

Freaks, Geeks, and Strongmen: Warsaw Jews and Popular Performance, 1912-1930

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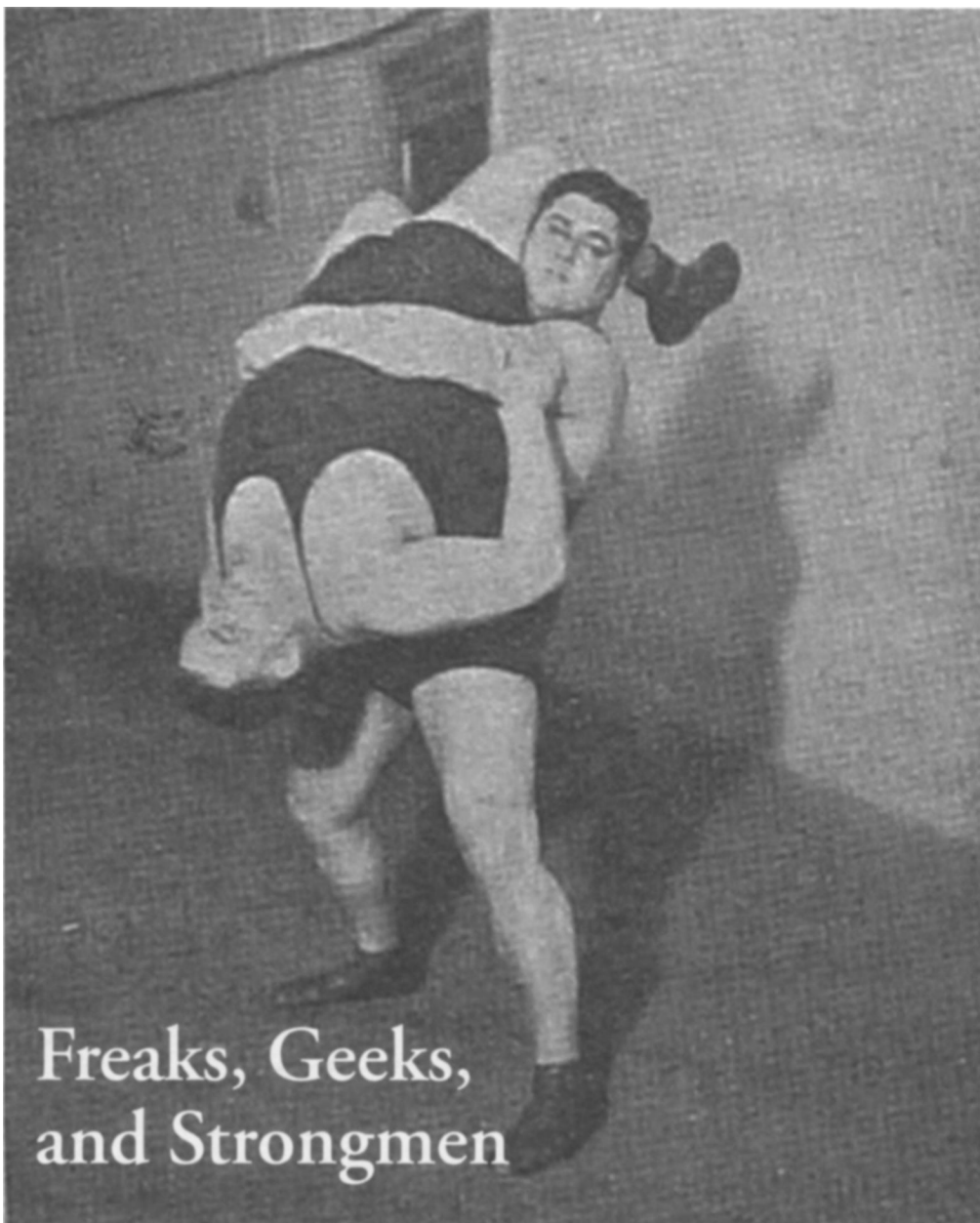
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Warsaw Jews and Popular Performance, 1912–1930

Edward Portnoy

When one considers the historiography of Jewish theatre in Poland, it becomes evident that the literary-based theatre has won the lion's share of attention. Historians have tended to follow the parameters of “high” and “low” culture initiated by Jewish drama critics, which were intended to

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lend a veneer of respectability to the Jewish theatre. As a result, there has been little research into “lowbrow” *shund* on its own merits, and even less on Jewish involvement in popular entertainments such as vaudeville and the circus. In spite of this neglect, within the urban milieu of early-20th-century Poland, Jews performed in a variety of low culture capacities and often did so publicly as Jews. These forgotten performances, which were frequently advertised in the Yiddish press but rarely reviewed, comprise the tip of the iceberg of a lowbrow, yet exceedingly popular, type of entertainment directed at the *amkbo*, the Jewish rabble, that warrants attention as a popular phenomenon among the Jews of Poland. Performing as tightrope walkers, fakirs, and professional wrestlers, among others, these performers appealed to Jewish audiences not only because of their entertainment value, but also on an ethno-inclusionary basis that allowed the Jewish audience to ethnically identify with the performer.

The notion that pre-emancipation Jewry frequently went to circuses resists the commonly held misconception that Jews participated only minimally in the general cultures of the societies in which they lived—particularly as the issue pertains to Eastern Europe. Counter to this notion, there exists a body of rabbinic admonitions, from the Talmudic period (5th to 6th centuries) through the 19th century, regarding Jews who attended performances at such popular theatrical venues—the existence of which indicates that Jews were quite active theatregoers, mixing with local populations both on- and offstage. Even esteemed historian Jacob Katz takes note that Jewish moralistic literature of the 17th and 18th centuries contains numerous complaints about Jews attending theatre performances (1998). In his analysis, however, Katz implies that “theatre” specifically means the bourgeois, literary theatre, and comments:

But since an understanding and appreciation of theatre depends on some measure of acculturation, it may be assumed that attendance was more common among Sephardim in Holland, England and France than among the Ashkenazim, especially in Germany. The frequenting of such places of entertainment presupposes, firstly, the aspiration of Jews to join a Gentile audience; secondly, the willingness of the latter to tolerate them in their midst. For although sitting in an audience does not require active relationships among those present, it does create a measure of belonging together. That this could be achieved between Jews and Gentiles at that time indicates a diminished desire for disassociation by both groups. (1998:43)

It is odd that Katz thinks the first motive of Jews in attending theatre is an “aspiration to join a Gentile audience,” combined with a desire to acculturate. It is far more likely that Jews attended theatrical performances simply to be entertained. Katz also apparently did not consider places like taverns or open markets, where ethnic miscegenation was the norm, and where “appreciation of theatre” did not necessarily depend on measures of acculturation.

Because of the marginalization of nonliterary entertainment, tavern, market, and street performances that preceded the 20th century have not been documented to the same extent as literary theatre and remain less well known within performance historiography (Schechter 2003:3). With this in mind, it is of note that over 100 Jewish performers—among them, magicians, acrobats, musicians, and some with trained animal acts—were included in a compendium of Jewish attendees to the massive Leipzig mercantile fairs in Germany from 1675 to 1764 (Friedenthal 1930). Interspersed in lists of thousands of merchants who attended the months-long fairs—the only period in which Jews were permitted in the city—there is a clear indication that not only were Jews attending performances, but they were also engaged as performers (Shiper 1927:7).

These issues surrounding Jewish audiences and performers in general theatre point to elements of this society that were more engaged in the surrounding non-Jewish cultures than previously supposed. If Talmudic prohibitions on attending the circus as well as subsequent admonitions up to the 19th century are considered, two main issues become apparent. One, Jews had been attending cir-

1. (previous page) *Zelig Pashov demonstrates a body slam.* (from *Nasz Przegląd Ilustrowany*, 20 February 1927).

cuses and popular theatre regularly since the ancient period; and two, a significant element of Jewish society consistently ignored rabbinic admonitions.¹

Documentation regarding popular leisure activities in early 20th-century Poland is limited to newspaper advertisements, brief announcements, and occasional articles penned by angry Jewish intellectuals decrying the spread of shund or worse. It should be noted that there is one text that addresses Jewish involvement in popular, nonliterary performance modes such as acrobatics and magic. Ironically, perhaps, Polish-Jewish historian Yitskhok Shipper's three-volume work on Jewish theatre in the premodern period addresses such performance by Jews in Western Europe, but fails to include similar material from his own home turf. Moreover, no subsequent work appears to document Jewish involvement in the wide variety of popular entertainments that were available during Shipper's own lifetime. In spite of significant activity in theatres, circuses, and the streets during the early part of the 20th century, academic interest in lowbrow performance had evidently disappeared.

An obvious reason for the failure on the part of Jewish historians to address such popular entertainment is that much of it was not specifically Jewish. Circuses, professional wrestling, and other forms of popular entertainment played to mixed audiences: language and culture were of little import at performances where animal acts and acrobatics took center stage. But, at differing levels, depending on the venue, ethnic identification did play a role. Such was the case with professional wrestling, which was extremely popular with the Jews of Warsaw from just prior to World War I through the early 1930s. Wrestling, as discussed here, is not the Olympic sport, but constitutes a sport-spectacle with a predetermined outcome.

Jewish Wrestlers and Strongmen

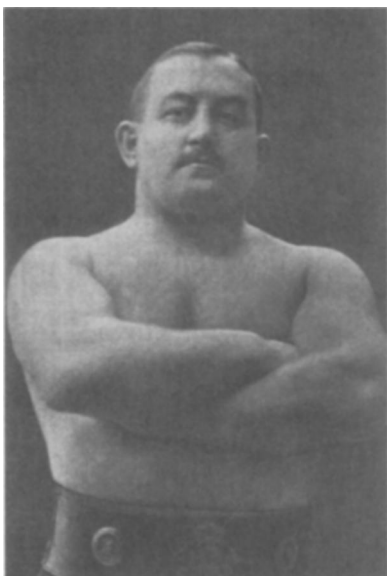
The Warsaw Yiddish press began to take notice of wrestling matches in 1912. These matches were initially held at a roller-skating rink and later, as they increased in popularity, at the larger circus arena. The Yiddish press first took notice not because Jewish wrestlers were competing, but because Jews made up the majority of the audience. In the first article to address the subject, written pseudonymously by folklorist and musicologist Menakhm Kipnis, the origins of wrestling were explained to an audience that is assumed to know little about it. In his piece, Kipnis queried:

Why Jews are more interested in wrestling matches than others is difficult to understand. It seems to me that when it comes to sports, Warsaw Jews are poorly represented and there are no Jewish wrestlers taking part in the matches. Can the reason be that it is the nature of the weak to take interest in the kind of entertainment where strength and power play the main roles? And maybe there's no explanation at all. Jews show up everywhere, where they're needed and where they're not, without any reason whatsoever. (Sfinks 1912)²

As the most significant urban minority in Poland, comprising up to 40 percent of Warsaw's population, Jews would inevitably become involved in popular modes of urban entertainment while pursuing the new kinds of leisure activities available to them. Like poor, urban dwellers elsewhere, their interest in leisure activities often leaned toward violence. Jewish immigrant interest in boxing in America, for example, is well documented (see Horowitz 2002; Bodner 1997).

Warsaw's wrestling promoters immediately grasped the need to exploit the Jewish audience's interest, and in 1913, when the next tournament began, a Jewish wrestler appeared on the roster. Advertised on kiosks and placards as "the Jewish Champion," Hungarian-born Avrom Vildman was an instant sensation among Warsaw's Jews. Described as having attended *kheyder* (Jewish religious elementary school) and learned *gemore* (Talmud), the Yiddish press did their best in articles about Vildman to give him a Jewish pedigree and mold his persona to the tastes of Warsaw's Jewish

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1. S. Ernst compiled a large selection of Talmudic rulings and rabbinic responsa prohibiting Jews from attending circuses and other venues of popular entertainment (1930).
 2. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.



2. Postcard of wrestler Avrom Vildman, c. 1913. (Photo courtesy of Gerard Silvain; from *Images et Traditions Juives*, Editions Astrid, 1980)

wrestling fans (*Der bloyer maske* 1912). In media interviews, Vildman included the information that when his mother prayed, she wore an *arbo-kanfes* (a religiously mandated fringed garment worn only by males), a comment which masculinizes her. Warsaw's Jews were so taken with the wrestler that these publicity machinations seem to have been superfluous. Recalling the reasons for Vildman's legendary status on Warsaw's Jewish streets, Menakhm Kipnis wrote, "the main thing was that he was a Jew, with a Jewish nose, with a Jewish forehead, with melancholy, *melamed*-like Jewish eyes" (Kipnis 1928:8). When asked if Jewish audience participation was important to him, Vildman replied in the affirmative, saying that he wrestled for the "honor of all Israel" (in Itsikl-Spirt 1922:3). There is little question here of Vildman's role as a Jewish icon: his photographs appeared in the papers, and postcards bearing his image were printed up and sold together with those of other Jewish icons like Theodore Herzl and Sholem Aleichem.

Warsaw's annual wrestling tournaments—which typically lasted one to two months, and were held after the end of circus season during May and June—were billed as "international" events in which the wrestlers would do battle for their respective nations. Wrestling personas on the Warsaw circuit relied mainly on national affiliation,

with wrestlers representing their alleged places of origin.³ Whether the wrestlers were actually from the countries they represented is highly questionable. In Israel Rabon's novel, *Di gas* (*The Street*; 1985), the only Yiddish literary work in which a major character is a wrestler, the main character is befriended by a Jewish wrestler who plays a Latvian in the ring. The wrestler reveals that in each city, he plays a different nationality, depending on the ethnic makeup of the place. This issue of national role-play was probably accurate and was one that caused difficulties during the Warsaw tournament of 1922, when the press reported that the Ukrainian wrestler, Kovalenko, went berserk in the ring and began screaming at the audience that none of the wrestlers were truly members of the groups they claimed to represent and that they were, in actuality, a "cabal of German Jews" (*Haynt* 1922:6). While it is impossible to determine the veracity of the allegation, it is certainly an interesting notion to consider the possibility of a traveling troupe of wrestlers top-heavy with Jews, probably speakers of Jenisch, which, as Mel Gordon has noted in his book on the psychic Hanussen, was the Romani/Yiddish/Germanic/Slavic lingua franca of popular-culture traveling entertainers throughout Europe (Gordon 2001:10).

It probably did not matter to Warsaw's wrestling fans if, for example, the purported Belgian or American wrestlers were truly Belgian and American. They were not familiar enough with the national characteristics of those peoples to make a distinction. The audience's desire for ethnic veracity was focused more on local distributions. It would thus be impossible for promoters to bring wrestlers into Warsaw who were not really Jewish or Polish, but claimed to be such. When, for example, the previously mentioned Vildman was slated to appear at a Warsaw tournament in 1921 (his first appearance since 1914), another wrestler showed up bearing his name. The Jewish audience was infuriated, not only because they had been duped with an impostor, but also because they wanted what they perceived to be a Jewish-looking wrestler. The day after the Vildman impostor made his

3. In *Russia at Play* (2003), Louise McReynolds notes the existence of "intellectual" personas among "Uncle" Vanya Lebedev's wrestling troupe, which performed in Russia proper during the World War I era. One of the Jewish wrestlers in Lebedev's stable was "Alfons Svhartser" (The Black Pimp), who was touted as a "doctor of venereal diseases."

first appearance, one press report commented, “Where is the nose? Where are the melancholy eyes? [This was a] blond haired man. Not a Jew at all!” (Itsikl-Spirt 1921:4). Subsequent announcements stating that the current wrestler was actually Vildman’s younger brother, Shloyme, helped bring the Jewish fans back to the matches, but many still felt they had been duped. “What a disappointment. [Before the tournament] we all talked about Rachel and they hoodwinked us with Leah,” lamented Kipnis in the Warsaw Yiddish daily, *Haynt* (Itsikl-Spirt 1921). Realizing their miscalculation vis-à-vis the Jewish fans, the promoters brought the real Vildman back to Warsaw the following year. Easily excitable, the Jewish fans were quick to forgive, and tickets to Vildman’s matches sold out soon after he publicly declared the previous year’s Vildman an impostor (Itsikl-Spirt 1922:3).

It was at this time, in the early 1920s, that Jewish interest in wrestling reached a fever pitch. As a result, theatre critic Alef Nayman wrote a pseudonymous article (as A. Foygl) complaining about the hysteria. Offering insight into the Jewish component of the audience, he compared the wrestling matches to other Jewish mass events, such as funerals and political rallies. Nayman further complained about the mass nature of the phenomenon: “The circus is overflowing. The circus takes more people in one day, ten times more than our Yiddish theatres altogether.” While the fact that more Jews seem to have been interested in wrestling matches than in Yiddish theatre is a legitimate complaint for a theatre critic, Nayman does not explore the reasons for this. In his elitist view, he explained that anyone who went to the circus or to wrestling matches must have been an idiot. Nayman saw the then current Jewish mania for wrestling as more of a mass psychosis than genuine interest (Foygl 1922:3).

Another example of this attitude can be found in the commentary of popular religious columnist Hillel Tseytlen. In connection with the death and very public mourning of Jewish strongman Zishe Breitbart,⁴ Tseytlen wrote:

I never saw him. I was never even curious to see him. I’m absolutely indifferent to the Jewish sports movement. My apologies to all the “Maccabees” and “Shomrim” [names of Jewish sports clubs]—or whatever they’re called—who never excited me. In this adulation of physical power and the intensity with which the Jewish youth in the cities and towns plays soccer I see a danger to the pure spirit of Jewry. This whole desire to “be healthy” is taking on a very sick form. *Kheyder* boys are leaving the *kbadorems*; public school students are leaving their studies and all are throwing their bodies and lives entirely into soccer. Who is learning? What is learning? Long live the match! (1925:3)

This was the apparent attitude of a significant number of Jewish intellectuals who were not interested in physical culture. Further evidence of this lay in the fact that no Jewish newspaper in Poland had a sports section, and it wasn’t until 1931 that the daily, *Moment*, developed a weekly sports supplement. Prior to that, any sports reporting that appeared in the dailies appeared in the back pages of the paper, lumped together with the crime blotter and the want ads. The intellectuals, after all, were in control of this press and many, apparently, did not see a need for sports coverage. The incredible popularity of sports among Jews, however, points to a blind spot in the press’s perception of the masses.

There was, however, a small coterie of Yiddish writers who did not share this view—notably, Menakhm Kipnis, who, as mentioned, was the first Yiddish writer to consider wrestling as a popular phenomenon among the Jewish masses. Kipnis, a folklorist who took interest in whatever was popular among Jews at the moment, considered wrestling to be a kind of “buffo-comedy,” in which the wrestlers were giant, tragicomic actors/athletes (1928:8). Yiddish novelist Hirsh-Dovid Nomberg also took an interest in the phenomenon and addressed complaints about the sport’s mass appeal by noting the similarities between wrestling and staged drama. Nomberg conceded that Jewish intellectuals had no interest in physical culture, but made it clear that the Jewish public was keenly interested in it. He proposed that the popularity of wrestling among the amkho should provoke the creation of Jewish sports clubs (Nomberg 1913:3). His call did not go unheeded: two years after

4. See Sharon Gillerman’s forthcoming monograph on Breitbart.

these comments were made, the Jewish sports club Makabi Warsaw was founded, in 1915. How much Jewish interest in wrestling had to do with that is unknown. Certainly, Zionist sports clubs had been in existence for the previous 10 years in Western Europe, but Jewish activity surrounding wrestling got its start in Warsaw without political or organizational connections at all.

Jewish Fandom

It is difficult to delineate the cultural contours of the Jewish masses that Nomberg and the others describe as enjoying the spectacle of wrestling. What kinds of Jews would evince an interest in professional wrestling? References in the Yiddish press describe them as poor, mostly artisans and small shopkeepers. While the Jewish audience component was probably a garden variety of the lower classes, press reports do offer a number of other clues. Kipnis noted in 1921 that the fans included many traditional Jews with beards, *peyes* (sidecurls), and long black coats, bewigged women, and kheyder boys who had skipped meals in order to pay for tickets (Kipnis 1921). A 1922 article in *Haynt* noted that hordes of kheyder boys would run after Avrom Vildman's *droshky* (horse-drawn carriage) (Nayman 1922:3). Writing in 1928, columnist B. Yehoashzon commented:

Every night the Jewish people of Warsaw besieged the circus and attended, participated in, really, and assisted in the battles that our "Samson" fought with the "Philistines." More than one Jew would, when things were going badly in the matches, begin to recite Psalms, imploring the master of the universe not to shame the Jewish hero. (Lorneto [Yehoashzon] 1928:3)

This statement not only indicates the audience's role in the performance, but also a level of specifically Jewish participation.

At a certain level, Jewish fans were interested in the exoticism of wrestling. Not only were pituitary freaks from all nations competing in violent shows of strength and agility, but one of their own was too. Interest in the exotic element becomes evident when it is reported that the match between Vildman and "the negro, Agniello," was sold out long before the match took place and that the circus had been packed "like never before" (*Haynt* 1922a:4). Careful perusal of wrestling press reports year after year indicates that only the finals were sold out prior to the events, providing evidence that the Vildman/Agniello match was a battle that warranted much attention and that the Jewish/"Negro" match was on par, popularity-wise, with a championship. The Jews' interest and support of their own staged exoticism served to make this particular match the most anticipated of the season. The following day's report noted that the audience became so loud during the match that the "entire building began to shake" (*Haynt* 1922b:5).

The audience members at wrestling matches were unlike a typical theatre audience, functioning as both participants and spectators. In this combination of sport and theatre, screaming one's lungs out in support of a favorite wrestler was not only considered acceptable, but was encouraged as a function of the audience's role in the theatrical equation. If Yiddish theatre audiences, as Nina Warnke (1996) has shown, could be considered by Yiddish intellectuals to have been obnoxious, what is one to make of the Jewish component at the wrestling matches? Referring to this audience, Kipnis wrote, "It seems to me that if you were to strike a match, the air would ignite [...] in a word, it is Dante's Inferno" (Sfinks 1912, 1928). When Jews went to ethnically neutral performances, such as vaudeville, or the traditional circus, there was no conspicuously Jewish sensibility displayed by audience members. The opposite reaction occurred when Jews went to support a Jewish wrestler: outward expressions of Jewishness, such as the recitation of psalms, were an integral element in the performances of Jewish fandom. Press reports over a period of 15 years indicate that Jewish spectators feverishly supported the Jewish wrestlers, screaming at the top of their lungs; argued and sometimes fought violently with opposing fans; and threw rotten potatoes and other projectiles at performers they didn't like, all in support of the Jewish wrestlers (Sfinks 1912; *Haynt* 1928b:6; Itsikl-Spirt 1928:11).

As is evident, the Jewishness of professional wrestlers was an important element for the fan base. Jewish fans actively sought out and constructed Jewishness in wrestlers, even when it wasn't there. In 1925, for example, an unknown wrestler named Leon Pinyetski (Pinjecki) appeared in the Warsaw

matches, billed as the “Polish National Hercules.” By the end of the tournament, the Yiddish press reported that a number of Jewish fans had questioned Pinyetski’s ethnicity and determined that he had “a Jewish nose.” There was such interest in exposing Pinyetski’s ethnic origins to the extent that a group of fans traveled to Lodz, where he had wrestled previously, to find out the truth about his roots. The fans determined that the wrestler’s real name was not Leon Pinyetski, but Leybush Pinkus. Eyewitnesses in Lodz not only placed him in the Bar Metropole, a popular Jewish hangout, but found him eating kugel there on Saturdays. In spite of this attempted “outing,” the Polish press never accepted the notion that Pinyetski was a Jew (*Goldener Shteyn* 1925:5). However, the Yiddish press, in subsequent reports on wrestling matches, frequently added “Jewish wrestler” in parentheses after his name. Pinyetski, in fact, was brought to America in the early 1930s by Warsaw-born wrestling promoter, Jacob Pfeffer, and continued wrestling as a “Polish wrestler.” At the time, there were many Jewish wrestlers and, if Pinyetski had been a Jew, he could have easily wrestled as one, perhaps more popularly than as a Pole (*Ring Wrestling* 1968). In the end, it seems that the Jewish fans’ desire for Jewish wrestlers eclipsed their need for veracity.

Another instance of a Jewish identity crisis came in 1928. Zelig Pashov, who was described in the press as the son of Jewish immigrants from the Russian Empire to Germany, and who wrestled for the Jewish sports club Maccabi Frankfurt, was having a very successful season and had built up a very strong fan base among Warsaw’s Jews. An amateur pianist and singer, he even performed with actors and musicians from the Yiddish theatre. Talking about the large number of fans he had attracted in Warsaw, he commented upon the significant number of women who had become interested in him and that, among them, there was one Hasidic girl with whom he was quite taken (*Itsikl-Spirt* 1928; *Kutsher* 1928a). Also mentioned was the fan mail he received and that, among the many letters, he had received one from a well-known rabbi who lauded his exploits in the ring (*Haynt* 1928c). Warsaw’s Jewish wrestling fans had again been thrilled with the success of a Jewish wrestler. So when news was published in a Yiddish paper that Pashov was, in fact, not Jewish, the fans fell into a depressed stupor. The mood in the Jewish quarter was compared to that on Tisha b’av, the commemoration of the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem (*Lorneto* 1928).

Pashov—who would enter the arena wearing a blue and white sash, reminiscent of the colors of Jewish prayer shawls (and which had also been appropriated by the Zionist movement for its flags and banners)—denied the news and was said to have been very depressed about it, claiming it wasn’t at all true. One reporter commented that the original accusation was false and slanderous. He added that it was impossible that Pashov wasn’t Jewish, since no Gentile would ever pose as one. In the end, Pashov’s mother was brought to Warsaw, carrying documents that proved his Jewishness (*Kutsher* 1928b). With this new proof, and a string of victories in the ring, Jews continued to pack the stands and cheered Pashov wildly in an atmosphere that was called “simply indescribable” (*Haynt* 1928b).

On the one hand, promoters understood very well how to exploit the atavistic nationalism inherent to working-class audiences. As fans, the Jewish component promoted and defended Jewish wrestlers as representatives of the people. On the other hand, to a certain degree, the national element of Jewish fandom befuddled some of the Jewish intelligentsia, even those who were interested in the sport. Kipnis admitted with surprise that, “Mr. Vildman is no great intellectual, not the son of a rabbi, nor a medical doctor, yet he has ignited a national spark in the hearts of thousands of people. And with what? Only strength!” (*Der bloyer maske* 1912). It seemed odd to Jewish intellectuals that something so apparently obtuse as wrestling could so easily bring forth national sentiment among Jews. It was, after all, the “intellectuals”—the scientists, scholars, and political figures—who were supposed to foment national feeling among the Jewish masses, through their inspiring words and deeds. The intense interest in wrestling, as well as in performers like strongman Zishe Breitbart, made Jewish literary figures a weak substitute as national heroes for the masses.⁵

5. Zishe Breitbart was the most popular Jewish strongman in the world. See Sharon Gillerman’s “Samson in Vienna: The Theatrics of Jewish Masculinity” (2003; see also forthcoming), and chapter 4 of Mel Gordon’s *Eric Jan Hanussen: Hitler’s Jewish Clairvoyant* (2001).



3. Cartoon of Zelig Pashov. Caption above: “How Zelig Pashov Runs a [Passover] Seder; On the contrary, they say now that he’s not a Jew?” Caption below: “The Jews off to the side (in amazement): ‘Ay ay ay, he’s some Jew, he’s eating matzo balls!’” (From *Der blofer*, 4 April 1928; collection of the National and University Libraries, Jerusalem, Israel)

Nonetheless, some of the writers who enjoyed the Jewish component of wrestling exploited it to comic ends. When in 1925 the aforementioned wrestler, Leon Pinyetski, won nearly every match by performing a hold called the full-nelson, an article published in *Haynt* described how it was perpetrated and what it did to its victim. While this does not seem unusual, an examination of the language used proves otherwise: “Di sugye fun toplitn nelson iz zeyer a shvere un kedey dos toyfes tsu zayn darf men zayn a shtarker mushlem in diney valkes.” (“The subject of ‘full nelson’ is a very difficult one and in order to grasp its meaning one must be a powerful scholar of distinction in the laws of wrestling.”) The description is overloaded with high-end rabbinic verbiage. The article also compared the ease with which the particular wrestler placed his opponents in a full-nelson to a *Kobeyn dukbening* (a simple but spiritually powerful hand gesture made by the Jewish priestly class), and stated that in literary circles, the full-nelson was jokingly known as the “full Katsenelson,” a reference to Yiddish writer Yitzkhok Katsenelson (*Haynt* 1925:5). Other press materials liken Jewish wrestlers to Esau, Bar-Kokhba, and Samson battling the Philistines, and the non-Jewish wrestlers they fought to Haman and Amalek, the enemies of Jews (Lorneto 1928:3; Nayman 1922:3; Kipnis 1928:8).

These prosaic gymnastics seem to be an attempt on the part of Yiddish intellectuals to Judaize what was, in their perception, irretrievably goyish. There is certainly a strong element of irony in doing so. It may also be that the secular writers were attempting to match the level of Jewishness expressed by the fans. The lives of Warsaw’s Jewish amkho who attended the matches were specifically and conspicuously Jewish, and often unaffiliated nationally—a consciousness which, as we have seen, had been handily exploited by wrestling promoters. In spite of the context of Yiddish cultural

production, the ironic heavy usage of biblical references and Talmudic verbiage in press reports betrays a feeling that the intellectuals' refined political and cultural nationalism was not as natural or authentic as the atavistic national sensibilities of the amkho. Hence the desire to participate in their culture the only way they could: through text.

Jews of Steel

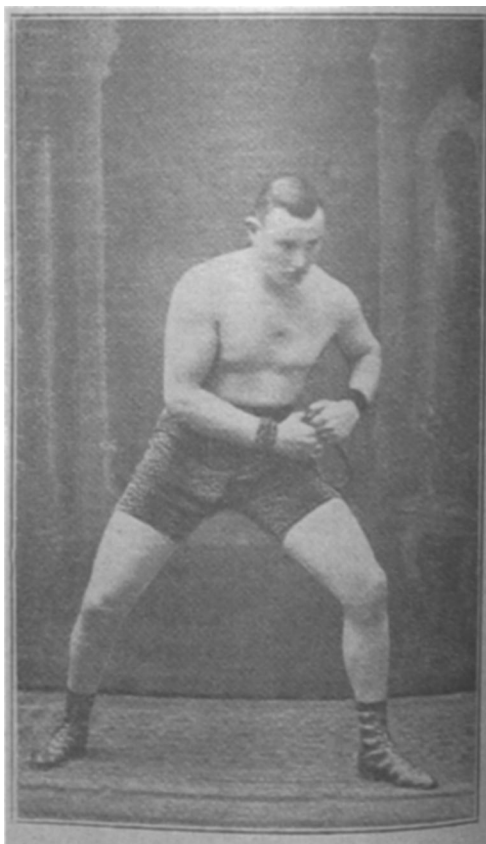
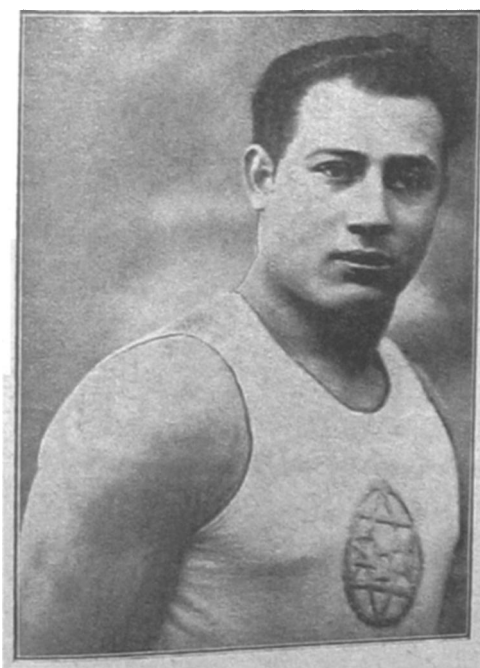
The most popular Jewish performance phenomenon of interwar Poland was that of the Jewish strongman, Lodz-born Zishe Breitbart, who made a triumphant return from years abroad to his homeland in 1925. Breitbart, the son of a blacksmith, had become a world-famous strongman, having toured Europe and America. Known as the "Iron King," Breitbart created an act that was a finessed version of a typical strongman act, during which he bent iron bars, bit through iron chains, lay on a bed of nails as a car drove over him, and performed other such risky activities. He was universally acclaimed for his feats. But for Jewish audiences, particularly those in Poland, he was a real, live, Jewish superhero.

Breitbart's act was usually culturally neutral, although in front of the heavily Jewish audiences in Poland, he made it a point to exploit his Jewishness. When he performed in Warsaw in 1925, he entered the circus arena in a horse-driven chariot with stars of David painted on the sides, to the music of Avrom Goldfaden's heroic operetta, *Bar-Kokhba*, while wearing "historic Jewish garb" (*Haynt* 1925:5). Further exploiting Jewish stereotypes, in an interview in the Yiddish press subsequent to his first performance, Breitbart said:

[...]it in no way pleases me that I am stronger than [everyone in my family]. However, I am not ashamed to say that I am more educated and cultured than my entire family, who really are uncultured people: I was beaten by my father more than once for wanting to go to *kheyder*: [...] In spite of this, I can write and speak a few different languages even though I never went to school in my life [...]. My wife, the daughter of Rabbi Dr. Vaytz of Koblenz in the Rhein region, is even more educated. (in Kutsher 1925:7)

In case Breitbart's exploitation of stereotypical perceptions of Jewish intellectuality was insufficient, he also mentioned that he had come to Poland for two reasons: one, to visit the graves of his ancestors, a traditional Jewish pilgrimage; and two, to promote physical culture among Jews. Breitbart made certain that his Jewishness was foregrounded on his trip to Poland. While Christian Poles went by the thousands to see his entertaining performances, the Jews saw much more in Breitbart than a quality strongman performance: they saw an icon. There is little question that it was quite natural for Breitbart to participate in Jewish activities, and it is very clear that he wanted to do so. He spent time visiting writers at the Warsaw Jewish Literary Union, went to the Yiddish Press Ball dressed as Samson and paid a visit to the Hasidic court of the Radziminer Rebbe, while thousands of Hasidim waited outside—not for a glimpse of the Rebbe, but of Breitbart. He also donated generously to Jewish charities (*Haynt* 1925:7). Ironically, it was during this triumphant tour of Poland that Breitbart accidentally drove a nail into his knee, which caused blood poisoning and death. In the wake of his death—which was mourned in public displays by nearly everyone, from Poland's Jewish intellectuals down to its street urchins—dozens of imitators cropped up, including some among Warsaw's Jews.

Among the dozens that appeared in Warsaw, there were three serious contenders for Breitbart's "Iron King" crown, not to mention the fact that the deceased's younger brother, Gershon, was also going around Warsaw giving strongman performances. There was even an 11-year-old imitator named Misha Geller, who bent bars and broke chains. But the main players—each advertising himself as the heir to Breitbart's throne—were Yankev Bruk, who performed as "Jack Bronx"; Maks Ehrlikh; and Monek Goldsteter. Competition among them came to a head during the summer of 1926, when during one of Max Ehrlikh's performances, Jack Bronx jumped onstage and accused him of being a fraud. Bronx was taking revenge for what Ehrlikh had done to him at a previous performance. Ehrlikh told Bronx to leave the stage; Bronx refused, and a fistfight ensued. In the meantime, the audience, which evidently included fans of both, chose sides and rushed the stage, resulting in a



4–6. Jack Bronx, boxer and strongman (from *Nasz Przegląd Ilustrowany*, 20 March 1927); Maks Ehrlich, Warsaw strongman (from *Nasz Przegląd Ilustrowany*, 3 March 1929); and Misha Geller, Warsaw’s youngest strongman (from *Nasz Przegląd Ilustrowany*, 20 March 1927). (Collection of the YIVO Library, YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, New York)

giant brawl. Both Ehrlich and Bronx were beaten bloody. The event was finally shut down by the police (*Haynt* 1926a:6).

Ten days later, Jack Bronx published an advertisement in the Yiddish daily, *Moment*, which read as follows:

To my competitors! In order to put an end to the baiting on the part of Max Ehrlich and Monek Goldsteter (Monek Stavker), who have disturbed my performances in the circus and theatre, I call both out for an open contest at the Circus on 14 August, before my trip abroad. The contest will determine who will take the place of the deceased Breitbart. The competition will take place under the jury of Warsaw Sport Club. (*Moment* 1926a)

Not only would the contest determine the winner of Breitbart’s mantle, but it was also a charitable event and a major entertainment extravaganza in the 5,000-seat Warsaw Circus. In addition to the strongman contest, which was being judged by Warsaw Maccabi Sports Club members, there were performances of “Gypsy songs” by vaudeville performer, Lusia Prager; a dance by the locally famous “three-year-old ballet dancer,” Yezhi Rozenboym; “Indian dances” performed by “Mea Mara Indra”; a routine by acrobats Zhorzheta and Zhorzh; stand-up by R. Bernard; as well as a full orchestra, led by the “famous conductor,” M. Honigshtok. The charity element of the show was that the proceeds were allegedly going to support 16 families who had been burned out of their apartment building (*Moment* 1926a, 1926b). While the press mostly ignored this event, it was reported that Jack Bronx was awarded the “Iron King” title.



What is interesting about the travails of these strongmen is that they appealed mainly to Jewish audiences. The supporting acts in this extravaganza were also all Jewish. While it is likely that non-Jewish Poles attended these events, such advertisements did not appear in the Polish press. In fact, the ads did not appear in the Polish-language Jewish press either, and seem only to have appeared in Yiddish. It is, however, distinctly possible that they were also advertised, as wrestling frequently was, on placards and on kiosks throughout Warsaw.

In the end, though, the battle for Breitbart's throne in Warsaw seems to have been a wholly Jewish event. Additionally, the conflict between Jack Bronx and Max Ehrlich may have been an extension of a neighborhood brawl. As was noted in the press, Bronx was from Twarda Street and Ehrlich from Tshepla Street: two poor, Jewish streets that abutted one another. It seems as if the fight between them was a neighborhood turf war that made it to the theatre.

Unfortunately, there do not appear to be any extant reviews of this show, or others like it. The critics either looked down their noses at such "lowbrow" events or, quite possibly, the eclectic mix of performances left their critical faculties reeling.

(Jewish) Variety

While wrestlers and strongmen enjoyed the enthusiastic support of the Jewish audience, performers in other popular entertainments sometimes embedded Jewish elements in their acts in order to engage the Jewish audience separately from the general audience. This type of activity has a long history and ranges from the insertion of Yiddish words or phrases in cartoons and films (and, no doubt, vaudeville routines) to Klezmer riffs in jazz performances. In this way, the Jewish performer could signify his Jewishness to the Jews in the audience, an act that provided an ethno-religious bond between the participants, without an ostentatious display.

This kind of activity most often occurred within the confines of the performance, although performers were often exposed in the Yiddish press. For example, in a 1938 article on Jews involved in circus arts, in the popular illustrated journal, *Idishe bilder*, there appeared an article on two sisters, Pese and Leah Rosenzweig of Mohilev-Podolsk, who became tightrope walkers (*Idishe bilder* 1937:22–23). The report takes care to point out the Jewish component of the act: during the Rosenzweigs' performances, their mother Yenta would sit backstage and recite *tehilim*, or psalms, and the sisters would not go out on the wire until they saw their mother begin to sway in prayer. In addition, the article makes much of the fact that the sisters Rosenzweig sought out two other Jewish circus performers—the tightrope walker/acrobat Yankev Birnboym and the clown Itsik Gayler—and married them. The two couples and their offspring continued working at the circus, performing as a family. The article thus promotes the possibility of Jewish circus performance as well as Jewish continuity as a shared value.

The same article also showcases Galician-born Moyshe Fayershteyn, who worked a variant of the water-spouting trick. Popular in Europe since the 17th century, water spouting entailed drinking large quantities of water and then expelling it out of one's mouth in a long-distance stream. This act was best known in Europe as performed at the Circus Busch in Berlin by Mac Norton, who worked as the human aquarium—an act in which Norton would swallow fish along with the water and then shoot it all out of his mouth in long-distance streams into aquariums placed up to 20 feet away



**„עסס נעזונט!“ ווילט זיך צואוינטשעווען דעמדאָזיקו יונגמאַן. פייערשטיינ'ען, בעת ער
 בייסט צו מיט אַ פּוץ מיין און זשאַכעס, און כרי זיי צו נעכן אין זיין מאָגן אָרט, וואו
 ארומצואשוימען, פרינקט ער פריער אויס 40 גלאָז וואַסער
 „ואכלת ושבעתו!“
 פֿיארשטיין סוער לבו בעכברים וצפרדעים אַחרי לגימה הגונה**

7. *Moyshe Fayershteyn: “Eat in good health!” is what one would like to wish this young man Fayershteyn, as he swallows a dozen frogs and mice. And to make some room in his stomach for them to swim around, he drinks 40 glasses of water beforehand.* (From *Idishe Bilder* [Riga], June 1937; collection of the Jewish Theological Seminary Library, New York)

(Jay 1998:295–98). Moyshe Fayershteyn’s variation was to swallow frogs and mice along with the water and then spew them back up alive. There was nothing ostensibly Jewish about Fayershteyn’s act; in fact, ingesting frogs and mice is clearly contrary to Jewish law and culture. *Idishe bilder*, a very middle-of-the-road kind of *Life* magazine for Jews, evidently felt that a Jew performing such a strange act warranted attention. Exotic reports like this, in which Jews are shown performing unusual activities, reflect a mix of novelty and national boosterism.

Another type of popular exotic performer that generally masked ethnic origins was the mentalist, or psychic. Numerous well- and lesser-known psychics made their way through Warsaw. The famed “Danish” psychic, Erik Jan Hanussen (born Hersh Steinschneider), performed there with his strongwoman assistant, Martha Farra (born Martha Cohen) (Gordon 2001). Though their performances were advertised in the Yiddish press, there was no indication whatsoever that either was Jewish. Another psychic who advertised in the Yiddish press was Laila Terfen. In an interview with a reporter from the Yiddish daily, *Haynt*, Ms. Terfen, who wore a turban with a giant ruby pin on it, repeated a well-rehearsed autobiography in which she explained that she was born in Bombay, but was sent for studies to Singapore following the discovery of her telepathic abilities. She subsequently studied philosophy and astronomy with well-known European masters, and later advised a number of world leaders. None of this was true and the reporter suspected as much. As a result, his first question was, “Are you Jewish?” To which she replied, “Khas vekholile! (God forbid!) I will swear

8. Advertisement for Jewish variety show. (From Haynt, 28 September 1926; collection of the YIVO Library, YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, New York)

on a mezuzah that I am a Brahmin,” in what the reporter described as “pure and excellent Yiddish” (Goldshteyn 1927). Laila Terfen’s real name was Elsa Frankel. As was the case with many psychics, Terfen relied on a false, exoticized autobiography to legitimize her psychic talents. By speaking Yiddish to a reporter from the press, she reveals another secret that would help draw the local audience to her.

Appealing to a more homogeneous audience than the traditional circus was a specifically Jewish type of variety show, in which a number of incongruously selected acts performed on the same bill, in either small theatres or in venues as big as the circus. Unlike either small-scale vaudeville varieties or large-scale circus shows, which were open to all, these shows were created for and advertised to a specifically Jewish audience. Among the acts were strongmen, dancers, drag artists, singers, psychics, and a host of others.

While some acts in these varieties were Jewish-oriented, not all were. One example is a 1926 production touting “*Simkhes toyre* [Simhat Torah, a holiday celebrating the beginning of a new cycle of Torah reading] at the Circus,” where viewers could avail themselves, according to the advertising copy, of “a three-hour spectacle of sensational wonders” (Haynt 1926b:7). This show’s headliner was described as “a Polish-Jewish fakir, who sticks a large number of long needles and stilettos (30 cm) through his flesh, and, in addition to having heavy weights sewn onto his body, nails are driven through his hands and feet painlessly and with no blood” (6). The show also included a contortionist, advertised as a “boneless woman”; a comic routine performed by Yiddish arch-satirist Yoysef Tunkel; an Oriental dance troupe; performances of operatic arias, romantic songs, and folksongs by Jewish singers from the Odessa and Viennese operas; as well as a three-year-old ballet dancer. All of this was accompanied by a 50-person orchestra under the direction of Henekh Kumok, who would be conducting music by Goldfaden, Levandovski, in addition to his own, as well as a cycle of Hasidic *nigunim* (religious melodies) composed by the Modzhitser Rebbe.

Since the Yiddish audience was already familiar with song and dance, it is evident why the fakir, the most radically alien element, was the headliner. But was it of import to the audience that the fakir was a Jew? That he is identified as such presents him as a double novelty. It is likely that, with Warsaw’s large Jewish population, performing as a “Jewish” fakir was a solid draw. Advertised in 1926 as the “Polish-Jewish fakir, Takhra Bey,” he appeared four years later in the Polish-Jewish magazine, *Nasz Preglad Ilustrowany*, as “Moyshe Shtern/Tachcha Bey.”

The emphasis on Jewishness also furthers the notion that the show itself was to take place completely *in der heym*, or within the comfort of a closed Jewish cultural space. This particular production seems to have been unique in its overarching Jewishness; other Jewish-oriented variety shows did not place such a heavy emphasis on the Jewish component and included Polish and sometimes African American performers as well. Regardless, the wide array of disparate performances taking place under the big top seems to be a useful metaphor for how much can be held within the tents of Jewish culture. Led by a fakir and a contortionist, presided over by a satirist, and anchored by the *nigunim* of the Modzhitser Rebbe, this Simhat Torah performance presents a Jewish culture that was constantly assimilating the new exotic and transforming the old exotic.

This combination of sideshow freakery, Yiddish stand-up, exotic dance, operatic and Yiddish theatrical and cantorial hits, as well as Hasidic *nigunim*, would appear to be reflective of the inclusive



9. *Moyshe Shtern, the "Polish-Jewish fakir."*
 (From *Nasz Przegląd Ilustrowany*,
 11 August 1929; collection of the YIVO
 Library, YIVO Institute of Jewish Research,
 New York)

"Messalini." From the description alone, it is impossible to determine the ethnic nature of the act, and since no reviews appear, we know nothing more than that which appears in the advertisement. But the artist does appear in a Jewish cabaret with other Jewish artists; one can assume that the language of performance was Yiddish. A bit more can be gleaned from a 1931 announcement that Palestinian-Jewish drag artist, Meir Arber, who performed as "Delice," would be appearing in Poland. According to the piece, Arber's repertoire consisted of an array of "song, dance, and costume from the Land of Israel." Though no reviews appeared, it is likely that this unusual representation of Palestinian-Jewish culture contained a mix of Middle Eastern characters (see plate 10 of Arber in costume as Cleopatra) and Hebrew song. With Zionism and Palestinian-Jewish cultures attaining such high levels of popularity among Poland's Jews, this act provides an interesting view into what was available in the popular realm, other than what has come to be known as traditional culture. It also provides a counterpoint to the more prevalent macho image of the "new Jew" in Zionist culture.

Jewish Freakery

Perhaps even more unusual is the presentation of freaks as entertainment. Freak shows, extremely popular in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were apparently less common in Eastern Europe. The traveling circus had a long tradition in Europe and, while acts like the "Lilliput Troupe," a group of performing dwarves, can be found in the circus advertisements of the Yiddish press, performances based on human deformities were not the norm. Yiddish writer H.D. Nomberg, while reporting on New York City for the Warsaw audience, noted the freak shows in Coney Island (Nomberg 1912:2). His attitude is one of disgust and repulsion, and he never indicates that there is any parallel whatsoever in Warsaw. In fact, while there is evidence that there were those living in Warsaw who might be considered perfectly exploitable types for such sideshow performances, there is no indication that such activity was even considered. For example, a 1912 article in *Haynt* describes two girls "who look and act like monkeys" in one of the city's heavily Jewish neighborhoods. Their father, known only as "Y.B.," informs the reporter that he considers the girls to be

potential of modern Jewish performance. Cutting a wide performative swath, from a base in which it commemorates a holiday celebrating the centrality of traditional Jewish text, it appears to heave itself far from Jewish tradition with sideshow-type performances. And then, maybe it is the perception of normative Jewish culture promoted so assiduously—that Jews don't do art or theatre—that this type of event allows modern Jewish culture to disprove. With Jewish historiography dominated by the production of intellectual elites, the lower echelons of a populist culture, with the exception of certain elements of folklore, have disappeared. Or, perhaps, it is simply reflective of the disparate productions that occurred in vaudeville, although writ Jewishly large with all acts exoticized equally. Unfortunately, reviews of this Simhat Torah show and others like it are not extant. As it was with the strongmen varieties, it seems that theatre critics did not know what to make of the strange mix of high, low, and completely off-the-charts performances.

Another type of act that critics avoided was drag. Outside of infrequent advertisements in the press, little data exist regarding this type of performance, making it difficult to analyze. Certainly there were Jewish drag artists performing in interwar Poland. Whether or not their acts were Jewish-oriented is another issue. One drag artist who was advertised in the Yiddish press was



10. Delice (Meir Arber), “A Famous Impersonator from the Land of Israel,” in costume as Cleopatra. (From Velt-shpigl [Warsaw], 1931; collection of the Jewish Theological Seminary Library, New York)

good luck charms, because his business has done well since they’ve been around. They are, no doubt, exploited at a certain level, but not for public performance. There is no indication that this was even a possibility.

Bolstering the notion that the exhibition of freaks was not the norm among the Jews of Poland is the story of Josephine Joseph, a half-man, half-woman performer at the Dreamland Circus Sideshow on Coney Island. Born in Krakow, Josephine Joseph was raised as a boy, but was discovered at the age of 12 to have been a hermaphrodite. Confined to her home following the discovery, Joseph was brought to New York at the behest of a visiting American who found out about her. Though her parents were deeply ashamed of the idea that she would be “exhibited,” economic considerations won out and Joseph left for America.⁶

Josephine Joseph was featured in a 1928 *Jewish Daily Forward* article entitled “Coney’s Side-Shows Are Full of Jewish Freaks.” This and a subsequent article also noted other Jewish “freaks,” such as Madame Gabrielle, a legless woman who performed as the “Half-woman”; Princess Fritz, billed as “the world’s smallest woman”; Martha Meyers, who performed as the “Armless Wonder”; Ella the Seal Girl; *Di Yidische Leonette*, The Jewish Lion-faced Girl; and Al Flosso (Levinson), known variously as *Der gelt kenig* and the Coney Island Fakir (Jay 2003). While it is not known how many of these Jewish performers were immigrants from Eastern Europe, it is evident that the Yiddish language played a role in at least some of their performances, no doubt to draw from the large pool of Jewish immigrants attending sideshows at Coney Island. While this is only specific to one diaspora of Eastern European Jewry, it is interesting to note that the attitude of the *Forward* toward the Jewish freaks was not one of derision, but of interest similar to any reportage of a Jew doing something out of the ordinary. The articles on Jewish freaks in the *Forward* do not make value judgments on either the concept of exhibiting freaks or viewing them, and make it a point to note that the performers are happy and make a decent living (Ewen 1928a, 1928b).

If exhibiting live human deformities was alien to popular performance modes among Warsaw’s Jews, the exhibition of dead ones, perhaps, was less so. A 1926 advertisement from the Warsaw Yiddish press notes the existence of a “Traveling Museum of Pathology,” which presented over 250 “nearly live” specimens of male and female victims of venereal diseases. Minors were strictly prohibited from the museum, which was advertised as making the most “powerful impression” on its

6. Josephine Joseph also appears in Tod Browning’s 1932 film, *Freaks*.

viewers. The exhibition was apparently so grotesque that the promoters advertised a “Laugh Salon” following the viewing, during which comedians would cheer up depressed patrons. It should be noted that this type of exhibition was not typical, at least according to the frequency of advertising in the Yiddish press. On the other hand, it is impossible to gauge what kinds of unusual performances occurred but were never advertised in the press. In large urban centers, this type of unadvertised performance was likely quite common, but lost to the historian and to history.

Conclusion

Eastern European Jewry is indelibly stamped as a homey, folkloric, shtetl-dwelling existence, according to the popular perception. Few popular notions consider the quasi-urban status of Jewish *shtetlekh*, nor the very idea that, by the turn of the 20th century, the Jewish population of urban Warsaw comprised nearly 40 percent of the whole. The notion that Jewish modernity exploded only when the immigrants hit the shores of New York is wholly inaccurate. At the same time that Jews in New York were climbing onto the vaudeville stage and creating a new, Jewish-American idiom, Jews in Warsaw were engaged in similar fare, though within a different cultural context, which serves as an indicator of both their attraction to modern, popular culture but also their sense of alterity as well. As the primary urban minority, the members of Warsaw’s Jewish lower class, which was itself heavily Hasidic, seem to have been less oriented toward acculturation than their immigrant cousins in New York. Immigrant Jews in New York knew there was no turning back to the Old World, a fact that was expressed in popular entertainment created by Jews, comprising cultural products that ranged from nostalgic Yiddish theatre to assimilationist efforts like Irving Berlin’s *White Christmas* (Rosen 2002). While it is certain that Jews cheered for Jewish boxers and wrestlers in the New World, it is difficult to imagine them responding in the same way as the Jews of Warsaw. Vaudeville was also a place where Jewish audiences could feel comfortable seeing both Jewish and non-Jewish acts.

This, ultimately, is the difference between the United States of America, where spectator activity served seemingly contradictory acculturative and nationalistic functions, and Poland, where the same activity functioned more to promote ethnic pride but also to secure the place of Jews in a society that was dominated by one majority ethnic group. This tendency provided opportunities for common Jews to engage with the modern, multicultural stage from a specifically Jewish vantage point—though not one in which acculturation was desirable. The integration of Jews into popular audiences in Warsaw was, in the case of wrestling, contingent upon their containment as a separate social entity within that audience. Jews in similar urban audiences in the U.S. were just another minority among many. Their role in ethnic fandom helped, to a lesser degree, to secure their position as a particularistic minority, but, by placing their ethnic boosterism within the framework of American popular culture, it also served as an agent of Americanization. The situation for vaudeville performers and audiences was very much the same.

That a certain strata of Warsaw’s urban Jews viewed and participated in a wide variety of popular culture performances during the early 20th century should not surprise anyone familiar with the popular entertainments of urban masses. What is fascinating and unusual about these Jewish audiences and performers is how their Jewishness was performed. In some cases, as we have seen, it was quite open. In others, Jewish performers insinuated into their work symbolic clues to their ethnic origins in order to make furtive connections to their Jewish audiences.

Jewish wrestlers, acrobats, contortionists, and other such popular performers may be looked upon as trivial by historians; apparently, their effect on Jewish history has not been of great significance. However, for thousands of Jews who were caught up in the immediacy of the events, there was nothing more intense or Jewishly important at crucial moments than, for example, to support the Jewish wrestler or to promote Jewish performers in general entertainment venues. These long-forgotten moments in Jewish history, in which Jewishness was synthesized with a variety of different performative forms, are important—if not vital—in attempting to comprehend the lives of the *amkho*, the common Jews who made up the majority of Jewish society.

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