

Marcos Silber

Cinematic Motifs as a Seismograph: Kazimierz, the Vistula and Yiddish Filmmakers in Interwar Poland

Beginning in the first part of the twentieth century Kazimierz Dolny and the Vistula River became important symbolic elements in the memory culture of Polish Jewry. This development had been fostered by earlier generations of storytellers and the Polish Jewish mythology they created. As Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska has emphasized, Yiddish literature associated Kazimierz, along with its river, woods, and castles, with the legend about King Kazimierz the Great and Esterke, his Jewish wife, even though the town's name is actually related to a different king — Kazimierz the Just (*Kazimierz sprawiedliwy*).¹ Chone Shmeruk demonstrated that during the nineteenth century the myth of Polish-Jewish brotherhood that the town symbolized was recreated and reshaped, becoming an emblem of Jewish integration in a Polish state and recreating the figure of *Polonia paradus judaeorum*.² The changes continued during the first decades of the twentieth century even as the myth retained its main features.³ It helped recall the past — a recollection that both groups may have needed in order to make meaningful their common existence in a convulsive era in Polish history.

In Yiddish films from interwar Poland Kazimierz was depicted as the emblematic Polish *shtetl*. Viewers saw two towns portrayed on the screen simultaneously — the real Kazimierz with its landmarks and the symbolic one representing the legend of King Kazimierz and Esterke. The town was

* This paper was made possible thanks to the generous support of research funds provided by the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Haifa.

1 Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Kazimierz vel Kuzmir, Miasteczko różnych snów*, Lublin 2006, pp. 28–30, 383.

2 Chone Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature*, Jerusalem 1985, pp. 14–16, 21–35.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 55–82.

both photographed in a natural setting on location and artificially recreated in the studio. It was perceived via the senses as a concrete reality, but its fleeting image of light in the darkness also evoked abstract ideas. In other words, it was recreated on the screen in three different perceptual dimensions: material, symbolic, and functional.

Motifs and symbolic images are usually used as vehicles to transfer ideas. Decoding them and interpreting their transformations may help us understand changing situations not easily represented verbally. This article analyzes the role that the symbolic images of Kazimierz and the Vistula River played in interwar Yiddish cinema as a vehicle for examining the interplay between the representation and the ones who represented it, the images and the social circle that created them. By analyzing the iconic moving images of Kazimierz and the Vistula River in Yiddish film we can trace the socio-political and sociocultural expectations of the filmmakers regarding the Jews' place in the Polish society. This article will follow the changing interpretation of both symbols in Yiddish films in Poland of the interwar period and how formal public spheres reacted to their interpretation. My main argument is that whereas during the 1920s the motif of Kazimierz helped to celebrate Jewish integration and modernization, the messages changed during the late 1930s, as the filmmakers showed in a very delicate way their own rejection of the message behind the myth. They used the Vistula and the myth embodied in the small town of Kazimierz as a vivid (or morbid) symbol in order to present their vision regarding Polish-Jewish integration. The symbolic use of Kazimierz probably helped them to bypass the censorship, which could be expected to look unfavorably at the messages they conveyed.

In order to present these points the article is divided in three parts. The first part deals with the *milieu* which created the films; the second explicates the representation of Kazimierz during the 1920s, the third during the 1930s.

“Slavdom Shakes Hands with the Ghetto”: The Filmmakers

From the beginning of the twentieth century Kazimierz on the Vistula became quite popular among artists because of its mixture of typical and atypical features. It was a place where an urban landscape merged with the surrounding countryside, where centuries-old buildings stood against the background of gentle rollings hills. It presented a picturesque market

square, an impressive assemblage of churches and synagogues and the winding Vistula River with its sandy shore and vast woods beyond. The ruins of the legendary king's castle watched over the city from the hills.⁴ In 1939 poet Andrzej Wolica mentioned a specific "psychological climate" that characterized the little town.⁵ At the same time Karol Siciński, the well-known Polish architect, declared that in Kazimierz "Slavdom shakes hands with the ghetto."⁶ Echoing the myth of King Kazimierz and Esterke, Siciński interpreted the space as a place where Polishness and Jewishness merged singularly in a way that gave the town a grand, charming, and unpretentious touch.⁷ It was an ideal place of reference for writers and artists who themselves merged Slavic and Jewish elements and who worked in what might be termed a social "third space."⁸ Occupants of that space embodied the polysemic character of interwar Polish Jewry; they created art on the border between the two cultures, belonging simultaneously to both.⁹ Most Yiddish filmmakers

4 Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Odcienie tożsamości: Literatura żydowska jako zjawisko wielojęzyczne*, Lublin 2004, pp. 50–54; Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Kazimierz vel Kuzmir*, pp. 20–28; Renata Piątkowska, "I come from Kazimierz, the town of Kazimierz, where painters sit..." in W. Odorowski and D. Święcicka, eds., *In Kazimierz the Vistula River Spoke to them in Yiddish: Jewish Painters in the Art Colony of Kazimierz*, ed. Kazimierz Dolny 2008; Waldemar Odorowski, "'Painters walked this den of poverty, as if it was a paradise,'" *ibid.*

5 Andrzej Wolica, "Mój Kazimierz," *Wiadomości Literackie* 2 (1939), quoted in Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Kazimierz vel Kuzmir*, pp. 197, 381.

6 Quoted in Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Kazimierz vel Kuzmir*, pp. 218, 383.

7 Karol Siciński, "Urbanizacja Kazimierza," *Wiadomości Literackie* 2 (1939), quoted in — *ibid.*, pp. 20, 383.

8 Theorists have used the term "third space" in various ways to describe and analyze the situation of ethnonational minority groups whose members live within a majority society that pressures them to acculturate and marginalizes them. I apply this concept to the field of art and media, using the term to denote how the real geographical space creates a symbolic space that contains members of the ethnonational minority who have adopted cultural elements of both the majority and minority groups and are active in both spaces. Following anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, I treat this third space as a dynamic social space based on both "recognition of cultural similarity or social contiguity" and a response to "exclusion and constructions of otherness." See Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Culture, Power, Place: Ethnography at the End of an Era," in A. Gupta and J. Ferguson, eds., *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, Durham, NC 1997, p. 13. For a theoretical discussion of a real third space and an imaginary space, see Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Cambridge, MA 1996. For a general discussion of power, space, and identity-building, see Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford 1991, and Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994. See also Homi Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London 1998, pp. 207–21.

9 On the polysemic character of Polish Jewry see the classic paper by Chone Shmeruk,

belonged to that group.¹⁰ They worked in both Yiddish and Polish and depicted on-screen worlds in both languages.¹¹ From a socioeconomic standpoint they belonged to Warsaw's Jewish middle class, which had undergone a process of acculturation or transculturation over a period of some decades.¹² Some of them moved back and forth between the two worlds of Yiddish and Polish filmmaking. For instance, during the 1920s producer Leo Forbert produced about ten films, half of them "Jewish," as it were.¹³ Henryk Szaro's body of work was similar to Forbert's in this regard. There were those who tended to work more in Yiddish, like Aleksander Marten (director of *On a heym* in Yiddish and *O czym marzą kobiety* in Polish), while others made only exceptional incursions into Yiddish film making, like Michał Waszyński, director of *Der dibuk*, one of the best-known Yiddish films.¹⁴ He worked with

"Hebrew-Yiddish-Polish: A Trilingual Jewish Culture," in: Y. Gutman et al, eds., *The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars*, Hanover NH 1989, pp. 285–311.

- 10 With a few illustrious exceptions, such as Joseph Green, Alter Kacyzne, Henryk Bojrn, Moshe Broderson, and Yekhezkel Moyshe Naiman, who worked only in Yiddish.
- 11 Edward Zajiček, *Poza ekranem: Kinematografia polska 1918–1991*, Warsaw 1992, pp. 28–29.
- 12 Marcos Silber, "Narrowing the Borderland's 'Third Space': Yiddish Cinema in Poland in the Late 1930s", *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 7 (2008):236–39.
- 13 In 1922 he produced *Ludzie Mroku*. In 1923, *Syn Szatan*. As Leo Forbert Film he produced *Ślubowanie (Tkies kaf, 1924)* and *Jeden z 36, (Lamed-Vovnik, 1925)*. As EF ES Forbert Film he produced *W lasach polskich (In di poylishe velder, 1929)* and *Rywale (1925)*. The same year he produced a documentary on the foundation of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In 1926 he produced *The Miner's Daughter in Australia*. As Leo Film he produced *Czerwony błazen (1926)*, *Zew morza (1927)*, *Kropka nad i (1928)*, *Policmajster Tagiejew (1929)*, *Uroda życia (1930)*, *Serce na ulicy (1931)*, *Legion ulicy (1932)*, and *10 procent dla mnie (1933)*. This last film included few "Jewish motifs" in Lopek's character. In 1935 he produced a documentary in Palestine: "Świat, dzień i noc Palestyny". *Kalendarz wiadomości filmowe 1933*, Warsaw 1933, pp. 47–47, 142–43; "Z żalobnej karty, B. P. Leon Forbert," *Wiadomości Filmowe* no. 15 (15 August 1938), p. 2.
- 14 Although generally he did not pay much attention to Jewish topics, Jewish characters appear in several of his films. For instance, in his *Sto metrów miłości* one of the heroes of the film is a Jew, a grotesque patron of sports named Mieszek Oszczep-Sardinensisz, played by Konrad Tom (who wrote the screenplay for *Yidl mitn fidl*). In the film Sardinensisz takes care of gifted street children, who, thanks to his care, are able to get ahead. Despite the grotesque depiction of the man (including his name), this is not anti-Jewish imagery, since it elicits sympathy in the viewer.

During the second part of the 1930s, when several Jewish filmmakers were reluctant to deal with Jewish topics because of growing antisemitism, Waszyński did not abandon such matters completely. Often he adopted a new strategy. On one hand he minimized the presence of Jewish characters in his Polish films. For instance, in his *Co mój mąż robi w nocy* he converted a Jewish role into a non-Jew (a foreigner): Kazimierz Krukowski played not the familiar role of the Jewish Lopek but a ridiculous, though nice, Romanian

Anatol Stern, the famous poet, a leading futurist, whose work in Yiddish film was sporadic as well.¹⁵ The filmmakers' attitude toward their own works in both languages was balanced. Waszyński, for example, was especially proud of his Yiddish film, *Der dibuk*,¹⁶ but he considered both that film and *Znachor* in Polish as his best work.¹⁷ Stern mentioned in the same breath writing the screenplays for both of those films.¹⁸ Jan Nowina-Przybylski, a Christian film director, was quoted as saying that of all his films he was most pleased with two, his Yiddish *Yidl mitn fidl* (shot on location in Kazimierz, 1936) and *Manewry miłosne* (1935), in Polish.¹⁹ Both of these films were based on screenplays by Konrad Tom, whose work in Yiddish films was outstanding (he was part of the teams of *Yidl mitn fidl* and *Mamele* [1938]), as were his Jewish characters in Polish films (like Moniek alias Mieszek Oszczep-Sardinienfisz in *Sto metrów miłości* [1932]).

Because we are speaking about filmmakers who worked in the “third space” of the encounter between Polish and Jewish cultures, I would like to explore here their representation of a space that has served as an icon of that encounter — Kazimierz on the Vistula. After all, these filmmakers had

baron named Lolo Carolescu. In an interview Krukowski commented on this character with typical cynicism, referring to Hitler and the growing antisemitism in Poland: “Under this man’s influence I became an antisemite, and in the present film I play a Romanian baron.” “O tym, jak popularny Lopek — gwoli Hitlerowi — antysemitą został,” *Reporter filmowy*, 19 July 1934. What he evidently meant was that antisemitic trends made it hard to play Jewish characters in a film in which a well-known, much-loved Jewish character like Lopek might appear. Nevertheless, unlike his colleges he occasionally presented minor Jewish figures in his Polish films, underlining their marginality (for example, the grain merchant in *Ostatnia brygada* from 1938). On the other hand, in *Der dybbuk* he maximized the Jewish presence, showing on screen a complete Jewish society, a kind of Yiddishland. Of course, this film was made in Yiddish. For elaboration see Silber, “Narrowing the Borderland’s ‘Third Space’.”

- 15 In summer 1939 Stern took part in an evening devoted to poetry written in Polish by Jews. During the evening the poems were read in the Polish original and in Yiddish translation. Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, “Jewish Writers on Painters in Kazimierz,” in Odorowski and Święcicka, *In Kazimierz*.
- 16 Samuel Blumenfeld, Waszynski’s biographer, quotes various acquaintances in different periods of Waszynski’s life as saying that Waszynski ascribed the greatest importance to *Der dybbuk*, his only Yiddish film. Samuel Blumenfeld; *L’homme qui voulait être prince: les vies imaginaires de Michal Waszynski*, Paris 2006, pp. 80, 100.
- 17 *Film* 25 (1 September 1937), p. 2.
- 18 “Utwórców polskiego filmu: Rozmowa z Anatolem Sternem,” *Świat filmu* 1 August 1937, p. 6.
- 19 Tadeusz Naruszewicz, “W polskim świecie filmowym: Artysta i człowiek (wspomnienia pośmiertne o ś. p. Nowinie Przybilskim),” *Srebrny Ekran* 18 (1937–1938), p. 31.

visited Kazimierz and were quite familiar both with the symbolic legacy of the town and its river and with its reality.²⁰

“How Close are the Polish Jews to the Polish Spirit!”

The first set of moving images of Kazimierz in a “Jewish” motion picture was contained in an American film — Sidney Goldin’s *Bleeding Hearts* (1913). Set in fourteenth-century Poland, the film described a “Polish paradise” devoid of persecution, where Kazimierz the Great gave Jews refuge from oppression thanks to Esterke’s intercession.²¹ By addressing the question of the Jews’ place in the Polish lands, this successful movie laid the foundations for further representations of Kazimierz as a symbolic image on the Jewish screen. From then on the landscape of Kazimierz, with its hills, woods, monuments, and river, appeared repeatedly in Yiddish films, recalling the Esterke myth time after time.

During the 1920s Leo Forbert was the main filmmaker who used images of Kazimierz and the Vistula to represent his vision of Jewish inclusion in the Polish state-building project. He presented such images in period when patriotic films, extolling the heroic Polish struggle for independence, blossomed.²² Forbert tried to incorporate a Jewish voice into these Polish silent films in order to present a specifically Jewish nuance. His ultrapatriotic film, *Jeden z 36 (Lamed-Vovnik)*, directed by Henryk Szaro, was shot in late 1925, during the short-lived mild optimism around the so-called *Ugoda* between the government and the Jewish parliamentary group.²³ The film, whose title recalled the traditional Jewish legend that the world is supported by thirty-six anonymous righteous people, told about Jewish participation in the Polish uprising of January 1863, transferring a Jewish motif to a Polish patriotic

20 See, for instance, Waldemar Odorowski, *Artistic Colony in Kazimierz Dolny Centuries 19th–21st [sic]: Guide to the Permanent Exhibition at the Celejowski House*, Kazimierz Dolny 2005, pp. 56, 57, 59.

21 J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film between Two Worlds*, Philadelphia 1995, pp. 33–34; *Moving Picture World* 10 (13 October 1913):1424; <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0342129>.

22 Tadeusz Lubelski, “Film Fabularny,” *Encyklopedia kultury Polskiej XX wieku: Film, Kinematografia*, ed. Eduard Zajiček, Warsaw 1994, pp. 119–20.

23 About this political agreement see Paweł Korzec, “Heskem memshelet W. Grabski im haNetsigut haParlamentarit haYehudit,” *Gal-Ed* 1 (1973):187–92; Moshe Landa, *Mi’ut yehudi lohem: Ma’avak yehudei Polin 1918–1928*, Jerusalem 1986, pp. 209–58; Szymon Rudnicki, *Żydzi w parlamencie II Rzeczypospolitej*, Warsaw 2004, pp. 175–88.

context and evoking an image of Polish-Jewish brotherhood.²⁴ However, Forbert's *lamed-vovnik*, played by Jonas Turkow, is a bit Christianized. He carries the weight of others' sins on his own shoulders and sacrifices his own life for the lives of his unfortunate neighbors in a *shtetl* occupied by the Russians during the January uprising. Shot on location in Kazimierz and in Sandomierz, the landscape images conjured up the legend of Kazimierz and Esterke, celebrating the Jewish commitment to the Polish nation that that historical association had produced.

Reviewing the film, Anatol Stern praised the "exalted symbolism of the subject, which in spite of highlighting the exoticism of the Jewish ghetto, remains pan-national and universal."²⁵ Basically, Stern represented de-Judaization as universalism, which he regarded as a step forward on the road to Jewish integration into Polish society.

In general, the Polish press received the film favorably,²⁶ applauding the representation of Jewish folkloric motifs, mystic legends, and superstitions, which provided a range of colors to this black-and-white film.²⁷ The film was widely considered the best film made in Poland in that year — a view that gave rise to the seemingly ironic situation in which, as one critic put it, "the best Polish film was... a Jewish one".²⁸ Yet in spite of the film's attempt to suggest a common Polish-Jewish vision, and in spite of its positive reception, *Jeden z 36* did not succeed in creating a perception of a single community embracing Poles and Jews together. Indeed, while the Polish press considered it a Jewish film no matter how de-Judaized it was, the Yiddish press saw it as a Polish one. Critics writing in Yiddish did not accept the disappearance of the traditional Jew (the death of the *lamed-vovnik*) nor the Christianization of the Jewish tradition. Even the most non political of Yiddish periodicals,

24 Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, pp. 144–45; Natan Gross, *Toledot haKolno'a haYehudi beFolin, 1910–1950*, Jerusalem 1990, pp. 34–36. On the portrayal of the Jews in silent movies in Poland, see Daniel Grinberg, "Obraz i cena asimilacji Żydów w filmach fabularnych i dokumentalnych kina niemieckiego", in Grażyna Borkowska and Magdalena Rudkowska, eds., *Kwestia żydowska w XIX wieku, spory o tożsamość Polaków*, Warsaw 2004, pp. 397–98, 400–401, 403.

25 Anatol Stern, *Kino dla wszystkich*, no. 7 (15 December 1925), p. 11.

26 Władysław Jewszewiecki, *Przemysł filmowy w Polsce w okresie międzywojennym (1919–1939)*, Łódź 1951, p. 33.

27 Leo Brun, "Nowy film 'Czerwony błazen'", *Kino dla wszystkich*, no. 28 (1 November 1926).

28 Stefania Heymanowa, "Wszystko możliwe!", *Kino dla wszystkich*, no. 10 (1 February 1926), p. 5.

like the popular *Ilustrirter magazin*, spoke about “so-called ‘Jewish films’” that “do not have much in common with Jewish culture and the Jewish spirit.”²⁹ As a result, Forbert and Szaro’s film remained in the third space. Nevertheless, the film succeeded economically, suggesting that perhaps there was indeed room for the third space to find expression.

Encouraged by the success of *Jeden z 36*, Forbert subsequently (in late 1928) presented a more complex vision of Jewish involvement in the Polish statebuilding project. As his vehicle he chose a historical epic, Joseph Opatoshu’s iconic novel *In poylishe velder* (In Polish Forests).³⁰ The enterprise was an ambitious one. Forbert engaged Majer Bałaban, the noted Jewish historian, to ensure historical precision. He also sought a location for filming that could symbolize Polish-Jewish brotherhood. The film begins with a shot of some ancient oaks from a Polish forest, with a traditional Polish forest keeper looking at poor children collecting wood, followed by an intertitle: “Because the Polish forests are great and wide, they can support the poor people who use them to warm their cold dwellings”.³¹ Indeed, the film underlined the character of Poland as a generous home for the dispossessed, recalling the myth of the generous reception of persecuted Jews by Kazimierz the Great. Echoing Forbert, the journal *Kino dla wszystkich* noted that “the work testifies how close the Polish Jews are to those Polish roads, Polish trees, Polish water, rituals, traditions, ways of life, Polish spirit.”³²

The charm of the surrounding non-Jewish culture is underlined from the film’s outset, when it shows pagan rituals connected with the Vistula from main character Mordkhe’s point of view. It recalls the legend of the Princess Wanda, who threw herself into the Vistula because she did not want to be married to a German, thereby becoming queen of the river. The film presents the fishermen’s ceremonial offering to her in order to quiet the Vistula’s waves, indirectly recalling the myth of Esterke as elaborated in

29 “Vegn der noytkayt fun yidishn film,” *Ilustrirter Magazin* 1 (1927):37.

30 According to the director, the book was chosen because “only a film based on remarkable ideals could lead to success.” “W lasach Polskich na ekranie: Rozmowa z reżyserem Johnem Turkowem,” *Kino dla wszystkich* no. 75 (1 December 1925), p. 28.

31 Emil (=Sh. L. Shneiderman), “In Varshtat fun di poylishe velder,” *Film Velt* 1 (1929):7. On the identification of the pseudonym see: <http://www.lib.umd.edu/SLSSES/donors/decades.html>.

32 Ed. EK. “‘Społeczeństwo Polskie a lasy Polskie’,” *Kino dla wszystkich* no. 76 (15 December 1925), p. 18.

Yiddish literature.³³ Mordkhe is curious about and attracted to these strange but magnetic rituals.

The film told about Jewish patriotism in the January uprising.³⁴ Deviating slightly from Opatoshu's novel, whose first half told of Mordkhe's early life, the film's main plot developed this theme from the outset, underlining Mordkhe's activities as a traveling agitator who is perceived alternately as a Jew and a Catholic. Thus this film emphasized the supremacy of the third space. It praised people active in both Jewish and non-Jewish societies, as well as people who transferred cultural components, bridging both worlds. Using techniques of melodrama the film encouraged the spectator to identify with people active in the two worlds simultaneously. In this way the film recreated the narrative of integration and Polish-Jewish brotherhood that crystallized during the second half of the nineteenth century and urged its acceptance in the late 1920s, when that narrative had long been under attack. Perhaps it was precisely the attack that led to its resurrection.

The film was mostly coldly received. The Yiddish daily newspapers that were committed to the Jewish autonomist agenda were the coolest. Their critics commented on the film's main characters, especially the Rebbe of Kock, complaining that the figure of the legendary *rebbe* was not sufficiently shown on screen. "We went [to the cinema] seeking the Kocker *rebbe* and found Berek Jozelewicz",³⁵ complained the cinema reviewer of *Haynt*, the most popular Yiddish daily.³⁶ Moreover, according to *Haynt*, Forbert's Kocker Rebbe, was "a Russian saint from Dostoyevsky's *Karamazov*."³⁷ In such fashion the Yiddish press expressed its disappointment over the Polonization (or Slavonization) of a Jewish topic: the film was simply "too Polish."

The Polish daily press presented a range of reactions. The socialist *Przedświt* regarded the film positively: "The action of the film develops in an orthodox milieu, which on the one hand was imbued with talmudism and sanctimonious hypocrisy and on the other with tolerance toward religious questions, thanks to the encounter with Polish culture... and the tradition

33 Shmeruk, *Esterke Story*, pp. 77–81.

34 Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, pp. 143–46; Gross, *Toledot haKolno'a*, pp. 36–40; Sheila Skaff, *The Law of the Looking Glass: Cinema in Poland 1896–1939*, Athens OH 2008, pp. 98–101.

35 Ykhezkl Moyshe Nayman, "Alt Kotzk ofn film: tsu di oyffirung fun 'di Poylishe velder'," *Haynt*, 20 January 1929, p. 6.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

of the heroic legendary Jewish colonel of the Polish army, the Jew Berek Joselewicz.”³⁸ The newspaper thus praised in a patronizing way the power of Polish culture to elevate traditional Jewish society. In this way Jewish integration was presented as possible. The Piłsudskist weekly *Głos prawdy* similarly accepted the film’s patriotic premises.

By contrast, other dailies, while praising the scenes of the landscape (forest, roads, streams, lakes, hills) as “the most Polish element” in the film, simultaneously deprecated the civic component of the film’s story or minimized its human dimension in favor of its supposedly archetypal construction.³⁹ For most Polish dailies *In poylishe velder* was not a “Polish” film but a “local” (*krajowy*) one — that is, not Polish in the ethnonational sense but Jewish. *Wieczór warszawski* complained about the strange linguistic constructions used in the intertitles, which, it claimed, demonstrated the filmmakers’ “tribal foreignness.”⁴⁰ *Gazeta warszawska* argued that the film was falsely patriotic. Worse, claimed the newspaper, it camouflaged the director’s Jewishness while at the same time idealizing the figure of Berek Joselewicz and hiding the ultimate failure of his efforts.⁴¹ Even so, both *Wieczór warszawski* and the ultranationalist *ABC* praised the characterization of Berek Joselewicz by Jerzy Leszczyński, the main and only non-Jewish actor on the set.⁴² For most of such Polish dailies, then, the film was “too Jewish.”

Unlike their counterparts in the daily newspapers, however, critics who wrote in the specialized press devoted to the cinema, in Yiddish and in Polish, lavished superlatives on the film. To be sure, this press was partially maintained by the film producers, so praise was to be expected.⁴³ Still, it is interesting to note precisely what it was that they praised. In the

38 “W lasach polskich,” *Przedświt*, 12 January 1929.

39 *Epoka*, 12 January 1929 (“Na ekranie: ‘W lasach polskich’”) explained that “the greatest value of the film is to be found in the beautiful landscape.” *Kurier Warszawski*, 1 December 1925, p. 21, observed that the film dealt with archetypes rather than with fully individualized characters.

40 “Z ekranu: ‘W lasach Polskich’,” *Wieczór warszawski*, 11 January 1929.

41 “Wobec filmowanych legend,” *Gazeta Warszawska*, 15 January 1929.

42 “Z ekranu, ‘W lasach Polskich’,” *Wieczór warszawski*, 11 January 1929; “Przegląd filmów: W lasach Polskich,” *Przegląd wieczorny*, 13 January 1929; “*Prasa Polska i żydowska o filmie ‘W lasach Polskich’*,” *Kino dla wszystkich*, no. 82 (December 1925).

43 Barbara Gierszewska, *Czasopiśmiennictwo filmowe w Polsce do 1939 roku*, Kielce 1995, pp. 156, 222.

first place, the film was lauded for the way it addressed the topic of Polish-Jewish coexistence and depicted Jewish commitment to Poland's symbols and traditions. They not only focused on the main characters but also gave special attention to secondary characters who moved from one social group to the other.⁴⁴ Accordingly they emphasized the friendship between Strahl and Komorowski, "which is not only a friendship between two persons but also between two nations heading toward union."⁴⁵ Strahl, a *maskil*, was said to have been attracted to "the Polish *szlachta* that adhered to the ideas of Towiański and Hoene-Wroński, who dreamed about complete brotherhood with Israel and liberty for the fatherland."⁴⁶ Other, similar, characters were mentioned in this way: the Frankist Jerzy Jeleński, the Jew Kahane ("the *spiritus movens* of the *emigracja* and insurgent movement's"), and the prince Zamojski ("the continuing living idea of the liberation of the Fatherland through the brotherhood of Jews and Poles").⁴⁷

These critics noted with favor "the mutual interaction of *both* cultures" depicted in the film.⁴⁸ They stressed the openness of certain social groups that had led to a mutual cultural exchange. In fact they were praising their own social circle. Critics writing in Yiddish in specialized periodicals devoted to cinema noted that local circumstances in Poland, especially in the heady days of 1863, had had a positive impact on the development of Jewish culture.⁴⁹ They also stressed that because the film was silent (even at a time when silent cinema was becoming archaic) Poles and Jews could interact with one another as human beings undivided by language, while at the same time "we [Jews] can come to the wider world and show [it]... our own literature and particular features."⁵⁰ In other words, critics who wrote in Yiddish argued that the film was a vehicle to promote Jewish culture among non-Jews.⁵¹ Thus the specialized film periodicals, both in Yiddish and in Polish, saw the film as

44 "Pierwszy polski film mówiący: 'W lasach polskich'," *Kino dla wszystkich*, no. 79, p. 27; Emil [Sh.L. Shneiderman], "In varshat fun 'di poylishe Velder'," *Film Velt* 1 (1928): 6–7.

45 Ed. EK., "Społeczeństwo Polskie a lasy Polskie," *Kino dla wszystkich*, no. 76, p. 18.

46 "Pierwszy polski film mówiący: 'W lasach polskich'," *Kino dla wszystkich*, no. 79, p. 27.

47 *Ibid.*

48 *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

49 "Di Poylishe Film Produktsie," *Film Velt* 1 (6):January 1929.

50 Sh.L. Shneiderman, "Film hot a tifern zin," *Film Velt* 1 (1928), p. 8.

51 Emil [Sh. L. Shneiderman], "In varshat fun 'di poylishe Velder'," *Film Velt* 1 (1928), p. 6. It is remarkable that a Yiddish periodical explained to its readers the importance of "Jewish" films not for internal consumption but for the non-Jewish world as well.

“Polish-Jewish” or “Jewish-Polish.” For them, the third space was a viable option leading to integration.

Both of Forbert’s films analyzed above addressed Jewish patriotism. They used the Vistula River or the city of Kazimierz as a place of memory to call to mind the myth of Polish-Jewish brotherhood.⁵² Such films apologetically represented Jewish patriotism and loyalty to the Polish cause. Perhaps they indicated that those responsible for them had internalized Polish nationalistic rhetoric with its demand for Jews to prove their loyalty. Indeed, the films transferred the memory of the past to the present because the past seemed so relevant for the daily life of a social group living in the third space. No doubt about it: that group needed to manipulate the memory of the revolt. Thus the filmmakers resurrected the myth of the Polish-Jewish brotherhood, emphasizing the social elements bridging between cultures and societies, so relevant to people creating in the social third space.

However, collective memory, as Maurice Halbwachs, who first gave the term currency, pointed out, is always selective. Thus the films presented a particular narrative of integration and assimilation but not one in which Jews disappeared as such altogether. In this way they demonstrated Anatol Stern’s notion about Kazimierz: “Everyone finds there what he is looking for. It is like in a dream.”⁵³ But in this case the filmmakers eventually alienated themselves from most of their public, Jews and non-Jews alike. During the mid-1920s there was still some receptivity to their program, but the cool public reception of *In poylishe velder* toward the end of the decade points, perhaps, to a polarizing process marked by heightened ethnic antagonism. Thus, like their makers, the films remained in the third space.

“We wouldn’t call this a paradise”

After the death of Poland’s head of state, Józef Pilsudski, in 1935 Poland witnessed a wave of anti-Jewish violence. The most notorious incident

Yiddish films could serve as a transmitter of cultural elements from one group to the other, thereby serving as an instrument of the third social space.

52 On the image of Jewish-Polish relations during the 1863 revolt in Yiddish and Polish literature see Magdalena Opalski and Israel Bartal: *Poles and Jews: A Failed Brotherhood*, Hanover, NH 1992, pp. 58–97.

53 Anatol Stern, “Miasto naszych synów,” in: Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Kazimierz vel Kuzmir*, p. 158.

occurred in Przytyk on 9 March 1936. In June 1936 anti-Jewish riots broke out in Mińsk Mazowiecki and in Myślenice (near Krakow). Although these anti-Jewish outbreaks were sporadic, the general situation of the Polish Jewry was rapidly deteriorating.⁵⁴ The deterioration, which included not only physical violence but sustained attacks on Jewish economic and religious life, continued through to the 1939 German invasion.⁵⁵

It was in the midst of such a threatening reality that arguably the most famous Yiddish film of all time, *Yidl mitn fiddl*, was created. In September 1936 Joseph Green, the film's producer, told the journal *Literarische bleter*, "I tried to present the salient moments of social injustice not as loud propaganda but rather as moments of pure art."⁵⁶ Green knew well that the question of social injustice toward the Jewish population in Poland could not be shown openly on the Polish screen in the late 1930s. Only a few months earlier the Polish censor had noisily banned the screening of Aleksander Ford's Yiddish film, *Mir kumen on*, due to its blunt, unabashed depiction of Jewish distress and its suggestion of an unacceptable solution in the eyes of the Polish authorities — class solidarity instead of national antagonism.⁵⁷ Unlike *Mir kumen on*, *Yidl mitn fiddl* aestheticized extreme poverty (in sharp contrast to the reality that the film's star, Molly Picon, later recalled).⁵⁸ The destitution portrayed in the film actually appeared photogenic; the forced wanderings of the protagonists did not evoke any pain, and the oppression was manageable, accompanied by copious musical scenes.

When presenting his principles of film making Green argued that there is a need for "a considerable scale of folklore and ethnography" in Yiddish films.

54 Emanuel Melzer, *No Way Out: The Politics of Polish Jewry 1935–1939*, Cincinnati 1997, pp. 53–63.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–52, 63–70, 81–94.

56 "Der Nayer Yidisher film 'Yidl mit'n fiddl' (a geshprekh mitn director un mitn regisseur Yosef Green)," *Literarische Bleter* 39 (1936): 625.

57 Antoni Słonimski, *Romans z X Muzq: Teksty filmowe z lat 1917–1976*, Warsaw 2007, pp. 232–233; Gertrud Pickhan, *Gegen den Strom: der Allgemeine Jüdische Arbeiterbund "Bund" in Polen 1918–1939*, Stuttgart 2001, p. 251; Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, pp. 230–31; Stanisław Janicki, *Aleksander Ford*, Warsaw 1967, pp. 31–34.

58 "...Kazimierz, a shabby, broken down village, where King Kazmierz (Casimir III) had once reigned with his Jewish queen. I had never seen such a poverty — outdoor plumbing, rickety wooden houses bent into fantastic shapes, and the people unbelievably threadbare. The skeletal children, with their long payes (sideburns) and little yarmulkes (skullcaps), wore trousers that were shreds and shoes tied on their feet with rope. My heart went out to every one of them." Molly Picon, *Molly: An Autobiography*, New York 1980, p. 67.

In a press conference devoted to the film, he and others emphasized the use of “Jewish popular motifs.”⁵⁹ Green, the producer, and the non Jewish (Polish Catholic) director of the Yiddish film, Jan Nowina-Przybylski,⁶⁰ made use of the motif of Kazimierz so enrooted in the Jewish-Polish folklore. It seems to me that the use of the motif of Kazimierz enabled them to present their critical point of view regarding the Jewish situation in Poland. An analysis of still and moving images from the picture reveals a subtle disappointment and despair that could not be presented directly because of severe censorship constraints.

Yidl mitn fidl begins with a panoramic view of Kazimierz. A long shot from the Hill of the Three Crosses shows the ruins of the king’s castle; it is followed by a sweeping view of the city and its well known buildings and city market in a manner that, as Avraham Novershtern has pointed out, evokes the myth of Esterke.⁶¹ By awakening historic memories associated with Kazimierz the directors led viewers to expect a story about the Jewish presence in Poland — more specifically, about the success of Jewish integration into the Polish polity. Then come shots of the marketplace in the market day while a melodic, longingly music recall the traditional market square and the Jew’s place in premodern Polish society. Then, the noise of the contemporary marketplace in full activity intermingles with the changing, less melodic, music. A cacophony of less pleasant sounds rises, reflecting contemporary Jewish existence. These early scenes offer a sharp portrayal of the market from different points of view, depicting it as a dynamic place of encounter and interchange. Like in Scholem Asch’s representation of Kazimierz in his 1904 novella, *A shtetl*, the images show Jews almost exclusively, while relegating non-Jews to the background in the role of peasants coming to the town on the market day.⁶² The non-Jews function as a picturesque symbol or, in a later scene, as a hostile rude figure who expels the protagonist, Yidl (literally, the little Jew), and his fellows from the courtyard.

After earning two złoty and buying a herring and a roll for her father, the film’s main protagonist, a poor girl, runs through Kazimierz’s narrow streets to her home, only to discover that she and her father have been dislodged.

59 “A nayer yiddisher klang film: ‘Yidl mitn fidl’ mit Molly Picon in der hoyptrole,” *Literarische bleter*, no. 29 (636), 27 July 1936.

60 On Jan Nowina-Przybylski as director of the film and Green as producer see Silber, “Narrowing the Borderland’s ‘Third Space’,” pp. 239–41.

61 Avraham Novershtern presented this idea at the conference, “Yiddish: Culture, Ideology and Politics,” held at in University of Haifa, 26–28 November 2000.

62 Adamczyk-Garbowska, “Jewish Writers on Painters in Kazimierz.”

The difficulties she experiences in making a living offer a glimpse into the misery and constraints of Jewish existence in Poland. Symbolically, being dislodged from Kazimierz, a place that evokes the Jewish myth of inclusion, is like the exclusion of Jews from contemporary Polish life that appeared to be the aim of the Polish government. Trying to console her father the protagonist notes that “Adam and Eve were also thrown out of Paradise, and we wouldn’t call this a paradise” — a statement that invites a contrast with the myth of *Polonia paradisis Judaeorum*. Hence smilingly, the film makers did not present “social injustice” as “loud propaganda”. Then, it avoids the wrath of the censors. By awakening myths of a positive Polish Jewish past, the film manages to highlight the failure to accommodate a Jewish presence in the Polish state.

With the abandonment of the traditional *shtetl* a metamorphosis of traditional Jewish society begins. Yidl, the little Jew, embarks on an enterprise of transformation and modernization (not only social and geographical but in terms of gender roles as well). The transformation is radical. Yidl is transformed and modernized in Warsaw, the Polish capital, the epitome Polish statehood. Yidl’s success is shown on the first pages of the main Warsaw Jewish dailies, Yiddish as well Polish, showing in this way his relevance for those ensconced in the multilingual culture of interwar Polish Jewry.⁶³ However, his successful transformation does not ensure Yidl a place in Poland. In the final analysis the film suggests that there is no room in the country, not only for the traditional Jew who has been expelled from the “paradise” of Kazimierz but also for the modernized urban Jew as well. As Avraham Nowersztern has observed, the film, whose scenes pass through Polish roads, forest, rivers, and its capital, Warsaw, ends in Gdynia, Poland’s new gate to the sea, on a ship to the United States. Yet like the abundant singing and the forced “happy end,” this outcome is completely unreal. By 1936 the doors of United States had been closed to mass immigration for more than a decade.⁶⁴

Another film that used the associations awakened by Kazimierz to deal subtly with the question of the Jewish presence in Poland was Aleksander Marten’s *On a heym*, shot during the frightening final month of 1938. This

63 The film shows the first pages of the Jewish dailies in the following order: *Haynt* (Yiddish), *5ta Rano* (Polish), *Moment* (Yiddish), *Nasz Przegląd* (Polish), then the following Yiddish dailies: *Varshaver Radio*, *Hayntike Naves*, *Unzer Ekspress*, *Folkstsaytung*.

64 See above, n. 61.

film, based on a 1907 play by Jacob Gordin, offered a counterpoint to the light and pleasant *Yidl mitn fiddl* as well as to the optimistic message of *In poylishe velder*. Like the former, it began in Kazimierz (the “beautiful, romantic *shtetl*,” as Marten himself characterized it when explaining why he shot the film there⁶⁵) and ended in America, contrasting the vision of migration with the contemporary Polish Jewish reality. But, in contrast to the optimistic and unreal solution presented in *Yidl mitn fiddl*, *On a heyim* showed the impossibility of finding any viable solution for Polish Jews.

Although, like in *Yidl*, Kazimierz is used to symbolize Poland, in *On a Heyim* it is not Esterke who conjures up past coexistence but the Vistula River and the well-rooted forest, in a fashion more akin to *In poylishe velder*. The action begins with images of a small town. The iconic Kazimierz images are not presented in the film and the little town looks as any other small town. A narrator introduces the story as a fairytale: “It was a small town in one country where living people, neither rich nor poor ... earned a living from the fields and from the river.” Ostensibly the place is everywhere; so the spectator understands that it is ‘Poland’. Slowly the images turn to the Vistula River, presented here as every Polish river. The narrator tells about the city’s (Jewish) fishermen, “strong as oaks, rooted in the soil,” evoking the images of *in Poylishe Velder*. Yet soon the peaceful images change: the sky becomes gray and the clouds bring a storm. The narrator explains the image of the flooded small town that now appears on the screen: “Suddenly a storm arises and the old town is shocked. The Rifkin family suffers more than others. The storm has stolen its child.” Indeed, the oldest son of the Rifkins, a Jewish family of fishermen rooted as deeply in the Vistula as an old oak in the Polish forest, is drowned.

Marten, the film director, explained that the film’s main characters are “representatives of three Jewish generations.” Thus the director’s notion of the archetypal structure of the three generations is clear: the grandfather is the traditional Jew; the second generation represents the modernized generation, and the two grandchildren represent the Jewish future.⁶⁶ Here the death of the oldest son of a strongly-rooted Jewish family symbolizes the harsh horizon of the Jewish future in Poland. The storm that claimed the Rifkins’ child actually swallowed the Jewish future in Poland. This long

65 G. M., “A nayer yidisher film: A shmues mitn regiseur Aleksander Marten,” *Literarische bleter*, 16 December 1938, p. 752. See also Gross, *Toledot haKolno’a haYehudi*, p. 60.

66 G. M., “A nayer yidisher film.”

prologue, taking place in Poland, is completely absent from the play by Jacob Gordin on which this film was based. This addition by Marten stresses that the situation of homelessness in the film's title refers to Poland.

The father, symbolically called Avreymel (like the Biblical patriarch Abraham) is so distraught that he can no longer bear to remain in Poland. "Since Moyshe is gone, part of my heart has left me," the father says as he prepares to leave his wife Bassheve and their younger son Khonokh for America. The father is so distraught that he can no longer bear to remain in Poland. His wife and son finally come to America to join him. However, misfortune does not leave them: the family falls apart (due to the destructive power of Americanization), and Khonokh seemingly drowns in the Hudson River. Thus Poland's Vistula consumed the Jews, and America's Hudson offers no different fate. There is no future for the children of Abraham. Seemingly Khonokh drowned but an epilogue shows that he actually escaped to find a new life. He comes back to relieve his mother, who had gone mad from agony and grief. Surprisingly, the whole family reunites. At this happy moment Bassheve, the mother, says: "We will all be together now. You and I and your brother. Do you know where we are? We are underwater." It is my contention that the director wanted to stress in this way that even such a "happy end" emphasizes destruction and distress.

In the play by Jacob Gordin on which this film was based, Bassheve wants to return to Poland. In the film adaptation no such return was suggested. Indeed, Polish reality of the late 1930s offered no such option. The situation is at an impasse. Consequently the overall tone of the film is morbid. As film critic J. Hoberman noted, death is illustrated even by the musical motifs,⁶⁷ which according to Marten "play a special role."⁶⁸

On a Heym was released in Warsaw in March 1939. It was not well received. The Yiddish-language press complained about its pessimistic evaluation of reality. The distinguished *Literarische bleter* was astonished: "What Jew who gets a visa to America will complain that he has no home?"⁶⁹ However, no critic blamed the film for presenting the sorrowful prospects for the Jews on Polish soil. Even the specialized Polish-language film press, though critical of the film, noted its depiction of "the impetus of

67 Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, pp. 293–95.

68 G. M., "A nayer yidisher film," p. 752.

69 M. A-S, "Yidisher klangfilm 'On a heyim'," *Literarische bleter* 1939 (no. 773), p. 145.

the American life dreamed of by the Jewish masses” but did not express any disagreement with its somber representation of the Jewish future in Poland.⁷⁰

The motif of death was even more strongly evident in a third Yiddish film shot in Kazimierz during the late 1930s — *Der dibuk*, based on the 1914 play of the same name by S. An-Ski. As the press in Polish and Yiddish pointed out, only in a location like Kazimierz could such a fantastic story come to life: the town, in the words of *Literarische bleter*, offered “a magnificent background for An-ski’s dramatic legend, in which, Jewish folklore and dreams of romantic melancholy were woven together as if in a mystical tapestry.”⁷¹ *Kino dla wszystkich* used almost exactly the same language, echoing, probably, the words of the film’s director, Michał Waszyński.⁷² The film shows clear, sharp images of the town’s ruins — a decrepit barn, the dilapidated castle, the old cemetery — using an expressionist technique to present them in either very bright or very dark light. Its location shots effectively transformed the vivid symbol into a morbid one, reshaping the myth of Polish-Jewish coexistence in an inexplicable and inevitable one of predestined death. These shots were supplemented by studio-constructed images of a dark and oppressive small town.

Death is clearly the *Leitmotif* of *Der dibuk*: it appears in the death of Nissan, father of the ill-fated young talmudic scholar Khonon; in the death of Khonon himself; in the graveyard scenes; in the terrifying *Totentanz*, featuring a figure wearing a death mask; in the dead Khonon’s possession of the love of his life, Leah; and finally in Leah’s own death. Waszyński even transformed one of the most prominent motifs of the Yiddish cinema, the wedding — usually a symbol of continuity and hope⁷³ — into its opposite. In *Der dibuk* the wedding symbolizes death, hopelessness, a predetermined, inescapable, cruel fate.⁷⁴

70 *Film*, 1–10 April 1939 (no 9–10), p. 8.

71 M. Filmicus, “Oyf di landshaft: Oyfnames tsum ‘Dibuk’ film,” *Literarische bleter* 1937 (no. 29), p. 469.

72 “Z ‘Dybukiem’ do Kazimierza,” *Film*, 1 lipca 1937 (no. 19), p. 11.

73 Nugit Altshuler Oprichter, “Hatunot baKolno’a haAlilati haYidi uvaKolno’a haAlilati haYisra’eli ad shenat 1977,” unpublished MA thesis, University of Haifa, 2009, pp. 71–73.

74 Samuel Blumenfeld, *L’homme qui voulait être prince: les vies imaginaires de Michal Waszynski*, Paris 2006, pp. 79–98; Ira Konigsberg, “The Only ‘I’ in the World: Religion, Psychoanalysis, and the Dybbuk,” *Cinema Journal* 36 (1997):22–42; Daria Mazur, “Sfera pogranicza doczesności i transcendencji w Dybuku Michała Waszyńskiego,” in Piotr Zwierzchowski & Daria Mazur, eds., *Kino Polskie wczoraj i dziś*, Bydgoszcz 2005,

As Omer Bartov pointed it out, in this film the Jew is the victim of a destructive other and cannot be understood by rational means.⁷⁵ The hardship is displayed by choosing an expressionist style for the film. The death as a main motifs presented in *Der Dybuk* shows the despair to present any solution but disappearance. The play on which *Der dibuk* was based was subtitled “*tsvishn tsvey veltn*” (Between Two Worlds). Michał Wyszyński, the director — a filmmaker from the third space who until the late 1930s was known mainly as a director of exotic melodramas and light comedies⁷⁶ — was himself now caught between two worlds. The gradual exclusion of the Jews from Polish life in the late 1930s, coupled with an intensified process of “ethnification” and delegitimization of the Jewish voice in the public sphere, made him gradually less able to offer an optimistic view of his situation. As a person of the third space he now found himself personally under attack precisely for being what he was.⁷⁷

Ironically, even when the Yiddish films of the late 1930s that made reference to the iconic visions of Kazimierz and the Vistula River suggested that there was no place for Jewish existence there, they were mostly well received by the mass Yiddish press. *Yidl* was depicted as “a completely Jewish film.”⁷⁸ One reviewer praised the principal professionals behind the film, Tom and Nowina-Przybylski. It praised Tom, the well-known Polish cabaret artist, for creating a screenplay where “the action is genuinely Jewish.” The reviewer also praised Nowina-Przybylski, a well-known non-Jewish director of Polish films, for obtaining such a “Jewish” result: “it is astonishing how he, a Christian, directed such a genuine Jewish film.”⁷⁹

Like the Yiddish press, which was astonished that a Christian could create such a “Jewish” film, the conservative *Czas* presented a similar attitude. *Czas* asked mockingly, “What made the owners of a film restaurant [the producers] hire Polish cooks [the director] for a kosher meal [a Yiddish

pp. 22–36; Omer Bartov, *The “Jew” in Cinema. From The Golem to Don’t Touch My Holocaust*, Bloomington, IN 2005, p. 30.

75 Bartov, *The “Jew” in Cinema*, p. 29.

76 See Blumenfeld, *L’homme qui voulait être prince*.

77 See, for example, “Przeciw filmom żargonowym pod sztandarem polskim,” *Dziennik Poznański* 26 (1939): 9.

78 A. Lerman, “Der yidisher klang film ‘Yidl mint fidl’”, *Unzer Ekspres*, 6 October 1936.

79 Ibid.

film]?”⁸⁰ As far as the newspaper was concerned, for a non-Jew to direct a film in Yiddish was an oxymoron. It is my contention that both newspapers represented a powerful public voice that rejected the option of creating a “third space.”

The Polish nationalist press, not surprisingly, ignored the films. Thus, for instance, when providing information about films screened in Warsaw in late 1936, *ABC* divided the cinema repertoire into “recommended” and “other.” Understandably for this right wing paper, *Yidl* was placed in the second category.⁸¹ Several months later the daily changed the categories from “recommended screened films to “Christian films,” eliminating in this way any reference to Yiddish films.⁸² *Warszawski Dziennik Narodowy* carried out a similar strategy. It did not mention cinema houses owned by Jews, whether or not they Yiddish films, but only “Christian companies.”⁸³ Ignoring the Yiddish film industry and its agenda comported perfectly with their project to boycott the Jews.

Dziennik Poznański, a National Democratic daily, wanted not only to eliminate the very production of Yiddish films in Poland but rejected the “third space” milieu that created them. The daily claimed that the Yiddish films “are not patriotic:” they “have no clear motherland.”⁸⁴ It thus attacked the milieu evident in both cultural spheres as misrepresenting and damaging Polish national culture: “The spectator [abroad] will reach the conclusion that the *zhargon* is a Polish national language! It is impossible to distinguish between *Znachor* and *Dybuk*, both filmed in Poland, and in addition tampered with by the same Mister Waszyński.”⁸⁵ The newspaper called upon the Polish censor to take measures to limit the production of Yiddish films in Poland.

On the other hand, the state authorities who supervised the film industry applauded the attitude the Yiddish films expressed. Józef Relidziński, head of the central film desk in Poland’s Ministry of Internal Affairs, told Poland’s

80 *Czas*, 4 October 1936, quoted in Gross, *Toledot haKolno’a*, p. 67.

81 *ABC*, 28 October 1936 (no. 309), p. 5.

82 See, for instance, *ABC*, 1937 (no. 309), p. 5; 1 March 1939 (no. 60), p. 8; 24 March 1939 (no. 83), p. 8; 7 April 1939 (no. 97), p. 16.

83 See, for instance, *Warszawski Dziennik Narodowy*, 1 September 1937, p. 7, 26 September 1937, p. 10. I thank Kamil Kijek for the material on *ABC*, *Warszawski Dziennik Narodowy*, and many other Warsaw Polish dailies.

84 “Przeciw filmon żargonowym pod sztandarem polskim,” *Dziennik Poznański*, no. 26 (January 1939), p. 9. I thank Hanna Kozińska Witt for this reference.

85 *Ibid.*

film producers and directors in March 1939, “The Yiddish films produced in Poland present the Jewish reality in an appropriate light, and it is desirable that Polish films should also represent such reality in a more or less positive way”.⁸⁶ The films presented poverty, but they were photogenic; they showed misery, but they did so folkloristically. The latent protest they embodied could be noted only by skilled eyes aware of the inner cultural codes in which they spoke. Thus in the end they neither endangered the current state of affairs nor protested the hegemonic manner of dealing with a cruel reality.

In the growing antisemitic atmosphere of the late 1930s, people who merged Slavic and Jewish elements, who exemplified through their lives the integration of the two worlds, and, most significantly, who made films in each of the two languages, used the motif of Kazimierz and the Vistula to project onto the silver screen their vision and their project. Whereas during the 1920s they saw that project as viable and celebrated it, in the second half of the 1930s they used it to depict a somber future of distress. Like many others of this milieu they did not manage to present any viable alternative that could challenge this deplorable situation. It seems to me, therefore, that the filmmakers internalized the idea that the problems of Jewish existence in Poland could be solved only by radical means, either through social change (as in the banned *Mir kumen on*) or by emigration. They no longer hoped for a liberal solution that would satisfy the needs of both groups, Poles and Jews. And because emigration was not possible, and social revolutionary change was even less realistic, it makes sense that only despair remained for them.

It seems to me that this depiction of a distressed society with no solution but death, dreams of an impossible emigration, or other expressions of futility, illustrated on screen a situation that other dark political forces were trying to turn into reality. Inadvertently, it thus contributed to making that situation appear viable.

86 Quoted in “Konferencja w Ministerstwie Spraw Wewnętrznych w sprawie tematyki filmów krajowej produkcji,” *Film*, 1 March 1939, p. 1; “Komunikat Prasowy związku Dziennikarzu i Publicystów Filmowych,” *Wiadomości Filmowe*, 1 March 1939, p. 3.

