

לקט

יִיִּדִישֶׁע שטודיעס הײַנט

Jiddistik heute

Yiddish Studies Today

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Der vorliegende Sammelband *לקט* eröffnet eine neue Reihe wissenschaftlicher Studien zur Jiddistik sowie philologischer Editionen und Studienausgaben jiddischer Literatur. Jiddisch, Englisch und Deutsch stehen als Publikationssprachen gleichberechtigt nebeneinander.

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יִיִּדיש װײַסגאַבעס און פֿאַרשונג

Jiddistik Edition & Forschung

Yiddish Editions & Research

Herausgegeben von Marion Aptroot, Efrat Gal-Ed,
Roland Gruschka und Simon Neuberger

Band 1

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Avrom Goldfaden's *Sheygets* Theater

Introduction

Most historians of the Yiddish theater still refer to Avrom Goldfaden as the father of the Yiddish theater, or, when aspiring to scholarly distance, the *so-called* father of the Yiddish theater. The self-conscious qualification is a way of acknowledging that such language lends itself better to mythology than to social history. "Fatherhood," of course, implies Goldfaden's pride of place as the first to write and stage modern Yiddish theatrical productions and manage a commercially sustainable acting troupe. But in fact, the notion of "fatherhood" both overestimates Goldfaden's personal role in the development of Yiddish theater and understates the historical significance of his achievement by turning Yiddish theater into nothing more than a Jewish family affair.

The conventional reading claims that Goldfaden "fathered" the Yiddish theater in Iasi, Romania in 1876 and, following his return to Russia, led two troupes on a tour of the empire's southwestern provinces. In 1880, Goldfaden secured permission to stage his work in the interior, where Jewish residence was still highly restricted, and his theater enjoyed extended spells in Moscow and St. Petersburg. At the end of 1883, the government placed a ban on Yiddish theater. As a result, a substantial number of the best actors, playwrights, and producers of the fledgling Yiddish stage left – many of them for America. Goldfaden attempted to build a theater business in Warsaw but met with limited success. By the time Goldfaden decided to go to America in 1888, it became clear that he had waited too long: his competitors as well as the members of his own troupe had already turned New York into the center of Yiddish theater without him. Furthermore, his former actors retained the memory of his abusive treatment and general egomania. Now in America, these same actors organized themselves anew (and would eventually form the very first actors' union in the United States), and when their old boss arrived, they turned Goldfaden away.¹ The sting of their rejection colored the rest of Goldfaden's days. Even as he re-

1 For more on the Yiddish Actors Union see YIVO 2009.

turned to Europe, first with the idea of producing Yiddish theater in Paris and other European cities, it was clear to Goldfaden that New York was the center of his world. He was in close and anxious touch with his few supporters and friends there. By 1900, New York-based Yiddish actors banded together to raise money for Goldfaden, who they heard was living in penury, and from then on sent annual stipends to his residence in Paris. He returned to the United State in 1903 and died in 1908.²

From 1888 to 1908, among a number of intellectual and artistic projects, theater-related and otherwise, which Goldfaden took on, he expended great effort on shoring up and defining his legacy. He pursued this agenda in his letters and in conversation with colleagues. He also wrote no fewer than eight autobiographical works, seven sketches and one more detailed autobiography that, as he explains, doubles as a detailed history of the modern Yiddish theater.³ It is punctuated by such abstract statements as, “The whole theater turned on my ‘I’” that lay claim to the theater as his singlehanded accomplishment. Goldfaden generated about a hundred pages of this account, but either he never made it past the early year of 1878, or the rest of the document was lost. What survives was edited by the Yiddish theater historian Sholem Perlmutter and published in the Philadelphia-based Yiddish-language daily newspaper *The Jewish Daily* twenty-one years after Goldfaden’s death. In fact, rather remarkably, in eight attempts at writing his autobiography Goldfaden never moves beyond the first two years of his career in Romania with any detail. Among his autobiographies, פֿון שמענדריק ביו, published in דער אַמעריקאַנער in 1907, underscores the close relationship he drew in his mind between his need to ingratiate himself

2 For more on Goldfaden during his final years, see the collected documents in *Goldfaden-bukh* 1926 and Shatzky 1930.

3 In *Goldfaden-bukh* 1926 Shatzky contextualizes four of Goldfaden’s autobiographical pieces in a short introductory essay. The first dates to 1887 and was published in Goldfaden’s own short-lived periodical entitled ניו-יאָרקער אילוסטרירטע צייטונג; the second was revised and published by Mordkhe Spektor as a third-person-history of the Yiddish theater and published in דרוי-פֿריינד in 1887; the third was published in וואַרדעייט soon after his death in 1908; and the fourth he completed in 1901 in Paris and published in three segments in a quarterly called בלעטער that same year. The 7th and 8th autobiographies are re-published and edited by Shatzky in *Goldfaden-bukh* except for the missing second of three segments (Shatzky was unable to find a surviving copy of the *peysakh* installment of *Minikes bleter*). “Shatzky was the first scholar to point out that Goldfaden’s copious autobiographical forays were tied to his experience in America. Apparently in 1926 Shatzky did not know about yet another autobiographical project Goldfaden had undertaken, which would have been the longest if it had been completed. See Shatzky 1926. Moyshe Shtarkman published an autobiographical piece by Goldfaden entitled “*Fun Shmendrik biz Ben-Ami*” (Shtarkman 1930). This one was quite obviously written to justify his play *Ben-Ami*, which he wrote late in his life in reaction to the Kishinev Pogroms of 1903 and desperately wanted to see on the American Yiddish stage. It was finally staged during the final weeks of his life. The eighth is described in the body of the text above.

to an American audience and what he achieved in presiding over the Yiddish theater during those first years. Read together and alongside his dramatic works, Goldfaden's autobiographical writings, letters, and conversations draw our attention to a set of cultural questions that intersect with the production of Yiddish theater in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, including what I would dub the Yiddish theater's gentile problem.

Goldfaden's version of his life was dominated by his persona as a father: first caring for an institution made up of an audience and actors both equally childlike, and then, later, abandoned by his ungrateful children – by which he means the actors who established themselves in New York theaters. His gripes with his former actors dovetailed with the frustration of many members of New York's Jewish intelligentsia over the absence of either artistic sophistication or ideological commitment in the New York Yiddish theater. Nina Warnke sets this parallel out nicely in her definitive article on the New York Yiddish theater scene of the 1890s, "The Child Who Wouldn't Grow Up," in which the metaphor of the theater as a child was often bandied about by critics and playwrights alike.⁴ The lack of socialist or artistic commitment, however, was not Goldfaden's issue. Goldfaden's vitriol was churned by the rising fame, opportunity and income of actors he had once cultivated and held under his thumb. The expression of his complaints, however, is sometimes vague and has a coded quality. In a letter to the writer Isaac Dineson, for instance, Goldfaden depicts himself as an Old-World immigrant "whose children have, when he joined them in the New World, turned their backs on all the sacrifices he made for them in the past."

He gestures, however, to more than just his rebellious actors.⁵

טענות האָב איך, כאָטש איך ווייס ניט צו וועמען,
וואָס דאָס ליב קינד מיינס וואַקסט אויס אַ גוטער
שייגעץ, אַן עזות-מחוצץ-פנים, און איך מעג זיך
ריכטן, אַז מען וועט מיך אַ מאָל שעלטן אין טאַטן
אַריין פֿאַר דעם טייערן תכשיט, וואָס איך האָב
אויף דער וועלט געבראַכט.

But I have a complaint, although I don't
know against whom, that my dear child
is growing up a *sheygets* [non-Jewish
male], an impertinent child and I should
prepare myself that some day they will
curse me for this precious brat that I
brought into the world.

Warnke renders *sheygets* in an idiomatic form, as if Yiddish theater is a 'rascal,' which accurately reflects the context and tone of the letter. But I suggest that Goldfaden chose this word here for its literal meaning as

4 Warnke 2003.

5 Quoted in Zylbercweig 1931 (1): 330. English translation from Warnke 2003: 203.

well. In bolder terms, he wrote to the French Jewish writer Adolf Lichtenstein complaining about the plethora of foreign adaptations being performed on the Yiddish stage. “Guilty for this are our Jewish-authors-anti-Semitic apostates (יידישע־מחברים־אַנטיסעמיטיים־משומדים) who have sought to make the stage gentile.”⁶ Here and elsewhere, Goldfaden would associate the post-Goldfaden Yiddish theater of the 1890s and 1900s with apostasy, and invoked the presence of the non-Jew as a dangerous specter haunting the Yiddish culture of performance.

Against the background of American fears about assimilation, Goldfaden went on to portray himself as the defender of the theater’s Jewish honor. In his autobiography and elsewhere, Goldfaden sought to establish himself as the theater’s legitimate father, and its sole Jewish proprietor. Furthermore, alongside the looming *sheygets* threat he obscured the full picture of the Yiddish theater’s first years – one which included a host of robustly competitive producers, writers, and actors working with and against each other throughout the seven formative years of modern Yiddish theatrical life in Romania and Russia (1876–1883). That is, while a number of these early founders had relationships with Christianity, Goldfaden’s description of them as constituting a gentile threat is a framework he cultivated years later in America. Before 1883, anxieties that attached themselves to a “gentile threat” were of a subtler complexion, as evidenced in Goldfaden’s own dramatic work, especially his celebrated historical operetta *Dr. Almaseda or the Jews of Palermo* (1880). But, as this paper will show, Goldfaden was more right than he knew, for the origins of the Yiddish theater were bound up with the social construction of its “gentile” otherness, both threatening and deeply seductive, both on the stage and off.

Part 1: Christianity and the Players of the Yiddish Theater (1876–1883)⁷

If you were to mention the Yiddish theater to the Jewish public in Russia in 1880, Goldfaden would immediately come to mind. But if you mentioned it in the more sophisticated Odessa circles, they would think of

6 Shtarkman 1926: 74.

7 The first period of the Yiddish theater is bookended by Goldfaden’s first Yiddish-language vaudeville productions in Iasi (1876) at the beginning and the Czarist ban on Yiddish theater enacted in the Russian Empire in October 1883. For a discussion of Christians (from birth) who performed on the Yiddish stage see Zylbercweig 1941: 187–193. Zylbercweig remarked on converts and the Yiddish theater in an article about himself as a lexicographer. See Shepard 1964.

Yoysef Yehude (Osip) Lerner (1849–1909). Yet, despite the important contemporary role that Lerner had played in the world of Yiddish culture, what we know of his biography is sketchy and contradictory. He was born in Berdichev in 1847 to traditional parents who sent him to תורה and then to a secular Russian high school. As a young man he studied law, but after receiving his degree settled in Odessa, where he devoted himself to literary and journalistic work in Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish. Among his early writings is an 1868 Russian-language pamphlet that champions the Yiddish language for its literary potential and includes an appreciation of one of modern Yiddish literature's first serious writers, Israel Aksenfeld. Lerner's efforts on behalf of Yiddish predate Sholem Aleichem's ביבליאָטעק פֿאַלקס-ביבליאָטעק by more than twenty years.⁸ In 1877–1878, Lerner was in Romania reporting on the Russo-Turkish War for a Russian newspaper; there, he observed Goldfaden's troupe at firsthand. He returned to Odessa to produce Yiddish theater, but his productions had higher artistic aspirations than the shows produced by Goldfaden. He staged over a dozen plays, trying for success with high-brow literary material (which he personally translated into Yiddish) or works in the tradition of the modern Yiddish closet dramas penned earlier in the century for consumption in Russian salons. Nokhem Meyer Shaykevitch (also an active theater producer in the Russian Empire during this period, before he became famous for his pulp fiction novels) claims that although Goldfaden was the first to stage Yiddish plays in Romania, the theater blossomed into its true artistic form only under the hand of Lerner in Odessa, particularly in the city's premier venue, the Mariinsky Theater. Shaykevitch writes in 1891:⁹

From then on [that is, from 1880], the Yiddish theater began to bloom. Mr. Lerner translated the renowned plays *La Juive*, *Uriel Acosta*, and *Deborah* into Yiddish and staged them in their full splendor. He spared no cost on the costumes, and the sets, and hired Mr. Grodsky, who studied theater in Vienna, to teach the actors how to deliver their lines and how to act.

Lerner was baptized sometime in the 1890s (no source provides a definite date), but according to the literary lexicographer Zalmen Reyzen, who offers a sensitive first glance at this figure, the contradictions predated his apostasy by decades. דער פֿעטער משה מענדעלסאָהן (Uncle Moses Mendelssohn), for instance, apparently staged during the Yiddish the-

8 For the most comprehensive biography of Lerner, see Reyzen 1926–1929 (III): 269–278 and Lerner's Aksenfeld essay (Lerner 1868).

9 Shomer 1901.

ater's first period (1876–1883), confirms this theory. The play reflects his strong dual interest in both Yiddish culture and radical assimilation. In it the German-Jewish philosopher is portrayed as a wise and doting uncle to Esther, who converts to Christianity in order to marry Heinrich, with whom she has fallen in love. Mendelssohn admonishes her – not because her apostasy is morally wrong, as he explains to her, since “in the world of ideas there are no differences between religious beliefs,” but because her baptism is too hard emotionally for her traditional father to bear. And Mendelssohn continues:¹⁰

ביסט דו דען אויס איבערצייגונג געוואָרן אַ קריסטין? געוויס ניין! דו האָסט דיין גלויבן געביטן נאָר צוליב דעם זאָלסט קאָנען דיין ליבע געזעצלעך מאַכן און אין דעם ביסטו שולדיק ווייל די אויפֿגאַבע פֿון יעדן בעסערן מענטשן יעדן אין זיין פֿאַך – ער זאָל זוכן פֿאַרבעסערן די לאַגע פֿון אַלע. די רעליגיאָן איז אַ באַדערפֿעניש פֿון יעדן מאַראַלישן מענטשן, דאָס איז אַ מלבוש פֿון פֿאַרשידענע קאָלירן וואָס יעדעס פֿאַלק דעקט דערמיט צו זיין נאַקעט לייב, דאָס מלבוש ווערט אַלע מאָל מער גערייניקט און מיט דער צייט וועלן אַלע פֿאַרבן פֿאַרשווונדן ווערן און איין מאַנטל פֿון אמת און שכל וועט באַדעקן די גאַנצע מענטשהייט... קאָנסטו דען האָבן אַ חלק אין דער שיינער זיסער אַרבעט, אַז דו נעמסט און וואַרפֿסט דאָס מלבוש אין גאַנצן ווי אַזוי קענסטו באַטייליקן זיך?

And are you a believing Christian? Obviously not. You changed your religion only to make your love lawful with marriage and in this you are guilty, since you have given up on improving the lives of all. Religion is a necessity placed on every moral person. It is a garment (*malbesh*) of many colors that each nation holds tight to its nakedness. With time, this coat will grow purer and with time all the colors will disappear and it will become a single mantle of Truth and Understanding and cover all of mankind... How can you take part in this work if you have thrown your coat off?

Uncle Mendelssohn's abstracted ideas about religion and their interchangeable nature would have been very radical for the Jewish audience of the Yiddish theater in the 1880s. This idea is intriguingly counterbalanced by the uncle's assumption that Esther's conversion to Christianity is not genuine. Lerner seems to be working out very personal questions in this work.

Reyzen describes Lerner's own apostasy as, on the one hand, shocking in light of his intense commitment to Yiddish literature and language, but also of a piece with a second literary life Lerner apparently pursued alongside his career in Yiddish and Hebrew, in (non-Jewish) Russian newspapers and books. A former student of Lerner's from his days as a teacher in Odessa claims that Lerner wrote anti-Semitic articles published in the *Novyi Telegraf* and other journals and newspa-

10 Lerner 1889.

pers from the 1870s into the 1890s. Although his entry on this intriguing figure is probing, Reyzen suggests that Lerner's extensive, trilingual literary career demands more attention and analysis. By the turn of the century, more tellingly, Lerner was participating in a collaborative revision of the Yiddish translation of the New Testament.¹¹ Until recently, Yiddish scholars, perhaps embarrassed by his apostasy, had largely excised Lerner from the literary record, with the exception of Reyzen and Nokhem Minkov (who occupies himself only with Lerner's Yiddish work, not his life or Hebrew and Russian writings).¹² For similar reasons, the unprecedented writing career of Lerner's wife Maria (née Miriam, 1860–1927) still awaits scholarly attention.¹³ She was the first modern female Yiddish playwright and one of the first published Yiddish short-story writers in a literature that has few recognizable female voices.

Equally vague is the biography of another convert, by the name of Moyshe Hurvitz (1844–1910).¹⁴ Along with his main rival Josef Latayner, Hurvits dominated New York's commercially-driven Yiddish theatrical scene from the last quarter of the nineteenth century into the beginning of the twentieth. Hurvits was born in Galicia in 1844 into a hasidic family but moved to Romania when he was eighteen and eventually became the director of a modern Jewish school in Bucharest. According to Zylbercweig, when he was kicked out, he promptly converted to Christianity and became a missionary. In the earliest surviving newspaper advertisements for Yiddish theater, dating to 1877, his are the only shows represented other than those produced by Goldfaden.¹⁵ He wrote and directed some theater in Romania but, according to the early theater historian B. Gorin, Goldfaden undercut him and, as a result, Hurvits eventually left for America.¹⁶

11 In Berlin in 1901, the B.F.B.S. invited J. Rabinowitz, W. I. Nelom, and Joseph Lerner, native speakers, respectively, of Bessarabian, Lithuanian and Galician Yiddish, to revise Hershon's New Testament translation. The Mildmay Mission to the Jews (whose main center was in Whitechapel, London) distributed one hundred thousand copies of this edition. See Prager 1990: 558.

12 Compare, remarkably, the entry on Lerner in Zalmen Reyzen's lexicon with the one in the *לעקסיקאָן פֿון דער נייער ייִדישער ליטעראַטור* (Yafe 1963).

13 See an informative entry on Maria Lerner by Zylbercweig (1931–1969 (III): 1169f). Included in her work are plays that were censored in St. Petersburg for public performance and contributions to *הויז-פֿרײַנד* and the *דער וועקער חובבי-ציון* periodical.

14 Zylbercweig 1931–1969 (I): 591.

15 See Shas-Roman 1930.

16 Gorin 1918 (I): 198. Hurvits's biography is curiously incomplete given the important and extended presence he had on the American Yiddish theater scene. His activities require more investigation and analysis. Latayner's unpublished memoirs and the memoiristic work of Cesar Grinberg, both quoted by Zylbercweig in his lexicon, would go far in providing such details but I have had no success in tracking them down.

We know even less about Benedict Ben-Tsiyon who was born in 1839 in Kiev and spent time in Romania and Berlin, where he converted in 1863.¹⁷ As a Christian, he was allowed to enroll as a student at the University of Würzburg, where he earned his medical degree in 1867. In England, he was in contact with a missionary group and returned to Romania and then to Odessa as one of their emissaries to spread Christianity among Jews. In Odessa, Ben-Tsiyon began writing for the Yiddish theater. There is no evidence that any of his works were actually staged in the Russian Empire, but there are censored manuscripts of his Yiddish plays in the Tomashevski Collection at the New York Public Library; most – if not all – are adaptations of British novels or plays. After pursuing missionary work for England’s Presbyterian Church in Odessa, Ben-Tsiyon moved to New York City. According to Gorin’s index of Yiddish productions, eight of his works were produced between 1881 and 1888,¹⁸ which does not include *The Jewess*, staged by the celebrated Yiddish actor David Kessler as early as 1881, and another two plays sold to Boris Thomashefsky in 1884, one of them called *The Baptized Daughter*. The Russian-Jewish writer Reuven Waisman, who remained Ben-Tsiyon’s friend in New York, recounts that Ben-Tsiyon autographed a book of his for Waisman with the following words, “The former Hornostopolye sexton’s son, now in the topsy-turvy world of New York City. Doctor Benedict (Borekh) Ben-Tsiyon.”¹⁹ It is clear that – putting aside his own ambivalence about his religious choices – Ben-Tsiyon pursued an active career as a playwright in the world of Yiddish theater and was tolerated even as an apostate.²⁰

In his account or “rewriting” of his early professional experience during his last years in the US, Goldfaden obscures the prominent place of his controversial co-founders. Ben-Tsiyon who at this time continued to enjoy some public attention, is not mentioned at all; Lerner, whose reputation was alive only in Russia, is mentioned only in passing, as if he had made no contribution. Hurvits, however, a celebrity playwright of the American Yiddish stage, is openly maligned. Goldfaden contends that he met Hurvits in Bucharest in 1877 when Hurvits asked him to look at some dramas he had written for the stage. In his rendering of

17 Some of Ben-Tsiyon’s plays are part of the collection of manuscript plays housed in the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library. He is also mentioned by the on-line edition of the 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia under the name “Benzion, Benedix” and mentioned in passing in *The Westminister*, the newspaper published by the Presbyterian Church in an article entitled, “Presbyterian Church in Odessa, Russia” (*The Westminister* 1905: 17).

18 Gorin 1918 (11): 233.

19 Quoted in Zylbercweig 1931–1969 (1): 187.

20 Ibid.

their encounter, Goldfaden refers to Hurvits as the “missionary-writer” (דער מיטיאָנער-מחבר):²¹

The author of the play was a missionary, was known as such in Bucharest. When I asked him why he converted, the missionary-writer told me that he was very desperate for work and that his family was subsisting on potato peels, things were so bad. [...] And as the new God bought him over for 90 francs a month, he had no choice but to take the position. As he himself was able to appreciate, I could not take his plays to mount on the new fresh Yiddish stage. The audience would think that my theater had converted!

Goldfaden spares no sensational detail regarding his meeting with Hurvits. He explains that as a result of their meeting, “the missionary” (Hurvits) headed to the local tavern, where he staged his conversion back to Judaism over a lot of schnapps before a quorum of wagon drivers who happened to be hanging around. Such a show apparently earned Hurvits no points; Goldfaden claims that he outright refused the young Hurvits a job in his theater. The high profile he achieved in New York notwithstanding, we know surprisingly little about Hurvits, and there is no competing narrative or biography of Hurvits’s meeting with Goldfaden or his path to producing Yiddish theater. This story has been repeated multiple times in Yiddish theater literature, but each rendition quotes Goldfaden’s autobiography as its only source. It has never been corroborated, and I would suggest that Goldfaden had plenty of motivation to have imagined retrospectively his indignation at what he presents as Hurvits’ cynical performance at the tavern.

Goldfaden also attacked the Jewish credentials of Jacob Gordin, recognized during his lifetime and by critics ever since as one of the greatest Yiddish playwrights.²² Before arriving in America, however, Gordin had served as a co-founder of the Spiritual-Biblical Brotherhood, which devoted itself to Jewish renewal and communal and agrarian life. While the group wasn’t conventionally Christian, it made no claim of continuity with Judaism and was attacked by Jewish enlighteners as a “profoundly misguided evangelical effort.”²³ Some found it so hostile to Judaism that they besieged the Brotherhood’s headquarters in Elizavetgrad. In her book on Gordin, *Rewriting Russia: Jacob Gordin’s Yiddish Drama*, historian Barbara Henry shows that Gordin himself sought to cover up or dismiss his Brotherhood activities, but that his involvement had, in fact, been extensive. Goldfaden was not alone in

21 Goldfaden 1929: 7f.

22 Henry 2011.

23 Ibid.: 52.

gesturing toward the compromised past that Gordin preferred to keep buried. “[G]ordin’s perpetual antagonist Moyshe Leyb Lilienblum (1843–1910) denounced him as a hypocrite: ‘To the authorities and the Russian press he presented himself as a reformer, and to the Jews he presented himself as a socialist, or a Tolstoyan.’”²⁴

Raising the specter of the *sheygets* theater, Goldfaden complained about Gordin to American Yiddish actor and playwright Leon Kobrin soon after he arrived in New York in 1905.²⁵

<p>וואָס האָט ער געטאָן מיט מיין קינד! גענומען מיין געליבט קינד, מיין יידיש קינד, מיין בנימינען, און אים אָפּגעשמדט! מיין קדש־קדשים האָט ער מטמא געמאַכט. ער איז דאָך גאָר אַ מיסיאָנער, ווי קומט ער צום יידישן טעאַטער!</p>	<p>What did he do with my child! He took my beloved child, my Jewish child, my Benjamin and converted him! My holy of holies he made impure. He is a missionary; how did he get involved in the Yiddish theater?</p>
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Undoubtedly, the notoriety Goldfaden attributed to the Christian activities of some Yiddish theater players was meant to raise his own profile as the guardian of the theater’s *yidishkayt*. Despite his version of the first period of Yiddish theater, written so many years later, there is no evidence that apostates had been rejected as legitimate sources of financial support or creative material at any point in the history of the Yiddish theater. Finally, and perhaps most revealing, Shaykevitch’s memoir mentions that Goldfaden and Lerner collaborated to put on plays in Odessa’s premier performance venue, the Mariinsky Theater. Their relationship did eventually crumble, but over business matters, not religious debates.

Part II: The Idea of the Gentile on the Yiddish Stage

A more reliable source for Goldfaden’s ideas about the gentile element on the Yiddish stage may be culled from the character of Alonso, a supposed gentile that occupies a central place in the historical operetta *Doctor Almasada* (די אַקטאָר אַלמאַסאַדאַ אָדער די ייִדן אין פּאַלערמאָ, היסטאָרישע) ²⁶ that Goldfaden first staged in a modest performance venue in St. Petersburg.²⁷ When it premiered in January 1881 *Doctor Almasada* struck Goldfaden’s critics as weightier than his previous works, which were regarded by many intellectuals as harsh

²⁴ Henry 2011: 53.

²⁵ Kobrin 1925 (II): 158.

²⁶ Goldfaden 1893.

²⁷ For a recent treatment of Palermo Jewish life, see Ashtor 1979: 219–241.

satires of unreformable Jews. For the first two years following his return to Russia, Goldfaden had been attacked in the newspapers by Jewish reviewers for denigrating Jews.²⁸ On the occasion of *Doctor Almasada's* premiere in St. Petersburg, the local Russian-Jewish newspaper, *Ruskii Evrei*, was somewhat protective and upbeat about the playwright:²⁹

The performance of the new play marks a step forward, and at the very least, a happy occasion in the history of the young Yiddish theater. The Yiddish theater, which has existed for such a brief time, has already been submitted to so much disparagement that there is already a corpus of literature on it. [...] but with this play, Goldfaden [...] did very well. [...] If from the execution of the play we could hope to expect more, the play itself made a good impression on the audience.

Goldfaden was under significant pressure in Russia to generate content that was acceptable in the eyes of his contemporaries. It seems from the rather bland review that *Dr. Almasada's* exotic and distant setting and plot obscured its more coded meaning, at least in the eyes of the reviewer, but its engagement with contemporary Russian-Jewish life is unmistakably present.

Doctor Almasada's ostensible subject is Jewish-Christian relations under the Crown of Aragon in the 14th-century Sicilian city of Palermo.³⁰ The story moves between two main camps of characters. The first camp includes the governor of Palermo, Don Pedro, and his wife Isabella, whose daughter Elvira is dying of a mysterious illness. The second group is the elderly Jewish Doctor Almasada and his daughter. By the first act of the play, they and the rest of Palermo's Jews have been driven out of the city by royal decree. Alonso, Dr. Almasada's Christian apprentice, recognizes that only Dr. Almasada can heal Elvira but, as he explains to Isabella, Jews are forbidden from treating Christian patients. Dr. Almasada and Alonso collaborate to convince the governor that he should be allowed to bring Almasada's Jewish medicinal genius to bear on Elvira's grave situation. Elvira is saved and her restoration convinces

28 See the reviews of his early comedies in Oyslender and Finkel 1926: 43–73.

29 Quoted in *ibid.*: 70.

30 Goldfaden was an avid reader of Jewish history and mentions the work of Jewish historians Jost and Graetz in his autobiography. The title cover of the printed edition states that Goldfaden wrote it based on a German novel but does not supply the title of the novel. I have not come up with a possible text. Zylbercweig recounts the theory that Goldfaden created this play from a play written by a former colleague of his from the Zhitomir *rabiners-hul* named N. B. Bazilinski, who published a number of plays during the theater's heyday in Russia (before 1883). This play was entitled דער בילבול (The Libel). See his book of theater anecdotes, טעאטער־מאָאָיק (Zylbercweig 1941: 144f).

the governor to influence the ruling “Czar” to repeal the anti-Jewish laws. Among its other plot-lines are a false accusation of murder followed by a stint in jail for Dr. Almasada, as well as the exploits of a band of robbers, and finally and most importantly, what seems at first to be a forbidden romance between the Christian apprentice Alonso and the doctor’s Jewish daughter Miriam. The audience looks on as they trade confessions of love in Act I while Dr. Almasada is away from home:³¹

איך דאַנק דיר אַלאָנזאַ, דו איידעלער קריסט אונדזער איינציקער טרייסט יעצט נאָר דו ביסט [...]	I thank you, Alonso, you gentle Christian You are our only consolation [...]
די ליבע צו מיין רעליגיאָן האָט מיר ניט גיקענט רויבן דאָס געפֿיל וואָס איך האָב צו דיר פֿון אַן אַנדער גלויבן איך זע דאָך דעם אונטערשייד פֿון היגע אַנדערע קריסטן [...]	My love of my religion could not rob me Of my love for you of another belief But I see how different you are from other Christians [...]
אַלאָנזאַ! מיין טרייע מיין ליבע האָסטו געווונען פֿאַר דיר. [...]	Alonso! You have won my love for yourself. [...]

Against a backdrop of tense Jewish-Christian relations, Miriam confesses to Alonso that her love for him transcends even her commitment to the Jewish religion. By act five, Miriam’s dilemma and the religious boundary between them will dissolve in line with the general ideological tenor of the play.

The operetta is both politically conservative and nationalistic, especially compared to Jewish historical fiction generated at the same time in Western Europe. In France, for instance, Jewish historical fiction by authors like David Schornstein promoted history in lieu of religion and highlighted positive relations between Jews and Gentiles. As the scholar Maurice Samuels observes:³²

The general devaluation of Jewish religious observance in Schornstein’s historical fiction also serves to promote other aspects of the ideological program of emancipation which continued to influence Jewish thinking in post-emancipation-France. [... Like] the importance of forming bonds with Christians, with breaking down the literal and symbolic walls of the Jewish ghetto.

In contrast, *Doctor Almasada* suggests that its Jewish onlookers are victims of an ignorant government and that the non-Jewish population,

31 Goldfaden 1893: 15.

32 Samuels 2008: 48.

and its leaders most of all, must slough off its superstitious ideas about the Jews and change its restrictive policies. In one scene, Doctor Almasada, in jail for a crime he did not commit, pleads for his life. In the end, the government of Palermo speaks openly and apologetically about its earlier mistreatment of its Jewish population and reverses anti-Jewish legislation. In the context of Russian-Jewish life, such a picture would undoubtedly be resonant, if aspirational.

Unlike Schornstein's, Goldfaden's grand gestures are organized around Jewish nationalist and religious sentiment and celebrate Jewish nationhood, God and Torah.

When the Jews are forced to leave their homes in the city, they maintain their dignity and sing:³³

דו הייליקע תורה קום מיט אונדז מיט	Holy Torah, accompany us
וווהיין מיר גיין, לאָזן קענען מיר דיך גיט	Wherever we go, we cannot be without you
דו ביסט אונדזער דעגן	You are our sword.
גאָט איז דאָך דאָרט	God is there
אין יעדען אָרט	Everywhere
ווו מען בעט אים נאָר	Where one calls for him.

Moreover, the religious practice of the Jews of Palermo does not stand between them and their ability to be peaceful citizens of the city. Unlike the ideas gentiles harbor about Jews, Torah-centered Jewish religion is not superstition.

Though we know little about the exact circumstances under which Goldfaden wrote *Doctor Almasada*, moments of it feel particularly apropos to Jewish life in St. Petersburg, where he first put the play on the boards. Only twenty years earlier, Jews were prohibited from residing in the empire's capital, but by the 1860s and 70s Jews began to migrate to the city by the thousands.³⁴ Widespread economic disadvantage pressed Jews to "travel clandestinely to larger cities and towns" and as a result, considerably more Jews lived in St. Petersburg "than were documented by either city or police census[es]."³⁵ By the time Goldfaden and his troupe arrived in St. Petersburg, soon before they staged the play in January 1881, the capital city had "a sizable Jewish migrant population," a good number of whom resided in the city illegally.³⁶ Palermo, on whose streets the intolerant thug Don Diego would prefer Jewish feet did not tread, doubles well as the city of St. Petersburg:³⁷

33 Goldfaden 1893: 21.

34 Avrutin 2010: 59.

35 Ibid.: 98.

36 Ibid.: 7.

37 Goldfaden 1893: 9.

institutions of higher education, or receive residential privileges in the interior provinces.” He continues:⁴⁰

Conversion entitled Jews to the legal rights to leave the Pale of Settlement and work in the profession of their choice [...]. By law, conversion erased much of the discrimination Jews faced in their daily lives – in the process improving their civil and material plight by allowing them to escape from the professional, geographic, and social stigmas attached to Judaism.

As a result of such strategic conversions, the figure of the friendly or covert apostate Jew assumed cultural currency during the nineteenth century. Historian Yankev Shatzky observes, for instance, that in 1840 baptized Jews in Warsaw contributed money to a Jewish orphanage in order to prevent Jewish orphans from falling prey to missionaries. “This institution was the first demonstration of Jewish unity in Warsaw. It united all sides.”⁴¹ But the Yiddish-language Haskala organ that Goldfaden read, and to which he contributed, provides a more cogent image of the Jewish apostate who deploys his newly acquired freedoms to alleviate the plight of Jews and society in general. An unsigned editorial, probably penned by the newspaper’s editor Alexander Tsederboym, legitimizes the contribution of baptized Jews to Russian-Jewish society:⁴²

עס איז פֿאַסט אַן אויסגעמאַכטע זאַך, אַז די דאָזיקע ייִדן, וואָס גייען איבער צו אַן אַנדער רעליגיע, כאָטש עס שייַנט אַז זיי זאָגן זיך פֿון אויסן אָפּ אין גאַנצן פֿון זייערע פֿרײַערע גלויבנסברידער, דאָך בלייבן זיי אין האַרצן גרעסטנטיילס טרייִ דעם ייִדנטום און זוכן אויף יעדן שריט עס צו באַווייַזן. מיר געפֿינען אָפּט צווישן אַזעלכע מענטשן די טרייסטע פֿאַרטערטער פֿון דער ייִדישער נאַציע וואָס טוען אונדז נישט איין מאָל גרויסע טובֿות, אַ סך מער ווי אַפֿילו מאַנכע פֿון אונדזערע ייִדישע יונגע לייַט, וואָס קוים האָבן זיי אַנגעהויבן עפעס צו לערנען, מיינען זיי אַז זיי מוזן זיך שוין אין גאַנצן אָפּזאָגן פֿון זייערע פֿרײַעריקע ברידער.

It has practically been decided that those Jews who adopt a new religion – and it appears on the exterior as if they have utterly renounced their old religion – remain, for the most part, true to Judaism in their hearts and seek out ways to express this at every turn. Among such people, we come across the most loyal representatives of the Jewish nation, who do us more favors than even many of our Jewish youth who, as soon as they begin studying, think they must sever all ties with their Jewish brothers.

40 Avrutin, 2010: 119. According to Avrutin, towards the end of the century, the Russian government questioned the sincerity of Jewish baptisms and began introducing laws to help divide converts “from the core of the Christian population by making their integration into Russian society increasingly difficult.” See p. 120.

41 Shatzky 1948: 152.

42 Tsederboym 1870: 14f.

The writer speaks of the “exterior” of such converts versus whatever feelings or convictions reside in their “hearts,” and goes so far as to compare apostates favorably with (unbaptized) Jews in non-Jewish Russian institutions. Presumably the latter feel the pressure to prove their Russian loyalty, whereas converts are unburdened by this obligation. As to why he pretended to be a Christian, Alonso explains in the fifth and final act of the play:⁴³

<p>זייט איך האָב אָנגעהויבן אין פּאַלערמאָ פּראַקטיצירן און ייִדן האָט מען פֿאַרבאָטן קריסטן צו קורירן האָב איך מיך אויסגעגעבן, איך האָב עס געמוזט אונטער דעם נאָמען אַלאָנזאָ פֿאַר אַ קריסט מיין פּלאַן איז געווען, עס זאָל מיך אַלעס קאָסטן אום בײַ דער רעגירונג באַקומען אַ גרויסן פּאָסטן אום איך זאָל קענען גלייך ווי אונדזערע פֿאַרשטייער אַ מאָל נוצלעך זײַן אין אַ נויט דעם כלל ישראל</p>	<p>Since I began practicing in Palermo And Jews were forbidden to treat Christians I have assumed a Christian identity by the name of Alonso, as I had to. My plan was to achieve even at the greatest personal cost An important position, and, as an agent for our people, One day be of use in a time of need for <i>klal Yisroel.</i></p>
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Like the markers of Christianity assumed by the subjects of Tsederboym’s editorial, Alonso’s Christian mask is justifiable and even laudable, since he puts it to the service of his people – Jewish and otherwise.

To a mostly Jewish audience in St. Petersburg, Alonso might have been particularly resonant as a Jew who *did not convert* but exercised a more temporary brand of social opportunism by assuming a Christian name. Nowhere in his explanation does he mention that he was actually baptized, only that he “impersonated” a Christian by adopting the name Alonso in place of his Jewish name Menashe. In the 1860s and 70s, administrators in the provinces and in St. Petersburg reviewed “countless requests from Jews wishing to change their nicknames to their Russian equivalent.”⁴⁴ Although such requests were arguably a welcome sign of the Jews’ acculturation to Russian society, they were denied. As Avrutin explains, “Like so many members of the Ministry of the Interior [one official] reasoned that Jews could easily invent fictitious identities and avoid recognition by changing their names.”⁴⁵ Even baptized Jews were not exempt from this law. In 1850, “in an effort to increase the visibility of baptized Jews and help distinguish the newly baptized from the core Christian population,” converts were forbidden to change their

43 Goldfaden 1893: 57.

44 Avrutin 2010: 153.

45 Ibid.: 152.

surnames.⁴⁶ “If baptized Jews were allowed to change their surnames, reasoned the State Council, then all Jews who [...] transgressed the law would “be able to evade surveillance” by converting to Christianity, masking their permanent places of residence, and masking their ethnic origin.”⁴⁷ Official anxiety over distinguishing Jews from Christians ran deep and reveals widespread social chameleonism on the part of Russian Jews, blurring boundaries of identity. And while officials stated that their worries stemmed from possible crimes, Jews just as often deployed a Christian name to further business and professional interests as well as to reside in a restricted city. Goldfaden's *Menashe* speaks to both Russian Jews with complicated identities and their less complicated Jewish brothers and sisters. He invites the former to maintain their sense of allegiance to their people and the latter to consider their baptized brothers as uncomplicated, sympathetic crypto-Jews.

Conclusion

As a kind of performer within the framework of a play, Alonso calls attention to the similarity between a play staged with actors and a social performance. His true Jewish identity lends stability and relief to the romantic narrative between him and Miriam: now her love for Alonso can be consummated. The stability that is achieved in the realm of romantic love, however, results in an instability more broadly felt than that of an isolated episode of intermarriage. Alonso's adoption of a Christian identity extends license to Russian Jews to exercise significant latitude including baptism, the adoption of a Christian name, and the adoption of Christian behavior in overcoming social and professional barriers or in residing in a restricted city. Especially for a people that underscores observance and the act (performance?) in their religious practice, one would think that behaving like a Christian poses risk to Jewish society. Doctor Almasada, however, endorses it.

Still more to the point, the character of Alonso calls into question the integrity of the later Goldfaden's self-righteous indignation regarding the apostates who sought to contribute to the Yiddish theater. It suggests that, at least during those formative years of the theater, Goldfaden sympathized with the complexities of identity upon which baptized Jews acted and felt comfortable justifying their apostasy to his audience by explaining their enduring – if secret – commitment to the needs of the Jewish people. This attitude is consistent with the particulars of Goldfaden's situation in January 1881. He had already succeeded

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 153.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

in obtaining the first permissions ever granted in the Russian Empire on either the central or local levels to perform Yiddish theater publicly, and he was about to stage Yiddish theater in, of all cities, St. Petersburg. Whether or not audience members noticed the parallel between their lives and the lives of Alonso, Miriam and Dr. Almasada, the operetta also expresses Goldfaden's optimism that life would imitate art in its tolerant denouement. The Goldfaden of the turn of the century, however, knew that what had followed instead was more of what we saw in the play's first acts, including greater restrictions in key cities and universities, and individual and mass expulsions. But it was Goldfaden's internalization of his critics' negative assessment of his work, more than his changing perspective on Russia, that pressed him to don the mantle of the theater's Jewish father. The character of Alonso – which introduces a layer of important cultural history into the operetta unnoticed by the Yiddish theater's observers – suggests that Goldfaden was as wrong-headed in attacking his apostate colleagues as he was in confirming the low opinion of his own early work.



Doktor Almasada
Frontispiece of the Warsaw edition, 1887

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