		Jewish Literary & Dramatic Society	Playhouse
1917	<i>Di Get</i>	Sholem Aleichem		Jewish Literary & Dramatic Society	Playhouse
1918	<i>Di Yesoyme</i> (The Orphan)	Jacob Gordin		Hebrew Operatic & Dramatic Company	
	<i>Dos Yidische Harts</i> (The Jewish heart)	Joseph Lateiner		Hebrew Operatic & Dramatic Company	
	<i>Mirele Efros</i>	Jacob Gordin		Hebrew Operatic & Dramatic Company	Playhouse
	<i>The Unknown</i>	Jacob Gordin	S. Davidoff	Jewish Literary & Dramatic Society	Railway Institute
1920	<i>The Dreamer</i>	Jacob Gordin	S. Davidoff	Jewish Literary & Dramatic Society	Railway Institute
	<i>Der Meturef</i> (The Madman)	Jacob Gordin	S. Davidoff	Hebrew Operatic & Dramatic Company	Railway Institute
1921	<i>Der Yidisher Kenig Lir</i> (The Jewish King Lear)	Jacob Gordin		Jewish Literary Society	Worcester
1923	<i>The True force</i>			Jewish Literary & Dramatic Society	Railway Institute
1924	<i>Shulames</i>	Avrom Goldfaden	Joel Myerson		Opera House
1926	<i>Shir ha-shirim</i> (Song of Songs)	Anshul Shur	Bert Herbert		Railway Institute
1929	<i>Madame Mirl from Odessa</i>		Phil Schragger		Zionist Hall
1931	<i>Riverside Drive</i>	Leon Kobrin	H. Kowarsky	League for a Working Palestine	Zionist Hall
1932	<i>Dos Groyse gevins</i> (The Windfall)	Sholem Aleichem		Paarl Dramatic Society	Paarl Talmud Torah, Zionist Hall
	<i>Di Shadhonim</i> (The Matchmakers)			Cape Town Jewish Dramatic Society	Zionist Hall
	<i>Riverside Drive</i>	Leon Kobrin	H. Kowarsky	Cape Town Jewish Dramatic Society	Zionist Hall
	<i>Dos Pintele Yid</i> (The Quintessential Jew)	B. Thomashefsky	B. Berman & H. Kowarsky	Paarl Dramatic Society	Palladium, Paarl
1933	<i>Der Yidisher Kenig Lir</i> (The Jewish King Lear)	Jacob Gordin		Paarl Dramatic Society	Paarl Talmud Torah
	<i>Moshke hazer</i> (Moshke the pig)	I. D. Berkowitz	H. Kowarsky	Zionist Socialist Party	Zionist Hall
	<i>Dos Yidische harts</i> (The Jewish heart)	Joseph Lateiner	Jacob Levinson	Stellenbosch Young Israel Society	Opera House
1934	<i>Briders</i> (Brothers)	S. Liptzin		<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	Oddfellows Hall
	<i>Motye Meylekh der stolier</i>			<i>Gezerd</i>	Oddfellows Hall
	<i>Tsvishn flamen</i> (In flames)			<i>Gezerd</i>	Oddfellows Hall
	<i>Der Fremder</i> (The Stranger)	Jacob Gordin	H. Kowarsky	Paarl Junior Zionist Society	Zionist Hall, Paarl

1935	<i>Ir Ervakhung</i> (Her Awakening) <i>Oyfn grenets</i> (On the border)	Leon Kobrin A. Vieviorka	Sarah Sylvia Chaim Klein	<i>Yidisher Arbeter Klub</i>	Hotel Edward
1937	<i>200 000</i> <i>Professor Mamlock</i>	Sholem Aleichem Friedrich Wolf	Yankev Waislitz Yankev Waislitz	Jewish Dramatic Circle Jewish Dramatic Circle	Zionist Hall Zionist Hall
1938	<i>Sosl vert a kale</i> (Sosl gets married) & <i>Der Opgenarter man</i> (The Disappointed man) <i>Di Fargesene mame</i> (The Forgotten mother) <i>Unzer rebele</i> (Our rabbi) <i>Rokhl's kinder</i> (Rachel's children) <i>A hasene in moshev zkenim</i> (A Wedding in an Old Age Home) <i>Mirele Efros</i>	Jacob Gordin	Vera Kanevska Vera Kanevska V. Kanevska Vera Kanevska Vera Kanevska V. Kanevska	Jewish Dramatic Circle Jewish Dramatic Circle Jewish Dramatic Circle Jewish Dramatic Circle Jewish Dramatic Circle Jewish Dramatic Circle	Zionist Hall Zionist Hall Zionist Hall Zionist Hall Zionist Hall Zionist Hall
1939	<i>Der Blinder mahler</i> (The Blind painter) <i>A Mames harts</i> (A Mother's heart) <i>Lakhn iz gezunt</i> (Laughing is healthy) <i>Kreutzer sonata</i>	Z. Kalmanowitch Sholem Aleichem Jacob Gordin	M. Himmelsztejn Vera Kanevska Vera Kanevska	Paarl Dramatic Society Jewish Dramatic Circle Jewish Dramatic Circle	Paarl, Muizenberg Zionist Hall Zionist Hall Oddfellows Zionist Hall
1940	<i>Di Fartribene tokhter</i> (The Cast out daughter)	Z. Kornblit	M. Himmelstein	Paarl Dramatic Society	Zionist Hall
1941	<i>Parnose</i> (A Living)	Ch. Gottesfeld	M. Himmelstein	Jewish Dramatic Circle	Zionist Hall
1943	<i>Chasse di yesoyme</i> (Chasse the orphan)	Jacob Gordin	Gotkin	Jewish Dramatic Circle	Zionist Hall
1945	<i>Mayn Yidishe Mame</i>	Joseph Lateiner		Paarl Dramatic Society	Zionist Hall
1946	<i>Der hosn</i> (The Bridegroom)	Der Tunkeler	Nathan Wollach	Jewish Dramatic Circle	Muizenberg Pavilion
1947	<i>Tevye der Milkhiker</i> (Tevye the Dairyman) <i>Mazeltov</i> <i>Tuml in shtotgortn</i> (Tumult in the avenue)	Sholem Aleichem Sholem Aleichem Gershon Laden & Benzion Mirvish	Joseph Lazar Alfred Facier	Jewish Dramatic Circle Jewish Dramatic Circle	Zionist Hall Muizenberg Pavilion Zionist Hall
1948	<i>Tevye der Milkhiker</i> (Tevye the Dairyman) One Act comedy	Sholem Aleichem Sholem Aleichem	Joseph Lazar Berl Padovich	Jewish Dramatic Circle Jewish Dramatic Circle	Muizenberg Pavilion Muizenberg Pavilion
1951	<i>Riverside Drive</i> <i>Mazeltov</i>	Leon Kobrin Sholem Aleichem	Pesach Barsky	Jewish Dramatic Circle Jewish Dramatic Circle	Muizenberg Pavilion Muizenberg Pavilion

	<i>Hoykhe fenster</i> (High society)	Zalmen Libin	Meyer Tzelniker	Cape Jewish Dramatic Society	Zionist Hall
1952	<i>Mazeltov</i>	Sholem Aleichem			Muizenberg Pavilion
1954	<i>Der Nayer Burgermayster</i> (The New Mayor)	Y. Bar Yosef	Y. Mansdorf	Cape Jewish Dramatic Society	Zionist Hall
1959	<i>Menshn</i> (People)	Sholem Aleichem	H. Scherzer	<i>Yidishe Kultur Federatsye</i>	Zionist Hall

3. EASTERN CAPE

1929	<i>Dray minut toyt</i> (Three minute death) & <i>In tsveyen a zeks unzekhtsig</i> (In two a sixty six)	Max Gabel	Max Angorin		East London
1930	<i>Kasrilevke Hotel</i>	Sholem Aleichem	Rev. Altshuler		East London
1932	<i>Dos Groyse gevins</i> (The Windfall)	Sholem Aleichem	Max Angorin	East London Jewish Dramatic Circle	East London City Hall
	<i>Tsurik aheym</i> (Homeward bound)	Abel Shaban	Max Angorin	East London Jewish Dramatic Circle	East London
	<i>Dos Yidishe harts</i> (The Jewish heart)	Joseph Lateiner	Max Angorin	East London Jewish Dramatic Circle	East London
1944	<i>Shloyme un Rikl</i>	I. Zolotarevsky	Max Angorin	East London Jewish Dramatic circle	East London
1945	<i>Shloyme un Rikl</i>	I. Zolotarevsky	Max Angorin	East London Jewish Dramatic circle	Port Elizabeth City Hall
1947	<i>Riverside Drive</i>	Leon Kobrin		Port Elizabeth Yiddish Culture Club	Port Elizabeth
1955	<i>Der Nayer Burgermayster</i> (The New Mayor)	Y. Bar Yosef	Y. Mansdorf	Port Elizabeth Yiddish Culture Club	City Hall
1956	<i>Der Yugnt ruft</i> (The Call of youth)	Ladislaus Fodor	D. Blumenfeld & Jonas Turkow	Port Elizabeth Yiddish Culture Club	Port Elizabeth & East London

4. NORTHERN CAPE: KIMBERLEY

1920	<i>Nokh a hasene</i> (Another wedding)		Ch. Kramer	Young Israel Society	Zionist Hall
	<i>Der Yidisher Kenig Lir</i> (The Jewish King Lear)	Jacob Gordin	Ch. Kramer		Dean's Hall

5. NATAL: DURBAN

1920	<i>Dos Pintele Yid</i> (The Quintessential Jew)	B. Thomashefsky	Phil Schragger	Combined Zionist Committee of Durban	Theatre Royal
1921	<i>Der Amerikaner glik</i> (American luck)			Hebrew Operatic & Dramatic society	Theatre Royal

1922	<i>Der Bal haloymes</i> (The Dreamer)	Joseph Shapiro	Hannan Hirsch	Durban Zionist Association	Theatre Royal
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6. ORANGE FREE STATE

1929	<i>Riverside Drive</i>	L. Kobrin	Rev. A. Altshuler		Bethlehem
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1933	<i>Oylem ha-bo</i> (World to come)	Sholem Aleichem	Rev. Z. Lison	Young Israel Society & Hebrew School	Marquard Town Hall
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1949	<i>Yener velt</i> (The other world)		E. Lapinsky	<i>Yidishe Kultur Federatsye</i>	Bloemfontein
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1952	<i>Pesah tsum seder & Ekspropriatsye</i> (Expropriation)	Sholem Aleichem N. Davidovitz	D. Kramer	<i>Yidishe Kultur Federatsye</i>	Bloemfontein
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University of Cape Town

APPENDIX III

SOUTH AFRICAN YIDDISH PLAYS

1907

Joffe, A. L. *Der Yudisher voluntir* (The Jewish volunteer). Performed by the Wallerstein Company, Gaiety Theatre, 7 May 1907. No manuscript extant.

1910

Landau, Judah Leo. *Kenig Hurdus* (King Herod). London: R. Mazin, 1901. Performed by the Wallerstein Company, Gaiety Theatre, 5 January 1910.

1916

Wallace, G. A Tate. (A Father). *Dos Naye vort*, 1916. Never performed.

Rutenberg, Y. *Der Hut* (The Hat). Performed at a literary evening of the *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn*, Johannesburg, 1916. No manuscript extant.

Rutenberg, Y. *Der Shed* (The Evil spirit). Performed at a literary evening of the *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn*, Johannesburg, 1916. No manuscript extant.

1920

Brill, Hirsch. *Baym grenets* (On the border). Read at function of the *Yidisher Literarisher un Dramatischer Fareyn*, Johannesburg, 1920. No manuscript extant.

1922

Shapiro, Joseph. *Der Bal haloymes* (The Dreamer). Performed by the Durban Zionist Association at the Theatre Royal, 5 August 1922 in aid of the Keren Hayesod, directed by Hannan Hirsch. No manuscript extant.

Brill, Hirsch. *Horev* (Ruin). *Dorem Afrike*, 1922. Published with: *Shaul* (Saul), Berlin, 1922. Never performed.

Brill, Hirsch. *Shaul: Biblishe drame in 4 akten*. Kovno: Farlag Likht, 1922. Serialised in *Dorem Afrike*, Nos. 2-5, 1923. Never performed.

1924

Brill, Hirsch. *Oyfn shvel*. (On the threshold). Berlin: Farlag Shveln, 1924. Contents: *Oyfn shvel* (On the threshold), *Oyf der grenets* (On the border), *Di dray* (The three). Never performed.

1929

Tabatznik, Mendl. *Dos oreme foygele*. (The Dejected bird). A play about school life, performed by children of the Yiddish *folkshul* in 1929. No manuscript extant.

1930

Tabatznik, Mendl. *Di Goldene Keytele* (The Golden chain) [*un*] *Fayvl's polotik*. Performed by the children of the Yiddish *Folkshul*, Johannesburg, 1930. No manuscript extant.

1931

Sevitz, M.Y. *Grine un gele* (Greens and yellows). Published in the newspaper, *Di Idishe Tribune*, 1931. Newspaper not extant.

Tabatznik, Mendl. *In keler, gegramte tsene loyt Morris Kanapnitsky* (In the cellar, rhymed scene according to Morris Kanapnitsky.) *Di Idishe Tribune*, 1931. Never performed.

1932

Fram, David. *A Tsigayner fantazie* (A Gypsy fantasy) with music by G. Ichilchik. Performed at the Jewish Guild, 5 February 1932. No manuscript extant.

Shaban, Abel. *Tsurik aheym* (Back home). Serialised in the *Afrikaner Yidisher Tsaytung* 1, 6, 27 May, 3, 9 June, 1932. Performed at the Standard Theatre on *Motsa'ei Yom Kippur* 1932, 10 October 1932, East London & Bulawayo. Directed by Mendl Tabatznik.

Sevitz, M.Y. *Onshitel* (Pretence). Published in *Di Idishe Tribune*, 1932. Never performed. Newspaper not extant.

1933

Fram, David. *Fun Fordsburg biz Mayfair* (From Fordsburg to Mayfair). Directed by Hannan Hirsch. Performed at the Jewish Guild, 19 July, 1933, and at the Hebrew Hall, Benoni, 13 September 1933. No manuscript extant.

1937

Kartun, Shloyme. *Tsvey Yidn leynen a tsaytung* (Two Jews read a newspaper). Sketch performed at a variety evening *Yidisher Kultur Fareyn*, Johannesburg. No manuscript extant.

Kartun, Shloyme. *Luft mentshn* (Idlers); *Bashert un umglik* (A misfortune was ordained); *Mit a gezunn kop* (With a healthy head); *shpiltzikh fun dem goyrl* (Plaything of destiny); *Mayn fraynd der syne* (My friend the enemy). Johannesburg, 1937. Produced by the *Yidische Kultur Fedratsye*, 1947.

Feldman, Richard. *Tambuza: an episod fun 'Groysn Trek'*. *Forois*, yorg. 1, nom. 1, June, 1937.

1939

Sachs, Wulf. *Dos Idische erd* (The Jewish earth). Performed by the Yiddish Art Theatre. 5, 6, 7, 9 December 1939. Director: Ossip Runitch. Choreography: Nina Parnel. Mandolin orchestra: L. Alter. No manuscript extant.

1942

Runitch, Ossip. *Di Maske fun soten* (The Mask of Satan). Performed by the *Idisher Forum*, University Hall, Milner Park, 25 April 1942 in aid of the Relief Fund for the Refugees in Mauritius and Medical Aid for Russia. Director: Ossip Runitch. No manuscript extant.

Sachs, Wulf. *Anrunen fun nekhtn*. (The Disappearance of yesterday). Performed in 1942. No manuscript extant.

1944

Ehrlich, Hyman & Ozynski, Benny. *Der Dibuk oyfn linkn zayt* (The Dybbuk on the Left). Performed by the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, Library Theatre, 18 & 21 October, 1944. Director: Benny Ozynski. No manuscript extant.

Zygielbaum, Faivel. *In Poyln* (In Poland), 1944. No manuscript extant.

1945

Zygielbaum, Faivel. *Getograd: drame in 3 aktn un 16 bilder*. Johannesburg: Aroysgegebn durkh Dorem-Afrikaner Boord of Depyutis tsum tsveytn yortog fun oyfshtand in Varshever geto, 1945. Front cover illustration by William Gropper, back cover illustration by Rene Shapshak. Also published in *Dorem-Afrikaner zamlbukh* edited by S. Kartun, M. Shor, & J.M. Sherman. Yohanesburg: Literarishn Krayz, 1945. Never performed.

1946

Segal, Y.L. *Hurbn* (Holocaust). Performed in Pretoria, 31 July, 1946. No manuscript extant.

Galvin, Leo. *Unzer farband*. (Our association). Performed by the Shavler Landslayt Fareyn, Johannesburg, 1946. No manuscript extant

1947

Laden, Gershon & Mirvish, Benzion. *Tumel in shtotogarten* (Tumult in the avenue). Performed at Zionist Socialist Party Concert., Zionist Hall, 28 October 1947. Director: Alfred Faclier. No manuscript extant.

Laden, Gershon. *Der Allrighnik*. 1947. No manuscript extant.

1948

Fine, Gershon. *Der Profeshyonef* (The Professional) by Gershon Fine. Performed by the *Yidisher Arbeter Klub*. 7 & 14 March 1948. Director: Israel Zygielbaum. No manuscript extant.

1949

Feldman, Richard. *Trayers: un dray dertsylungen* (Triers: and three stories). Yohanesburg: R. Feldman, 1945. Read at a playreading, Johannesburg, October 1949.

**APPENDIX IV
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

PAGE 17. The Golden years, 1896-1910.

1. Sarah Sylvia, in D. L. Sowden, 'In the artistic life of South Africa', in *Jewish Affairs*, May 1960, p. 63.
 2. Hannan Hirsch. Hannan Hirsch collection, ARCH 914.
 3. Gaiety Theatre, in J. Fletcher, 'Johannesburg at leisure: Luscombe Searelle and Harry Stodel', in *Founders and followers*, 1991, p. 178.
 4. Joseph Sacks, in P. Baneshik, 'Joseph Leopold Sacks', *Jewish Affairs*, vol. 36, no.11, November 1981, pp. 58-60.
 5. *House of Freedom*, 1907. Hannan Hirsch collection, ARCH 914.
 6. Gaiety Theatre, in C.A. Stoloff, 'The old theatres in Johannesburg' in *South African architectural record*, vol. 32, May 1947, p. 137.
- 7-12. S., E. & B. Wallerstein, M. R. & F. Waxman. Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, Ferlag Elisheva, New York, 1931, pp. 648-650, 660-662. For S & E. Wallerstein I have used the the pictures that coincide with those in a surviving programme from 1907. They are those of Hymie & Ella Wallerstein. See Chapter 3, Footnote 49.

PAGE 44. The Barren years, 1911-1930

1. Vera Kanevska & Paul Breitman, Mark Brajtman private collection.
2. Paul Breitman, Vera Kanevska & Adolf Teffner, Mark Brajtman private collection.
3. Nathan Brajtman, Mark Brajtman private collection.
4. Mary Einhorn, in *Afrikaner Yidisher Tsaytung*, 10 June 1938,
5. *Bal Haloymes – The Dreamer*, 1922. Hannan Hirsch collection ARCH 914.
6. The Railway Institute, Cape Town. 'Cape Town's new Railway Institute' in *S.A. Railways and Harbours Magazine*, August 1915, pp. 709-710.

PAGE 70: Zionists, radicals and refugees: community theatre in the Transvaal, 1930-1947.

1. Simche Nathan, in *Afrikaner Yidisher Tsaytung*, Erev Rosh ha-Shanah, 1933.
2. Yankev Waislitz, in *Afrikaner Yidisher Tsaytung*, 20 October 1936.
3. Faivl Zygielbaum, in *Afrikaner Yidisher Tsaytung*, 5 August 1938.
4. Ossip Runitch, in *S.A. Jewish Times*, 13 October 1939.
5. *Gelt, Yidisher Arbeter Klub*, 1937, M. Shain et al. *Looking back*, 2002, p. 25.
6. *Hershele Ostropoler*, 1940, in *Afrikaner Yidisher Tsaytung*, 7 June 1940.
7. *Der Atstatat*, 1939, in *S.A. Jewish Times*, 25 August 1939.

PAGE 101: Community theatre at the Cape, 1930-1947.

1. *Moshke Hazer*, 1933, Rose Mow private collection.
2. *Oyfn grenets*, 1935, M. Shain et al. *Looking back*, 2002, p. 22-23.
3. *Di Gele late*, 1937, Rochel Turok album.
4. *A wedding in an old age home*, Max Raysman Yiddish Theatre Collection.
5. *Dos Pintele Yid*, 1932, Milly Penkin private collection.
6. *Der Yidisher Kenig Lir*, 1933, Milly Penkin private collection.
7. Programmes, Paarl, Milly Penkin private collection.

PAGE 117: A Short lived revival, 1947-1960: Johannesburg.

1. Meyer Tzelniker & Bertha Englander, Bertha Englander Yiddish theatre collection ARCH 914.
2. 'Merchant of Venice – Berry goes backstage', in *Zionist Record*, 24 August 1951.
3. Ozynski, Zygielbaum, Hirsch, Tzelniker, in F. Zygielbaum, 'Baym frishn keyver fun a Yidishn artist', *Dorem Afrika* 6-ter yorg., nom. 1, September 1953, p. 27.
4. Max Perlman & Co., Photo Eli Weinberg, Benny Ozynski private collection.
5. Nusia Gold, Jewish theatre and theatre personalities, ARCH 968A.
6. Benny Ozynski & Max Perlman, Photo Eli Weinberg, Benny Ozynski private collection.
7. *Draysik yor teater-gang fun Yankev Mansdorf, 1924-1954*, Jacob Mansdorf Jubilee Committee, Johannesburg, 1954.
8. Gold & Mansdorf in *Tevye der Milkhiker*, 1954, *Yankev Mansdorf in zayn dor*, 19-?

PAGE 118: A Short lived revival, 1947-1960: Cape Town

1. Kretzmar & Turok in *Riverside Drive*, 1951, Rochel Turok album.
2. *Der Nayer Burgermayster*, 1954, Rochel Turok album.
3. Yankev Mansdorf and the Cape Town Jewish Dramatic Society. *Yankev Mansdorf in zayn dor*, 19-?