

## Yiddish theatre in Denmark 1906-56

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Morten Thing

# Yiddish theatre in Denmark 1906-56

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### **Jews in Denmark**

Jews have been allowed to settle in Denmark since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. From the 1680s they were even allowed to live in Copenhagen and to have a synagogue, though only when religious service could not be seen from the street. The first Jews were called “Jøder af den portugisiske Nation” (Jews of the Portuguese Nation). Later on also German Jews settled in the country and they outnumbered the Sephardic Jews by the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Jews achieved (nearly) full citizenship, and the small provincial congregations closed and their members moved to Copenhagen. By the 1880’s about 4.000 Jews lived in Denmark and most of them in Copenhagen.

In 1882 the Russian Jews, or Ashkenazim, began to migrate westward towards England and the US. But a minor group reached also Copenhagen, especially in 1905-1914. 10-12,000 Jews settled for a period in Copenhagen, 3,000 stayed for good. They stressed their identity through the use of their language, Yiddish. They made papers, a library, organizations, politics – and theatre – all in the Yiddish language.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have written about the Russian Jews in Denmark in Morten Thing, 2008.

## Yiddish theatre

To Danish historians of the theatre it is an unknown fact that a Yiddish scene existed in Denmark for 50 years, from 1906 to 1956. I have tried to make a register of all performances and plays as far as there are sources like flyers, posters, advertisements or reviews. In this register I have information of 275 performances, i.e. more than 5 performances a year.<sup>2</sup> It is outstanding in Danish theatre history that a minority tries to keep up their cultural identity through such a long period. In fact, this is what groups of Russian Jews did wherever they settled. The Yiddish theatre was a strategic element of Yiddish modernity.

This didn't spring from tradition. A Jewish theatre did exist in the form of the *Ester-plays* at Purim.<sup>3</sup> In the German-Jewish enlightenment, among the *maskilim*, there was a secular theatre. A Danish Jew, Isaak Euchel (1756-1804) wrote, while he lived in Berlin, in 1793 the play *Reb Henoch, oder: Woß tut me damit*, a rationalist play in West-Yiddish (jüdisch-deutsch), which more than the Ester-plays points to the modern Yiddish theatre.<sup>4</sup>

The modern Jewish theatre was born late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and witnesses to the dense social signification of the theatre. A first performance was staged in Jassy in Romania I 1876, when Abraham Goldfaden (1840-1908) united with Israel Gradner. Goldfaden was well-known as composer and author of popular songs and Gradner was a *broder zinger*. 'Broder zingers' was a local form of entertainment from Brody in Poland. They often performed at weddings, singing and playing comedies. It was Goldfadens achievement to unite this genre of entertainment with the theatrical

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<sup>2</sup> The register and the sources I have dealt with in Morten Thing 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Evi Butzer, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Isaak Euchel, 2004.

possibilities of a framing narrative. The Yiddish theatre was an immediate success and Goldfaden's troupe grew and launched new plays.

This new cultural form was born in the early period of the Jewish exodus from Eastern Europe, and as early as in 1882 the first Yiddish play was staged in New York. At first London became the epicenter of Yiddish Theatre, but very quickly New York took over. When mass immigration had peaked 50 years later there was 11 Yiddish theatre-halls in New York, four in Chicago and three in Philadelphia.

One of the main reasons that it developed that fast and as an immigrant-theatre was the anti-Jewish wave, that rolled over Russia after the murder of Alexandr 2. in 1881, and in 1883 lead to a ban on Yiddish theatre in Russia. It was in London the new kind of theatre got its western form. Jacob Gordin (1853-1909) became number one author of the Yiddish scene. He rewrote a whole series of classical theatre in Jewish garments, and his plays were the most performed in London, as in Copenhagen. Influenced by modern European realist theatre (Strindberg, Ibsen), Gordin paved the way for the Yiddish avant-garde theatre of the twenties.<sup>5</sup>

The Yiddish theatre developed alongside the Yiddish press and the language of Yiddish literature. In the period 1860-1890 embryo-forms of *Jewish modernity* developed in Eastern Europe. The theatre, the press and the literature were non-traditional forms in Jewish public sphere that broke with the religious dominance and to a certain

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<sup>5</sup> Nahma Sandrow, 1977; Joel Berkowitz, 2003; Zachary M. Baker, 2004; David S. Lifson, 1975; Heidelore Riss, 2000; for an early version of the history of the Jewish theatre, see Fabius Schach, 1901.

degree in non-patriarchal ways, for instance by widening the social space of women. The new public space and especially the use of Yiddish made those embryo-forms of modernity very vulnerable to tsarist suppression. For this reason and because of the Big Exodus in the same period, Jewish modernity unfolded mainly in Western Europe and

the US. When Lithuania and Poland became independent countries after WW1, the Jewish modernity also unfolded there, while in the Soviet Union (and in the Ukraine as a part of the Soviet Union) it was subjected to a system of control very much alike the tsarist one.

### **Periodisation**

Due to the size of the audience, the Yiddish theatre of Copenhagen was different from that in New York and later in Warszawa. It changed character, too, in its fifty years of existence. It was influenced both by internal factors and by the global Yiddish theatre. The history can be divided into four periods: 1906-21, 1921-27, 1927-39 and 1939-56.

### **Performances of the first period 1906-1921**

The first period is the most central to the Yiddish-culture in Copenhagen. In this period (1911-21) there were Yiddish papers and it is in this period that a tiny group of semi-professional actors lived in the town. It is the married couple Morris and Glike Bilavski (staying in the town 1908-21) and Adolf Timianov (staying 1909-15) and, in a shorter period, Mrs. Timianov and Mr. Rothstein (first names unknown).

Not least the period when Adolf Timianov dominated the scene was a fertile period. In 1912 there were 12 performances, in 1913 9, in 1914 12 and in 1915 15. When Timianov emigrated to New York the number of performances dropped to around four a year 1916-19, while the years 1920-21 was a revival with 7 and 13 performances (13 for all the year, but only 6 in this first period). The total picture 1906-21 can be seen from this scheme; first we have the number of plays, then the number of performances:

Plays	Performances
1906 2?	2?
1907 2	2
1908 6	6
1909 4	3
1910 7	6
1911 3	3
1912 12	12
1913 9	9
1914 12	12
1915 15	15
1916 8	7
1917 9	4
1918 6	3
1919 4	3
1920 10	7
1921 6	6
Total 115	100

### Halls and plays

The addresses of the theatre halls changed a lot. In the beginning the most used hall was Østerbro Teater. From 1904-16 this building with a theatre hall was owned by 'The Nordic Good Templar Lodge'. The theatre groups simply hired the room. As remembered by a woman, who performed already as a child:

"The room was a really big one and beautiful, I remember. At each side of the scene there were a colossal lion, gilded and standing on two legs. They looked very good. Around the room there were red plush sofas."<sup>6</sup>

The format of a theatre-evening was in the first years like this: First there was a play (or more plays), then there was a ball until two o'clock. The average age of the immigrant population was in the beginning rather low and the ball after the play witnesses to the double goal for the evening: You should be entertained in your own language and meet new people (among them representatives of the opposite sex). Later on the ball was separated from the theatre. But theatre performances could (often as one-act plays) fuse with music and singing or as in the thirties with wrestling shows.

The repertoire of the Yiddish theatre was indeed very Yiddish, as the grand old man of Yiddish Theatre, Jacob Gordin (1853-1909), is the author of 50 of the plays performed in Copenhagen, while 22 are dramatizations of Sholem Aleykhem- narratives. Number three on the list is Schalom Asch (14), J.L. Peretz og Peretz Hirschbein number four (each 11) and Mark Arnstein number five (8 plays). There were translations among the plays, too. Some of Gordin's plays were part translations, part adaption like דער יידישער קעניג ליר (*Der yidisher kenig Lir*) from Shakespeare's *King Lear* and קרייצער סאַנאַטע (*Kreytser*

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<sup>6</sup> Ida Weisdorff's story, Bent Blüdnikow, 1982.

*sonate*) from Tolstoj. And there were Nordic translations like August Strindberg's דער פּאָטער (*Der foter*) and Henrik Ibsen's פּופּענהויס (*Pupenhoy's*), too. There were a couple of plays written directly for the Copenhagen stage by immigrant authors.

The Yiddish scene was not a scene alike the Danish scenes (the traditional, the modern or the entertainment theatre), it was a scene in its own right. The Yiddish scene formed part of a world theatre: the Yiddish scenes in all the places, where Yiddish-speaking Jews had settled. An important distinction in Yiddish theatre is between באַוווּסטער ליטעראַרישער טעאַטער (*bavuster literarisher teater*) and שונד (*shund*), i.e. between 'serious theatre' and 'entertainment'. 'Shund' translates the English word 'thrash' and was used very much in discussions on the American-Yiddish scene. From the American scene the Yiddish operettas reached Copenhagen, and also light comedies.

In the thirties new impulses reached Copenhagen through guest performances like the Hebrew הבימה (*Habimah*) from Moscow or representatives for the group די ווילנערס (*Di vilners*), originally from Vilna. Genres like 'speech choir', didactic proletarian theatre and the revue-like 'living newspaper' came from the communist theatre of Germany, Poland and Soviet Russia.

### Style and actors

When it comes to the performance or style, we know next to nothing. This has to do with the fact that it was a marginal minority theatre. We nearly only have reviews and commentaries from the immigrants themselves. Some of these seem to know the norms of playing of mainstream theatre. But only for the first rather few performances, we have reviews from Danish Jews. Since they didn't understand the language, the reviews don't give us much information about performance style. When it comes to reviews from the minority itself there is a whole series of critique of the style for being amateurish or

undifferentiated and of the culture of the public for being plump and uncivilized.

The professional actors had actually got some training. Adolf Timianov was born in Poland 1886 and attended 18 years old at a German opera school. After some years he began travelling with a theatre troupe, either the קאמינסקא-טרופע (Kaminska-trupe) or the סיעראצקי און ווייסמאן-טרופע (Sierotski un Vaysman-trupe). He played in Copenhagen under the name Timjanka in 1909 and then went to London to play at יידישע פֿאָלקס טעאָטער (Yidishe folks teater) under Jacob Adler. In 1912 he came back to Copenhagen under the name Tamianov. Later he was known under the name Timianov in America, when he emigrated there in 1915. In the beginning he was attached to groups in Toronto and Montreal, later in the US. Often he played the summer season in Europe. In 1927 he visited Copenhagen on his 25-years jubilee-trip. Also in 1931 he came on a visit.<sup>7</sup>

As for Morris Bilavski he was born 1881 in Kutne in Poland. He already played theatre while in קהר (kheyder), the Jewish, religious primary school. 16 years old he came to London with some family and became a member of Samuel Goldenberg's drama club. He started playing Yiddish theatre and performed among other places in Paris. In 1907 he went to Poland to act. Here he met Glike Degensheyn (born 1891 in Zhiklin) and they fell in love. He was a member of the Jewish Social-democracy בונד (Bund) and since bundists were hunted by the police, they decided both to go abroad. They Went to Copenhagen, where they got married. They both took lessons with the Danish actor Holger Rose, and they began to act both in Yiddish and in Danish. Morris Bilavski acted at 'Dagmar Teatret' and Glike Bilavski at

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<sup>7</sup> זאַלמאַן זילבערצווייג (Adolf Timianov) in אַדאַלף טימיאַנאָו (Zalman Zilbertsvayg, 1934, col. 882 and in an interview with 'A. Temianoff', *Vore Damer* 22.2.1928.

'Casino'. She was also used in some of films made by 'Nordisk Film Co.'<sup>8</sup> In 1921 they emigrated to the US. They both acted in Yiddish in America, but especially Morris Bilavski. 1925-28 he played and was stage-manager at Irving Place Theatre and 1929-30 at זאַץ פֿאָלקס-טעאָטער (Zats' folks-teater).<sup>9</sup> From their time in Copenhagen we have this depiction from *Jødisk Samfund*:

”Det store Publikum, der Aften efter Aften fylder teatrene aner ikke, at der her i vor kære Hovedstad eksisterer den store Komedie, det uskoledede Talent, det blodrøde, hjertevarmeste Naturel.

Det er Herr og Fru Bielawski. Det desværre uskoledede Talent bor ude paa Islands Brygge og ernærer sig til daglig Brug ved Mellemandhandel med Cigarer og Cigaretter - - Dilettanter altså, vil Læserne altsaa udbyrde; nej, netop ikke, derimod Skuespillere uden Engagement, men ikke uden Publikum.” (“The big audience, evening after evening filling the theatres, do not know that here in our lovely capital we have the big comedy, the unschooled talent, the blood-red, heart-hottest naturel.

It is Mr. and Mrs. Bielawski. The unfortunately unschooled talent lives on Islands Brygge [street at island Amager in Copenhagen] and holds up life on a daily scale by selling cigars and

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<sup>8</sup> According to The Danish Film Institute Morris Bilavski had his debut at Nordisk Film in 1914, where he had smaller roles in films 1914- 1921, <http://www.dfi.dk/faktaofilm/nationalfilmografien/nfperson.aspx?id=144858>.

<sup>9</sup> מאָריס בילאַווסקי (Moris Bilavski) and גליקע בילאַווסקי (Glike Bilavski) in זאַלמאַן זילבערצווייג (Zalman Zilbertsvayg, 1931), col. 163f. and 'Glike Bilavsky' in *Jewish Women. A Comprehensive Encyclopedia*.

cigarettes - - dilettantes the readers will exclaim; no, precisely not, but actors without engagement, but not without an audience.”<sup>10</sup>

### The first performances

The first Yiddish performance was probably staged in the beginning of 1906. The paper *Berlingske Tidende* wrote in connection with the first public Yiddish performance in 1907:

”Andre steder [end New York og London], hvor mange russiske Emigranter er samlede, og hvor man ikke har faste Teatre, gives der lejlighedsvis dramatiske Forestillinger i Jargon af Dilettant-Selskaber. Dette har ogsaa været Tilfældet hos os, hvor for halvandet Aarstid siden en tilfældig samlet trup her i Kjøbenhavn gav en eller to private Forestillinger.” (“In other places [than New York and London], where many Russian emigrants are present, and where there are no fixed theatres, you can now and then see dramatic performances in Jargon [Yiddish] by Dilettante-troupes. This was the case here, when one and a half years ago a randomly composed troupe gave one or two private performances.”)<sup>11</sup>

The first public performance was staged November 10<sup>th</sup> 1907. A couple of days prior to the premiere the physician Louis Fränkel was

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<sup>10</sup> *Jødisk Samfund* 16.1.13. *Jødisk Samfund* formed the Danish part read from the left end of a bilingual paper; read from the right end it was in Yiddish and was called *Di yidische gezelshaft*. It was published by the organization *Feraynigung far ale rusishe yidn in Kopenhagen* (The Association of all Russian Jews in Copenhagen).

<sup>11</sup> *Jødisk Komædie i Kjøbenhavn* [Jewish comedy in Copenhagen], *Berlingske Tidende*, evening, 5.11.07.

interviewed to the paper *Politiken*. He was the one who had got the license for the performance.<sup>12</sup> He told:

”I Londons, Amsterdams og Varshavs Jødekvarterer finder Teaterforestillinger i den ejendommelige Jiddisch-Dialekt hyppigt Sted, hvorimod det vistnok er første Gang, at en saadan Komædie opføres offentlig i Danmark.

De medvirkende Skuespillere er alle Haandværkere, mest Vævere og Skræddersvende, der har faaet Idéen til Opførelsen paa deres aftenlige Sammenkomster her i Toynbee-Hallen; de har selv besørget alt Forestillingen vedrørende; ja, de har endog ingen fremmed Hjælp haft til Indstuderingen, hvorimod jeg har bistaet dem lidt med Leje af Lokale og Ansøgning om Polititilladelse.” (“In the Jewish quarters of London, Amsterdam and Warsaw theatre performances in the special Yiddish-Dialect are often staged where as it probably is the first time such a comedy is performed public in Denmark.

The actors are all artisans, mostly weavers and tailor journeymen. They have got the idea at their evening-meetings here in Toynbee-Hall [a meeting place for Russian Jews set up by Fränkel himself]; they have done all themselves; even for the rehearsals they had no help from outside, while I have helped a little by renting the hall and applying for police-permission.”)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Permission from the Police-Director no. 846 af 1.11.07, Louis Fränkel’s archives, box 27, Rigsarkivet [National Archives].

<sup>13</sup> “Den fine Hertz og Jakob Kusk”. Dr. Louis Fränkel fortæller om de russiske Jøders Dialektkomædie paa Søndag, *Politiken* 7.11.07 [”The noble Hertz and Jakob the coachman”. Dr. Louis Fränkel tells about the Russian Jews dialect-comedy Sunday.]

The program for the performance was hectographed in both Danish and Yiddish. The Danish was typed, where as the Yiddish was hand-written. There were not yet printers in Copenhagen able to set and print Yiddish type. The play was *Herzele mejuchos oder Jekel ba'l agolah* and it was written in this orthography when Romanized. It was written by Moses Richter, was rehearsed by Mr. Podiewski and had nine actors. The performance took place in Prins Wilhelms Palæ at St. Annæ Plads and was very popular.

*Herzele mejuchos oder Jekel ba'l agolah*  
*Skrevet af Moses Richter*  
*Revideret af Podiewski*  
*Udgivet af B. D. D.*  
*Regle: H. Podiewski*

Personerne:

Rob Herzele mejuchos, Skovmandier.	
Helene, hans Kone	Frk. D.
Jekel, hans søn	Mr. Lifschitz
Jekel, Kusk hos Rob Herzele	Mr. Willinski
Libke, hans Kone	Frk. D.
Talbele, Jekels Datter af første ægteskab	Frk. R.
Chavoh Lejs, Libkes Niece,	
Tjenestepige hos Rob Herzele	
Chajim Joel, 1 Tjeneste hos Rob Herzele	Frk. O.
Michol Schadehon	Mr. Kalb
Rivkele, Eislkes første Kone	Mr. Kroner
Rivkeles Barn	Frk. C.
Rob. Mandel, en Chassid	Bernh. Lifschitz
	Mr. Dawidowitsch

*Handwritten Yiddish notes and program details on the left side of the page.*

According to *Jødisk Tidsskrift* all tickets were "revet bort ved Forsalget, og Lørdag Aften var alt udsolgt" ("sold like hot cakes, and Saturday Evening everything was sold out").<sup>14</sup>

Fra „Hebraisk russisk Dramatisk Forening“s Forestilling  
 igaar.

Herzele mejuchos oder  
 Jekel ba'l agolah

Personerne i „Herzele mejuchos oder Jekel ba'l agolah“.

Hebraisk russisk dramatisk Forening opførte iafte i „Prins Wilhelms Palæ“ for et Publikum, der næsten udelukkende bestod af indvandrede russiske Jøder: *Herzele mejuchos* og *Jekel ba'l agolah*, paa Dansk: *Rige Herze* og *Kusken Jacob*. Kuriosere Forestilling vil man vanskeligt komme til at opleve i Kjøbenhavn. Publikum, Skuespillere, de fremmede Tungemaal, der taltes saavel paa Scenen som i Salen, alt virkede saa fremmedartet, at man kunde tro sig hensat til en By i Galicien eller Polen eller de halv-asiatiske Grænsedistrikter, hvortil Franzos har hentet Stof til sine jødiske Fortællinger. Naturligvis maatte man nøjes med væsentlig pantomimiske Indtryk. Det Blandingsprog, Stykket er skrevet i, umuliggjorde selvfølgelig enhver intimere Forstaaelse. Handlingen var imidlertid saa traditionel, at man uden Vanskelighed kunde faa fat paa den og følge den. Og selve Spillet interesserede, fordi ogsaa det virkede fremmedartet, og ejendommeligt.

Politiken 11.11.07

<sup>14</sup> *Jødisk Tidsskrift* 15.11.07.

Even though Danish spectators didn't understand the language, the performance was commented in more papers. *Politiken* wrote:

”Kuriøse Forestilling vil man vanskelig komme til at opleve i Kjøbenhavn. Publikum, Skuespillere, de fremmede Tungemaal, der taltes saavel paa Scenen som i Salen, alt virkede saa fremmedartet, at man kunde tro sig hensat til en By i Galicien eller Polen eller de halvasiatiske Grænsedistrikter, hvorfra Franzos har hentet Stof til sine jødiske Fortællinger. Naturligvis maatte man nøjes med væsentlig pantomimiske Indtryk. Det Blandingsprog, Stykket er skrevet i, umuliggjorde selvfølgelig enhver intimere Forstaaelse.” (“An odder performance will be difficult to experience in Copenhagen. The audience, the actors, de foreign tongues, both in the audience and on the stage, everything was so odd, that you felt yourself situated in a town of Galicia or Poland or the half-Asiatic frontier-districts, where Franzos has picked his stuff for his Jewish narratives. Naturally we had to settle for the pantomimic impressions. The mixed language of the play made it impossible to achieve anything more intimate.”)<sup>15</sup>

The Daily *Dannebrog* had a longer record of the plot and called the actors next time to write a shorter record of the narrative in the program. *Ekstrabladet* wrote:

”Det kan uden Overdrivelse siges, at det er den mærkeligste Komedie, der længe er set herhjemme. Men det maa tilføjes, at denne Forestilling,

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<sup>15</sup> The Franzos mentioned was the author Karl Emil Franzos (1848-1904) a Galician-Austrian author of Sephardic extraction. He was a prolific writer and especially *Aus Halb-Asien* from 1876 was famous and translated into among other languages Danish as Franzos, 1879.

som udførtes af jævne Haandværkere og spillede paa en latterligt lille Scene med umulige Dekorationer, ingenlunde virkede ilde. [...] De russiske Dilettanter bør gentage Forsøget. De bør ikke standse ved dette første skridt. Det kunde være interessant at se endnu en Prøve paa, hvad de kan præstere. Navnlig naar de næste Gang sørger for en bedre Luft i Salen, end der var denne Gang.” (“It can without exaggeration be said that this is the most peculiar comedy seen here for long time. But it must be added that this performance, acted by humble artisans and played on a ridiculous little stage with impossible decorations, in no way seemed bad. [...] The Russian dilettantes should try it another time. They should not stop at this first step. It could be interesting to watch one more sample of their art. Especially when they next time will give us better air in the hall than this time.”)<sup>16</sup>

The performance was such a success that it had to be repeated on December 8<sup>th</sup>.

Already in February 1908 a new performance was announced. *Jødisk Tidsskrift* wrote: ”For at lette Publikum Forstaaelsen af Stykket vil der paa Programmet være trykt en Redegørelse for Handlingen i hver Akt.” (“To make the understanding easier for the audience, the program will have a text on each act of the play.”) The review in *Dannebrog* had been read, and for this performance the program was *printed*, a practice followed ever since. Here the narrative was recorded in dense printing *in Danish* and if you didn't know better,

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<sup>16</sup> Fra ”Hebraisk russisk Dramatisk Forening”s Forestilling (From ”Hebrew Russian Drama Association’s Performance), *Politiken* 11.11.07, Den russiske Kolonis Theaterforestilling (The performance of the Russian colony), *Dannebrog* 11.11.07, En ejendommeligt Forestilling. Den jødiske Komedie (A peculiar performance. The Jewish Comedy), *Ekstrabladet* 11.11.07.

you would think it was a Danish performance. The play was דער ווילדע מענטש *Der vilde mentsh* by Jacob Gordin. *Jødisk Tidsskrift* wrote:

Pris 10 Øre

# Russisk Jødisk-Teater

\*\*

Søndag den 16 Februar Kl 7 Aften  
 „Der vilde Mensch“ (Den forrykte Søn)  
 Drama i 4 Akter af Jacob Gordin

Personerne:

Schmuel Leiblach, 60 aarig rig Kornhandler	Hr. F.
Selde, hans anden Hustru	Frk. D.
Simon, Student	Hr. B.
Alexander, ansat i Forretningen	hans Børn af første Ægteskab
Lemach, Idiot	Hr. Kalb.
Lisa, 19 Aar	Hr. Belavsky
Wladimir, Dagdriver, Seldes Elsker	Frk. Degerstein
Sifra, Tjenestepige hos Schmuel Leiblach	Hr. Wielunsky
Tyve, Studenter og Gæster	Frk. S.

Handlingen foregaar i Odessa

## Regisor: Hr. Belavsky.

E. J. Henriksen Tryk, Gothersgade 59

### Den jødiske Forestilling hos Wittmack i aftes

**Scene af 1ste Akt: Bryllupsgildet.**

1. Hr. Belowsky som Lemach. 2. Frk. Degerstein som Lisa. 3. Hr. B. som Simon. 4. Frk. S. som Sifra. 5. Hr. Wielunsky som Wladimir. 6. Frk. D. som Selde. 7. Hr. F. som Schmuel Leilach. 8. Hr. Kalo som Alexander.

Den jødiske Forestilling i aftes havde fyldt Wittmacks Lokale med et meget interesseret Publikum, der hovedsagelig bestod af russiske Emigranter, og saaledes besøgte Forudsætningerne for at forstå det mærkelige Sprog, i hvilket den spændende Handling oprulledes. Hovedrollen udførtes af en indkaldt dramatisk kraft, en londonisk Skræddersvend, der spillede den rige Korn-Købmands aandsvage Søn; det var ham, der hævdede hele Familien paa den onde og utro Stedmoder, som den aldrende Fader havde været svag nok til at gifte sig med, og tilsidst borede den straffende Dolk i hendes Hjerte.

Politiken 17.2.1908

”Forestillingen er sat i scene af den jødiske Skuespiller *Belawsky* fra London, og han udfører selv Titelrollen.” (“The performance is directed by the Jewish actor *Belawsky* from London, and he is playing the main part, too.”)<sup>17</sup> The daily *Politiken* wrote:

”Den jødiske Forestilling i aftes havde fyldt Wittmacks Lokale med et meget interesseret Publikum, der hovedsagelig bestod af russiske Emigranter, og saaledes besad Forudsætningerne for at forstaa det mærkværdige Sprog, i hvilket den spændende Handling oprulledes. Hovedrollen udførtes af en indkaldt dramatisk Kraft, en londonsk Skræddersvend, der spillede den rige Korn-Købmands aandssvage Søn; det var ham, der hævnede hele Familien paa den onde og utro Stedmoder, som den aldrende Fader havde været svag nok til at gifte sig med, og til sidst borede den straffende Dolk i hendes Hjerter.” (“The Jewish performance had yesterday evening filled Wittmacks hall with a very interested audience, mainly Russian emigrants, who had the ability to understand the peculiar language used to unroll the action. The main part was played by a called dramatic power, a tailor journeyman from London, who was playing the mentally retarded son of the rich grain merchant; it was him who took revenge on behalf of the family on the evil and unfaithful stepmother, with whom the ageing father had been weak enough to marry, and at last he stuck the punitive knife in her heart.”)<sup>18</sup>

’According to *Jødisk Tidsskrift* nearly 500 tickets had been sold, and Louis Frænkel thought, that although the play did not offer anything extraordinary in content, ”interesserede det dog ved det flinke Spil, og

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<sup>17</sup> Russisk-jødisk Theater, *Jødisk Tidsskrift* 7.2.8.

<sup>18</sup> Den jødiske Forestilling hos Wittmack i aftes (The Jewish performance at Wittmack’s last night), *Politiken* 17.2.08.

man havde foruden de fra tidligere Forestillinger kendte Kræfter Lejlighed til at bemærke Hr. *Belawski* og Frk. *Degenschein* som intelligente Fortolkere af denne specielle Kunst.” (“it was interesting in the nice playing, and besides the known forces from last performances we noted Mr. *Belawski* and Miss *Degenschein* as intelligent interpreters of this special art.”)<sup>19</sup> Do we hear some echoing from the culture-clash? The Danish highly educated Jew felt some way that the entertainment was a bit raw. But seen with the eyes of the immigrant it was a clear success. They had staged two different plays and for full houses. They had got a proper support from Morris Bilavski and Glike Degenschein when they put up in the second play. And the best of it was that they had established their own culture in the own language in the foreign country, even though the Danes and the Danish Jews thought it somewhat foreign.

Late in 1909 Adolf Timianov popped up in Copenhagen under the name Timjanka. On December 19<sup>th</sup> he was the director of Jacob Gordin’s די שחיטה (*Di shkhite*) [The slaughter] with actors from Jødisk Dramatisk Forening ”Progres” (Jewish Drama Association “Progres”). According to the program he would after די שחיטה (*Di shkhite*) play ”den Forrykte paa Hospitalet” af Gogol (“The Insane in Hospital” by Gogol). Afterwards there would be a ball. For a period it looks as if there were competition between Bilavski and Timianov, but in 1912 they began to act together and the programs bore photographs of both of them. Ida Weisdorff, a kid when Timianov came, told in the 80ties about him: ”Han var utrolig dygtig til at iscenesætte, og selvom han skældte dem bælgen fuld og sagde, at de ikke duede til noget og ville ødelægge det hele for ham, så elskede de ham endnu mere og gjorde sig mægtig umage. For at gøre det så godt som muligt.” (“He was incredible good in directing, and even when he scolded them and

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<sup>19</sup> *Jødisk Tidsskrift* 21.2.8.

said that they were no good and that they would destroy everything for him, they loved him and took pains in following his directions.”<sup>20</sup>



<sup>20</sup> Bent Blüdnikow, 1982.

Sometimes there were criticisms of the milieu around the professionals, but also the opposite. For instance the Yiddish weekly *Vokhen blat* (Vokhen blat) wrote:

"כדי אויך דער נישט קאפענהאגערנער זאל ריכטיג אינפארמירט זיין, מוז באלד דארויף אויפמערקזאם געמאכט ווערדען, אז דאס יודישע טעאטער אין קאפענהאגערן שפיעלט איין מאל אין דריי אדער פיער וואכען, אז א חוץ דריי פראפעסיאנעלע שוישפיעלער-קרעפטע, זענען די איבריקע אויפטערענדע דילעטאנטען. [...] די פראפעסיאנעלען אויך [קענען] נישט פון זייערע זעלטענע און קליינע גאזשעס לעבען [...].

נאך די קורצע בעמערקונגען איז עס לייכט צו פערשטעהן, אז צו דעם שפיעלען פון דעם קאפענהאגערנער יודישען טעאטער מוז צוגעלעגט ווערען א בעזונדערע מילדערע מאסשטאב און אז די שוישפיעלער מוזען מוטערליכער בעהאנדעלט ווערען, ווי אנדערע אפילו ווי פון אן אנדערען יודישען טעאטער."

("To make it clear also to non-Copenhagensers, it is necessary to underscore that the Yiddish theatre in Copenhagen plays once in three or four weeks, and except for the three professional actors the others are dilettantes [...] even the professionals [can] not live from their rare and small wages. [...] Towards the actors we have to behave motherly and not that harsh as on other Yiddish stages.")<sup>21</sup>

### Yiddish theatre culture

A special feature was the behavior among the audience during the play. There were some complaints; one of them came from A.K., probably Abram Krotoschinsky (1889-1961), a confectioner and one of the activists of Yiddish culture in Copenhagen:

<sup>21</sup> In yidishen teater, *Vokhen blat* (Vokhen blat) 25.2.16. The Danish-Yiddish papers printed Yiddish without using nikuddim, although they were used in the logo of the paper.

„ווען מען זעהט אונזערע עכטע...היימישע געזעלשאפטליכע אויפפיהרונגען, דורך ציוויליזירטע פענסטער, קאן מען זיך ערשט איבערצייגען, ווי ניט עסטעטיש מיר רוישענדיגע זיינען, אין דער בעציהונג, און ניט ווילענדיג קומט דער געדאנק...וואס גיעט די דענישע פרעסע, - - ווענזיי ווארפען אונז אויף, אז מיר אויפפיהרען זיך אזויאזוי; (סאצאל-דעמאקראטען 20. אפריל ד.י.) [...] צו דארף א יודישע טעאטער-פארשטעלונג פערוואנדעלט ווערען אין א ארט אכסנית? ניין! זי דארף ניט! [...] צו האט איהר אמאל געזעהען ביי אנדערטע לייטען, אז אין א טעאטער זאל מען מיט נעהמען קליינע קינדער פון איין יאהר אלט? ניט בלויז וואס זיי שטערען די רוה, ווערען זיי אליין אויסגעמוטשעט, וואס צולעצט שלאפען איין, און עס זעהט אויס, ווי מען איז אין א גרויסען וואקזאל ביי נאכט. אויף דער גאלערויע זיצט א פרוי מיט איהר קליין קינד. וואס זי קארמעט איהם מיט "מילך". און מיט איינמאל פערקוקט זי זיך אויפ'ן סצענע, און דערווייל רעגנעט די מילך אראף, וואס ענדיגט זיך מיט א טומעל. נעבען איהר זיטזט א פאמיליע וואס עסט א גאנצע שבת'דיגע סאודה, מיט א געוואלדיגען אפעטיט – וואס גיעהט א אבקלאנג... אונטען ביים א יונגערמאן זייער שטיוועל, וועלכע זיינען איהם צו ענג, אונד פאר כעס גיעט ער זיי א זעץ! [...] אין א זייט קריגען זיך צוויי איבער א פלאטאן. קינדער שפילען זיך אין אייאגען. אויף א זייטען באנק זיצט זיך א יונגערמאן [...] וואס ווערט מידע זיצענדיג און איהם ווילט זיך אויסלעהנען, און אונגעשטערט ציהט ער אויס זיינע פוס, אין דער וועלט אריין... און שטויסט אן אויף א שטוהל וואס צולעצט דינט עס איהם אלס פוסען-באנק... דערווייל איז א פויזע. וואס ווערט אויסגעגילט מיט צייטונגען פערקויפען און מיט כל המיגים זאמלונגס-ליסטען, אוירופען, סתם, בעקאנטמאכונגען, און מען גרופירט סיך, און דער זאאל בעקומט איצט דעם אויסזעהען וואס א „פוילישע שענק“.

“When you watch our genuine...home-made Yiddish social performances through civilized windows, you must realize how very little aesthetic feeling we Russian-Jewish have, and that the Danish press is right: we behave in an Asian way.<sup>22</sup> [...] Does a Yiddish theatre-performance have to be something like an inn? No! It doesn't! [...] Is it seen by other people, that small children one years of age are

<sup>22</sup> A reference to a review of the Jewish choir 'Hasomir' in *Social-Demokraten* 20.4.14, in which the audience was characterized as 'half-Asian'.

taken to the theatre? Not only do they disturb the performance, but as they fall asleep it looks like a waiting room during the night. At the balcony a mother is breast-feeding her child. Once she lost herself in the scene and it rained milk and ended in chaos. At her side a family is eating a shabes-meal. With an enormous appetite as it can be heard. ... Down in the hall a young man takes his boots off, [...] because they're too narrow and puts them on the floor. [...] Two persons are warring over a seat. Children are playing and chasing each other. A young man is tired of sitting and puts his feet on another chair [...].

Then there is a pause. Papers are sold and all kind of money-collecting, proclamations will be shared out and the hall looks like a "Polish inn".

He proposes: 1) the play begins at time and not as now two hours later. 2) It should be prohibited to bring children less than five years of age along. 3) In the hall four responsible persons should maintain order, and if anybody disturb, they should leave.<sup>23</sup>

It might seem that it hadn't changed that much more than 20 years later. In a review of the 50-year celebration for the poet Halpern Leivick (1888-1962) in 1939, the same Krotoschinky wrote:

”Kan vi ikke i Fremtiden blive fri for det evige Rend op og ned ad Salens Midtergang, medens der er Optræden paa Scenen? Eller stille sig op foran Scenen hele Aftenen som en ”Cæsar”? – vise sit Skyggebillede bag Fortæppet eller Søgen og Raaben efter en Optrædende gennem hele Salen-?

<sup>23</sup> A.K.: וועגען דער ארדענונג אויף א יודישע-טעאטער-פארשטעלונג אין קאפענהאגען (Vegen der ordenung, oyf a yidishe-teater-farsthelung in Kopenhagen), יודישע געזעלשאפט (*Yidishe gezelschaft*) 17.7.14.

Alt dette bidrager kun til, at man bringer hele Aftenens Milieu ned paa et Niveau, der totalt ødelægger Helhedsbilledet.” (“Can we not in the future be free for the eternal running up and down the centre-aisle when the show is on? Or the ‘playing Caesar’ in front of the stage? Or showing shadow-pictures on the curtain, or the seeking and shouting for a performer through the hall? It all contributes in bringing the milieu of the evening down to a degree destroying the overall pattern.”)<sup>24</sup>

The tone in the reviews was often rather critical. S.B., surely Samuel Beilin (1885-1959), a joiner and another of the activists, reviewed a play announced as “the sensational comic operetta creating great success in America and Warszawa, זיין ווייבס מאן (*Zayn vaybs man*), with song and dance”:

„אויסערליך איז אלעס צוגעגאנגען כמעט ווי געווענליך. דאס הייסט, ווי מיר זענען געוועהנט. א גאנץ איום-טיב'דיגעס עולם, געקליידעט כמעט שבת'דיג, בחורים און מעדלעך אין בעסטען הומאר. דער לאקאל געדיכט פון ציגארעטן-רויך... אבער דאך מיט א קליינעם אלעמען שפיעלט אַזעלכעס, וואס עס שטעלט צופריעדען נאר איין זייט: אדער דאס פובליקום אדער די ארטיסטען. [...] נאטירליך האט דאס פובליקום מיט בעגייסטערונג מיטגעזונגען. דאָס מוז זיין אן-אַמת'ער אמעריקאנער-סוקסעס. [...] א שאד וואס אַזעלכע גוטע קרעפטע ווערען אוועקגעלעגט אויף אַזעלכע “On the outside everything was as it used to be. A festive public in their best shabes-clothes and their best spirits, and the room was filled with tobacco-smoke... and yet it was different. Both the audience and the actors were satisfied. The audience sang

<sup>24</sup> *Jødisk Ugeblad* 19.5.39.

along with enthusiasm. A true American success. It's a shame that such good effort was wasted on such a sensation-piece.”)<sup>25</sup>

Another case was the prompter. As it was put in a Danish review of the Bilavskis version of Sholems Aleykhems מזל טוב (*Mazl tov*) and Dimovs שמא ישראל (*Shma Jisroel*) on October 29<sup>th</sup> 1916 in Casino Theatre:

”De fremmedartede Skuespil virkede meget ejendommeligt paa en Dansker, især gjorde Fru Bilawski ved sin voldsomme – men i dette Tilfælde naturlige – Ageren et stærkt Indtryk. Af de øvrige Rollehavende fortjener især Souffløren Ros for sin distinkte Oplæsning. Han kunne høres til den fjærneste Plads i Salen.” (“The strange plays seemed peculiar for a Dane, especially Mrs. Bilawski made by her violent – but in this case natural – acting a strong impression. Among the others playing a role especially the prompter deserves praise for his distinct reading. He made himself heard to farthest seat in the hall.”)<sup>26</sup>

The prompter was important, not only because the actors forgot words or sentences, but apparently also because of the noise in the hall.

Many performances were benefice-performances, where the surplus was given to the suffering in Poland, to the בונדס אַרבעטער (Bund's arbeter lezesal far ale in Copenhagen) or other good causes. In March 1915 the most popular operetta in Warszawa and New York, די לוסטיגע אמעריקאנערין (*Di lustige amerikanerin*) was played to benefice for Timianov. S.B. [Samuel Beilin] reviewed and he wrote it was a good benefice-evening for Timianov, but at the same time he was silent on the content, but ended:

<sup>25</sup> *Yidische folks-tsaytung* (Yidische folks-tsaytung) 21.12.14.

<sup>26</sup> *Jødisk Samfund* 10.11.16.

“Further on a little more respect.”) „אויף ווייטער א ביסעלעמעהר דרך-ארץ. And he thought probably both of Timianov and the theatre.<sup>27</sup> In a review of Gordin’s די נעשומע כאפערס (*Di neshume khapers*) [The soul catchers] he wrote that it was nice with good decorations. „דער אווענד, וואלט געווען גאנז נישקשה’דיג, ווען ניט דאס פובליקום, וואס האט זיך געהלטען פונקט ווי גענז אין א שטייג שטאנען אויף איין פוס און געברוימט [...]“ “It could all have been just a fine evening, had the audience not performed like geese in a sty, standing at one leg buzzing.”<sup>28</sup>

Money was collected for many causes. The so-called Frivillig-Gruppe (Voluntary-group), collecting money for the Jews in Eastern Europe that suffered from the war, made public that the performance on November 27<sup>th</sup> 1915 had resulted in 744,31 Dkr. in surplus, while the performance on December 18<sup>th</sup> had resulted in 380,01 Dkr. and the performance on January 15<sup>th</sup> 1916 had produced 243,66 Dkr.<sup>29</sup> On October 20<sup>th</sup> 1917 600 Dkr. was played in surplus. It was quite big amounts, considering a ticket costing from 20 øre to 1 krone.<sup>30</sup>

Nearly all performances were in Yiddish, but not everybody was yiddishists, that is supporting the language policy that Yiddish was the national language of the Jews. The Zionists were Hebraists and viewed Yiddish culture as a transitional phenomenon to be replaced by the ‘revitalized’ Hebrew, which was establishing itself as a spoken language precisely in these years in Palestine. In the Zionist *Yidishe folksstime* you could read, that the Zionist youth organization Hoivri hazoir deserved praise for showing the naturalness and vitality

of the Hebrew language.<sup>31</sup> It was a solitary ideological demonstration and was not repeated until the troupe Habimah visited Copenhagen 1930.

<sup>27</sup> יודישע פֿאָלקס־צייטונג (*Yidishe folks-tsaytung*) 15.3.15.

<sup>28</sup> פֿון יודישען טעאטער, יודישע פֿאָלקס־צייטונג, *Yidishe folks-tsaytung* 30.8.15.

<sup>29</sup> יודישע פֿאָלקס־צייטונג (*Yidishe folks-tsaytung*) 21.3.16.

<sup>30</sup> נואַכען בלאַט (*Vokhen blat*) 26.10.17.

<sup>31</sup> די העברעישע פארשטעלונג, יודישע פֿאָלקסשטימע (*Di hebreishe farshtelung, Yidishe folksstime*) 7.12.15.



Performances were in most cases organized through one of the Jewish theatre-associations or the Jewish social associations. In the first period there were three dominant ones: יודישער דראמאטישער דילעטאנטען פער איין

(Yidisher dramatischer dilettanten ferayn), פראָגרעס, (Yidisher dramatischer ferayn "Progres") and פֿער איין קולטור (Dramatischer ferayn "Kultur"). In the second period it was יודישער חבֿערי חציר דראמאטישע גרופע (Hovri hazoir dramatishe grupe) and יודישער האַנדווערקער־פֿעריינס דראמאטישער גרופע (Yidisher handwerker-ferayns dramatischer grupe). In the last years of the 20ties it was 'Jødisk Dramatisk Forening "Progres"', 'Jødisk dramatisk Klub' and 'Jødisk Teaterforening', now with Danish names. In the 30ties it was 'Jødisk Teaterforening af 1935', 'IKOR's Teatergruppe' [IKOR: יודישע קאָלאָניזאַציע אָרגאַניזאַציע אין רוסלאַנד (Idische kolonizatsie organizatsie in Rusland), יודישער יוגנט טעאַטער (Yidisher yugnt teater), יודישע קולטור־סצענע (Yidische kultur-szene), צוקונפֿט (Tsukunft) and 'JAKFs Teatergruppe' [JAKF, Jødisk Arbejder Kultur Forening (Jewish Workers' Culture Association)]. It was from these associations the actors were recruited.

#### Performances in the second period 1921-26

The years 1921-26 was a period of only amateur-theatre. The amateurs (or דילעטאנטען (dilettanten) as it was in Yiddish) had been there all the time, but with the professionals as the stars. The new system began in 1921 and was not least marked by the industrious work of Samuel Beilin.

Morris and Glike Bilavski had their penultimate performance in Copenhagen on February 20<sup>th</sup> 1921 playing Jacob Gordin's שאַרלאַטאַן שלוימ'קע (Shloym'ke sharlatan). The following week the Tailors' club played Gordin's דער יודישער קעניג ליר (Der yidisher kenig Lir) in Beilin's direction. In March Hovri hazoirs drama group played Gordin's סאַנאַטע קרייצער (Kreytser sonate) directed by Beilin.

April 30<sup>th</sup> 1921 was the last time Bilavskis were seen at the stage, this time with דער ווילדער מענטש (*Der vilder mentsh*). In those three months in the winter 1921 there were four Yiddish performances, twice Bilavski and twice Beilin.

If we look at all performances 1921-27, we have:

Plays	Performances
1921 9	7
1922 3	3
1923 4	4
1924 4	4
1925 6	4
1926 2	2
1927 4	4
Total 32	28

Except for 1921, the 20ties is a decade with a declining number of theatre-performances. This tendency continues until 1934. 1934-38 the number raises radically and reach the peak in 1936 with 26 performances. In the 20ties it is most often the Haandværkerforeningen (Artisans' Association) and Hoivri hazoir providing the actors. Louis Beilin directs 17 plays in the 20ties. But also Louis Halberstadt, Walter Weisdorff and Louis Reznik directs.



reached a certain degree of internationalization, that made these guest-performances desirable. Last not least it developed under the pressure on Yiddish performers from the development in Germany. When Berlin was no longer a Jewish theatre-town, the actors from Poland, the Baltic states and Germany had to invent other stages. And some of them had to seek more humble hunting-fields as Copenhagen.

The development 1927-39 looks like this:

### Performances in the third period 1927-39

In the third period the 'Vagabond Stars' popped up in Copenhagen. Sholem Aleykhem wrote a comic novel, *Blondzhende shtern* [Vagabond stars 1909-10, New York 1912]. From this Nahma Sandrow has taken the title for her book about the world-history of Yiddish theatre.<sup>32</sup> The travelling actors became in the inter-war period something like the main form of Yiddish theatre. The vagabonds as a phenomenon grew out of more causes. Most important it is naturally that there was a Yiddish culture beyond the frontiers of national states that made guest-performances possible. But also that this culture had

<sup>32</sup> Nahma Sandrow, 1977.

Plays	Performances
1927 4	4
1928 2	4
1929 3	3
1930 2	2
1931 6	5
1932 2	2
1933 12	6
1934 25	14
1935 15	15
1936 32	26
1937 25	23
1938 17	16
1939 7	7
Total 152	127

The first guest-actor to visit Copenhagen was Adolf Timianov when he returned in 1927. On March 12<sup>th</sup> he played for the Artisans' Association יום האכופעה (*Yom hakhupeh*) [Wedding-day]. He was on a European tour and stayed in Copenhagen a couple of months. According to the review in טריבונע קאפענהאגענער (*Kopenhagener tribune*) he was exceptionally good, and refined was also his partner on stage, the New-Yorker actor Gitele Lifshits.<sup>33</sup> In December the same year he came back and staged Anski's דער דיבוק (*Der dibuk*) [The demon]. Pinches Welner (1893-

<sup>33</sup> קאפענהאגענער טריבונע (*Kopenhagener tribune*) 15.3.27.

1965)], tailor, activist and later Yiddish author, reviewed in *Social-Demokraten*:

”Det var en Tilfredsstillelse for den jiddisch talende Del af de københavnske Jøder, at de endelig fik at se det Stykke opført, som har gaaet sin Sejrs gang over næsten hele Verden. Naturligvis skal ”Der Dibuk”, som er blevet til paa Jiddisch, helst spilles paa Jiddisch, for Jøder, for kun i dette Miljø kan det komme til sin fulde Ret og blive forstaaet.” (“It was a satisfaction for the Yiddish-speaking part of Copenhagen Jewry that they at last saw the play conquering nearly the

whole world. Naturally “Der dibuk”, born Yiddish, at best is played in Yiddish for Jews, only in this setting it can be played in its own right and be understood.”)

Welner had some objections; he thought that Timianov played the character Zadik too ordinary. But when you know the conditions under which they work the actors deserve thank for the performance.<sup>34</sup> Among the actors were the 16-year old Sam Besekow, who later became a very famous Danish actor and director.<sup>35</sup>

1930 Habimah visited Denmark and performed גולם (*Golem*), דיבוק (*Dibuk*) and *Crown of David*. This visit was commented and recommended in *Jødisk Familieblad*, the new magazine of Mosaik Troessamfund, the Jewish Congregation of Copenhagen, as no other theatre guest-visit was. It could only be understood as an official consent to the viewpoint, that Hebrew was *the* national language of the Jews and not Yiddish.

Habimah was founded as a Hebrew theatre in Moscow in 1917 headed by Nakhum Zemach (1887-1939) and got very quickly a grand reputation as theatre. In 1926 it went on a tour among other places to the USA where the troupe split. Zemach and many others stayed in the US while a group in 1928 went to Palestine and founded a new Habimah in Tel Aviv, later to be Israel’s national theatre.<sup>36</sup>

Habimah was introduced by Editor Povl Grossmann in *Jødisk Familieblad*:

”De danske Jøder er kendt for deres store Interesse for Teatrets Kunst, en Interesse, der i dette Tilfælde ogsaa omfatter Sproget og Racen. Vi

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<sup>34</sup> P. Welner, 1927.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Weisdorff, in: Bent Blüdnikow, 1986, p. 100.

<sup>36</sup> See Gad Kaynor, 1998.:

imødeser derfor den sjældne Begivenhed med Forventning, i Forudfølelse af, at vi i ”Casino” i de kommende Aftener vil faa den store Oplevelse, moderne Hebraisk udtalt paa den smukkeste mulige Maade, jødisk Aand omsat i Nutidens kunstneriske Form.” (“The Danish Jews are known for their interest in the art of theatre, an interest which in this case also includes the language and the race. We therefore look forward to this rare opportunity with expectation, in presentment of having the *great* experience in “Casino” the coming nights, in hearing Modern Hebrew pronounced in the most beautiful way, in Jewish spirit transformed into the artistic form of the Present.”)<sup>37</sup>

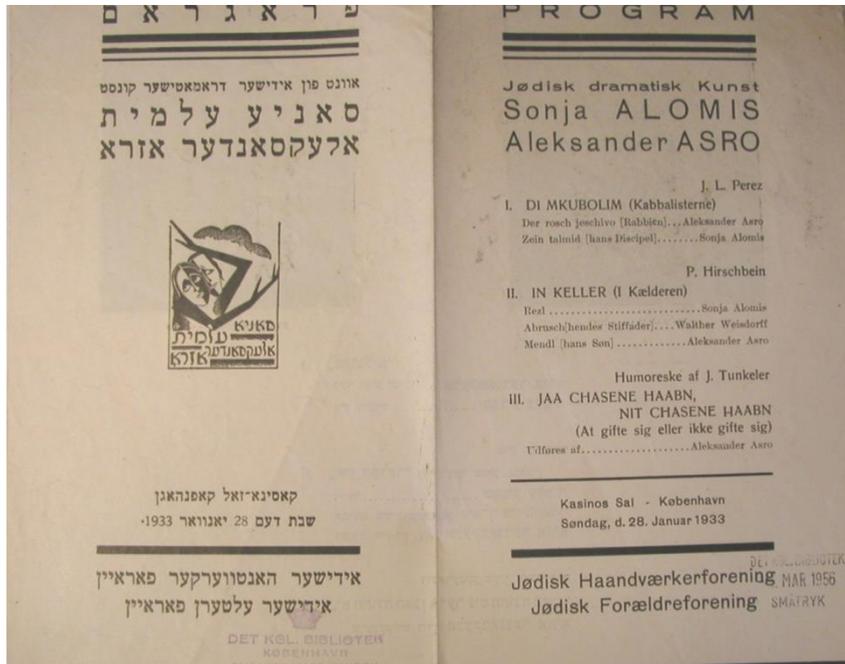
The Habimah arrangement was hosted by the Zionist Association. As a word of welcome Joseph Nachemsohn (1865-1936), antique-dealer and for many years in the leadership of the association, said: ”Vi skylder *Habimah Tak for dens Arbejde og Propaganda i Zionismens Sag.*” (“We owe *Habimah thanks for its work and propaganda in the service of Zionism.*”)

In 1932 the Danish-language paper *Mosaik Samfund* printed something very unusual, an ad in Yiddish. It communicated that the Haandværkerforeningen (Artisans’ Association) and Forældreforeningen (The Parents’ Association) had invited famous guests to visit Copenhagen, די ווילנערס (*Di vilners*). They would perform two plays by J.L. Peretz, דריי מתנות (*Dray matones*) [Three gifts] and דער גרינע פּעלדער (*Der meshugener batlen*) [The crazy cabalist] and גרינע פּעלדער (*Grine felder*) [Green pastures] by Peretz Hirschbein. Vilners was in this case Sonja Alomis (1896-?) and Aleksander Asro (1888-1963).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Povl Grossmann, 1930 a and b.

<sup>38</sup> 1934 זאלמאַן זילבערצווייג, וואָל. 2, וואַרשע (Zalman Zilbertsvayg, vol. 2, Varshe 1934), col. 1571-75; *Mosaik Samfund* 30.12.32.



The history of Di vilners started when the German troops in the winter 1915 occupied Vilna and gave the inhabitants greater freedom than they had known under Russian rule. An association of theatre was founded with the members of Nachum Lipowsky's טעאטער ווילנער (Vilner yidishn teater) and numerous actors among others from פֿאַרבאַנד פֿון ייִדישע דראַמאַטישע אַרטיסטן (Farband fun yidishe dramatishe artists). Members were such as Aleksander Asro, Sonja Elmith (Alomis), Frieda Blumenthal, Josef Bulow, Leib Kadison, Josef Kamien, Judith Lares, Nachman Nachbush, Rachel-Dora Rivkina, Chaim Schneuir, Aliosho

Stein, Schalom Tanin, Frida Vitalina, Polia Walter. Their first performance was staged in Vilna on February 8<sup>th</sup> 1916. Played was Schalom Asch' דער לאַנדסמאַן (*Der landsman*) and Perets Hirshbein's אין אַ פֿערװאַרפֿענע װינקעל (*In a fervorfene vinkel*) [In a corner apart].

The troupe played in Kovno, Łódź, Białystok and other Polish towns before going to Warszawa in September 1917. Here Abraham Morewski and Herz Grossbart joined the group. Di vilners produced a new standard for Yiddish theatre that moved it in into the big European scene. The troupe built on the ideas of the Russian dramaturgic Konstantin Stanislavskij (1863-1938). More members had received a professional education, like Asro by the Solowzow Theatre in Kiev, Morewski from the Theatre School of St. Petersburg, and Judith Lares in Moscow.

They wished, in Asro's words, to build a new and true artistic theatre, and they became the model for more of the Yiddish art theatres of the 20ties. In 1921 the troupe went on a European tour, from which the most outstanding actors never returned to Vilna. 1921-22 the troupe played in Berlin. Already from the first performance Alomis, Asro, Blumenthal and Grossbart began to perform with readings and short scenes in association with the performances, a form they later could travel with on their own. Herz Grossbart travelled all over the world and made ten records with his art.<sup>39</sup> In *Jødisk Familieblad* a reviewer wrote:

"disse Kunstnere spiller og fortolker deres Kunst i det Sprog, mange af os taler og forstaar, nemlig: Jiddisch, hvorfor Betingelserne er til Stede for at kunne faa det rette Udbytte af deres Spil, hvad man ikke kunde

<sup>39</sup> Heidelore Riss, 2000, 91ff.; A. Ezra, 1968, s. 23-34 and ווילנער טרופע (Vilner trupe) in 1931 גיט יאָרק 1, זאַלמאַן זילבערצװייג, װאַל. 1, ניו יאָרק (Zalman Zilbertsvayg, vol. 1, Nyu York 1931), col. 704-717.

sige det samme om ”Habimas”, da man ikke fuldt ud kunde følge med paa Grund af Sprogvanskeligheden.” (“these artist play and interpret their art in the language many of us speak and understand, i.e. Yiddish, why the conditions are present to get the right benefits of their playing, which couldn’t be said of “Habimah”, because you could not fully follow the play due to language difficulties.”)<sup>40</sup>

On occasion of Di vilners’ visit in Copenhagen Hovri hazoir staged a series of lectures on Yiddish theatre by Samuel Beilin.<sup>41</sup> The performances of Alomis & Asro were a tremendous success among the Jewish immigrants, and already in March 1933 they came back and gave new performances.

In December 1933 the Zionist Association had invited members of Habimah, Chawe Joelit & David Varda to perform at Casino. In January 1934 Di vilners came back and gave two shows playing “*Den røde Itzik* (middelalder tragedie overs. til Jiddisch), *Rachels Rettergang med Gud* (Zweig oversat til Jiddisch), S. Anski: Scener fra *Der Dibuk*, L. Tolstoy: *I Havnen*, M. Ravitsch: *Ballade om Moderen til den faldne Soldat Nr. 1603* og Perets Hirshbein: *De grønne Enge*” (“*The red Itzik* (a medieval tragedy translated in to Yiddish), *Rachels trial against God* (Zweig in Yiddish), Anski: *Scenes from Der dibuk*, Tolstoy: *In the harbor*, Meylekh Ravitsh: *The ballad of the Mother of the fallen soldier no. 1603* and Peretz Hirschbein: *The Green Pastures*).<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *Jødisk Familieblad* 1.1.33.

<sup>41</sup> *Mosaik Samfund* 6.1.33.

<sup>42</sup> *Jødisk Familieblad* 5, Jan. 34, *Mosaik Samfund* 12.1.34 and 19.1.34.



In March 1934 it was David Vardi & Chawe Joelit who gave a show at Casino. David Vardi (1893-1973, orig. Rozenfeld) formed originally part of the Habimah-troupe while still in Moscow and director for a part of the troupe’s plays. In 1932 he went as one of the first Habimah-actors on a tour through Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, ending in Palestine. In 1924 he went to New York. In 1927 he founded together with Chawe Joelit a Yiddish theatre called וואַרדי־יאָעליט־טעאַטער־סטודיאָ (Vardi-Joelit

Theatre-Study), where Jewish workers from Newark were the actors.<sup>43</sup> In Copenhagen Vardi & Joelit played both in Hebrew and Yiddish and was invited by Jødisk Forældreforening (Jewish Parents' Association) and Jødisk Folke Forening (Jewish People's Association).<sup>44</sup>

In April 1934 the Jewish-American actor Benny Adler played in Copenhagen.<sup>45</sup> Benny Adler (b. 1886 in Romania) had trotted the same paths as many other Vagabond stars. He had been discovered as a 13 year old by travelling actors and was taken in by playing. As 15 year old he performed in New York, Montreal and Chicago. Towards the end of the 20ties he played in Vienna and in Poland.<sup>46</sup> On April 21<sup>st</sup> he played פרוי מענטש טייזל (*Froy mentsh teyvl*) [Mrs. Human Devil] at Casino "with local forces."<sup>47</sup> He was a success and had to repeat his performance on May 10<sup>th</sup>. He then performed אוריאל אקוסטה (*Uriel Acosta*). He had got very good reviews for his first performance but *Uriel Acosta* was rehearsed in only two weeks, and it could be seen. The review in *Mosaik Samfund* was very critical.<sup>48</sup>

Di vilners, Habimah and Benny Adler brought new perceptions of Yiddish theatre to Copenhagen. The classic melodramatic way of action was under fire. The communist theatre-group from Jødisk Arbejder Kultur Forening (Jewish Workers' Culture

Association) began for instance to work with the well-known director Per Knutzon (1897-1948), who both directed the communist Revolutionært Teater (Revolutionary Theatre) and some of the most successful modern pieces by Bert Brecht, refugee in Denmark at that time, and Danish modernist playwright Kjeld Abell (1901-61). With the Jewish Workers' Culture Association he directed speech choirs and a series of Levende Aviser (living newspapers), i.e. a topical revue-like performance built on the genres of the paper.

The topical perspective came in focus, when Jewish Association of 1930, organizing the Russian Jews, was asked by Danish actors and the Social-Democrat educational association, AOF, to perform Ferdinand Bruckner's play *Racerne* (*The Races*), a play critical to German race-policies. The association said yes, and the play was staged at Casino on February 17<sup>th</sup> 1935, but the theatre-censor banned the play for public performance. It was too provocative in relation to Germany he told *Social-Demokraten*.<sup>49</sup>

Benny Adler came back in August 1935. Together with the local יידישער יוגנט-טעאטער (Yidisher yugnt-teater) he played August Strindberg's דער פאטער (*Der foter*). Actually it had been played three times in Yiddish in Copenhagen already, and it received an interesting review by Samuel Beilin. He wrote that Adler made the refined, polished, Nordic captain a bloated Russian officer. "Det er ikke noget at vise os, som kender Strindberg." ("This is not a thing to show us, who know Strindberg.")<sup>50</sup> It can be taken as a measure of the progression of integration.

Chayele Grober (1896-1978) from Habimah was on visit in the Odd Fellow Palæet (Odd Fellow Palais) November 10<sup>th</sup> 1935.

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<sup>43</sup> ווארדי-יואליט (Dovid Vardi) and ווארדי-יואליט-טעאטער-סטודיא (Vardi-Joelit-teater-studia), 1931 יארק 1, ניו יארק 1931, col. 663ff. זאלמאן זילבערצווייג, וואל 1, ניו יארק 1931, col. 663ff.

<sup>44</sup> *Jødisk Familieblad* 5, Feb. 34, *Mosaik Samfund* 23.2.34.

<sup>45</sup> *Mosaik Samfund* 13.4.34.

<sup>46</sup> זאלמאן זילבערצווייג, וואל 1, ניו יארק 1931, col. 10f. בעני אדלער (Beni Adler), 1931 יארק 1, ניו יארק 1931, col. 10f.

<sup>47</sup> *Mosaik Samfund* 20.4.34.

<sup>48</sup> *Mosaik Samfund* 4.5.34,

<sup>49</sup> *Mosaik Samfund* 4.5.34, *Jødisk Familieblad* 9, May 34, *Mosaik Samfund* 18.5.34.

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<sup>49</sup> *Mosaik Samfund* 7.12.34, 28.12.34, 25.1.35. Theatre censorship existed in Denmark 1853-1954.

<sup>50</sup> *Mosaik Samfund* 6.9.35.

Beresowski (1890-1971), director of the Jewish choir Hasomir, reviewed her exuberantly.<sup>51</sup> December 1<sup>st</sup> there was a concert with Grober in the Studenterforeningen (Students' Association), where 800 people heard her sing and recite.<sup>52</sup> In April came another of Di vilners, Jacob Weislitz (?-1966) on tour. He gave a reciting on April 18<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>. But he was such a success, that he performed at IKOR's bazaar the 27<sup>th</sup>, at IKOR's and Jødisk Arbejder Kultur Forening (Jewish Workers' Cultural Association's) May-party on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, in Jødisk Haandværkerforening (Jewish Artisans' Association) May 3<sup>rd</sup>, for Zionistforeningen (Zionists' Association), Hasomir, Foreningen af 1930 (The Association of 1930) and Jødisk Ungdom (Jewish Youth) on May 4<sup>th</sup>. May 10<sup>th</sup> IKOR, IKOR's Women and Jewish Workers' Culture Association arranged a gala night. It was a Weislitz epidemic. After this tour de force he began directing Friedrich Wolff's פראפעסאר מאלמלאק (*Professor Malmlock*) "with the best forces". It was staged on May 17<sup>th</sup> with amateurs from יידישער יוגנט-טעאטער (Yidisher yugnt-teater). He had translated the play himself in to Yiddish with the title די געלע לאטע (*Di gele lote*) [The Yellow Patch] and played Malmlock himself. It received an overwhelming review.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *Mosaisk Samfund* 8.11.35, 15.11.35.

<sup>52</sup> *Mosaisk Samfund* 6.12.35.

<sup>53</sup> *Mosaisk Samfund* 17.4.36, 24.4.36, 1.5.36, 6.5.36 and 29.5.36.



Weislitz was scarcely out of the door before the two famous Jewish actors, the brothers Rudolf Zaslavski and Shloyme Naumov. Zaslavski (b. 1886) and Naumov (b. 1898) were originally from Ukraine. They had a long experience as tramp-actors. Zaslavski had played with Ida Kaminska, one of the biggest Yiddish stars ever. He migrated to South America in the 20ties and performed in Argentine and Brazil. In 1933

he returned to Europe and began to perform with together with his brother.<sup>54</sup> On July 21<sup>st</sup> they performed in Copenhagen. First they played a part of Sholem Aleykhems טעויע דער מילכיגער (*Tevye der milkhiger*), fragments of Peretz and Nadir, a scene from Israel Joshua Singer's יאשע קאלב (*Yoshe Kalb*), in the second part Yiddish folksongs and khasidic songs and in the third part Jewish musical pictures, among them Jewish jazz. They stayed in the city for some months and directed among others *Tevye der milkhiger*, and it was performed on August 23<sup>rd</sup> with both brothers and local amateurs. In September they were joined by Nusia (or Nucia) Gold (1909-?). On September 20<sup>th</sup> they all three performed Tolstoy's קרייצע סאנאט (*Kreutzer Sonata*) in Yiddish, ליבע אן (*Libe on frayndshaft*). Rudolf Zaslavski wanted to put up Sholem Aleykhem's דאס גרויסע געווינס (*Dos groyse gevins*) under the title 200.000. Unfortunately he fell ill, and in November he left. Instead Nusia Gold and Shloyme Naumov directed and played in Ossip Dimovs יאשקע דער שטאט כליזמער (*Yoshke der shtot klezmer*) [The city musician Yoshke] on November 15<sup>th</sup>. Twenty actors were on the stage, and Samuel Beilin gave it a fine review. In December they travelled on, but first Nusia Gold did a reciting-evening on December 9<sup>th</sup>. She read from works of Avrom Reyzen, Richarik, Bialik, Olgin, Nadir and Itzik Fefer, and also "vor egen begavede og afholdte Digter, *Ritterband*, af hvilken der bl.a. reciteres: "Der Schuster". ("our own gifted and loved poet, *Ritterband*, from whose works, she recited: "Der shuster".")<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Rudolf Zaslavski and Shloyme Naumov (Rudolf Zaslavski) and זאלמאן זילבערצווייג, וואָל. 1, ניו יארק 1931 in 1931 (Zalman Zilbertsvayg, vol. 1, Nyu York 1931), col. 751f., and מעקסיקאָ סיטי (vol. 5, Meksiko Siti 1967.) col. 4843f.

<sup>55</sup> *Mosaik Samfund* 17.7.36, 31.7.36, 14.8.36, 21.8.36, 28.8.36, 11.9.36, 17.9.36, 25.9.36, 2.10.36, 9.10.36, 16.10.36, 23.10.36, 30.10.36, 6.11.36, 13.11.36, 20.11.36, 4.12.36. Chaim Ritterband (1893-1944) was a tailor who wrote poems with melodies.

Handels- og Kontoristforeningens Festsal,  
Studiestræde 1

Torsdag, den 6.  
Maj, 1937,  
Kl. 20 pr.

דאנערשטיק דעם 6  
מאי, 1937  
20 א זייגער



גרויסער געזעענונגס-קאנצערט  
פון דעם גרויסן קינסטלער

**הערץ גראסבארט**

פולשטענדיק נייער פראגראם.	נוצט אויס די זעקטענע געלעגנהייט און קומט אלע איבערקעבן א גייסטרייכן אוונט!
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**PROGRAM**

I.  
Guldskæden ..... J. L. Peretz  
Vægspe ..... Kuschnirow  
Ballade ..... M. L. Halpern

II.  
Fabler ..... El. Stæinberg  
a) reb Chamariach  
b) Skjotter  
c) Kysser  
Krig ..... M. Nadir  
Chelemer Melamed ..... J. L. Peretz  
Sovet over ..... M. Nadir  
Doktorer ..... Scholem Alechem

III.  
Ved Rabbien's Bord ..... A. Lutzki

(Programmedinger: fastholdes.)

**פראגראם**

I.  
די גאלדענע קייט ..... י. ל. פרץ  
וועגס ..... א. קושניראו  
באלאדע סונם קיני ..... מ. ל. האלפערן

II.  
שוליס ..... אליעזר שטיינבערג  
א) ר' כאמאריש  
ב) שקיטער  
ג) דער קיס  
מלחמה ..... מ. נאדיר  
קעלעמער מלמד ..... י. ל. פרץ  
מאשיסאן ..... מ. נאדיר  
דאקטוריס ..... שלום עליכם

III.  
ביום רבינס טיש ..... א. לוצקי

(פארזענונג העלדער)

יידישער עלטערן-פאריין געזאנגפאריין. הומיר.	יידישער האנטווערקער-פאריין יידישער ארבעטער-קולטור-פאריין	יידישער פאלקספאריין איכאר-פאריין
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Another great guest-star was Di vilner-actor Herz Grossbart (1895-1994). He had cultivated a kind of artistic lecture with great success. He called them ‘word-concerts’. He stayed in Copenhagen from April till September 1937 and gave eight word-concerts. He also performed at Scandinavian Jewish Youth’s 17<sup>th</sup> congress on July 28<sup>th</sup> at a gala banquet together with Børge Rosenbaum (1909-2000); that was before he changed his name to Victor Borge.<sup>56</sup>



<sup>56</sup> *Mosaik Samfund* 9.4.37, 16.4.37, 23.4.37, 30.4.37, 14.5.37, 21.5.37, 2.7.37, 16.7.37, 27.8.37, 17.9.37, 27.8.37.

In October the two Di vilner-actors Semmy Weinstok and Lola Silberman came. They stayed till December. What Zaslavski had failed to do, due to his illness, they did: to put up Sholems Aleykhem’s 200.000 together with the association ציקונפט /*Tsukunft*. In his review Abram Krotoschinsky wrote, that Lola Silberman shined like a brilliant.<sup>57</sup> In the beginning of 1938 the two Polish-Jewish actors Mila Weislitz and Moszek Potaschinsky visited Copenhagen. They stayed for nearly four months and performed and recited in the Jewish associations, and they put up Gottefeld’s פּרנזע (Parnose) [Subsistence]. They performed with Børge Rosenbaum and Abram Krakowski.<sup>58</sup> In the autumn of 1938 they came back and gave a series of new reciting. In March 1939 Shloyne Naumov came and in June Herz Grossbart was in Copenhagen on a short visit. But that was the end of the story of the vagabond stars.

### The performances 1940-56

When the guest-actors stopped coming to Copenhagen the local Yiddish stage took over again. In 1938 and 1939 there had been some amateur-performances, even in 1940-43 there was Yiddish theatre in town. On May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1941 Samuel Besekow (1911-2001) staged Peretz Hirschbein’s די פּוּסְטֶע קרעטשמע *Di puste kretshme* [The empty inn]. He was as mentioned before a legitimate child of the Copenhagen Yiddish stage and got in the 30ties an education at the Royal Theatre. He became a well-known director and author and even played a Yiddish-speaking tailor in the movie *Skaf en Sensation* [Get a sensation] from the mid-30ties.

<sup>57</sup> *Jødisk Ugeblad* 29.10.37, 12.11.37, 19.11.37, 3.12.37, 17.12.37.

<sup>58</sup> *Jødisk Ugeblad* 7.1.38, 28.1.38, 11.2.38, 18.2.38, 25.2.38, 4.3.38, 11.3.38, 25.3.38, 1.4.38, 8.4.38, 22.4.38. Abram Krakowski (1889-1957) was a shoe-worker and a much used and entertaining recite.



א זייער אינטערעסאנטע  
**באגעבנהייט**  
 דערווארטעט דער יידישער געזעלשאפט  
 אין קאפענהאגן:  
 אונטער דער לייטונג פון  
**סאמועל  
 בעסעקאוו**

ווערט איינגעשטודירט דאס וועלכע בארימטע טעאטער־זונקער פון  
**פּרָץ הירשביין:**  
**„די פוסטע קרעטשמע“**  
 (דראמע אין 4 אקטן)

און ווערט אויסגעפירט שבת אוונט ד' 3 מאי 1941 האלב 8 א זיגער  
 אין גרויסן טעאטער־זאל:  
 — אין „בארגערנעס הוס“ —

עס נעמען אנטויל די בעסטע פון אונזערע היגע אייגענאכטע  
 יונגע שפילער.

In October 1943 the Germans opened a hunt of the Jews, but most of them succeeded in fleeing to Sweden (some 7.000), while a minority of some hundred were caught and sent to kz Theresienstadt. In Sweden the Danish Club in Gothenburg played three one-acts with Georg Levin and Nora Unterschlak on April 29<sup>th</sup> 1945.

After the war there were nine performances. The last one was hardly a play. On February 11<sup>th</sup> 1956 The Yiddish Library was donated to the Royal Library. At this occasion Abram Krakowsky made a one-man-act he called *Et tidsbillede fra 1906* [A period-picture of 1906], when The Yiddish Library was founded by Bund in Copenhagen. That was the last play in Yiddish. When 3.000 Polish Jews immigrated to Copenhagen in 1969, they for a short time revived Yiddish theatre. Only a couple of plays were put up.

The development 1940-56 can be shown like this:

Plays	Performances
1940 2	2
1941 2	2
1942 2	2
1943 3	2
1945 3	3
1948 3	3
1950 1	1
1952 1	1
1956 1	1
I alt 18	17

All four periods put together:

Plays	Performances
1906-1921 118	103
1921-1926 32	28
1927-1939 152	127
1940-1956 18	17
I alt 320	275

Besides this 275 performances and 320 plays, 12 Danish, 5 Hebrew, 1 Russian and 1 German plays were shown. 25 plays were shown twice, five were shown three times. The following plays were shown four times: דער אמת'ע קראפט (*Der emes'e kraft*), דער פאטער (*Der foter*), קרייצער סאנאטע (*Kreytser sonate*), מזל-טווי (*Mazl tov*), מענטשן (*Mentshn*) and אוריאל אקאסטא (*Uriel Acosta*). The most played was מירעלע אפרת (*Mirele Efros*); it was played six times.



### **A story of integration and assimilation**

The fabulous story of the Yiddish stage in Copenhagen is not comparable to anything like it in other immigrant-groups, for instance among Swedes and Germans, the two largest immigrant-groups in Denmark. Anyhow the story is also a story of integration and assimilation. The first period is marked by the settling of Russian Jews in Denmark and their need for an identity marker. This marker is their language, Yiddish. To uphold Yiddish and use it in papers, meetings and theatre is what we see in the first period 1906-1921. In that period nearly all programs (and flyers and posters) are in Yiddish.

In the second period the programs are in Danish. In this period the children of the immigrants are grown-ups with a living spoken Yiddish, but most of them didn't *read* Yiddish. The Russian Jewish activists fought for Yiddish education in the two Jewish schools – and they finally succeeded. But it didn't change the fact, that during the third period the use of Yiddish is declining, although Yiddish Theatre experiences an Indian summer due to the vagabond stars.

In the period 1906-1940 the Russian-Jewish immigrants were in opposition to the Danish Jews. But in the thirties they outnumbered the Danish Jews. And when they experienced in October 1943 that the Danes rescuing them were blind to the difference between the two groups and rescued all of them, this marks the final signal for assimilation of the Russian Jews. And the death of Yiddish theatre in Copenhagen.

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