III. CONVERGENCES ET DIVERGENCES IDENTITAIRES

YANKEV SHTERNBERG AND THE MODERNIZATION OF YIDDISH THEATRE IN INTERWAR ROMANIA[1]

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Abstract

The end of the First World War brought the theatre audience back to the performance halls. The Yiddish theater, with a few decades of experience and an already assured popularity, was already considered to be the vector for the preservation and promotion of the Yiddish culture and Jewish identity in the Romanian lands. In this context, from the musical to the avant-garde performance, the artistic concept proposed by poet and director Yankev Shternberg modernized the Yiddish theater left by Avram Goldfaden and turned it into a true ferment for the revival movement of the Yiddish culture in Romania.

Keywords

Yiddish theatre; modernism; Romanian Jewry; interwar Romania; Eastern European Jewish culture.

The social mission of the Yiddish theater[2]

After Avram Goldfaden's era, when Yiddish theater functioned as a socio-educational tool for the masses, in the early twentieth century, Yiddish

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[2] The current project continues my previous work on the history of Yiddish theatre in Romania, namely my retrospective volume, *140 de ani de teatru idiş în România*, ICR, 2016, but focusing on the interwar period specifically.

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theater became, in a fully acknowledged way, an important means of preserving and promoting Yiddish culture and Jewish identity among the Jewish population already involved into an intense process of acculturation and modernization. Thus, during the First World War, immediately after the Chernivtsi Conference[3] of 1908 and the subsequent extensive debates on the promotion of Yiddish as the national language, a number of cultural initiatives emerged publicly, having as the main purpose the revival of Yiddish culture and theatre in Romania. Among these initiatives, a significant one was represented by the *Licht*[4] group. Its most important outcome, the first Yiddish-language literary magazine in the Old Kingdom, bearing the same name as the group, *Licht*, was published in Jassy between 1914-1915, being edited by a group of intellectuals consisting of Efraim Waldman, Iacob Groper, Matatiahu Friedman, Moti Rabinovici and, later, Yankev Botoshanski. Printed at the Kadimah Publishing House, *Licht* magazine included programmatic articles in which Yiddish theater was defined as the most accessible way of promoting Yiddish culture among the masses, confirming that Yiddish theater played an increasingly significant role, beyond its already mentioned educational and cultural significance. Thus, in the magazine's platform, the editors stated that

"*Our program is also interested in the Jewish theater. The only way to preserve the Yiddish word, more effective than any other, is this theater. (...) The Jewish scene must be a means of education, to bring the Jews closer through the Yiddish word. (...) The Jewish theater is the only way to bring closer and make the different layers of the Jewish population communicate with each other*"[5].

Indeed, *Licht* magazine's discourse in favor of Yiddish theater was based on the broad impact of this cultural phenomenon and its history in

[3] Between 30 August and 3 September 1908, the first Yiddish Language Conference took place in Chernivtsi, where the language of the Ashkenazi Jews was proclaimed the national language, holding equal rights with Hebrew, and where projects to promote Yiddish culture were discussed. The Conference was attended by numerous personalities, including Sholem Ash and Abraham Reizen, but also I.L. Peretz.
[4] P. Almoni, 1943.
[5] *Licht*, an I, no. 2, 1914, p. 97, *apud* Israil Bercovici, 1998, pp. 116-117.

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Romania, even before the publication of the magazine's theoretical platform and initiatives. After the period when the Yiddish theatre gained worldwide popularity due to Abraham Goldfaden's creation of the first theatre company in Jassy in 1876 and due to his efforts of taking it everywhere Jewish communities lived, Yiddish theatre thrived in Romania. Touring successfully across Eastern Europe, Goldfaden promoted Romania as a popular destination for Yiddish actors and companies who travelled extensively and performed in the country, attracting and educating a large public on Yiddish drama. Thus, immediately after the end of the First World War, many local companies began to travel on tour in Romania and present various forms of theatrical productions, including drama, comedy and musical. In the post-war context, many famous Yiddish-speaking actors came from all over the world to perform in Romania: Misha Fishzohn, Paul Baratoff ("Fraie Idișe Folksbine" from Vienna), Solomon Shtramer (the Jewish theater "Habimah" which performed in Transylvania), Sara Kanner, Moris Siegler, Maly Picon, Bulov, Nelly Kassman, Heyman Prisant, Iacob Rechtzeit, Ludwig Satz, Moris Schwartz, Herz Grossbart, Sidy Thal, Beny Adler, Seidy Gluck, Sigler company, Herman Yablokoff and Iacob Kalich brought here shows that had enjoyed success in America and in other Western countries[6]. Indeed, Yiddish theater was an important part of Jewish cultural life both before, but also after the First World War; Romania attracted, thanks to its large audience of theater lovers, the most important Jewish actors in the world, becoming an interesting and frequented destination, raising the quality of Yiddish drama in Romania.

Yankev Shternberg's theatrical perspective

Certainly, the most active and prolific intellectual in the Yiddish-speaking cultural environment in Romania during the interwar period was Yankev Shternberg (1890-1973), poet, journalist and, perhaps most importantly, theater director, initiating many projects that have transformed Bucharest into a new Yiddish cultural center and managing to attract other Yiddish-speaking intellectuals around him. During the interwar period, he

[6] Bercovici, pp. 120-125.

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was considered a central figure in Yiddish theater in Romania not only as a director, but also as an artistic director for an international company, playwright and theater theorist. He exerted an extraordinary influence both on the Yiddish theater in Romania, but also on the Romanian interwar theater in general.

Born in 1890 in Bessarabia, in Lipkan, a *shtetl* known as the birthplace of many famous Yiddish writers, Yankev Shternberg received a traditional education in the *heder*[7], followed by a five-year period at the Russian secondary school in Kamenets Podolski. In 1913, at the age of 23, the young Shternberg moved permanently to Bucharest, the capital of the Old Kingdom, and remained here until 1940, when he returned to his native Bessarabia, to Kishinev, which had become Soviet territory. Fleeing the Nazi threat, he found refuge in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 1941, and in 1943 in Moscow. In 1949, he was sentenced for Zionist activity to a ten-year sentence in Stalinist camps, returned to Moscow in 1954, and was rehabilitated after Stalin's death[8].

His Romanian period is dominated by theatrical initiatives, followed by literary and journalistic projects. He began writing poetry and prose early; his first poem, *In a shlitn* (In a sleigh), was published in *Folks-Shtime*, the Yiddish-language newspaper in Vilna, in 1907. Moving to Bucharest in 1913, he was initially attracted to journalism and the editorial work that he practiced for several years, during the First World War, but soon began to get involved in theatrical projects.

After the end of the First World War, Yiddish theater underwent important changes. After a period of rise and a peak in popularity, which ended in the early twentieth century due to economic and political reasons, most actors and companies decided to leave Eastern Europe and move to America, where Eastern European Yiddish-speaking immigrants had already settled in successive waves. Actors and companies still activating in Eastern Europe were going through a period of stagnation, and the end of the First World War determined a drastic change that Yankev Shternberg took full advantage of. After the trauma of the war, the population desperately needed

[7] *Heder* represents the traditional religious Jewish school attended by boys aged 3 to 13.
[8] Moyshe Lemster, "Yankev Shternberg", in: Gershon David Hundert (ed.), 2008.

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entertainment and any kind of easy fun; as a result, musical and cabaret performances were becoming very popular in Romania. At the same time, Yiddish theater became the central element in the cultural platforms of many intellectual associations and publications, being perceived as a means of preserving and supporting Yiddish culture in Romania. In this complex context, Yankev Shternberg formulated his perspective regarding the Yiddish theatre, confessing that:

"*I have developed, from literary and theatrical perspective, due to the Romanian environment, just as my great predecessor, the father of Yiddish theatre, Avram Goldfaden, who reached his potential as a theatre creator only in Romania, although he travelled through the whole world, through Jewish centres of different sizes and development stages … I have understood that the only way to attract the great Jewish masses is to propose a traditional-cultural theatre. Not even a literary theatre which I greatly supported during that time … This is why I created a socio-political theatre, a musical theatre which, I think, was at that moment the first ever theatre of this type in Yiddish. This type of theatre was born in Bucharest on the eve of the October Revolution … I presented on stage in ironical terms the bourgeois assimilation process, I attacked the rabbinical authorities, I have fought for progressist Jewish culture, for Jewish emancipation, for their citizenship rights … for Yiddish-language progressist literature.*"[9]

The musical: *Bucharest Yiddish Theater*

Following his ideas and projects, but taking into account the needs of the public, Yankev Shternberg created in 1917, in Bucharest, an avant-garde initiative promoting a Yiddish musical-theater[10] or cabaret, known as the *Bucharest Yiddish Theater*, the first of this type in Yiddish and which attracted a significant audience. Here he staged musicals based on scripts written with his two collaborators, writers Yankev Botoshanski and Moyshe Altman. Between 1917-1918, Shternberg wrote and produced nine plays and

[9] Bercovici, p. 118. [my translation]
[10] Bercovici, p. 119.

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musicals in Yiddish, adding to the popular Goldfadenian tradition new artistic trends in line with the preferences of the new audience. During this period, he began to assert himself as one of the most popular directors in interwar Romania.

His two collaborators, Yankev Botoshanski (1892/95-1964) and Moyshe Altman (1890-1981), remarkable Yiddish-language intellectuals, also came to Bucharest from the new periphery of Greater Romania. Moyshe Altman, born in the same year and in the same place as Shternberg, respectively in 1890 in the Lipkan *shtetl* in Bessarabia, was a writer and journalist and received the same traditional education as his fellow writer, followed by studies at the Russian school in Kamenets Podolski. Unlike Shternberg, Altman moved to Chernivtsi in 1919 and worked for various Jewish institutions and cultural publications such as the Yiddish Cultural Federation of Romania as a lecturer in Jewish and world literature, traveling through the Bessarabian *shtetls*. After an early debut in print with Yiddish poetry, at the age of 14, Altman made his editorial debut with *Blendenish* (Radiance), a volume of prose published in Chernivtsi in 1926[11]. Although his decision to move to Bucharest brought him to the Capital only in the early 1930s, his collaboration with Shternberg and with the local Yiddish press began earlier and had already earned him a reputation in Romania.

Shternberg's second collaborator was Iacob Botoshanski, a remarkable writer, journalist and playwright. A few years younger than Shternberg, Botoshanski was born in 1892 (or, according to other sources, in 1895) also in Bessarabia and received the same traditional religious education as the other two intellectuals presented. For a while, Botoshanski had a plan to study in the *yeshiva*[12], but he abandoned it after a few years and continued his studies in Russian schools in Odessa and Kishinev. His acculturation to the Russian milieu is proved by his literary debut in both Russian and Yiddish in 1912 in local newspapers. Moving to Bucharest a year after Shternberg, in

[11] Moyshe Lemster, "Moyshe Altman", in: Gershon David Hundert (ed.), *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2008.

[12] *Yeshiva* is a higher Jewish religious educational institution, where future rabbis were trained.

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1914, he showed Socialist sympathies and became involved in politics. After participating in the creation of *Licht* magazine and acting as one of its editors, he wrote and directed many short plays with Yankev Shternberg. After more than a decade, he left Romania for good in 1926 and moved to Buenos Aires[13].

Guest stars: *Di Vilner Trupe.* ("The Vilna Troupe").

After the musical theatre project, the second initiative concerning the revitalization of the Yiddish cultural life in Romania generated by Yankev Shternberg was *Di Vilner Trupe*, a theater company known for the first staging of S. An-sky's famous play, *Der dibek,* in 1920, at the first commemoration of the author. Already a famous company in the world of Yiddish theater when it arrived in Bucharest on tour, *Di Vilner Trupe* was a renowned company in the former Tsarist Empire that enjoyed a European reputation due to its extensive tournaments and innovative modernist perspective. Arriving in Romania at the invitation of Isidor Goldenberg[14], *Di Vilner Trupe* had a large repertoire consisting of classical and contemporary Yiddish plays, but it also performed Russian, German and French works staged during the eight years of activity, since its creation in 1916 in Vilna. Therefore, its presence was a great cultural event not only for the Yiddish-speaking audience, but also for the Romanian-speaking audience due to its special artistic accomplishment. From the very beginning, being founded as a literary theater company, *Di Vilner Trupe* brought together numerous actors trained in the famous Russian and Polish theater schools or influenced by the Moscow Art Theater and by the vision of Konstantin Stanislavski[15], yet very new for the Romanian public. Following I.L Peretz's theatrical perspective on a literary theater capable of bringing Yiddish performance to the level of the greatest dramatic cultures in Europe, *Di Vilner Trupe* went far beyond the entertainment role that Yiddish theater has had since Goldfaden's time and brought together modernist and Symbolist influences, folklore, Romanticism

[13] Sol Liptzin, 1985, p. 356.
[14] Bercovici, p. 125.
[15] Miroslawa M. Bulat, "Vilner Trupe", in: Gershon David Hundert (ed.), 2008.

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or Expressionism[16]. Between 1924-1927, the company settled in Romania, but, in the end, despite its popularity, it fell apart due to financial difficulties and professional offers received by the actors.

In Romania, *Di Vilner Trupe* enjoyed great success and also performed in front of the Royal Court its most popular show (with over 150 performances), the adaptation of Yankev Shternberg and Iosif Bulov's after Osip Dimov's play, *Der zinger fun zain troier* (The Singer of His Sorrow) or *Yoshke Muzikant*, bringing together both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences[17], intellectuals and the Romanian-language press. In fact, the company was a cultural phenomenon in itself, enthusiastically presented to the general public by well-known Romanian intellectuals and writers such as Ion Marin Sadoveanu and Victor Eftimiu, but also by Romanian actors such as Tanți Cutava[18]. Its songs turned into hits, and Romanian theaters proposed various collaboration projects, prompting a general increase in interest for Yiddish culture among Romanian society, consisting in requests to stage Jewish theater performances in Romanian and in projects of Yiddish literary evenings involving Romanian actors. Due to the great popularity of *Di Vilner Trupe*, the initiative to establish branches of the association "Friends of the Jewish Theater" in Bucharest and in the provincial cities was born, with the specific purpose of financially supporting the company[19].

In Romania, the activity of *Di Vilner Trupe* was coordinated by Yankev Shternberg who, between 1924 and 1927, was the artistic director of the company. During these years, Shternberg produced pieces by I. L. Peretz, Shalom Alehem, Osip Dimov, Gogol and Tolstoy, which represented real events for the cultural life of Bucharest. With Yankev Shternberg managing the artistic activity of the company that was recognized for its modernist and avant-gardist approach, *Di Vilner Trupe* reached the peak of success, transforming itself into a true avant-garde theater in Bucharest.

[16] Ibid.
[17] Nahma Sandrow, 1996, p. 221.
[18] I. Bercovici, pp. 129, 131.
[19] I. Bercovici, p. 126.

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Original projects: *Bukarester Yidishe Teater Studie* (BITS) and its reception

In 1930, after the break-up of *Di Vilner Trupe*, Yankev Shternberg's next theatrical project was *Bukarester Yidishe Teater Studie* (BITS), a local Yiddish-language theater that brought together highly talented artists such as M. H. Maxy, Arthur Kolnik, M. Rubingher, Max Halm, M. Poleanski, H. Schwartzman, but also the actors from *Kovno Trupe*: Levitas, David Licht, Glezer, Kaplan, Olshanetskaia, Ruth Taro or Scheinbaum[20]. Like *Di Vilner Trupe* a few years ago, BITS enjoyed great success, although Shternberg's modernist approach brought him some criticism. Yankev Shternberg's staging of the play *Bay nakht afn altn mark* (At night at the Old Market) by I. L. Peretz was much appreciated and popular, as many theatrical chronicles testify; summing up the general reception of the show, A. Toma concluded: "Are you asking me for my opinion on Shternberg's theater? I respond after the impression of the first show: a revelation. (…) And here there is the richness of Shternberg's poetic and plastic fantasy."[21] Practically, the well-known cultural magazine *Adam* dedicated an entire issue[22] to the echoes of the first show, bringing together reactions from Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals who watched the show despite the linguistic difficult accessibility. For example, Tudor Arghezi, the great modernist poet, confessed having attended Shternberg's performance despite the linguistic barrier, while still being impressed by the genius of the director:

"*Because we don't have to understand the language in which Bay nakht afn altn mark*[23] *was performed, the meaning of the fable and the consequence of the play was indifferent to us. We went to see the show because we knew it was organized, in all its complexity, by a young, enigmatic*

[20] I. Bercovici, p. 147.
[21] A. Toma, „Însuflețitorul", in: *Adam*, year I, no. 16, 1 February 1930.
[22] Romanian-language cultural magazine *Adam* dedicated the issue of 1 February 1930 to Iacob Sternberg's staging of I. L. Peretz's *Bay nakht afn altn mark*: A. Toma, „Însuflețitorul"; Dr. L. Ghelerter, „Se face ziuă…"; Ury Benador, "Sternberg"; Tudor Arghezi, Studio Teatrului Idiș din București. „Noaptea în târgul vechi"; H. St. Streitman, „Un creator".
[23] *Bai nakht oifn altn mark*, a play from the classic Yiddish repertory written by I. L. Peretz.

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and distant artist named I. Sternberg and whose stage achievements instinctively interested us. Intermittently manifested and employing strictly personal means that no financial capital supports, Mr. Sternberg has the heroism to remain in a Bucharest which is too limited to unleash his artistic neuroses and, from time to time, with his angelic trumpet sounds the rising of dead from a bell tower"[24].

Undoubtedly, Shternberg's BITS promoted a new type of Yiddish theater, the "total theater", in line with the latest modernist cultural trends of the European scene that led to the professionalization of actors and to a particularly complex artistic production for the general public that included not only Yiddish speakers, but also the general public, interested in quality shows. Attending Shternberg's performances represented an exceptional experience, as B. Iosif wrote in his chronicle:

"*For the Jewish audience, a premiere of Sternberg's is like climbing the mountains. The lungs that breathe the atmosphere clogged by the secular dust of the shund*[25] *of some 19th century stars can hardly adapt to the ozone trapped within Sternberg's backstage. Both spectators and artists! The lack of training forces them to gasp for air at first and to get mal d'air. (...) For Sternberg's audience, the premiere is like the first time taking the plane. On the descent, they return to the ordinary world with the dimensions balanced by the peaceful coexistence of all the contradictions of reality. With their foot on the ground, they miss returning to the dizzying ascent. (...) And this maladaptation will last as long as Sternberg persists in offering us his shows only as seasonal gifts. Between the "Jewish theater" and Sternberg's theater there is the distance between the traveler by foot and the vertigo of the air vehicle. Because Sternberg's world, of poetry and theater, is a four-dimensional space*."[26]

[24] Tudor Arghezi, 1930.

[25] *Shund* represents a special form of theatre (but also art, in general) of low quality, accessible for the larger public.

[26] B. Iosif, „A patra dimensiune a lui Iacob Sternberg", in: *Adam*, year VI, no. 74, 30 September 1934.

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Together with Moyshe Altman, Yankev Shternberg returned to his passion for musicals and staged *Rojinkes mit mandlen* (Raisins and Almonds), with the scenography and costumes of the famous artist M. H. Maxy, followed by *Scotsl Kint,* written with the same Moyshe Altman; because the demand for tickets for these shows was high, it was decided that they should be performed in Bucharest and in the main cities in Romania in a national tour between 1933-1934[27].

To better illustrate the impact and success of Yiddish theater in Romania during the interwar period, as well as the prestige of Yankev Shternberg, an informative description of interwar Jewish theatrical life offered by a great Yiddish actress, Hayele Grober, on tour through Eastern Europe in the mid-1930s and acting in Romania, is edifying:

"*In 1935, I received the invitation to have a tour in Romania. Romania was known for having the best theatre audiences. Great actors from Europe and America were travelling far to act and perform there. In Romania, performances were organized all-year-round: in winter, performances were organized in the city's theatre halls, while in the summer, they took place in summer gardens. Even the most remote and small shtetls were included. If a small shtetl did not host a theatre hall, the performance was organized in an improvised wooden barn. Old and young people hurried to the theatre shows. Actors recall that, when two performances were advertised for the same day, spectators came to the matinee with a small lunch bag and also stayed for the evening performance. I received the invitation for touring in Romania from two writers who were directing the theatre, Yankev Shternberg and Moyshe Altman. I started my tour in Bucharest where I met poet and theatre director Yankev Shternberg. By then, Shternberg-Altman was already a famous artistic brand in Romania. They introduced the genre of Yiddish-language revue shows to the Romanian audience. (...) Yankev Shternberg also directed*

[27] I. Bercovici, p. 159.

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in the Romanian mainstream theatre. We were traveling from midnight on, sleeping during the day and performing every evening in another city. Everywhere we went, the halls were full."[28]

Also, for the Bucharest cultural life, the impact of the Yiddish theater was overwhelming; thus, the jubilee of the establishment of Yiddish theater in Romania, organized on May 9, 1926 at the historic *Jignitsa Garden* in Bucharest by the Jewish Cultural Federation, brought together Jewish actors and intellectuals, but especially non-Jewish artists. Not only representatives of the most important theaters participated, but also the most popular actors, among them actors Constantin Nottara and N. Soreanu on behalf of the *National Theater*, V. Maximilian, one of the most important stars of the *Bulandra* company, Constantin Tănase, the director of the *Cărăbuș* company, representing the artists' union, but also members of the *Scena* artistic society. Out of professional solidarity, when proposing a list of donations for the construction of a building to house a permanent Jewish theater in memory of Avram Goldfaden, the first to join and make donations were actors Constantin Tănase and C. Nottara[29].

Epilogue

After the early beginnings represented by Avram Goldfaden's efforts to educate the Yiddish-speaking masses, Shternberg suceeded to address the intellectual elite (regardless of their language) with his new theatrical approach, bringing new artistic forms of expression and dramatic genres on the scene. The Yiddish theatre boom generated by the protean figure of Yankev Shternberg and by the theatrical projects created by him and by his collaborators turned the artistic phenomenon into a popular and ultimately more accessible form of art for wider audiences as, we know, theatre has a

[28] Hayele Grober, *Main veg alein*, Tel Aviv, 1968, pp. 60-65, *apud* Israil Bercovici, 1998, p. 164.
[29] Bercovici, pp. 140-142

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way of getting its artistic message across despite language barriers. To conclude, the words of H. St. Streitman come naturally, as he expressed his wonder in front of the incredible talent of Y. Shternberg, while also amazed by his persistence in producing art for the local public, despite adversities and resistance:

"I already knew that Sternberg was a man of talent. A rounded, mature, largely recognized talent, with a deep, profound mark. But I didn't know, I wouldn't even have guessed, that he was a stubborn, irreducible director. How could he, now, during this time of growing social upheaval, carry out with his bare hands, almost having nothing to build upon, this dramatic workshop in which so much youth, enthusiasm, vitality were buzzing and throbbing, like in a beehive? (...) But that much I understood very well: that this is the work of a robust and authentic creator."[30]

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[30] H. St. Streitman, „Un creator", in: *Adam*, year I, no. 16, 1 February 1930.

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