

## Document Citation

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|---------------|--|
| Title         | <b>Bridge of light -- excerpt</b>          |
| Author(s)     | J. Hoberman                                |
| Source        | <i>Schocken Books</i>                      |
| Date          | 1991                                       |
| Type          | book excerpt                               |
| Language      | English                                    |
| Pagination    | 324  |
| No. of Pages  | 1  |
| Subjects      |  |
| Film Subjects | An appeal to the Jews of the world, , 1941 |

Yiddish film between two worlds

- J. HOBANMAN

1991, NY, Museum  
of Modern Art,  
Schocken Books

distributed a short entitled *Appeal to the Jews of the World* in which three prominent Russian-Jewish artists (Solomon Mikhoels, Sergei Eisenstein, and Peretz Markish) delivered their message of ethnic solidarity in Russian, English, and Yiddish. Still, what would amount to the only wartime Yiddish talkie—and perhaps the most radical ever—was produced in mid-1944 in the Yishev. There, Tel Aviv exhibitor Ya'acov Davidon not only redubbed Columbia's *None Shall Escape*, but altered it to foreground the film's depiction of Nazi brutality in Poland.

Davidon maintains that the doctored *None Shall Escape* was his biggest hit of the year. Columbia—which had dispatched its local representative, an Egyptian Jew, with a threatened injunction—was sufficiently impressed to distribute his version throughout the Middle East, even requesting a print to circulate in New York. Although the original movie showed German soldiers setting a synagogue aflame and massacring Jewish civilians, only one speaking character was a Jew—a philosophical rabbi who plays chess with the local priest. In dubbing the film, Davidon transformed one Nazi into a Jew and completely rewrote the rabbi's dialogue. Thus, instead of offering religious comfort, the rabbi advises the Jews, in Yiddish, warning them that they are being deceived, exhorting them to rebel and fight the Germans. Here, Davidon writes, he dubbed in additional shouts and gunfire. The audience response was nearly as intense: "It's hard to describe in words what was happening in movie theaters during this scene." Fourteen years after the screening of *Mayn Yidishe Mame* incited a riot, the sound of Yiddish in a Tel Aviv movie house produced an agonized wave of Jewish pride.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1. In fact, *Mirele Efros* had opened at the Cameo four months earlier, and two other Yiddish talkies (*Der Purimshpiler* and *Der Vanderer Yid*) had their New York premieres at the "accredited home" of Soviet tub-thumpers. As patriotic insurance, perhaps, Oysher's vehicle was billed with *Sons of Liberty*, a twenty-three-minute Warners short starring Claude Rains in the role of Haym Solomon, Jewish financier of the American Revolution. (According to *Variety*, this Technicolor two-reeler, directed by Michael Curtiz, was originally to have been a feature with its "Jewish angle" subordinated to the story of George Washington.) *Der Vilner Shtot Khazn* remained at the Cameo for a month and enjoyed healthy runs that spring at the Clinton, People's, Radio, and Ascot theaters.

2. It seems appropriate that the publisher of *Der Tog* would invest in a movie on this theme. Alone among the Yiddish dailies, the newspaper featured English-language personals placed by both traditional *shadkhonim* and more newfangled variations, such as the Modern Marriage Broker. (Rubin's Prominent Matrimonial Bureau purchased a display ad in every issue of *Der Tog*.) A more direct reference to Rubinstein's other interests, however, is the plug for Maxwell House coffee—the sponsor for Molly Picon's radio show.

3. Ulmer and Peretz Hirschbein doctored the script for PRC's 1942 *Prisoner of Japan*; they also worked together (Ulmer uncredited) on PRC's most elaborate production, *Hitler's Madmen*, a film about the assassination of Czechoslovakia's Nazi administrator Reinhard Heydrich (as well as the first movie that Douglas Sirk would direct in America).

A few Yiddish actors made their way to Hollywood and were featured in anti-Nazi movies. Billed as Walter Lawrence, Moishe Oysher sang Jerome Kern and E. Y. Harburg's "And Russia Is Her Name" in *Song of Russia*, a 1943 MGM musical based, according to Ulmer, on a script he had developed at PRC. Both Maurice Schwartz and his erstwhile employee Kurt Katch had minor roles in Warners' 1943 paean to our new Soviet ally, *Mission to Moscow*. Although Schwartz is not even credited for his part as a defendant in the Moscow Trials, Katch was able to make a go of it in Hollywood, building a career as an exotic, often shaven-pated heavy in *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1943), *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1944), and *Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy* (1955), among other films.