

# **INDECENT** **by** **Paula Vogel**

**A Dramaturgical Casebook**



**Director- Kelly O'Donnell**  
**Dramaturg- Liv Fassanella**

**Playhouse on Park**  
**January 25th- February 26th**



# Index

<b>The Players (As they Lived).....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Matilda "Madzhe" Asch.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>10 Things you Need to Know about God of Vengeance.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Paula Vogel.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>The Golden Epoch of Yiddish Theatre in America: A Brief Historical Overview.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>"Wiegala" by Ilse Weber.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>LEARN ABOUT LODZ: Map and Timeline.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Visual Research.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Glossary.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Links.....</b>	<b>27</b>

## Trigger Warning:

Pages 16-21 contain graphic depictions of the events of The Holocaust.

# The Players

## (As They Lived)



### **Sholem Asch**

Yiddish novelist and playwright. Born in Kutno, Russian Poland, Sholem Asch was the youngest of his Hasidic parents' 10 children. Traditionally educated and a talented student, he began teaching himself German with the aid of Moses Mendelssohn's translation of the Bible. Since his parents disapproved of these secular studies, he moved in with relatives in a nearby village, where he became a Torah instructor and for the first time encountered the lives of Polish peasants. Relocating to the town of Włocławek, Asch earned his living writing letters for illiterate people, an experience he appreciated for the insights it offered into human needs and longings.

*(From yivoencyclopedia.org)*



### **Rudolph Schildkraut**

Actor. Born in Constantinople, Ottoman Empire (now Istanbul, Turkey), he was well known on the European theatre scene and in the early silent film era. In 1920, he permanently moved to America, made his debut on the Broadway stage and founded his own Jewish theatre in the Bronx in 1925. He also appeared in several Hollywood film productions, most notably: "Young April" (1926), "King of Kings" (1927), "A Ship Comes In" (1928) and "Christina" (1929). He died of a heart attack at age 68 in Los Angeles, California. His son was Joseph Schildkraut, a Best Supporting Actor Oscar winner.

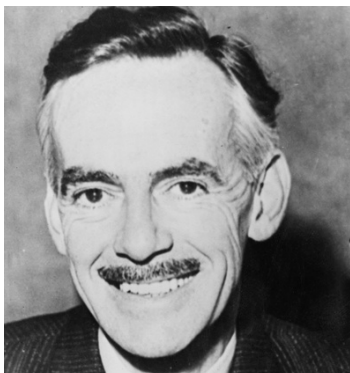
*(bio by John "J-Cat" Griffith)*



## **I. L. Peretz**

Peretz was a writer, social activist, and a leading figure among the authors of Yiddish literature in Poland. He was born in 1852 in Zamość to a well-respected mercantile family. He died on 3 April, 1915 in Warsaw.

*(From culturepl.com)*



## **Eugene O'Neill**

Eugene O'Neill was a famed playwright and his masterpiece, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (produced posthumously 1957), is at the apex of a long string of great plays, including *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), *Anna Christie* (1922), *Strange Interlude* (1928), *Ah! Wilderness* (1933) and *The Iceman Cometh* (1946). O'Neill died on November 27, 1953, in Boston, Massachusetts.

*(From Biography.com)*

## **Harry Weinberger**

Harry Weinberger was born in New York City in 1888. He attended New York University and was admitted to the bar in 1908. A staunch believer in civil liberties, Weinberger defended many aliens, immigrants, anarchists, and other radicals, including Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, whom he believed had been deprived of their rights. He also developed an expertise in copyright law, representing many writers, including Eugene O'Neill. Weinberger died in 1944.

*(From Yale Archives.)*

# **Matilda (Madzhe) Asch**

**From *Melech Ravitch- My Lexicon***

**Translated by Corbin Allardice**

Nee Shapiro, originally from Lodz, the wife of Sholem Asch.

This was in 1911 and I was then in Lemberg (Lviv). At that time, my teacher in the poetic arts, Shmul Yankev Imber, was just returning to Lemberg from a brief visit to Warsaw. At that time, Warsaw was a magic kingdom to me, a place populated by magicians and by the one God--Peretz. It was then that Imber told me about the wife of Sholem Asch, the woman whose name was Matilda--or Matle, in Yiddish--or Madzhe, as Asch called her--and who I had already encountered in the dedication pages of his books. Then, Imber told me--no, he didn't tell me, he sang to me--of an incredibly beautiful woman who spoke Polish like a Galitsianer, with whom you could discuss world literature, who was full of poetry, who was herself a poem.

The impression stuck. It was only twelve years later that the impression would take living form before my own eyes, when I first met Mrs. Matilda Asch in Warsaw.

Heavy is the crown of the queen consort, as it is called in English, of a Sholem Asch in the world of Yiddish literature. We got lucky with our literature's queen consort. I wouldn't dare to imagine what would have become of such a stormy, creative personality like Sholem Asch without his Matilda, whom he always loved and had-to-thank-for-everything. I required a word which does not exist--had-to-thank-for-everything--but there it is on the page.\* Let it stand.

Countless are the anecdotes about Sholem Asch--and Matilda Asch. But Asch hates anecdotes, so let us show a little piety--piety toward Matilda Asch. How many times did I see Asch fly into a rage--in Warsaw, at the PEN Congress in Vienna--and then with that one word, "Shulem," in Matilda Asch's Ur-Polish accent, the lion would retract his claws, the lion would smile, even.

And how gracefully did Mrs. Asch, who had excellent command of several European languages, bear Yiddish in her mouth. In her mouth, Yiddish naturally became one of the European languages, like Swedish, Norwegian, or French.

Mrs. Asch would always let you know that she knew her husband's work, but she would never talk about it. At most, she would discuss technicalities, when and where something was published, staged, or translated. Only a few times did I get to see Mrs. Asch's enthusiasm in discussing Asch's work. But under discussion was not the work of Sholem Asch--but of their son, Nathan (Nosn) Asch. Then Mrs. Asch would abandon her role to fall into that eternal and holy role: the mother. And she was always shocked when someone was unfamiliar with this or that piece by Nathan, and she would order them to read it, since everyone was saying that Nathan Asch was growing to be great.

Once at a ball I saw a couple dancing a waltz. The man was then around fifty, the woman was around the same age, but she looked very young. A classy pair: the man was tall, and the woman was a little shorter, in perfect proportion. They danced silent and elegant. I stood transfixed with a beating heart marvelling at them, as if I was standing before some holy landscape, and I thought: A marriage made by God.

The couple: Matilda and Sholem Asch. It was in Warsaw, on 13 Tłomackie Street in the hall of the Association of Jewish Writers--the year was 1931.



# **10 Things You Need to Know About God of Vengeance**

## **by**

## **David Mazower**

*Published on the website for The Digital Yiddish Theatre Project*

SHOLEM ASCH'S GOT fun nekome (God of Vengeance) has one of the most remarkable histories of any modern drama. A Twitter summary of its production history would read something like this: "admired, translated, parodied, panned, banned, prosecuted, withdrawn, forgotten, revived, celebrated." The current staging by New Yiddish Rep gives New York audiences a rare chance to hear the play in Asch's original Yiddish. Here is an overview of the play's rich, complex, and often tempestuous production history.

### **1. The Author**

My great-grandfather Sholem Asch was twenty-six and a rising star of Yiddish literature's new wave when he wrote Got fun nekome in the summer of 1906. The former yeshiva student had absorbed the latest trends in Polish, German, and Russian modernism and was now a cosmopolitan European writer. In five years, he had published dozens of short stories in Hebrew and Yiddish, and an acclaimed lyrical novella A shtetl (A Small Town). His first full-length drama, Tsurikgekumen (The Return) - later retitled Mitn shtrom (With the Current) - was produced in 1905 in Polish translation in major theatres in Cracow and Warsaw. A second play, Meshiekhs tsaytn - a kholem fun mayn folk (In the Messianic Era - A Dream of My People) was staged in Russian by Vera Komissarzhevskaya's famous St Petersburg theatre in 1906. Asch dramatized the dreams and dilemmas of his people, bringing them to an international audience. For many Europeans, he was also the first Yiddish writer to reveal small-town Jewish life in Poland in all its variety - capturing its intense spirituality and romanticism as well as its wretchedness and poverty.

## **2. The Plot**

Yankl Tshaptshovitsh and his wife Soreh run a brothel in the basement of their home in a typical Polish Jewish town. It's given them a good income. But the taint of the whorehouse has thwarted their dream of finding a respectable match for their teenage daughter Rivkele. Finally, Yankl's money has talked and the matchmaker has found a pious young groom. Yankl commissions a Torah scroll and puts it in his daughter's room to watch over her. It's time to close the brothel down. But will God forgive his sins and allow his daughter to live a decent life? The answer soon becomes clear as we see Rivkele sneaking downstairs into the arms of one of the prostitutes, unleashing a chain of events that brings Yankl's dream crashing down. Sex, prostitution, lesbianism, and the desecration of a Torah scroll grabbed the headlines. But *Got fun nekome* is also about social and religious hypocrisy, man's relationship with God, and parents' dreams for their children. Plus some universally familiar types - a rebellious teenager, a domineering father, and a practical, resourceful mother.

## **3. The Premiere**

The early buzz around *Got fun nekome* was less about whores than herrs - Herr Reinhardt and Herr Schildkraut. The enthusiasm of these two German theatre titans for Asch's play secured its sensational Berlin premiere at the Deutsches Theater in 1907. Director Max Reinhardt's temple of theatrical modernism was probably the most highly-regarded theatre in Europe. Asch had seen Reinhardt's staging of *The Merchant of Venice* in 1906 and had been "transported into a fairy-land" by the production and Rudolf Schildkraut's portrayal of Shylock. Vacationing in Switzerland in the summer of 1906, Asch wrote *Got fun nekome* with Schildkraut in mind to play Yankl. The German-language premiere, *Gott der Rache*, ran in repertory from March 19th to September 8th, 1907. The director was Reinhardt's dramaturg, Ephraim Frisch, a fluent Yiddish speaker from Stryj in Austrian Galicia who had once trained as a rabbi. Playing in repertory alongside *Got fun nekome* were Goethe's *The Siblings (Die Geschwister)*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Gogol's *The Government Inspector (Revizor)*.

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#### **4. Early Success**

Got fun nekome was the first Yiddish play to be translated and staged throughout Europe. From Berlin, Asch went straight to St. Petersburg for the Russian-language premiere. Over the next few years Asch's "brothel play" was also translated into Polish, Hebrew, English, Italian, French, Dutch, Czech, Swedish, and Norwegian. In 1912, the Moscow branch of the cinema firm Pathé Frères released a silent film of Got fun nekome with Russian titles. According to film historian Jay Hoberman, it featured two Yiddish actors, Israel Arko and Misha Fishzon, at the head of a mainly non-Jewish cast. The film is now presumed lost. But Got fun nekome found its greatest success on the Yiddish stage. The towering dramatic actor Dovid Kessler headed the cast of the New York Yiddish premiere, and the play was also hugely popular among the amateur Yiddish dramatic groups that flourished worldwide in the early twentieth century.

#### **5. The Parody**

Warsaw's Jewish writers were a rivalrous bunch and they reacted to Asch's runaway success with about as much enthusiasm as Joseph's biblical brothers for his fancy coat. Dovid Frishman, a renowned Hebrew and Yiddish writer, decided it was time to have some fun at the young Asch's expense. Putting aside loftier projects, he penned a parody called God of Mercy. In Frishman's satire, Yankl and Soreh are the parents of a dreamy, Torah-obsessed son called Ruvendl. Despairing at his lack of interest in girls, they hire an attractive young nanny to seduce him, but this only terrifies Ruvendl further and he escapes to his friends in the study-house. In place of Asch's lesbian scene, Frishman gives us a homoerotic pastiche. "We'll sleep in one bed every night," Ruvendl's yeshiva study partner entreats him. "Your father will never come near us.....will you run away with me to a faraway yeshiva?" The parody appeared in a Warsaw Yiddish theatre journal in 1908. More recently, Binyomin Weiner translated excerpts from it for Pakn treger, the magazine of the Yiddish Book Center .(It's in the Winter 1996 issue.)

## **6. The Obscenity Trial**

Got fun nekome on Broadway should have been Asch's moment of triumph. Instead it turned into something of a nightmare. The English-language production opened in December 1922 at the Provincetown Theatre, moving first to the Greenwich Village Theatre and then, in February 1923, to the Apollo Theatre on 42nd Street. Schildkraut starred and directed with a stellar cast including Morris Carnovsky, Sam Jaffe, and Lillian Taiz. Urged on by influential members of the Jewish establishment, producer (and noted civil rights attorney) Harry Weinberger and the cast were arrested on March 6th and charged with "unlawfully advertising, giving, presenting, and participating in an obscene, indecent, immoral, and impure drama or play." They pleaded not guilty. Debates about the play raged in the press, with Constantin Stanislavsky, Eugene O'Neill, Frank Crane, and Jewish Daily Forward editor Abraham Cahan all coming to Asch's defense. The ACLU refused Weinberger's request to help finance the appeal, but he won anyway, overturning the verdict after a two-year battle.

## **7. Actors**

Asch was an enthusiastic amateur actor in his younger years, and with Got fun nekome he created some of the most intensely theatrical roles in the Yiddish repertoire. At some point in their careers, almost all the biggest Yiddish theatre stars played one or more of the main parts - Yankl the brothel-owner, Soreh his wife, their teenage daughter Rivkele and Manke the prostitute. Rudolf Schildkraut not only created the part of the father at the German-language premiere, but went on to play it in Yiddish and English over the next two decades. The acclaimed and admired Soviet actor Shloyme Mikhoels played Yankl in Moscow, as did Maurice Schwartz in America and on tour. Mark Meyerson, an actor's actor, long ago forgotten, was renowned for his performances of Yankl in Warsaw in the 1910s. Luba Kadison and Stella Adler shared the stage as Rivkele and Manke in Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre production while, for the legendary Vilna Troupe, actresses Leah Noemi and Sonia Alomis played Soreh and Manke respectively. Finally, Joseph Buloff's 1930 performance as Reb Eli the go-between was said by the New York Times critic to "make the audience gape and wriggle with a delighted astonishment that approaches ecstasy."

## **8. Censorship**

Got fun nekome kept the censors busy on many occasions, often with farcical results. In 1923 the celebrated Vilna Troupe came to London and a typical cat-and-mouse game ensued. The single-sheet English synopsis of "Vengeance" submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's Office, which issued permissions for all professional theatrical performances nationwide, made no mention of a brothel. Yankl was now "the keeper of a low cabaret" with "cabaret girls" in the basement. The censor passed the play, with a strong warning about "the cabaret scene." The Sunday Express sent a reporter along to the Pavilion Theatre, Whitechapel, and worked up a fine lather of outrage, thundering, "nothing like it has ever been staged in England." The Lord Chamberlain shrugged ("What else could we do? No one here understands Yiddish"), and took the play off after five performances. God of Vengeance was banned one final time in London in 1946 on the advice of the Deputy Chief Rabbi, who described it as "offensive ... sordid ... and repulsive." Asch himself withdrew his play that same year. Hearing of a production in rehearsal in Mexico City, he warned the company against proceeding, saying "the situation described in the play is dated and no longer exists."

## **9. Revivals**

In recent years, Got fun nekome - along with An-sky's Der dibuk (The Dybbuk) - has become one of the most frequently revived plays of the modern Yiddish theatre. Among notable productions I have seen, New Yiddish Rep's recent sell-out staging proves there is still an audience eager to hear Yiddish theatre classics in the original mame-loshn. (Even a Manhattan snow blizzard couldn't keep people away on the afternoon I went). The 1999 Todo Con Nada company's staging, using Caraid O'Brien's new translation, was a triumph and a revelation. The action unfolded on the go-go platform at Show World, a just-closed strip joint in a seedy labyrinth of a building in Times Square. The low-ceilinged, mirrored room made the perfect setting for Asch's uncompromising interrogation of the motives behind the deals we make with ourselves and others. More recently, Romanian Yiddish theatre director Andrei Munteanu brought his pared-down, grotesque vision of the play to the Jewish Theatre in Warsaw. The angular wooden set resembled a scaffold as much as a house, and Munteanu's production delivered a series of noir-like twists. Yankl's simkhe [celebration] attracted a thieves' parade of back-alley low life, led by a one-eyed mafia godmother in a wheelchair. And, as the play opened, the dead body of one of the girls was ritually washed, before being unceremoniously stashed under the family dining table when visitors are heard approaching the house.

## 10. Reworkings

Powerful dramas are like good jazz tunes - they invite creative riffs and artistic tributes. Over the last twenty years or so, *Got fun nekome* has been updated, revised, adapted, and reworked almost as many times as it's been staged in the original. Pulitzer Prize winners Donald Margulies and Paula Vogel have both engaged with the play, in very different ways. Margulies's adaptation (first seen in Seattle in 2000) sets the play on the Lower East Side in 1923, featuring a father who came to the US as a "scrawny orphan with nothing." Paula Vogel's *Indecent* uses fragments of Asch's original in a much broader exploration of authorship, the power of theatre in general, and the lost world of Yiddish theatre in particular. In yet another recent adaptation, British writer Atar Hadari's *Merciful Father* is set in postwar Manchester in a world where phone sex offers a more modern business model than prostitution. Explaining his inspiration, Hadari says, "I was living at the time in North Manchester, the biggest ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in Europe, and passed a newsagent window one day where I saw a card advertising for phone sex workers. The notion of a phone sex business in the midst of this very upright neighborhood stayed with me."



Szene aus „Der Gott der Rache“ von Schalom Asch. Dritter Akt.  
Jankel (Schildkraut) und Sara Schepshowitz (Frau Wangel).  
(Spezialaufnahme für „Ost und West“.)

*Scene from the third act of God of Vengeance at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin 1907.  
(Courtesy of the Leo Baeck Institute , New York.)*

# Paula Vogel

*From paulavogelplaywright.com*

PAULA VOGEL is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright whose plays include INDECENT (Tony Award for Best Play), HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE (Broadway production set for spring 2020; Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the Lortel Prize, OBIE Award, Drama Desk Award, Outer Critics Circle and New York Drama Critics Awards for Best Play), THE LONG CHRISTMAS RIDE HOME, THE MINEOLA TWINS, THE BALTIMORE WALTZ, HOT'N'THROBBING, DESDEMONA, AND BABY MAKES SEVEN, THE OLDEST PROFESSION and A CIVIL WAR CHRISTMAS.

Her plays have been produced by Second Stage, New York Theatre Workshop, the Vineyard Theatre, Roundabout, and Circle Repertory Company, Center Stage, Intiman, Trinity Repertory, Woolly Mammoth, Huntington Theatre, Magic Theatre, The Goodman Theatre, American Repertory Theatre, Dallas Theatre Berkeley Repertory, and Alley Theatres to name a few. Harrogate Theatre and the Donmar Theatre have produced her work in England.

Internationally, her plays have been produced in English in Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand and in translation in Italy, Germany, Taiwan, South Africa, Romania, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia, Canada, Portugal, France, Greece, Japanese, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Peru, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Brazil and many other countries.

John Simon once remarked that Paula Vogel had more awards than a “black sofa collects lint.” Honors include induction in the American Theatre Hall of Fame, the Dramatists Guild Lifetime Achievement Award, the Lily Award, the Thornton Wilder Prize, the Obie Award for Lifetime Achievement, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the William Inge Award, the Elliott Norton Award, a Susan Smith Blackburn Award, the PEN/Laura Pels Award, a TCG Residency Award, a Guggenheim, a Pew Charitable Trust Award, and fellowships and residencies at Sundance Theatre Lab, Hedgebrook, The Rockefeller Center’s Bellagio Center, Yaddo, MacDowell Colony, and the Bunting.

She is particularly proud of her Thirtini Award from 13P, and honored by three Awards in her name: the Paula Vogel Award for playwrights given by The Vineyard Theatre, the Paula Vogel Award from the American College Theatre Festival, and the Paula Vogel mentorship program, curated by Quiara Hudes and Young Playwrights of Philadelphia.

Paula was playwright in residence at The Signature Theatre (2004-05 season), and Theatre Communications Group publishes six volumes of her work. Paula continues her playwriting intensives with community organizations, students, theater companies, subscribers and writers across the globe. She is the 2019 inaugural UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television Hearst Theater Lab Initiative Distinguished Playwright-in-Residence and has recently taught at Sewanee, Shanghai Theatre Academy and Nanjing University, University of Texas at Austin, and the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis. From 1984 to 2008, Paula Vogel founded and ran the playwriting program at Brown University; during that time she started a theatre workshop for women in Maximum Security at the Adults Correction Institute in Cranston, Rhode Island. It continues to this day, sponsored by the Pembroke Center for Women at Brown University. From 2008-2012, she was the O'Neill Chair at Yale School of Drama.





# **The Golden Epoch of Yiddish Theatre in America: A Brief Historical Overview**

## **By Edna Nahshon**

The Yiddish theater was the great cultural passion of the immigrant Jewish community in the United States. It was the theater, Harold Clurman noted in 1968 that “even more than the synagogue or the lodge, became the meeting place and the forum of the Jewish community in America between 1888 and the early 1920s.”

The Yiddish theater was a new phenomenon in Jewish life. It came into being in 1876 in Iasi, Romania, and arrived in New York six years later. This novel form of entertainment quickly took hold; within less than a decade, New York turned into the undisputed world capital of the Yiddish stage. Supported by a constantly growing Yiddish-speaking immigrant population (nearly 3.5 million Jews settled in the United States between 1881 and 1925), the New York Yiddish rialto was brimming with energy. It produced celebrated stars, generated a wealth of dramatic material, and presented a rich spectrum of productions ranging from sentimental melodramas and quasi-historical operettas to sophisticated experiments inspired by the latest trends of the European, particularly the Russian, stage.

Although always in the hands of private entrepreneurs the American Yiddish theater was a genuine people’s institution insofar as its appeal was not limited to any one socioeconomic group. It was attended by rich and poor, educated and illiterate, observant and free-thinking. Statistical data attests to its popularity. In 1927, two years after mass immigration had reached a virtual halt, there were 24 Yiddish theaters across America, 11 of them in New York, 4 in Chicago, 3 in Philadelphia, and 1 each in Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, Newark, and St. Louis. Some 10 years later, during the 1937-1938 season, when the Yiddish theater in America was well past its prime, it was estimated that 1.75 million tickets to Yiddish shows were sold in New York City alone. Such sales meant that every Yiddish-speaking adult in the city saw an average of more than three Yiddish shows per year, an impressive figure unmatched by any other ethnic group in America.

In order to understand the development of the Yiddish theater in the United States, however, it is imperative to consider its East European roots. Professional entertainment, even on a modest scale, was introduced into Jewish life only after secularization and urbanization had begun to change traditional Jewish life. Music was the only performing art for which Jews could boast of having skilled personnel. Music also provoked the least protest because of its nonrepresentational character. Hence, it was only natural that the earliest modern Jewish performers were itinerant minstrels. The first such group, the Broder Zinger, originated, as its name indicates, in the Polish town of Brody. By the mid-nineteenth century, its members began to travel across the towns and villages of Eastern Europe, presenting their comic songs and ballads to working-class audiences. As this kind of entertainment became popular, the number of such musicians increased. Some began to introduce bits of dialogue and to use some makeup and props to add continuity and dramatic flavor to their musical numbers.

These rudimentary theatrics finally evolved into a cohesive, albeit crude, performance in 1876, when Abraham Goldfaden (1840–1908), a Russian intellectual known for his popular tunes and lyrics, joined forces with Israel Gradner, a Broder singer performing in a Jassy tavern on the eve of the Russo-Turkish War. Goldfaden imposed a simple dramatic framework on Gradner's musical material and created a genre that has been compared to Italian *commedia dell'arte* because it combined a fixed scenario with improvised dialogue and stage business. The successful Goldfaden enlarged the troupe and began to produce full-fledged musical plays, some of which—*The Witch* (1879), *The Two Kuni Lemls* (1880) and *Shulamith* (1880)—have become classics of the Jewish stage and have been frequently revived in the original as well as in Hebrew and English translations. Known as the Father of the Yiddish Theater, Goldfaden was a man of many talents who produced, wrote, composed, directed, and designed the sets of his own productions. However, in a world of wandering troupes with little regard for copyright laws, he also suffered from his own phenomenal success: actors who were initiated into the stage by him, including Gradner, frequently opted to leave the master's majestic rule and to found their own competing traveling companies whose main repertoire consisted of Goldfaden's original plays.



In 1883, following the assassination of Czar Alexander II, the Russian government proclaimed a series of anti-Jewish laws, including the prohibition of Yiddish theatrical productions, throughout the Russian empire. Because anti-Semitism and the depressed economic conditions that afflicted Jewish communities in other East European countries were not conducive to theatrical activity, the young actors and fledgling playwrights of the new Yiddish stage joined the great migration to the West. London became the new, though temporary, center of the Yiddish stage.

Unfortunately, the poor immigrant community of the East End could not support this influx of Jewish thespians. The latter were also hampered by the fierce opposition of the Anglo-Jewish establishment and by the strict fire-safety rules of the municipal authorities. The freedom to flourish without such constraints was to be found in the Golden Land, particularly in New York, soon to become the largest Jewish urban center in the world.



*The members of the Cairo Yiddish Dramatic Circle, 1916.*

# **"Wiegala" by Ilse Weber**

From holocaustmusic.weebly.com

Ilse Weber was a Czech author and songwriter. She wrote children's fiction, and her most popular book was "Mendel Rosenbusch: Tales for Jewish Children" (1929). She had learned to sing and play guitar, lute, mandolin and balalaika, but she had never sought a career as a musician. When the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia in 1939, the Webers were able to get their eldest son to safety in Sweden through Kindertransport. Unfortunately, Ilse, her husband, and their younger son Tommy were sent to Theresienstadt in February 1942. She worked in the camp's children's hospital at night, doing all she could for the patients without the help of medicine, as it was forbidden for Jewish prisoners. She wrote many poems while she was there and set a good number of them to music. She would accompany herself on guitar while she sang her lullaby-like songs to children and the elderly of the ghetto. When her husband was deported to Auschwitz two years later, she and Tommy went with him so as not to break up their family. It is said that Ilse sang to her son and many other children as she accompanied them voluntarily into the gas chambers.

## **"Weigala" by Ilse Weber-English Translation:**

Wiegala, wiegala, weier,  
the wind plays on the lyre.  
It plays so sweetly in the green reeds.  
The nightingale sings its song.  
Wiegala, wiegala, weier,  
the wind plays on the lyre.

Wiegala, wiegala, werne,  
the moon is a lantern.  
It stands in the darkened firmament  
and gazes down on the world.  
Wiegala, wiegala, werne,  
the moon is a lantern.

Wiegala, weigala, wille,  
how silent is the world!  
No sound disturbs the lovely peace.  
Sleep, my little child, sleep too.  
Wiegala, wiegala, wille,  
how silent is the world!

**[Click here to listen to a recording](#)**

## **LEARN ABOUT LODZ**

### **Map and Timeline**

**From <http://agolodzghetto.com/>**

Lodz, Poland, was a flourishing industrial city in the mid-1800s with a successful textile sector and a mixture of Polish, German, Czech and Jewish inhabitants. Before World War II, a third of the population of 672,000 was Jewish. Lodz's Jewish residents played a significant role in the economic and cultural life of the city.

In 1939, after WWII began, the German Army invaded Lodz and later renamed it "Litzmannstadt." As the Nazi regime terrorized the city and destroyed Polish monuments, Catholic churches and Jewish synagogues, many members of the Jewish population fled to other European countries. In early 1940, the Nazis rounded up more than 160,000 of the remaining Jews - including Henryk Ross - and forced them into the Lodz Ghetto. The Nazis then isolated the Lodz Jews from the rest of the world using barbed wire, sentry booths and a German police patrol.

The ghetto was an area of less than 4.13 square kilometres situated in the poorest part of the city. The conditions in the Lodz Ghetto were atrocious from the start, and steadily deteriorated until the summer of 1944, when the Nazis sent most of the remaining residents to death camps.

#### **1939**

September 1: Germany invades Poland. World War II begins.

September 8: The Germany Army enters Lodz, followed by the Nazi security police.

September 18 - 21: Jewish holidays are banned in synagogues. Financial transactions by Jews are limited. Poles and Jews are rounded up for German labour camps. An announcement is made that a Jewish Council will carry out German regulations in the ghetto.

October 13: Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski is appointed by the Nazi administration to the Jewish Council, in the position of Elder of the Jews.

October 18 - 31: The Nazis expropriate Jewish property. Jews are restricted from trading in leather and textile goods. Jewish trade professionals stage failed boycotts. Jewish unions and economic groups are liquidated. Jews are recruited for labour. On October 28, Heinrich Himmler, Commissioner for the Consolidation of German Nationhood, visits Lodz.

November 9: Lodz is officially included in the German Reich, under the authority of Nazi high official Arthur Greiser. Nazis carry out brutality against Poles and Jewish intelligentsia. Artists, journalists and performers are arrested.

November 10: Polish monuments are destroyed and four synagogues are left in ruins (one small synagogue survives).

December 10: Memorandum: Friedrich Uebelhoer, Governor of the Kalisz-Lodz district and "Jewish Affairs," issues the first memorandum on the establishment of a "Ghetto in the City of Lodz." He concludes that the ghetto is "only a temporary measure. I reserve the right to decide when and how the City of Lodz is to be purged of Jews."

December 11: Greiser decrees that Jews are to be identified with a yellow Star of David on the fronts and backs of their clothing. Public transport use is restricted.

## **1940**

March 15: A postal service is established in the ghetto.

April 11: Lodz is officially renamed "Litzmannstadt," after the general who captured Lodz in World War I. Rumkowski establishes a Jewish police force of 250 officers in response to orders from the Mayor of Lodz. Eventually, more than 1,100 police officers are employed to curb black-market trading and theft and to fulfil deportation quotas. The German secret police occupies an office inside the ghetto.

April 30: The ghetto is sealed off with barbed wires, barricades and German sentry booths.

May 5: Hans Biebow is appointed head of the ghetto's German administration, and sets goals for the ghetto to function as a labour camp.

May 19 - 28: Police presence is increased in the ghetto. The German police and crime police suppress strikes and disobedience, and are given the authority to shoot without warning.

June 12 - 29: A census records 160,320 residents in the ghetto, which occupies 4.13 square kilometres. Special ghetto money, called "rumki" or "chaimki" notes, is introduced. It becomes the only valid currency in the ghetto.

October 1: A Central Office for Labour is established in the ghetto to oversee factories and workshops that produce clothing, shoes, textiles and metal for the German market.

October 20: The Central Prison is established on Czarniecki Street.

November 17: Rumkowski establishes an archive, which holds documents and photographs. The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto survives as the most authoritative source about life in the ghetto.

December 30: Food coupons are introduced. The death rate increases due to starvation.

## **1941**

March 7: The first issue of the newspaper Getto Cajtung appears. Between now and September, 18 issues are published.

May - June 7: The ghetto area is reduced to 3.82 square kilometres. Himmler pays a visit to the Tailoring Department.

September 21 - October 17: Trams are introduced in the ghetto. A total of 19,954 Jews arrive from Western Europe. They are settled in empty school buildings.

November 5 - December 7: A transport of Austrian Roma arrives, and nearly 4,500 are segregated into a separate ghetto area. Jews from liquidated ghettos in German provinces arrive. The killing facility in Chelmno nad Nerem, 70 kilometres from Lodz, is activated.

December 16: The Germans inform Rumkowski that 20,000 people are to be deported from the ghetto.

## **1942**

January 5 - May 15: Deportation begins, with 4,500 Roma sent to Chelmno. Subsequently, 52,304 Jews board freight trains at the Radogoszcz station and are sent to be killed in gas vans at Chelmno.

June 1: Rumkowski orders Jews to shave off their beards and shorten their coats, which the Nazis consider offensive.

September 4: Rumkowski delivers a speech to the parents of the ghetto, imploring them to give up their children for "resettlement."

September 5: A curfew begins in the ghetto. Residents are forbidden from leaving their premises, which are searched by Jewish and German police officers. The police round up the elderly, the ill and children under the age of 10, who are considered "unproductive." By September 12, a total of 15,681 persons, including 5,862 children, have been exterminated at Chelmno.

October 1 - December: The ghetto numbers 89,446 residents. Labour in the ghetto is accelerated, and members of the German Ghetto Board begin to supervise production. Relative calm sets in, and two hospitals are opened due to outbreaks of typhoid, typhus and tuberculosis. Many residents die from starvation and disease, and in public executions.

## **1943**

Adolf Eichmann visits the ghetto. Factories and workshops continue to produce goods for the German Reich. Food remains scarce. About a 1,000 residents are sent to labour camps in Germany.

## **1944**

March 4 - 10: About 1,600 residents are deported to work for plants.

June 10: Himmler orders the liquidation of the Lodz Ghetto.

June 23 - July 17: 7,196 residents are sent on the last transport to Chelmno. Subsequently, evidence of the killing facility is destroyed.

August 1 - 29: About 70,000 residents are deported from the Lodz Ghetto to Auschwitz. Rumkowski and his family are carried in a special wagon. Most people are sent directly to the gas chambers or to labour camps. A small number of Lodz Ghetto inhabitants survive their time in Auschwitz.

September: Biebow sends more than 1,000 residents to a concentration camp near Berlin, and holds back about 900 people to clean up the ghetto and gather all property from the empty buildings. These residents are to be executed after they finish their work.

## 1945

January 15: The Russian Red Army enters the Lodz Ghetto and liberates its inhabitants. Many Jews had gone into hiding when the deportations began. A total of 877 are officially recorded as survivors.





# Visual Research

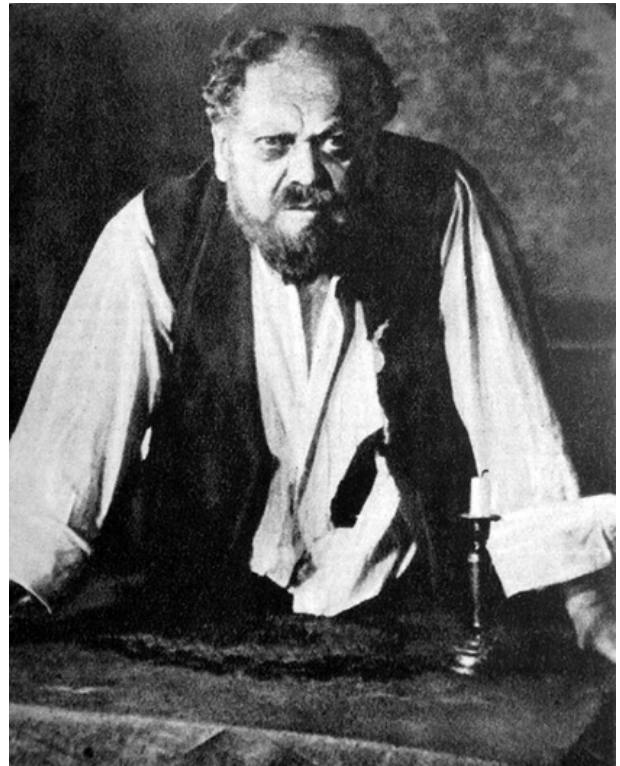


Typical streetscape of Łódź, 1900s



Miodowa Street in Warsaw, 1906



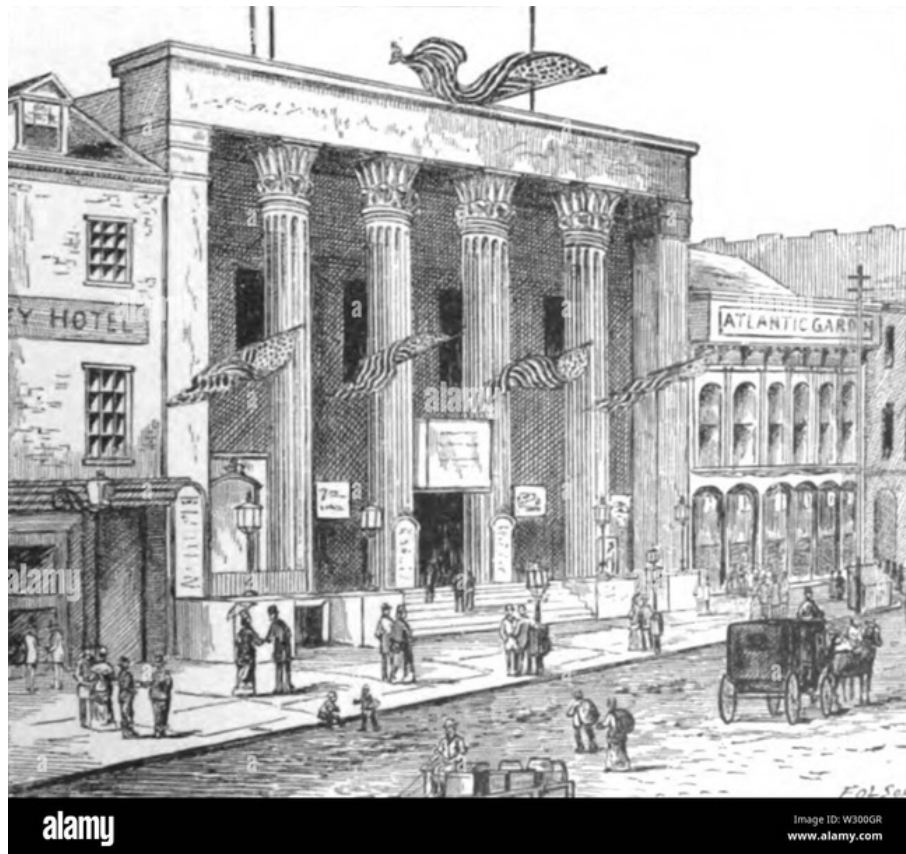


Actor Rudolf Schildkraut, Berlin, 1907 production, *God of Vengeance* (Archive, Yiddish Book Center/ Digital Yiddish Theater Project)

1900s German burlesque postcard



Original Broadway Cast of *God of Vengeance*



The Bowery Theatre, New York City



Provincetown Playhouse , New York City





Ellis Island Ferry, 1800s



Hell Hole, John Sloan (1917) – Eugene O'Neill is the mustachioed man in the top right corner.

# Glossary

*(all words are Yiddish unless stated otherwise)*

**Shtetl** - A small Jewish town

**Traif** - Unkosher.

**Minyan** - A group of ten Jewish men needed to perform certain ceremonies.

**Intelligentsia (Russian)** - Russian colloquialism. Referred to educated, modern society. An English alternative would be "

**Farshtinken- Adjective**, Stinking or Contemptible

**Potchkying** - Verb. To tinker. To work aimlessly.

**Pogrom (Russian)- Noun**. An organized genocide.

**Seconal-** A short-acting barbiturate drug prescribed as a sedative. Later used to perform assisted suicides. Today, the drug has been, for the most part, replaced with benzodiazepine drugs.

**Ketubah-** A Jewish marriage contract

**Dyybuk-** An angry lost spirt that takes human hosts. Prominent in Jewish folklore.

# **Links**

**All links are clickable**

**The writings of David Mazower, great grandson of Sholem Asch**

**From God of Vengeance to Indecent**

**Interview with Paula Vogel**

**Wandering Stars, Documentary on Yiddish Theatre**

**Interesting article about American Yiddish Musical Theatre**

**I highly recommend visiting the website for The Digital Yiddish Theatre Project. It is a wonderful archive of information that includes historic and modern Yiddish theatre.**

**EXPLORE THE HISTORY OF YIDDISH THEATER IN NYC WITH THE MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

**Overview + History of Ellis Island**

**December 1943, A Hanukkah celebration in the Lodz Ghetto, Poland**