

**SEVENTY YEARS OF YIDDISH THEATRE
IN MELBOURNE (1909-1979) ★**

**By
Serge Liberman,**

In 1892, there arrived in Sydney a very young man, a worker from Warsaw, named Chaim Reinholz. Having a fine voice and being familiar with the stage, he succeeded in becoming involved with the English-speaking theatre. He toured about the cities with a number of theatrical troupes. On one occasion, while in Hobart, vanishing from the troupe and surfacing at the Hobart Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to conduct the prayers when the congregation had none to lead them. In 1905, Reinholz received Abraham Goldfaden's "Shulamis" which he had earlier not known. It excited him considerably and he decided to have it performed. Together with two ladies who knew a little Yiddish, he established a choir of thirty people, all of them non-Jews, and rehearsed the piece with them. His own role he sang in Yiddish, as did, in parts, his two companions. Everyone else sang the text in English, the text having been specially translated for them. Reinholz, to his credit, did try to teach his non-Jewish singers the Yiddish text, but without success, for at the performance, they either forgot the Yiddish or so badly mutilated it that the audience could not have known what language they were using. Thus in 1905, in Sydney, was conducted the first Yiddish performance in Australia.

For Reinholz himself, it was the first and last attempt at staging Yiddish theatre, although he did give recitals of Yiddish songs for the benefit of Jewish communal institutions. He wrote songs of his own as well, mostly dealing with Jewish life in Australia, but in later years these ceased to be sung, disappearing finally into oblivion.

On Monday 2 November, 1908, there arrived in Melbourne the actor Samuel Weissberg who came with the intention of founding a permanent Yiddish theatre in Australia. He was born 46 years before on 1 May, 1862 in Pyotrkov in Poland, and by the time he arrived in Australia he had wandered throughout half the world with Yiddish theatre troupes. It had been on a friend's recommendation that he came to Australia to test his luck in creating a local Yiddish theatre. That may have been his ultimate dream but he soon came face to face with reality. In an autobiographical sketch, he writes as follows:

I arrived in Melbourne in November 1908 on the 'Vulcania'. As I disembarked, I was approached by a distinguished-looking Jew with a fine patriarchal beard and he asked me, "Are you Mr. Weissberg?"

"Yes," I replied.

"My name is Malinski. I received a letter from London informing me of your arrival and requesting that I should meet you."

I was pleased indeed by his cordial greeting and by his warm welcome to the new land. I thanked him sincerely and Mr. Malinski took me home with him and introduced me to his wife and six lovely

daughters. The table was prepared for dinner and the atmosphere was a festive one, as though they were awaiting some important guest . . .

Mr. Malinski was an intelligent, easy-going, peaceful man. He was of the kind that one can only respect. Sitting at the table, we chatted naturally about different things. When we had finished, we went into his garden which was blooming with flowers to catch a breath of fresh air.

It was a very hot day. As we sat on the garden bench, Mr. Malinski said to me. "Mr. Weissberg, according to the letter which I received about you from my brother, I know precisely why you came to Australia. I honestly regret to tell you that you have made a big mistake."

"You believe then, Mr. Malinski, that I shall not be able to organise a Yiddish theatre here?"

"Yes."

"Are there no Jews here?"

"There are, there are. But very few. In all of Melbourne, there are only some 200 families. Most of these are English Jews or Jews who have been here more than fifty years and who do not understand — or do not wish to understand — Yiddish. Besides that, they are dispersed in all corners of the city. And where do they come together? In the Synagogue; and that only twice a year, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur."

"Do you have no club? No cultural institution?"

"Regrettably, no."

"Is there no working-class here? I mean, Jewish craftsmen?"

"There are some, but very few."

"And where do they meet?"

"There are two Jewish hotels — or, as we call them, boarding-houses — and there they come to eat or to play cards . . . and to bet on the races."

"As I see it then, Mr. Malinski, I have been misled, fooled. I met an Australian Jew in London who told me that there are more than 10,000 Jewish families here and more than 8,000 Jewish families in Sydney, and that should I perform in Yiddish theatre in Australia I would make a fortune in a very short time. And as I have always been a pioneer throughout the world, to open a way for Yiddish theatre, I did as he suggested. And now I seem to have fallen in quite badly. I have travelled 12,000 miles, lost so much money, so much time, left a wife at home. Think of my disgrace in the theatre world; I'll be the laughing-stock of them all that I should have made so bad a mistake."

I sat for a few minutes in bewilderment and said nothing.

"I am sorry, Mr. Weissberg, that I have caused you so much distress," said Mr. Malinski. "You asked me, and I had to tell you the truth."

"Oh, no, Mr. Malinski. You have caused me no distress. I am a

different sort of man than you think. I shall see for myself what I must do; I shall yet make Jews out of gentiles. I shall yet stage Yiddish theatre for them. And now, Mr. Malinski, you told me that there are two boarding-houses where young men, workmen, come together. Could you please show me where they are? I wish to visit them."

Following the directions of Mr. Malinski, who himself declined to accompany Weissberg because of the "bad repute" attached to the boarding-houses, Weissberg walked along Cardigan Street in Carlton where he met a man whom he "recognised immediately to be a child of Israel".

This fellow-Jew took him to the boarding-house where Weissberg introduced himself as a cigar-maker from London. But the ploy failed. As he writes further:

"In the dining-room stood a long table surrounded with chairs. At about six o'clock in came the diners, all young men with different occupations — tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, cigarette-makers. As the guest, I was placed at the head of the table. The landlord, Abraham Berman, introduced me to the others and told them I was a cigar-maker. At the table, the men spoke with enthusiasm mainly about the races, for the following day was to be the 'hag ha'susim', the Melbourne Cup. The young man who sat on my right also came from London. His name was Reinholz . . .

As we spoke, several others Jews approached to play cards. One Jew entered whom I immediately recognised as Mr. Lubransky. I pretended not to notice him, but he asked, "And who is this young man?"

"A cigar-maker from London," the others answered.

He moved nearer the table and studied me closely.

"No," he said finally. "This is no cigar-maker. And I know I'm not mistaken. Hyman!" He then shouted into the adjoining room. "Hyman, come here! Look at him closely. Don't you recognise this bird?"

"On my life," cried Hyman, "it's Mr. Weissberg! Children, this is a Yiddish actor. I know him from the Princess Street Theatre, from Adler's Company."

The words "Yiddish actor" enthralled everyone. They all stood up and surrounded me and plied me with a hundred questions and the word spread like wildfire throughout Carlton, the Jewish area, that a Yiddish theatre troupe had come to Australia. In the next half-hour, the room became crowded with Jewish men and women trying to catch a glimpse of me . . . There also came people who knew me well. Foremost among them was Abraham Stone who had been my prompter in Capetown, and also a certain Tshan from the Amateurs Club in Johannesburg.

It suddenly became lively in the town. The same evening, a provisional committee was founded. We immediately sat down to important work and, as the next day, Tuesday 3 November, was the

sacred holiday 'hag ha'susim', everyone had time to work out a plan. We sat together until two a.m."

The following day, the provisional committee called a meeting of respected citizens. At that meeting, Weissberg proposed that, as he neither had a troupe with him nor was he familiar with the local Jewish public, a public reading should be arranged for the following Sunday evening and that news of this should be circulated among the Jews of Melbourne.

This was duly done. To his surprise, the hall was packed. He was received, as he writes, with a hearty welcome and stormy applause.

"I took my place upon the stage" — he writes — "and carefully studied the faces so that I should have an idea what to read to them — a melodrama or a scene from life. I spoke to them briefly and decided upon "Gabriel" (better known as "Hinke-Pinke"). I tried my best not merely to read, but I performed the first act with all its different characters and sang the songs myself because I wanted to take the public by storm and win their support. After the first act, their enthusiasm was overwhelming."

Weissberg had intended to read two pieces but the chairman of the committee stopped him as he wanted to get down to more serious matters. That same evening a club — the Lyric Club — was founded which enrolled several hundred members, and £50 was collected on the spot. To Weissberg's appeal that suitable ladies and gentlemen of talent present themselves before him for a future production of the complete play "Gabriel", there immediately registered many young men and women.

"Within a few days" — Weissberg continues — "I succeeded in assembling the necessary ensemble which prepared itself for the play "Gabriel". Also a large choir of ten ladies and ten gentlemen did gather together, all of them with fine voices and some musical ability. The trouble was that none of the ladies knew a single word of Yiddish, neither to speak, to read or to write. They had to write out their parts with English letters. I was more fortunate with the men. Nearly all of them could read and write Yiddish. However, I could not find a single prima donna in Melbourne and one had to be imported from Sydney, a certain Miss Dina Opitz. In the meantime, I organised a choir of 20 Jewish schoolgirls and taught them choruses from Goldfaden's "Shulamis" and from "Bar Kochba" as well as solo roles and Yiddish recitations. The opening night attracted an enormous crowd. Fathers, mothers were delighted to see their children singing Yiddish songs or reciting in Yiddish. The atmosphere was most homely and truly Jewish."

After several weeks of effort, Weissberg announced that on 11 January, 1909, there would be staged in the Temperance Hall, the first historical Yiddish performance of the operetta "Gabriel" by Joseph Lateiner.

"The operetta "Gabriel" — Weissberg writes — "was performed with radiance and splendour. The event was highly successful. After the first act, the public pleaded that the play be staged again, and,

indeed, four days later, this was done with even greater success, both moral and financial."

The "Jewish Herald" of 22 January, 1909 wrote of the performance as follows:

("Gabriel") is described as an operetta but is in reality of an unclassifiable nondescript character, partaking of tragedy, comedy, farce, vaudeville, and a number of other things too numerous to mention . . . Mr. Weissberg showed himself to be a comedian of no mean accomplishments and his sallies were greeted with roars of laughter and volleys of applause . . . Considering that Mr. Weissberg had only about six weeks in which to train his company, none of whom, with the exception of Miss Dina Opitz and Mr. Hyman Reynolds (Chaim Reinholz, anglicized? S.L.), had had any previous experience of the stage — many of them knowing little or no Yiddish — it speaks volumes for his industry and ability that he succeeded in giving what was on the whole a really interesting and entertaining performance.

What was not known to the audience or to the critic of the "Jewish Herald" was the little drama that, despite the success of the programme, was being played out behind the scenes.

As Weissberg writes in the climactic finale in his memoir:

"The actors called a strike. They refused to go on stage until they were paid. The leader of the strike was Hyman Reynolds who played the lead role and demanded five pounds. He was paid the money before the performance. The others were finally placated with the promise by the committee that they would be paid at the Club on the following evening. This weighed heavily on my heart. I couldn't bear it. I instructed the committee to divide the earnings amongst all the amateurs and refused to take a single penny of that money for myself. I went home, packed my things and prepared myself for my journey back to England. I had enough. Finished."

In actual fact, Samuel Weissberg's was not the first attempt at Yiddish theatre in Australia. Chaim Reinholz had preceded him by four years. More important still, however, was the fact that Weissberg remained in Melbourne several years more and indeed took part both in the staging of several more plays and in bringing out other members of his family who were professional artists.

The success of this first Yiddish production in Melbourne made possible the creation of an amateur group under Weissberg's guidance. It is worth noting that the first Yiddish cultural institution in Australia, the "Kadimah", was founded in 1911 and one may well suggest that the Yiddish theatre may have stimulated Yiddish cultural activity in Melbourne and possibly in all Australia. Also worth noting is the total opposition of the local rabbis who issued a call — an unheeded call — for a boycott of the Yiddish theatre. If one may draw parallels with the American experience of the late 1890's, it would appear that their opposition stemmed from their attitude to theatre as a shameful trifling, and also, being at that time of a more anglicized nature, they may well have felt embarrassed before their

gentile neighbours by the over display of an essentially alien culture.

The work around Yiddish theatre assumed concrete forms. The second production which Weissberg staged was Jacques Halevy's grand opera "La Juive" ("The Jewess"), also in 1909, which was performed three times. Considering the small Jewish population of Melbourne at that time, this was no mean achievement. The reviews of this production in the Australian press were warm. Even "Truth" newspaper, a widely-circulated paper which was a mixture of sensationalism, bawdy stories and anti-Semitism, praised the production, but added the rider that the piece was performed in a "bastard" language. When Weissberg complained to the editor over this insult to Yiddish, the editor, far from retracting, replied that, to his way of thinking, English, too, was no less than Yiddish a bastard language.

It was after this second production that Weissberg brought to Australia his brother-in-law, Reuben Finkelstein, and his wife from Buenos Aires together with their children, three daughters and a son. In time, the whole Finkelstein family was to perform in Yiddish theatre. Their first play together was "Holy Sabbath" staged on 26 June, 1911 and performed five or six times.

For some time, Weissberg worked together with the Finkelsteins but later they parted company over disagreement on the question of repertoire. Weissberg, an ardent follower of Jacob Gordin, held that above all they had to present Gordin's works before the public. Finkelstein was less particular. Now, the question of repertoire was not merely an academic one. To appreciate this, one needs to digress briefly to the American Yiddish theatre scene. There, until the 1890's, apart from the homely, folkloristic, tradition-bound works of Goldfaden, the Yiddish stage was dominated by what Irving Howe² calls "shund" or trash. These were in the main hack pieces, usually naive mixtures of historical pageantry, topical references, family melodramas and musical comedies, pieces written in a matter of days, often mere sketches comprising a central situation and set speeches left to the actors on the stage to pad out, plays that were either crude adaptations from Russian and German nineteenth century drama sprinkled with incongruous homely Jewish touches or bombastic and wildly inaccurate renderings of Jewish history, depicting the lives and heroics of such figures as Joseph, King Solomon, Judas Maccabbeus and Bar Kochba. In these, there was a surfeit of burlesque, clowning and degeneracy, and the theatre was less a vehicle for the play than for personalities such as the legendary Jacob Adler and Boris Tomashefsky to display their charismatic talents. As one critic and playwright, Leon Kobrin, wrote: "The theatre was a place where clowns and comedians with glued-on beards and earlocks, sometimes in long coats but mainly in royal robes with tin swords and crowns of gold paper declaimed at the top of their lungs".

The quest for a better theatre in the 1890's produced Jacob Gordin who saw Yiddish theatre at that time as vulgar, false and immoral. He was the model of an enlightened Jewish intellectual imbued with Tolstoyan idealism, and intent upon lifting the masses out of superstition into culture. For almost two decades, from 1891 with his first play "Siberia" until his

death in 1909, he was a central presence in Yiddish theatre, a man trying to make Yiddish theatre like other theatres and grounding Yiddish drama in the soil of common life, translating and adapting the works of Hugo, Ibsen, Gogol and Shakespeare, bringing discipline to a stage too commonly marked by high jinks and chaos, insisting on strict adherence to scripts, and attempting to create a system of painstaking rehearsals. Several of his plays, which bore the tag of "realism", became standard in the Yiddish repertoire; for example, "The Jewish King Lear", where an old and wealthy Jewish father makes the same mistake with his daughters that Shakespeare's Lear made long before, and "Mirele Efros", also called "The Jewish Queen Lear" again telling of the ingratitude of children towards their elders, and "God, Man and Devil", a reworking of the Faust story in which Hershele, a poor weaver, buys a lottery ticket from a salesman (the devil in disguise), becomes a manufacturer and a cruel sweater of labour and, in the end, murmuring that "man is like vapour that rises to the clouds and vanishes" hangs himself in remorse.

These, then, were the kind of plays over which Weissberg and Finkelstein parted company. In the years 1911 to 1914, Weissberg staged a series of Gordin's plays, these being "The Jewish King Lear", "Mirele Efros", "Chasey the Orphan", "Kreutzer Sonata" and "The Massacre", all of which were performed several times. Later productions of Weissberg were, among others, "Herzele Meuches", Joseph Lateiner's "Don Judah Abrabanel", "The Converted Priest", "The Golden Land", "Bar Kochba", "The Sacrifice of Isaac" and Goldfaden's "Shulamis". He finally gave up active theatre activities around 1915. In the seven years under his direction, the most active stars performing with him were Solomon Mendelssohn, Horowitz and Hoisy as well as the Finkelsteins. He was also aided in his attempt to assert the superior Gordin repertoire in Melbourne by a young actor named David Raitzin, who was billed as "the chief star of the leading American theatres". He was later to become Finkelstein's son-in-law. A large number of the plays which Weissberg staged and in which, even after his formal retirement, he performed were in support of the local Jewish schools and other cultural institutions.

Samuel Weissberg is rightly regarded as the grandfather of Yiddish theatre in Australia. His activities here were the stimulus to the development of other Jewish cultural institutions in the community, among which the "Kadimah" has already been mentioned. He was, by occupation, a hairdresser, situated at 110 Rathdowne Street, Carlton, and died on 27 November, 1943 aged 83 years.

His brother-in-law, Reuben Finkelstein, had his own approach to theatre. Not too particular about repertoire, he also manipulated the actual plays according to his own sights. He gave them different names from the original, declared himself the author of a series of pieces which the public knew were not his, or performed familiar but ostensibly modified pieces in the name of utterly fictitious authors. As an actor, he permitted himself a series of liberties in order to draw public attention continually to himself. If all this be thought to be charlatanism or an idiosyncrasy, let it be known that he was merely imitating a long-standing tendency on the American

Yiddish stage where actors and directors alike modified the written piece, mangled it sometimes beyond recognition, deleted scenes, added others and took liberties against which Finkelstein's efforts were pale mimicry. Finkelstein's wife, on the other hand, was a plain, modest woman, a talented actress in her own right who, nurturing a serious approach to theatre, continually demanded — fruitlessly, it would appear — from her vain husband more integrity and responsibility both as an actor and as stage manager.

Between the years 1911 and 1915, the Finkelstein troupe performed a mixture of hack-works, though also of artistically sounder pieces. Alongside Goldfaden's "Shulamis", one sees Lateiner's pretentious "Alexander, Crown Prince of Jerusalem"; also against Goldfaden's "Grandmother Yanke", one finds grand pieces such as "King Ahasuerus" and Leiner's "Uriel Acosta". Also staged were "Hannele the Convert" (or "Tate-Mame Tsores"), "The Sailor in Danger", "Yossele Miker" and Sharkanski's "Kol Nidrei". In 1912, the actor Mendelssohn in the capacity of impressario brought the Finkelstein troupe together with David Raitzin to Sydney where they performed Lateiner's "Alexander" and Goldfaden's "Shulamis" and "Grandmother Yanke". Each of these was staged twice; each proved to be a financial disaster, and Mendelssohn ceased his work as impressario. However, the troupe remained in Sydney for a while and played on its own account. Later, it travelled to Perth and, it is believed, to several smaller States.

During the war years, Finkelstein repeated a number of his productions. An amateur group performed "Dos Pintele Yid" (awkwardly translated as "The Quintessential Jew"), which Irving Howe describes as "a piece of sentimental clap-trap", and even Weissberg, together with Mendelssohn and some amateurs, staged "The Jewish King Lear" for the benefit of the Bikur Holim Society. Nearly all plays were performed on week nights, mainly Mondays, as it was virtually impossible to hire a suitable hall for Saturday nights.

Between the end of World War I and 1925, there was a hiatus in Yiddish theatre activity in Melbourne. The professional actors went over to other occupations. Yiddish theatre could not offer sufficient material sustenance. Immigration was virtually at a standstill and to keep repeating the same repertoire of plays for such a small community became impossible. There were some pieces performed, but relatively few.

In 1925, however, there was a new upsurge in Melbourne theatre activity. The two most active groups performing in Yiddish were the Kadimah Dramatic Group and the "Yiddishe Bineh". (The Kadimah Group underwent about six changes of name in subsequent years, but in 1941 once more regained its original title of the "Kadimah Dramatic Group".) More exciting than the mere upsurge of theatrical activity was the maturing, the coming of age, the increasing sophistication of the plays presented. The first Kadimah performance, on 5 October, 1925, was Sholom Aleichem's domestic drama "Scattered and Dispersed". In 1926, through the efforts of a Mr. Shechtov who had just arrived from Poland, a series of one-act plays were staged: "The World to Come" and "Only a Doctor" by

Sholom Aleichem as well as David Pinski's "To Each His Own God" and Peretz Hirshbein's "Green Fields", the last a romantic-comic pastoral in which a pious young man is cozily absorbed into a not-so-pious rural Jewish community, a charming, relaxed, pleasant piece that has kept its



Hebrew Programme of Jacob Waislitz's first performance.

bloom, a piece as remote from the burlesque of "shund" as it is from the realism, sometimes too serious, of Jacob Gordin or the later Asch and H. Leivick.

In March 1927, there came to Melbourne the artist Jacob Ginter who had, behind him, many years of professional theatre work in Poland. His first production in Melbourne with Kadimah Dramatic Circle, as it was then called, was Sholom Aleichem's "Tevye the Milkman". In the same year, the Circle performed David Pinski's "Yankel the Blacksmith" in which the lure of the flesh is dramatised in all its intensity, and Gordin's "The Stranger". In the years that followed, Yiddish theatre attained a still higher sophistication with the amalgamation of the Kadimah Circle and the Yiddishe Bineh and with the extension of the repertoire to include, among other plays, Hirshbein's "The Blacksmith's Daughter", Gordin's "God, Man and Devil", "Shlunke the Charlatan" and "Mirele Efros",

Berkovitch's "From the Other World", David Pinski's "The Mother", Sholom Aleichem's "The Great Lottery Win" and "It's Hard to be a Jew", and Sholem Asch's "The Landsmen", "God of Vengeance" and "Uncle Moses" (dramatised by Pinchas Goldhar).

For many years the chairman of the Yiddishe Bineh, Jacob Ginter initiated the trend to have all playbills printed in Yiddish and English and not, as had been done until then, all-English except for the title of the play which was printed in Yiddish. To do that was difficult, as there did not yet exist a printing firm that could print in Yiddish. Only one printer, an elderly man named Ford, a non-Jew, possessed some Yiddish lettering. After much error and confusion in the typesetting by the printer, Ginter virtually had to roll up his own sleeves and set out the playbill. Ford's was for many years the only place in Melbourne and probably in Australia where the printed Yiddish word could see the light of day. This was due, it was believed, to old Ford's weakness and affection for Yiddish; else he would not have troubled so much with the little Yiddish printing that he received. It was through him that the Yiddish word was enabled to be printed in Australia. It is also of note that it was largely as a result of the needs of Yiddish theatre that Yiddish was, at first, printed at all.

In 1936, Jacob Ginter's brother, Nathan, also a professional actor, arrived from Buenos Aires. Together with the Kadimah Dramatic Stage Union (note the new name), he acted in Sholem Asch's "Mottke the Thief" as well as in an artistic programme. Of Nathan Ginter, the Australian Jewish Herald of 31 March, 1938 had this to say:

"He lives his part almost forgetting his real self. There is not a moment of stillness with him on the stage, silent or speaking, asleep or awake, according to the design of the part he always acts and acts artistically . . ." while Sarah Ginter, his wife, the same critic Aaron Patkin wrote in another issue, is "an actress with feeling, who possesses a deep sense of stage craftsmanship".

In that year, 1936, Israel Rotman produced Gordin's "Kreutzer Sonata", Fraiman's "The Blind Painter" and Asch's "With the Stream", while in 1937 he also staged "The Jewish King Lear".

The year 1937, which saw the death of Reuben Finkelstein, also saw the arrival of Abraham Braizblatt, then a young folk-singer and recitalist from Warsaw. He performed in two concerts of song and recitations and at the invitation of the Kadimah Yiddish Theatre Corner, staged a revue "From Beyond the Sea", followed by B. Orlanski's social drama "Blood", another revue "Of All That is Good", Goldfaden's "The Mischief-Maker", Leon Kobrin's "The Wild Boy" as well as several one-act plays in a series of cultural evenings held by the Kadimah.

Then two momentous events in the development of Yiddish theatre took place in 1938 and 1939. Through the initiative of the Friends of the Yiddish School Movement in Poland, Jacob Waislitz arrived on 26 January, 1938. He had been one of the leading members of the Vilna Troupe, a cast responsible for many great contributions to the development of Yiddish theatre. In the year of his arrival, he performed several artistic word-concerts as well as in several pieces with the Yiddishe Bineh. Of his first

appearance in public on 5 February, 1938 at the Assembly Hall where he delivered recitations from Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice", Rudyard Kipling's "Boots", and from Peretz, Asch, Bailik and Lutzky, Dr. Aaron Patkin wrote in the Australian Jewish Herald:

"Jacob Waislitz, who is an exponent of the best and noblest tradition of the modern Jewish theatre, convinced us last Saturday that a real actor who was born into this troubled world with the dream of a poet, an artist blessed with a true love and devotion to his art, does not need any particular setting, painting, architecture, even music, to convey to the spectators the truth of his artistry . . . Jacob Waislitz is a great artist — he brought here the Messianic message of the cultural rebirth of our suffering masses. His voice is the voice of true art and as such it must reach every ear which is not deaf to the sound of hope, freedom and culture."

It was at Waislitz's suggestion, on the first anniversary of the death of the famous Yiddish theatre director and Waislitz's mentor, David Herman, that the Yiddishe Bineh became known as the David Herman Theatre Group, the name under which it exists to this day. He took an active part in a series of cultural evenings until towards the end of 1938 when he sailed for Brazil. However, he was to return in 1940.

The second major event was the arrival in Melbourne on 3 April, 1939 of Rachel Holzer. In Poland, Rachel Holzer had played in works of Sholem Asch, Sholom Aleichem, H. Leivick, S. Ansky and David Bergelson as well as in those of Tolstoy, Strindberg, Gogol and Arnold Zweig, among others. Her sojourn in Melbourne was part of a wider tour. She delivered her first recital on 15 April, 1939, which moved Aaron Patkin to write in the Australian Jewish Herald of 20 April:

(Rachel Holzer) "is one of the few chosen by God and nature to inspire those sparks of the poet's dreams with her own life, with her own spirit and soul . . . An actress by God's grace, a woman of engaging charm and simplicity, she conquered our hearts and told us in the holy words of artistic truth that our sources of creation are inexhaustible . . . (With her), nothing is left to mere chance, every movement of her body, every vibration of her magnificent voice is controlled by long schooling in stagecraft and indefatigable industry and perseverance."

In the first six months of her stay in Melbourne, she acted in Morozovitch-Shchepowski's "Three Women", which had been translated by her husband Chaim Rozenstein, and in Verneuille's "Frau Advokat" with Yasha Sher, as well as in many cultural evenings and concerts. After those six months, she prepared to leave and to continue her theatrical tour in the wider world. But the outbreak of World War II compelled her to remain in Melbourne.

With the return of Jacob Waislitz in 1940 and the pooling of talents of Abraham Braizblatt, the Ginters and others, the standard of Yiddish theatre was raised to a high level.

From all accounts, Yiddish theatre around the turn of the fourth decade truly began to flourish. In 1939, Jacob Rotman directed David Pinski's "To Each His Own God"; the Polish Yiddish actress Sonia Zomina, on a visit, performed in folk concerts and plays; Abraham Braizblatt together

with Nathan and Sarah Ginter starred in Karl Sheinher's "The Devil's Wife"; and on the Kadimah's invitation, Newman Jubal from Vienna (the same who was to write the affectionate "The Smile of Hershele Handle") staged H. Leivick's "The Poor Kingdom", A. Rudolph's drama "Power Through Fire" and Gogol's "Husbands". He followed that up in 1940 with Sholom Aleichem's "The Gold Diggers", Leon Kobrin's "Riverside Drive", a revue entitled "Chad Gadya" and Botashansky's "Hershele Ostropoler". Nathan Ginter that year produced "Tevye the Milkman" and organised a number of concerts and cultural evenings, the two grand concerts were held to enable the launching of Herz Bergner's "The New House" in Yiddish. That year (1940) also saw the staging of Gordin's "Chase the Orphan", A. Tsvoldzinski's comedy "Freud's Theory of Dreams" in which Jacob Waislitz and Rachel Holzer appeared together for the first time, August Strindberg's "The Father" with Rachel Holzer, and a series of plays in which Jacob Waislitz either appeared or which he directed, namely David Bergelson's "The Bread Mill", Chaim Gottesfeld's "Parnassah", Osip Dymov's "Yoshke Musikant" and H. Leivick's lyrical "The Poet Has Become Blind".

In 1941, the repertoire continued to grow, diversify and mature. Among the plays staged by Abraham Braizblatt, by the Yiddish-English revue artist Sam Stern, by Newman Jubal, Rachel Holzer and Jacob Waislitz were such pieces as Goldfaden's "The Mischief-Maker", "Shlunke the Charlatan", Antoni Slonimski's "The Family", Katayev's "Squaring the Circle", Karol Capek's "Mother", V. A. Somin's "Attentat", Asch's "Mottke the Thief", Bill Beltzerkowski's "Life Calls" and Hirshbein's "Green Fields".

Of those who took part in the performance, the most frequent were Faivl Jedwab, Berl Rosenberg, Sam Podemski, Chaya Segal, and Judith Silman, while under the professional guidance of Rachel Holzer and Jacob Waislitz, a number of new talents were uncovered, among them Yasha Sher, Saul Oliver, Chava Dan and Leah Zucker.

Yiddish theatre was concerned not only with performing plays. It attempted to help materially a variety of communal activities and particularly the furtherance of Yiddish culture. Proceeds from the concerts were donated toward the establishment of Yiddish schools in the community, the creation of the first Yiddish newspaper in Australia and, among other things, the publication of a theatre lexicon, of Pinchas Goldhar's "Stories from Australia" (the first creative literary work in Yiddish in Australia) and Herz Bergner's "The New House".

To prepare a Yiddish play was a difficult enterprise. Each performance was preceded by months of rehearsals, the actors were in the main amateurs who worked in other occupations. With the progress of the war in the early forties, these difficulties were compounded. In 1941-42, Japan entered the war and brought the frontline to the shores of Australia. The country took fervently to the task of defending itself. Men up to their forties were drafted into the army, and of the Jews, those who were not yet citizens were drawn into special behind-the-front formations. There also reached Australia at that time the horrible news of the Nazi murders of Jews in Europe. Under such conditions, which struck at both the personnel and the

morale, for the theatre group to pursue its work was a near impossible task, indeed. Performances were seldom held and, when they were, were conducted mainly in aid of Jewish and non Jewish causes and appeals.

This state prevailed into the late forties. The new immigrant stream of refugees from Europe arriving at the turn of the fifth decade was, despite all the trauma leading up to it, a shot in the arm for local theatre. There arrived a number of gifted amateurs who, in time, became involved with the stage. The David Herman Theatre Group, now enlarged, resumed its activities. The audience, too, was naturally bigger.

In the years that followed, it became customary to stage at least three or four Yiddish full-length plays each year, among them old favourites like Sholom Aleichem's "The Big Lottery Win", Gordin's "Mirele Efros" and Goldfaden's "The Mischief-Maker", also social dramas like E. Morris's "The Wooden Bowl" and a variety of pieces not previously performed, new plays, sometimes experimental and avant garde plays such as Sigmund Turkow's "Sing My People", Bar-Yosef's "On the Walls of Jerusalem", Moshe Shamir's "Beth Hillel" and De Benedetti's "Red Roses". These titles represent only a small selection of the plays performed, but the range of the repertoire and the standard of the acting and stagecraft made Yiddish theatre in Melbourne the equal to that of Yiddish theatres in Europe and America. As well as the above mentioned plays, there were many evenings given over to one-act plays, revues, concerts, cultural gatherings, jubilee celebrations, Purim plays and other enterprises. The roll-call of participants in these plays is a long one, and even if one were to mention, apart from Rachel Holzer, Jacob Waislitz and the Ginters, the names of Rachel Becker, Rachel Lewitz, Leah Zucker, Mira Waislitz, Sigmund Brustman, Yasha Sher, Shie Tigel, Shmuel Migdalek, Abraham Zuckert, Moshe Szmerling and Moshe Potashinsky, there would still be two or three times as many others standing in the wings.

Sadly, Jacob Waislitz died in August 1966 but the Group, albeit depleted, continued with its work.

Since then, the theatre group has continued to stage one or two or three plays a year with the sole participation of its own actors. More recently, however, it has followed a more active policy of bringing out to Australia recognised names in the theatre world, either to give solo performances or to act in plays together with the local cast or to direct the local theatre. The Melbourne Yiddish stage has, in recent years, seen stars like Ida Kaminska, Shimon Dzigan, the near-octogenarian Jacob Rotbaum, Joseph Stein, Dinah Halperin, Leah Koenig and Zvi Stolper of the Habimah, Ethel Kovenska and Lev Kogan, Leah Shlanger and Shmuel Atzmon. The repertoire has, to the credit of the theatre, continued to expand and among the plays performed have been Sholom Aleichem's "Wandering Stars" and "The Heirs", Fisher's "A Day in Our Lives", Ephraim Kishon's "Ketubah", Aharon Megged's "Genesis" and Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman".

The actual quantitative involvement in acting of the David Herman Theatre has declined. Many of the regular members of the cast are involved in a variety of administrative functions, either within the Kadimah under

whose auspices the Theatre has long been functioning, or with, for example, Ethnic Radio 3EA, the chief among the latter being Yasha Sher. Also, there is the inevitable ravage of age. One-time artists have either migrated to Israel, as have done Abraham Braizblatt and Abraham Zuckert, or have passed away, or have simply grown too tired to pursue the arduous round of rehearsals and performing that serious theatre requires. The public appears to be sufficiently content to be entertained by musical artists, comedians, raconteurs and by imported films, particularly from Israel, so that the demand imposed upon live Yiddish theatre has abated considerably. Although it is too early to expect very much from them, the arrival here of Russian Jews, many of them especially musically-talented, has not as yet made an impact on the theatre scene. There is a considerable number of young people in Melbourne who speak Yiddish and there is a Melbourne Yiddish Youth Theatre in existence. It has, in the past few years, staged Itzik Manger's "The Megillah", Arthur Miller's "The Price", Sholom Aleichem's "The Big Lottery Win", and a more recent Israeli play "I'll Meet You in Two Weeks at the Kinneret". Those who care for the future of Yiddish theatre place their hope upon the youth.

NOTES

1. Samuel Weissberg: Reminiscences of Early Theatrical Performances in Yiddish in Australia. (Published in the original Yiddish in the First Australian-Jewish Almanac — Melbourne 1937.)
2. Irving Howe: World of Our Fathers (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich 1976). Other sources:
Articles on Yiddish theatre by Chaim Rozenstein in the Second and Third Australian-Jewish Almanacs 1942 and 1967 respectively (in Yiddish).
The Australian Jewish Herald.
Kadimah annual reports.
Taub, Samuel Weissberg — the Grandfather of Yiddish Theatre in Australia, *Melbourne Chronicle*, July 1976.

Ed. From further notes furnished by the author, the following item was included in Weissberg's autobiography in Yiddish, handwritten and incomplete.

"Everywhere have I built and helped to build all manner of institutions; fifty years have I worked on the Yiddish stage; I was a pioneer of Yiddish theatre and performed theatre throughout the world; I have directed many companies and have myself written several pieces.

"But who knows of these things and who shall ever know of them? Why have I left no permanent mark in the world of my work or of who I was? Who shall remember me and who shall ever recall my name? I have nobody. My wife is old and we have no children. What is to become of all my labours?" These remarks were rather prophetic, for when Weissberg died the Jewish press contained no reference whatsoever to his contribution to the Yiddish theatre. His death passed without notice. His tombstone shows the surname spelt Weisberg, not Weissberg.

*'hag ha susim', hebrew, "festival of the horses".

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