

READINGS:

Schlemiels & Schlimazls



Jay Boyer, "The Schlemiezel: Black Humor and the Shtetl Tradition," from *Semites and Stereotypes: Characteristics of Jewish Humor*, eds. Avner Ziv and Anat Zajdman (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993): 3-12.

In *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1981), M. H. Abrams aligns black humor with the theater of the absurd. In the *Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1976), Harry Shaw defines it as humor which is perverted or morbid, a literary elaboration on our sick joke or on an American brand of gallows humor. In "Anatomy of Black Humor" (1970), scholar Burton Feldman describes it as the American correlative to French existentialism, with a commitment most of all to "detachment." Scholar Ihab Hassan (1971) puts it in an American tradition of the grotesque. John W. Aldridge (1983) places it in an American romantic tradition, one heading "away from the fictional treatment of actual events toward the creation of metaphoric and fabulative impressions of the kind of derangement that may be responsible for these events" (p. 74).

Bruce Jay Friedman, less willing to commit himself, and not nearly so trusting of the scholarly method, fails to come up with a satisfying definition. "I think I would have more luck defining an elbow or a corned beef sandwich," he explains in the foreword to *Black Humor*. "I am not, for one thing, even sure it is black. It might be fuchsia or eggshell" (1969, p. viii). Friedman throws up his hands in the end, defining black humor as that which cannot be defined.

That's a joke, of course, but one much in keeping with the absurdist spirit of black humor. It's the kind of joke Richard Kostelanetz, writing in 1967, was finding central to this new, strange subgenre of American fiction: [3]

In recent American fiction, both long and short, many of the best works express one of two complementary themes: the absurdity of society and the madness of the self. In contrast to the European absurd novel of, say, Sartre and Albert Camus, which discovers through description of rather normal activities a disjunction between values and behavior, intention and effect, belief and



reality, so broad and irrefutable that the world is meaningless, the American absurd novel . . . [is] an exuberant, nonrealistic portrait of thoroughly ridiculous events which, in toto, suggests that the world is ultimately senseless. In the novel form, the absurd writer can take on history itself, as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Joseph Heller do, and show in a sprawling, diffuse narrative that history, both in its single events and on the whole, is absurd . . . but American [short] story writers confine their absurd vision to more modest, mundane activities. To Donald Barthelme, in many of his stories, the capacity to spend large amounts of money renders life absurd. To Kenneth Koch . . . the absurd activity is the vain attempt to define in declarative sentences the ambiguous experience of art; for Bernard Malamud, it is the artist's irrational and indestructible devotion to his own work; and to Jack Ludwig, it is all situations that reveal the nonsensical discrepancy between social demands and images and individual desires and identities. (Kostelanetz, 1967, pp. 16-17)

Reading what has been written about black humor since the 1960s, one is apt to be impressed with how little specific agreement there is about what the term really means. Too, one is apt to be impressed with the tendency of scholars of American literature to acknowledge its debt to European letters only in passing. Perhaps that is the most impressive thing as one reviews this scholarship, in fact – that, somehow, black humor is agreed to be a literature of the absurd which, by degree if not kind, stands distinctly apart from any European writing.

I want to suggest an alternative line of thought. I am going to propose that black humor, coming to the American canon of letters after World War II, may have some of its deepest roots not in our literary traditions but rather in a tradition we think of as Eastern European. I have in mind the tradition of the fool-as-protagonist; and more precisely, the shtetl tradition of the schlemiel and the schlimazl. For the purpose of this chapter, I am going to call this peculiarly modern, American protagonist the schlemiezel. In broadest terms, I mean by schlemiezel a protagonist who has only lately come to our novels, one who is a loser, a failure, a

man out of control, a city dweller living most often on the East Coast, and, matters of proper geography aside, an "immigrant" who feels he lives [4] among "natives." This is a protagonist who emerges in his most pristine form, I believe, not in the novels of such widely accepted American black humorists as Pynchon and Barth and Heller, but rather in the novels of writers we think of as being pronouncedly Jewish American, among them, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth. This is a protagonist who by his very presence violates some of our most basic suppositions about this country and the literature it has produced.

To be sure, a full exploration of the matters I intend to raise is well beyond the scope of this chapter; a reader must stand warned. Rather than define black humor once and for all, or to find the place of the fool within it, all I hope to do is to offer a line of thought that might be worth pursuing, one that may lead to some greater agreement about what black humor is and how it came to be.

THE FOOL AS SCHLEMIEL AND SCHLIMAZL

Traditionally, ours has been a literature of accommodation at one extreme and of rebellion at the other. Black humor holds that neither choice is viable any longer, and it is often from the protagonist's failure to recognize this that the comedy originates. We see, even if he doesn't, that choosing is out of the question. If not by an act of God, then at least by an act of cultural fate, he is doomed to live the life he lives -- helpless, without alternatives, not better off than he is at the moment.

Such a point of view is virtually un-American. It suggests a spirit more often associated with the European immigrant than with the native, a sense of an America close at hand and yet nevertheless out of reach. And that may be telling. For black humor may owe a greater debt to European influence than we have fully recognized. In fact, a literature we associate with Barth, William Burroughs, Pynchon, James Purdy, a rather WASPish group, really, may owe a significant debt to the fools of Eastern European shtetl tradition, the *schlemiel* and the *schlimazl*.

The simplest definition of these terms is probably the best, to begin with. The cliché would have it that the *schlemiel* is the poor soul who spills his bowl of soup, while the *schlimazl* is the poor soul he spills it on. That's not a bad distinction. But the matter is slightly more complicated.

The *schlemiel* is a "loser," I would argue. He's a failure. He was born that way. There is nothing he can do to change this, for he was born without the resources necessary to become more than he already is.

To be a *schlimazl*, though – that's a different matter. The *schlimazl* is a combination of strengths and weaknesses. He's just a man, to be sure, but a man with the potential for better. [5]

The *schlemiel* tries to understand his world using what we quickly recognize are oversimplified beliefs. It's not just that he believes in magic, superstition, and more of the same. Logic, facts, the assimilation of information – such things are virtually beyond him.

Rather than allowing facts to alter his beliefs, the *schlemiel* interprets events to fit what he already believes. This is just the opposite of what the *schlimazl* does. Possessing a keener, more rational mind, the *schlimazl* tries to integrate more information than he should. Try as he might to hold one set of beliefs fixed in his mind, try as he might to maintain one logical superstructure, new information bombards him. He cannot revise quickly enough to keep up with events.

Unlike the *schlemiel*, the *schlimazl* takes it all in – that's not his problem. His problem is rather that he doesn't know what to do with the information once he has it. And as a consequence, he is constantly modifying his system of beliefs, trying fruitlessly to find a place for everything, then trying to put everything in its place.

The *schlemiel* is the butt of the joke. Lacking the skills and resources the society embraces, he becomes the outsider. He is incapable of fitting in, for he is incapable of the sort of accommodation the culture demands. But that is not true of the *schlimazl*. Often he has these skills. Too, he

often occupies what might otherwise be a respected position in the community, if only someone else were to occupy it. He learns all the rules, obeys all the laws, lives by all the orders . . . and yet, somehow, for some reason, he never quite prospers. He does all the things the culture says he must do in order to succeed, and fails nevertheless.

The *schlemiel* doesn't develop very much as a character from beginning to end of the story. He is already who he is going to be at the moment we meet him: a dim-witted fellow, most often, someone without the skills of self-preservation his culture demands, someone ruled more by the heart than by the head. He is also someone more likely to react to situations as they occur than someone who acts on his own behalf. It doesn't really occur to him to try to have his own way with the world.

This last point is particularly significant, for it speaks to why we tend to embrace the fool of shtetl tradition. Without fully recognizing it, the fool stands in opposition to what his culture holds up as a model for manhood. And when we compare him with that model, it is the model, not the *schlemiel*, that we are most likely to question. We recognize through the process of comparison that the *schlemiel* is too good for this world – too sweet, too kind, too human to fit in.

This is less true of the *schlimazl*, though the function he serves in the narrative is closely related. He embraces his culture, accommodates it, makes its rules and regulations his own, compromises his [6] wishes and dreams, bends to accommodate his culture until he finds himself in the shape of a paper clip – and for what? Everything he touches turns to dung. Nothing his culture has taught helps him get what he wants.

BLACK HUMOR AND THE AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION

These distinctions may help us understand and appreciate the protagonists of that form of fiction we have come to call black humor. I identify black humor with particular post-World War II American novelists and their work. I am thinking of the novels of writers as otherwise diverse as John Barth, William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon,

James Purdy, J. P. Donleavy, Terry Sothorn, and John Hawkes. Joseph Heller is occasionally placed in their midst as well, but of late he is just as likely to be grouped with Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Bruce Jay Friedman, Philip Roth, and Herb Gold – that is, as more a Jewish humorist, whatever that means, than a black humorist. And, as I will discuss a bit later, we may be able to account for this cross-over and be guided by it, perhaps.

By the phrase black humor, I mean much what the gifted American scholar Donald Greiner has in mind in the introduction to *Comic Terror*, his study of the works of John Hawkes, one of the darkest of our black humorists. Like Greiner, I use the phrase black humor with three things in mind. The first of these has to do with authorial vision, one which is comic, and then again not:

The comparable blackness of a particular writer's humor is indeed secondary – all are black, but some are blacker, and funnier, than others. More important is the attempt to decide what the presence of so many modern American comic novelists means. Taken together, the novels of Hawkes, Kurt Vonnegut, Heller, John Barth, Donleavy, Friedman, Thomas Pynchon, Ken Kesey, James Purdy and others suggest a type of fiction so refreshingly different from the conventional novel that one suspects prophets of the novel's death to be wrong. What these authors do have in common is a vision of their world as chaotic and fractured. How can one affirm order in a world which is fragmented? (Greiner, 1973, p. xiii)

In addition to this fragmented, disjunctive sense of lived reality in the modern world, the novels themselves seem fragmented, disjointed, often out of whack and comically illogical. Conventions of plot, character, setting, and theme are often called into question. And why not? None of these writers is certain that an inherent moral order can be found, he suggests, nor do they believe that we can be [7] ordered to approximate it. Writes Greiner, "At the risk of oversimplification, I suggest that these authors refuse to verify a moral code because verification would allude to order and sanity in a world which they see as fractured and absurd" (p. xiii).

Satirists have long pointed out the absurdity of human experience, of course, and much of the humor in literature is dark to the point of being gallows humor. Yet the black humorist is not a satirist as such, nor is his humor precisely gallows humor. For "black humorists reject the satirist's faith in the ability of satirical laughter to reform man's follies. Even the most elaborate definition of satire must emphasize the author's use of laughter not so much to tear down as to encourage rebuilding. The black humorist dismisses reformatory and ethical certainties" (Greiner, 1973, p. xiv).

I would agree with Greiner on all of these points, but I would like to try to go beyond them. If black humor is not what we normally think of as literary satire, neither is it what we normally think of as American literature. That's a sweeping statement, I realize, and it calls for a bit of background and explanation.

To begin with, ours is a literature more agrarian than urban, more Western than Eastern. As Leslie Fiedler, Richard Chase, and countless other scholars have demonstrated, the American novel has its deepest roots in a romantic, frontier mentality, one evident in this country well before we had a printed literature of our own. One has only to consider our oral traditions to see what they mean. As a country, we are somewhat unique insofar as our richest oral traditions are divisible by gender. On the one hand, there are what we call fairy tales. These were known as old wives' tales in the last century, and in either case they are stories and story lines brought to this country from Europe and handed down from the "old wife," that is, the grandmother of the family, to the children for whom she was caring.

That in the extended family the task of raising infants was generally left to the husband's mother is reflected in the fairy tales we read to our children today. The most positive image of an adult woman in our fairy tales is the fairy godmother, the white-haired, apple-cheeked matron who makes wishes come true with the wave of her wand. In other words, the grandmother has cast herself in the most favorable adult female role, leaving her daughter-in-law to fend for herself.

Daughters-in-law, mothers, in other words, don't fare very well in our fairy tales. This is true even in their Disneyfied, twentieth-century variations, in which the wicked mother becomes the wicked stepmother. She is more often the cause of the young protagonist's dilemma – think of the mother-daughter sexual rivalry in *Snow White*, to name but one instance – than the source of the protagonist's salvation. [8]

That the grandmother should have cast her daughter-in-law in such an unfavorable light suggests that certain family tensions have been common down through the ages; and this suggestion is complemented, perhaps, by her depiction of her son. Only the adolescent male, the handsome young prince, the unmarried son, is sure to have our storyteller's blessing. Positive images of adult males are virtually as hard to come by in our fairy tales as positive images of women, for the men in our fairy tales are alternately ineffectual (that is, dominated by a scheming woman), evil, or downright stupid.

Such sexual prejudices are small potatoes, however, when one compares them with those of our second oral tradition – the tall tale, the "fish" story. These are male stories with a capital M. They emerged on the frontiers of America as men sought to entertain one another at the end of the day, and perhaps as a consequence, they are about male exploits in the absence of women, told with just the flare for exaggeration that one might expect.

List the legendary figures to emerge in this American oral tradition -- Paul Bunyan, John Henry, and so forth – and you will note that they share certain things in common. Size, for one thing. They're bigger than life. Whether they are figures cut from whole cloth, like Paul Bunyan, or vast exaggerations of men who actually lived, John Henry or Johnny Appleseed, they are sure to be either men of giant size and capabilities or men with some special, natural talent that allows them to impose their will on the frontier landscape.

This imposition of will is central to the heroes we have honored through our legends. If you seek to be an American folk hero, the subject of stories passed along from one generation to the next, you're wasting

your time in investment banking. Choose instead to live on the frontier, that is, to the west of city life, and choose to work with your body. For frontier, physical skills, and the prowess they entail are requisite to the image of maleness that these folktales project.

And requisite too is the need to perform as a male in the absence of women. In American folklore, you must head for the sea or the nearest frontier if you want to be a man's man – the water, the wilderness, any place a woman might be unlikely to go. Women played a significant role in the settling of this country, but there is little evidence to that effect in our folktales. Our folk heroes not only do their best male work independent of women, they do so far away from city life, from domesticity and churches and schools, away from all the institutions where a woman would be expected to leave her mark.

To be a man in our folktales is to be most of all in control of things, and traditionally, this was to be found as well in our print literature. In its simplest form, this has meant to impose your will on the landscape, cutting down timber at an impossible pace, say, or laying railroad ties due westward, but it has also meant imposing your will on other people without a woman there who will stop you. In [9] literature both "highbrow" and "lowbrow" we find such things. Take the western, the most American of all American genres.

A nation too young to have an *Odyssey* or an *Iliad* or an *Aeneid*, we have in their place the American cowboy and tales of his exploits and journeys. The cowboy's physical courage, his stoic dignity, his self-sufficiency, his penchant for moving beyond the latest civilized settlement are more the stuff of legend and penny-dreadful novels than of American historical fact. Yet the cowboy occupies a larger place in our mythology than he could ever have occupied as a historical figure. To much of the world he is an icon of this country – for better or worse. He is the physical embodiment of American personhood (a euphemism for American manhood), the corporal reification of our obsession with independence, remaining in control of our own fate, and living by a code of honor having less to do with the letter of the law than with a fiercely independent sense of right and wrong.

IN THE TRADITION OF THE FOOL

It is not hard to see why the *schlemiezel* might be a rather new addition to our literature, coming as he does with the rise of black humor and a particular sort of postwar Jewish American writing as well.

Whether it be physical sexual prowess, as in Norman Mailer, the prowess of the seaman, as in Herman Melville, the prowess of the frontiersman, as in James Fenimore Cooper, the prowess of economics, as in F. Scott Fitzgerald, or the prowess to be had through a private codification of American maleness, as in Ernest Hemingway, it is prowess our literature has honored traditionally. Perhaps that has been its single greatest concern. From its very beginnings, ours has been a literature filled with protagonists determined to gain control of a situation, to take charge of their own destinies, to "light out for the territory," as Mark Twain puts it at the end of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and fend for ourselves.

We have not suffered victims gladly in such a tradition. Beginning in this country before print literature itself, the victim has been alternately an enigma and an embarrassment. Or at least we haven't suffered victims until lately, for black humor is just filled with them.

The protagonist called to mind by the phrase black humor is a loser. He's not simply the naif, the picaro figure, a Huck Finn – the outsider. We have always liked to honor outsiders. He's different. He's inept.

Too, he's a weakling. And worse, he's out of control. I don't mean to say merely that he can't gain control of his own fate, though that's often the case as well; I mean rather that he himself is out of control. He's everything the stoic cowboy would despise. Women torment [10] him, bullies kick sand in his face, parents nag him, and in response, he whines, he bitches, he moans.

This new sort of American protagonist is more Eastern than Western, more likely to be city-bound than at home on the range. As portrayed by our black humorists, he's defined by all the things that limit him. He's

the embodiment of that great American male fear, impotence. Figuratively, and sometimes literally, he can't get it up.

Overcome by the landscape in which he finds himself, he can't even flee when he wants to. He may try to flee the city, of course; but this won't come to much – we know that. It's one of the great lessons of these novels that all American highways lead back to where they began.

This same sense of circularity is to be found on yet another level. Traditionally in our literature protagonists have followed one of two paths. The first of these has been the most satisfying, but it has also been the most risky: to create a system of values and live true to them, recognizing all the while that to live true to yourself must come at a price.

The second, and often the more practical, path has been to find one's place in the culture, to adopt a role, if you will, one replete with customs and values, and then accommodate that role as well as you can. This is what it has often meant to live one's life as a man: to choose between rebellion, on the one hand, and accommodation on the other. But to choose – that's the thing!

Not now, however; at least not in black humor. What sense is there in making a choice when neither alternative can satisfy? Why choose at all, then? Why light out when there's no territory to light out for?

THE SCHLEMIETZEL AS CONTEMPORARY PROTAGONIST

Both the *schlemiel* and the *schlimazl* serve to point us toward some higher order, toward some greater scheme of things than the values of their own culture, and it is here that black humor and the shtetl tradition of the fool meet and then part company. Black humor denies this greater scheme of things. It envisions neither gods nor devils. It has faith in neither grace nor transgression. Nor, for that matter, does it embrace the shtetl's *schlemiel* or *schlimazl* as such.

What we find instead are protagonists midway between these two points

on a continuum, as it were, characters embodying the failings of both extremes, moving first toward the right, then back toward the left, forever betwixt and between.

This is a new notion of American manhood, American man as *Homo incapacitus*, one might say, where man is defined by his incapacities – a notion offering us in place of the fool and his goodness only the sense of man's loss. At one moment rebelling, at [11] another trying to accommodate, at one moment trying to fit the information to a closed set of beliefs, at the next moment furiously trying to rearrange these beliefs to fit the latest information, they are hybrids, one and all classic fools, and then again not: *schlemiezels*.

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Wegman Brothers Joke Books (1905)

Lawrence J. Epstein, selections from *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001).

“The Land of Hope and Tears: Comedians and Immigrant America”: 3-20.

Meyer Kubelsky's father had to struggle for nearly ten years before saving enough money to send his son to the Golden Land, the one place where hope still breathed, where Jews, through hard work and cheerful optimism, could survive, the land where even the Cossacks could not ride their horses. Meyer's father, a wine merchant, had followed the rules and gotten a passport for his son. Then, with the frightening control the authorities so arbitrarily exercised over Jewish lives, a government official told the family that despite the passport Meyer would not be allowed to leave. Distraught, the father concocted a desperate plan. He knew a man who delivered empty bottles to the Kubelsky wine shop and tavern. The man, seeking to help the young Kubelsky [3] and to make a profit, agreed to the plan: Meyer would be smuggled out of Lithuania, hiding under a shipment of the bottles.

The escape was successful. Meyer made his way to Hamburg, a principal departure point for ships to America, and in 1889 he landed in New York Harbor. Ellis Island had not yet been designated as the entry point for new immigrants, so Meyer entered the country through Castle Garden. He remained in New York for just a few days before setting out across the country to Chicago, where some of his landsmen had already settled and where he would eventually marry and become the father of a son named Benjamin, later known as Jack Benny.

Such stories were not unique. Although most accounts of Jewish immigration to America begin at the New World's gateway, typically New York, in fact the effort to reach such debarkation points as Hamburg was often the most dangerous part of the entire journey. Sophie Tucker, for example, was born on the road from Russia across Poland. Her mother and young brother were traveling in a large wagon when Sophie's mother tapped the driver on the shoulder to let him know

that the baby inside her had decided to enter the world. The driver promptly let the expectant mother and the two-year-old boy named Philip off the wagon – and then drove away. Luckily, there was a house nearby, and the mother and son got there in time for Sophie to be born. Sophie Tucker's mother was seventeen years old.

Marrying so young was common. Another young man living in Eastern Europe named Louis Birnbaum was sixteen when he married Dorothy Bluth, fourteen. Two years and two children later, the couple decided that their future lay in the faraway land that all young Jewish people were talking about. After a two-week journey, they arrived in New York, where they would eventually have twelve children, the most famous of whom grew up to be George Burns. [4]

Many immigrants traveled alone and, like Meyer Kubelsky, would meet other immigrants in America and get married. Sam Marx, for instance, emigrated from Alsace wearing a green topcoat and a black stovepipe hat. Minnie Schoenberg came to America at fifteen from Dornum, Germany, where her father was a magician and her mother a harpist. Sam married her when Minnie was eighteen, and together they raised the most brilliant, riotous, hilarious brother act in American history, sons who would define comedy for their generation and beyond.

Most of the comedians who became famous at the beginning of the twentieth century had ancestors who left Russia or Poland and ventured across hostile land only to make a dangerous ocean crossing and to disembark poverty stricken onto the shores of their dreamland. They joined the German Jewish immigrants who had come earlier in the nineteenth century and the Sephardic Jews who had come even earlier.

Some of these comedians' ancestors had come earlier as well. George Jessel's grandfather, Edward Aaron Jessel, entered America in 1835, immediately joined in the gold rush, and eventually became an auctioneer in Chicago. Jessel's father was a playwright who then traveled the country selling what he could.

Also, not all immigrants were poor. Milton Berle's father and the rest of

the Berlinger family came from Wamp, Germany, and were well off. The first Uncle Miltie (Milton Berle's actual uncle for whom he was named) would rise to become the vice president of the Ex-Lax Corporation. The Berlingers were deeply proud of their German Jewish heritage and, like some others in that community, believed that the East European Jews were beneath them. Berle's mother's family came from Poland and was poor. His father's family was so upset at the match that they disowned him.

These families of the great comedians were part of a historic movement of the Jewish people. Between 1880 and 1920, 2 million [5] Jews from Eastern Europe came to the United States. One-third of East European Jews left their homeland, with 80 percent coming to knock on America's Golden Door.

They came for a variety of reasons. They were mostly poor, of course, and they saw in America a chance to pick up the gold that surely lay untouched on every street. Jews were persecuted as well. The sad legacy of the hatred of the Jews had its own poignant nineteenth-century chapters.

Still, up until the last two decades of the century, Jews prayed and adapted; they rarely left their Russian villages. Despite the crushing poverty, most Jews accepted their condition as a seemingly permanent element of Jewish existence.

The generally optimistic spirit of the age buoyed the Jews and allowed them to perceive continuing Russian hatred of the Jews as a historical anachronism doomed to oblivion by what they sensed would be the inevitably humanizing effects of a spreading European enlightenment. In time, the Jews generally believed, czarist Russia would evolve into a democracy that would grant them civil and religious rights. They saw no urgent need to leave their homes when the light of reason streaming across Europe was headed their way.

These hopes evaporated immediately after the assassination of Czar Alexander II of Russia in 1881. Although Jews were not involved in the

attack, the new czar, Alexander III, blamed them. The czar had a fanatic hater of Jews as a teacher, Konstantin Pobedonostev, who wielded immense power in the government. Together they developed a neatly symmetrical solution to what Pobedonostev termed Russia's Jewish problem: one-third of the Jews would emigrate, one-third would be converted to Russian Orthodoxy, and one-third would starve to death. At the time, Russian Jews constituted half the Jews in the world.

In April 1881, the first organized attack against the Jews prompted [6] by the assassination began. Although pogroms had occurred earlier in Russian history, this new fury was coordinated and supported by the government, and had clear political and economic goals. About thirty more attacks took place just in April. They continued into May and then resumed in July and August. Over time, the increasingly violent pogroms were characterized by the murders of individuals or whole families, numerous sexual assaults, the looting of property, and the burning of houses and land.

The Russian government, arguing that the peasants had to be protected from the purported economic domination by Jews, began passing laws (known as the "May Laws") that forbade the Jews from returning to their hometowns and that severely restricted their access to a high school education.

The military draft was another factor sending Jews out of the land. The May Laws and hatred of the Jews did not prevent the czar from continuing the practice of conscripting Jewish boys. At the age of eight, they were drafted as cantonists, or military trainees. They continued with that training for ten years at which time they were drafted into the army. The young Jews were obligated to serve in the army for twenty-five years. They were not, of course, allowed to follow Jewish customs during their service; religious Jews were forcibly fed pork products. Every Russian town had a quota to fill. As the New York Evening Post wryly commented in 1905 about Jews being conscripted to fight in the Russo Japanese War: "Russia, while denying her Jewish subjects all civil rights, does not object to sending them to Manchuria to stop Japanese bullets."

The increasingly tenuous lives that the Jews of Russia led became simply intolerable. These realities prompted especially young Jews to conclude that their parents' hopes for a democratic Russia were dangerous delusions. The young unblinkingly looked at the lives they were going to lead and realized that escape to [7] America, however wrenching the departure, however uncertain the prospects, provided the best hope for a place where their dreams and their futures would not be crushed.

So, more and more, the younger generation of Jews left Eastern Europe. The trip itself was made affordable even for the poverty-stricken masses of Jews by the increasing use of steamships, which could make the journey across the Atlantic in eight to fourteen days depending on the weather, rather than the previous one to three months. The steamships journeyed to America to collect freight to take back to Europe and saw in potential immigrants a way to make extra money by filling their empty ships on the way west. Most Jews found it possible to save the thirty four dollars it cost to go from Hamburg to New York. Of course, the steamship companies tried to make the voyage appear attractive. The advertising posters showed parties on board the ships as potential immigrants headed toward the land of liberty.

For its part, America needed the immigrants. Six hundred thousand Civil War deaths had left a huge shortage of workers for decades to come. This happened at the same time as the American gears of capitalism shifted forcefully into forward. Of course, America had tremendous natural resources. These, combined with the effects of the Industrial Revolution in providing new machinery, completely altered the economic landscape. Still, people were needed to do the work. Between 1865 and 1900, the population of the United States doubled in large part because of immigration and despite the losses from the Civil War. Manufactured goods increased sevenfold. This led to a quadrupling of America's national wealth. America desperately needed more healthy workers if the boom was to continue.

Almost all of the Jewish immigrants were, indeed, healthy. This was not only a tribute to their hygienic habits and their kosher diets, but also

reflected the simple economic fact that steamship [8] lines would not accept as passengers anyone in obvious bad health. The companies were held responsible not only for returning the ill back to Europe but were charged one hundred dollars by immigration authorities for each of those passengers as well. Indeed, on the ships themselves, the baggage was fumigated and antiseptic baths were given. Passengers stayed in seaport hotels for about four days, and then, thirty-six hours before departure, they were deloused again and put in quarantine on a clean side of the hotel.

The ships had three classes of passengers: first class, second class, and steerage – the unhappy alternative most Jews were forced to choose because of their economic straits. Steerage (named for where the steering mechanisms for the ship had once been placed) was on the lower deck. A thousand people were packed onto the deck for the voyage. People wore their clothes the entire trip, slept when they could and where they had been placed, felt most forcefully the rocking of the boat during storms, and had to endure a pervasive stench that inevitably accompanied the overcrowding.

For those immigrants who came to New York, the first stop was actually the Hudson or East River Pier. First- and second-class passengers were examined on board and allowed to enter. Steerage passengers were sent on a ferry or barge to Ellis Island to be examined. Sometimes, of course, hours were spent on the boat even before being sent to Ellis Island.

When the immigrants finally were off the ferry or barge and, for the first time in weeks, felt the land beneath their tired feet, some bent down and kissed the ground.

As they came onto Ellis Island, landing cards pinned to their clothing, they went in groups of thirty to the front door and into the baggage room. From the baggage room, the immigrants went up the staircase to the second floor. There was a line inspection, with officials searching for immigrants who had any difficulty [9] breathing or made odd facial expressions (indicating mental problems). Blue chalk marks were put on the lapel of immigrants who required further scrutiny. An X chalk mark

indicated a mental illness was suspected. If the X was circled, the inspector believed that the immigrant showed definite signs of such an illness.

Of course, for immigrants this health inspection was both odd and profoundly embarrassing. Many of the Jews had never been to a doctor. Their religion and cultural upbringing made them very uneasy about exposing even part of themselves in a large room filled with strangers.

Those who passed the health inspection went to the Registry Hall, a hot and crowded place where immigrants sat on benches waiting for their names to be called. The average wait was five hours. The hall was divided into sections based on the country of origin. The immigrant was eventually called up to see the official, who used the manifest lists with their twenty-nine questions to grill the immigrant. Could the immigrant read? Write?

The trickiest question of all involved work. Immigrants were asked if they had jobs waiting. It might be assumed that a positive answer to this question would help the immigrant. In fact, those immigrants who had jobs waiting were sent back; they were seen as taking jobs from Americans. Young, single women without sponsors were detained until social workers could find someone to sponsor them.

After the Registry Hall, immigrants descended the stairs (dubbed by them the "stairs of separation") and went either to the detention room or to the "kissing post," so-called because they could see the people—often their families—who were coming to meet them. They then went to the service center where, for example, they could exchange money, and, finally, they left Ellis Island – the place the immigrants dubbed the Isle of Hope, the Isle of Tears – and walked through the Golden Door to America. [10]

Most Jewish immigrants to America went first to New York City. Some, like Henny Youngman's father, headed to the Lower East Side and the Mills Hotel, which charged twenty-five cents a night and was popular with the new immigrants who didn't have waiting families. Others

became boarders with families. Soon the Lower East Side became a teeming symbol of immigrant Jewish life.

In 1880, there were 80,000 Jews living in New York. By 1910, that number had swelled to 1,250,000. By one estimate, a typical block consisted of 2,781 people – and no bathtubs. George Burns, for example, lived at 259 Rivington Street with a coal-burning stove in the kitchen used for both cooking and heating. The three bathrooms for the building were three flights down the stairs and out into the yard. The family lit the apartment by gaslight, and when the gas ran out they had to put a quarter in the meter. Baths were a special problem in the household. On Thursdays, Burns's mother would boil water and pour it into her washtub. The girls would jump into the washtub first, one at a time, moving quickly, and then the boys rushed in, each in turn, hoping the water would still be hot when they got there. No one dared hope the water would still be clean.

Eddie Cantor's mother died a few months before his second birthday, his father either died or disappeared soon after, and his grandmother Esther Kantrowitz raised the young boy. The poor woman took her grandson and moved to a basement apartment at 47 Henry Street. The apartment had three rooms, a living room, kitchen, and bedroom. They rarely had money. Once, when Cantor needed to see a dentist but couldn't afford to go, he earned money by going down to the docks and bringing new immigrants to boardinghouses. The renters paid Cantor a small commission, and soon he got his teeth fixed.

Cantor's strongest memory was the heat in the summer. As in [11] all tenements, gas jets and steam boilers supplemented the sun's heat. It could be unbearable; for example, in just eight days in 1896, 420 New Yorkers died from the heat. Tenement dwellers had other worries as well, particularly fires caused by the heat and the smoking of cigarettes.

A typical tenement building had six or seven stories, usually with four apartments on each floor. Most front apartments had four rooms, whereas rear apartments had 325 square feet partitioned into three rooms. The back apartments were not desirable because of the foul smell coming

from the shared privies in the backyard. One room in each apartment faced the street or other tenements, presumably to let in sunlight. The other rooms were so dark that a law was passed in 1901 requiring every room to have a window, whether or not the window faced the outdoors. Children frequently slept on orange crates or thick rugs. The ten- to twenty-dollar monthly rent could most commonly be paid only if a family took in boarders who slept on cots or folded beds, in a situation sadly reminiscent of their lives in steerage. Many women used the front room for piecework, sewing clothing, rolling cigars, gluing labels on cigar boxes, making artificial flowers, or other similar jobs.

The streets, too, were crowded. On Friday mornings in the market on Hester Street, a double row of pushcarts filled the area. People, struggling to prepare for the Sabbath – "Shabbes" in Yiddish – pushed and wiggled, looking for the perfect piece of fruit to eat. Fish was particularly popular for Shabbes dinner. Old men with beards behind the pushcarts screamed in Yiddish: "Gutes frucht! Metzihs!" meaning "Good fruit! Bargains!" Often they would interject English. "Three pennies for the whole lot" became "Drei pennies die whole lot."

Deprived for so long of the certainty that there would be food for the next meal, Jews embraced the abundance of food in the [12] Golden Land. Mothers, especially, urged their children to eat. Food was a living symbol of the Jewish drive for survival. A chicken on Shabbes meant a successful life. The aroma of a Shabbes meal sustained many with its rich assurances and its heady promises of even greater success.

These streets overflowed with boisterous merchants and were raucous with the teeming collective rhythms of immigrant life. The children played stickball when they could and looked for free ways to entertain one another. Eddie Cantor's first audience was made up of all the kids in his neighborhood. Cantor dated a young woman named Kitty Brookman when she was fourteen or fifteen. Although the romance didn't blossom, Kitty never quite got out of the comedy business. After marrying someone else, she later gave birth to a boy who grew up to be Mel Brooks.

The difficult life they led might have crushed others, but the Jews and other immigrants were survivors. They were mostly young and optimistic. They dwelled in the house of possibility. Their sense of adventure – exemplified in their willingness to leave Eastern Europe and journey to a new life – carried them through tough times. Additionally, the Jews had a healthy tradition of helping one another. Landsmanshaften, or mutual aid societies for people from the same city or town, sprang up, providing much-needed health insurance and for such matters as burials. The landsmanshaften supplemented the more fundamental unit of immigrant Jewish life: the family. For Jews the family meant not just the immediate or even extended family, but ultimately included the entire community. A sense of communal obligation encompassed all those within the immigrant Jewish world. When families were in trouble – when, for instance, a husband died or abandoned the family – others came to provide support.

Family in this broader sense was assumed by Jews to be part of life. Jews might (and did) complain about a spouse's habits, a [13] child's truancy and bad manners, a parent's refusal to learn English, or an aunt or uncle's meddling. Sometimes they even did this in public, in the *Bintel Brief* column of the most famous of the Yiddish dailies, the *Forverts* (the *Jewish Daily Forward*). Letters were printed in the column, and then an editor would respond to them. The plaintive, despairing tone of many of the missives reflects the troubled communal substructure that betrays any attempt to romanticize immigrant life. But, despite the annoyances engendered by such a life, the assumption that, however meddling, a family was always there, a last resort in times of trouble, was ultimately comforting. Such an assumption would give Jewish comedians a tremendous psychological resource, not to mention generations of material.

There was also a strong religious life in the neighborhood. In 1905, the Lower East Side housed 350 congregations in synagogues and storefronts. An exciting Jewish cultural flowering was also taking place there. There were Yiddish newspapers (four dailies before World War I), books, and theater. Yiddish plays were filled with adoration of the "Yiddische mama," the Jewish mother. Almost every play had a wedding

and a happy ending. This sentimental communal experience was vital in reassuring the Jews that their arduous trip across the Atlantic had not deprived them of their heritage.

In a way, the Yiddish theater was a counterpoint to vaudeville, which was more American. It is no accident that Burns, Berle, Benny, Cantor, Jessel, Brice, and the other comedians of that age did not go to the Yiddish theater, for they sought a larger stage. The great Yiddish stars, with rare exceptions, never achieved fame outside the Jewish community. Even at this point, there was a struggle within the American Jewish soul about whether they should embrace their tradition or their new land.

There were other attempts at community in the new country as [14] well. Immigrant Jewish workers frequently joined together for common cause, attempting to organize unions. The 1909 strike by teenage women shirtwaist workers and the 1910 strike of sixty thousand largely male cloak makers provided huge victories for the workers and gave great strength to the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, which had been established in 1902.

Of course, not all Jews lived on the Lower East Side. The Marx Brothers grew up in Yorkville, a German neighborhood, and lived at 179 East Ninety-third Street. Bert Lahr lived at First Avenue and Eighty-fourth Street. Phil Silvers was born at 417 Pennsylvania Avenue in Brooklyn in 1911. His kitchen included an iron bathtub covered by a wooden plank that was used for ironing. As children, Milton Berle and George Jessel lived next door to each other at 68 and 66 West 118th Street in Harlem until the Berlinger family (Milton's mother changed the name for her son because she didn't think "Berlinger" would fit on a marquee) was evicted. Jack Benny grew up in Waukegan, Illinois, living over a butcher shop. Sophie Tucker was raised in Hartford and Ed Wynn in Philadelphia.

The young and poor found their escapes where they could. In the Lower East Side, the candy store became a social center, especially for an immigrant boy. "The candy store," the New York Tribune reported,

"serves as a clubhouse where he can meet old friends and make new ones, as well as a haven of refuge and a safe retreat from the persecution of the corner policeman."

This last statement was no exaggeration. Many of the immigrant children were young thieves. George Burns always claimed that he took his name from the Burns Brothers coal yard. He and his brother would steal the coal, and neighbors would shout, "There go the Burns brothers." (This story may, of course, be apocryphal. George Burns enjoyed exaggerating the truth and bragged about it. His name could simply be a shortened form of his real name – Bimbaum – or even an attempt to "pass" as Irish.) He also claimed [15] that he had gone to the Automat with a sister's hairpin, stood by the beef stew, and after someone bought the stew, Burns slipped in the hairpin, preventing the door from closing. He either stole the next stew for his own meal or sold it to another customer. Phil Silvers stole from pushcarts and sold stolen pipe. Fanny Brice stole gum from her mother's store and then began shoplifting until she was caught. Eddie Cantor stole from pushcarts. At thirteen, he stole a purse. Bert Lahr stole from local stores and resold the goods at an open market on Saturday mornings (the Sabbath to observant Jews). He once stole a pumpkin from a police officer. The cop knocked on the Lahrheim door only minutes after the theft. Young Irving Lahrheim had not turned out to be a very good thief; the pumpkin was sitting on the fire escape. Groucho Marx didn't exactly steal. His mother would give him six cents for a loaf of bread. He knew day-old bread cost only a nickel, so he'd buy that and keep the penny, sometimes earning a nickel a week, which was exactly his allowance. His mother always knew what he was doing; she let him continue because she thought it showed initiative.

These childish acts, born of a simple desire to eat and an environment that – indirectly at least – encouraged such behavior, nevertheless had an effect. All of the comedians stopped stealing at a very young age. But the antiauthoritarian nature of such thievery helped make them feel apart not only from the rules of society but also from their own Jewish culture and sometimes, even, their families. It was a sort of assertion and transgression that would in subtle ways influence the Jewish comic voice.

Beyond frequent petty thievery, the emerging comedians also shared an active distaste for school. Unlike so many young Jews, who saw in education the gateway to all the splendors the new land had to offer, the young comedians found school either difficult or useless, or, more commonly, both. These young comedians were bright but spent a lot of time fantasizing about money and [16] pleasure rather than reading books and learning. They were unable or unwilling to do regular work like their peers.

Jack Benny skipped school to play his violin in a theater when there were matinees. He quit school when he was thirteen. Bert Lahr did poorly in school and always felt trapped in a classroom. Fanny Brice was a truant and, unsurprisingly, had low grades. Henny Youngman never made it through high school. George Burns quit in the fifth grade. George Jessel managed all of eight months in school. Harpo Marx was thrown out of school in the second grade – literally. Two raucous classmates would take the poor young boy by his belt and shoulder and toss him out of the window on the first floor. One day he simply decided not to return.

Nor did the young comedians find much comfort in Jewish life. Jack Benny had a powerful memory of one Yom Kippur. He had joined his Orthodox father in the synagogue but walked out in the middle. His father hit him in the face with a prayer book. That night, Meyer Kubelsky tried, in his way, to apologize by saying that it was considered a great blessing to be hit with the prayer book on Yom Kippur.

Phil Silvers once refused to recite his lessons in Hebrew school, and the teacher slapped his palm with a ruler. Silvers then pushed the teacher back into a chair. When the teacher unbuckled his strap, Silvers ran away and never returned.

Groucho Marx's only memories of his bar mitzvah involved the fountain pen he received that, when it dripped, made unusual designs on his shirt. Henny Youngman didn't even have a bar mitzvah ceremony until sixty years after the normal age. Milton Berle had his bar mitzvah ceremony at Mount Zion Temple at 119th Street. The synagogue was strategically located because Berle was then appearing in a show and was scheduled

to perform right after the ceremony. While preparing his speech, Berle had been tempted [17] to mention the play in which he was appearing, but the thought struck him that although Mount Zion was a Reform temple, the reforms hadn't gone far enough to permit a commercial. (He was wrong. The rabbi, evidently at Berle's mother's suggestion, told the congregation about Milton's theatrical appearance.)

George Burns lived in a kosher home, but became disenchanted with religion at an early age. When his grandfather died, only seven men could be rounded up for the minimal prayer quorum, called a minyan, which required ten men. It became necessary to pay three men fifty cents each to take part. It was the necessity of paying that so bothered the young Burns.

Another crucial common element for many Jewish comedians was having a weak father who was fundamentally a failure in the New World and a strong, intelligent, ambitious mother. Sam Marx was a failed tailor, known in the neighborhood as "Misfit Sam" because he disdained the use of a tape measure, believing, with spectacular inaccuracy, that his tailor's eye was sufficient. There were very few repeat customers. Luckily, Sam was a good cook.

George Burns's father wanted to sing for a living in synagogues, not as a cantor but as a ba'al tefillah, a leader of the prayers. However, his voice was not very good, and he rarely had sufficient money for the family. As Burns joked in an unpublished interview he later gave the American Jewish Committee: "After he sang in one little synagogue, the following synagogue, instead of hiring him, they kept it closed during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur." Louis Birnbaum, a failed helper for a kosher butcher and a failure in assisting the cantors in local synagogues, died when the future George Burns was just seven.

Milton Berle's father was such a failure that Berle compared him to Willy Loman from *Death of a Salesman*.

By contrast, Eddie Cantor's grandmother ran an employment agency for servant girls, was a matchmaker, and was arrested for [18] rolling cigars because she didn't have a license. Bert Lahr's mother once saved a child's

life by sending money across an alley over a clothesline to a neighbor who couldn't afford to pay the doctor. Minnie Marx and Sadie Berle were the exemplars of ambition for their beloved sons.

In his study of Jewish comedians, psychologist Samuel Janus noted that an astonishing 92 percent "came from families in the lowest socio-economic class." This class factor, seen also in the emergence of Irish and, later, African American comics, is significant. Those in the lower class with quick minds struggled to overcome their fathers' failures and prove the worth of the family to America. Their poverty, their lower-class status, and their failure in school (which would continue to be a tradition among Jewish comedians) added to their desperation, their sense of having to prove their worth to the world, to their mothers, and, not least, to themselves. Janus noted that it takes some level of masochism to "survive the climb to stardom in comedy," and this masochism emerged from these family structures.

The restraining power of a patriarch was missing because these future comedians had weak, absent, or dead fathers. This situation gave the young children what amounted to permission to escape school and take other risks that sons with strong fathers were simply unable to take. It also made them more assertive. The boys especially could assume a sort of familial "leadership" role, filling the emotional space their fathers had vacated.

These children weren't social insiders. They were poor and powerless. That made them skeptical about what others in the society took for granted. But they weren't truly outsiders either, and that fact gave them a belief that they could enter society, though they would have to work extra hard to please an audience, to find the right material, and, most of all, to take what life had to offer, absorb it, and continue working to succeed. [19]

The simultaneity of their condition – being, at the same time, both an American and not quite an American – made for a strong sense of doubt and uncertainty. If one's own identity wasn't clear, after all, it followed that all else was in question, all the supposed truths were, perhaps, simply conventional lies. This in-between status was difficult, unstable,

and closer to a tightrope than a bridge. The simultaneity promoted a sense of disillusionment with the society because it wouldn't fully provide admission. These feelings enabled Jewish comics to be part of American life but to look at it with an outsider's eye, with enough emotional distance to see truths that others missed, to laugh at the foibles that others considered simple normalcy, and, in some cases, to confront the culture when others were willing to abide by its rules.

These were invaluable assets as the young comedians made their way onto the vaudeville stage. [20]

“Curtain up and Curtain Down: the Age of Vaudeville”: 21-52.

It was in 1901, at age five, that young Nathan Birnbaum first felt the stirring passion, the love, that an audience's applause could give him. The youngster, who would shortly become George Burns, had listened with others in the crowd on Mangin Street while an organ-grinder filled the street with music. Nathan, who a year later would enter the first grade at P.S. 22, instinctively started a Spanish dance to the music. The crowd clapped, and young Nathan felt a deep need for approval being partially met. It turned out that his need was such that a lifetime of success and applause could not diminish or fully satisfy it.

This drive to succeed, this fire in every vein, has driven generations of comedians. In Burns's case, this drive needed a channel – [21] amply provided by vaudeville – and a good deal of help. The first help came from the neighborhood mail carrier who heard Burns and two friends harmonizing to pass the time as they mixed and poured syrup in a candy store basement. Lewis Farley, the mail carrier, suggested a fourth boy for a quartet, and managed them as an act. The Peewee Quartet played on amateur nights at the Cannon Street Theatre, a movie house. The boys also sang on the corner of Columbia and Houston Streets while the crowd gave them money. In fact, they sang almost anywhere: in backyards, in saloons, and on the Staten Island Ferry – where they serenaded young couples and, Burns later remarked, were actually paid to go away and leave the lovers alone.

Nathan left the quartet at age ten and started a dance act with Abie

Kaplan, who taught him the rudiments of tap dancing. The two, seeking a stage name, settled on the Burns Brothers. "George" was taken from Nathan's brother Izzy, who had Americanized his own name to George.

In 1905, the Burns Brothers began their career by appearing in Seidman's Theatre, a "presentation house" where live acts were presented between showings of silent films. This first experience was useful to George Burns in more ways than one. There was a Yiddish play also on the bill, in which one of the characters is asked to become Christian. The character replies, "No! A Jew I was born and a Jew I shall die!" Burns used this line whenever he was asked if he had changed his name legally.

Burns would continue to struggle, to change partners, to try any act. As Burns would have been the first to admit, he had more nerve than talent as he made his way into vaudeville. He frequently simply determined what kind of act was needed and presented himself as specializing in that particular talent.

Such a claim was not always accepted. One day at the Farley Theater, the manager heard Burns rehearsing and canceled him [22] before the first show. Burns, characteristically, took this experience and transformed it in his mind. When he retold it, he added to it a "vaudeville shine," a comic exaggeration of reality. Years later, this is how he described what had happened: "I was in the middle of my act ... and just before my yodeling finish the manager walked out and canceled me.... To make matters worse, the audience applauded him. And as he dragged me off the stage, the musicians gave him a standing ovation."

Burns would not succeed until he was in his mid-twenties, when he made his first appearance with Grade Allen. Throughout the years before that, however, his career was generally considered a failure to everyone but himself. He did tricks on roller skates. He was a dance teacher, and much else. Despite the failures, Burns had great perseverance; his good spirits, his confidence, and his willingness to surrender his ego by giving the best material to a partner would eventually make him one of the most successful Jewish comedians of the century.

According to one story, Burns and Allen were introduced in 1922 in Union City, New Jersey, by Mary Kelley, Gracie's room mate and Jack Benny's girlfriend. Gracie had recently been fired by Larry Reilly, her partner in vaudeville, and she needed a new partner. Mary told Jack Benny, and he told Gracie about his friend George Burns. Gracie approached Burns backstage about starting an act. Burns later recalled listening to her voice and assuming she was a dancer. Another story had them introduced by Renee Arnold, another of Gracie's roommates who was on the same bill as Burns.

However they met, Burns and Allen began by singing and dancing. Burns wrote a routine in which, in baggy pants, he was the comic and Gracie fed him the straight lines. Burns, however, was very sensitive to audience reaction. He immediately saw that audiences laughed when Gracie spoke, even when the lines were [23] not humorous – and they didn't laugh at his jokes. Recognizing the love the audience had for Gracie, Burns immediately rewrote the act, giving Gracie the funny lines and the daffy persona she became famous for displaying.

Burns had built the character on what were then known as Dumb Dora acts, but with a twist. Vaudeville comedians often made demeaning remarks about women, and the typical Dumb Dora act made the "dumb" woman the butt of the joke. Burns changed that. Gracie was not the object of the laughter; her comments and the subjects she talked about formed the source of humor.

This change is revealing. It is an example of how Jewish comedians of the era fitted seamlessly into current show business and did not attempt to subvert it in an obvious way, but transformed it tellingly. Burns kept the form of the Dumb Dora act, but – drawing on the idealization of the Yiddische mama – he dignified the woman by making her the center of the act. If the straight man didn't understand this new Dumb Dora, he never got angry. In addition, Burns took the social observations that had been important in Yiddish life, and filtered them not through a shrewd con artist but through a seemingly naive partner.

This smuggling of Yiddish humor into an accepted vaudeville format is emblematic of what the most successful Jewish comedians did. They

developed a code, a way to make their Jewish humor seem fully American yet include profoundly Jewish influences.

The Burns and Allen personae were carefully and thoughtfully constructed by the two performers, and writing for them was harder than it looked. In 1934, F. Scott Fitzgerald met Burns and Allen on tour and asked to write for the couple. He prepared an eight thousand – word film treatment for them, titled "Gracie at Sea," but it could not be used because even the great Fitzgerald couldn't capture the Allen character. [24]

Gracie's character saw the world through the lens of what Burns called "illogical logic." She thought she was smart and did not understand why others made obvious mistakes in language and thinking. She would explain the world as she understood it. Burns – and the audience – accepted the logic and never challenged her intelligence or insights. His salty voice and her high pitched, funny voice were perfect for delivering the lines Burns wrote. The partnership worked from the start. Their first successful routine began with the two walking on-stage holding hands. Gracie would look over toward the wing and wave. She then would let go of George's hand and go over to the wing, still waving her hand. She would signal to the person to whom she was waving to come over. A man would then come out on-stage and kiss Gracie, who would kiss him back. They would wave at each other, and he would walk off. Gracie would then come back to George, and the dialogue would begin:

GRACIE : Who was that?

GEORGE: You don't know?

GRACIE : No, my mother told me never to talk to strangers.

GEORGE: That makes sense.

GRACIE: This always happens to me. On my way in, a man stopped me at the stage door and said, "Hiya cutie, how about a bite tonight after the show?"

GEORGE: And you said?

GRACIE: I said, "I'll be busy after the show, but I'm not doing anything now," so I bit him.

GEORGE: Gracie, let me ask you something. Did the nurse ever happen to drop you on your head when you were a baby?

GRACIE : Oh, no, we couldn't afford a nurse; my mother had to

do it. [25]

GEORGE: You had a smart mother.

GRACIE : Smartness runs in my family. When I went to school I was so smart my teacher was in my class for five years.

GEORGE: Gracie, what school did you go to?

GRACIE : I'm not allowed to tell.

GEORGE: Why not?

GRACIE : The school pays me twenty-five dollars a month not to tell.

Much of Burns and Allen's material has to do with family, especially the supposedly crazy members of Gracie's family. Her nephew Willy was a favorite.

GRACIE : When Willy was a little baby my father took him riding in his carriage, and two hours later my father came back with a different baby and a different carriage.

GEORGE: Well, what did your mother say?

GRACIE : My mother didn't say anything because it was a better carriage.

GEORGE: A better carriage?

GRACIE : Yeah ... And the little baby my father brought home was a little French baby so my mother took up French.

GEORGE: Why?

GRACIE: So she would be able to understand the baby ...

GEORGE: When the baby started to talk?

GRACIE: Yeah.

GEORGE: Gracie, this family of yours, do you all live together?

GRACIE : Oh, sure. My father, my brother, my uncle, my cousin, and my nephew all sleep in one bed and ...

GEORGE: In one bed? I'm surprised your grandfather doesn't sleep with them.

GRACIE : Oh, he did, but he died, so they made him get up. [26]

In laughing at Gracie, audience members could relieve the stresses of their family life, stresses that were especially acute in immigrant life.

But there was another unspoken family issue that came up whenever Burns and Allen performed. For Jewish audiences sensitive to issues of

assimilation, the marriage of the Jewish George to the Irish Catholic Gracie was clearly a conflict. Jewish audience members loved Gracie, but that love was tempered by a recognition that she was a Gentile married to a Jew. Intermarriage presented to American Jews the first clear signs that America's loving arms had unforeseen consequences for their survival as a people. The pain was acute precisely because the embrace was so different from the centuries of hatred Jews had encountered and because Gentiles like Gracie Allen were so attractive.

In a sense, the Burns-Allen partnership mirrored the developing relationship between Jewish comedians and the established American comedic forms. It was a mixing of DNA, and, like many evolutionary factors, just how far-reaching the resulting change was could not possibly be glimpsed at the moment. Also, like most things evolutionary, much of the change was subtle and seemingly minor.

The vaudeville world in which Burns and Allen found such success started as an alternative to the men-only nature of American entertainment. In 1865, an immigrant and former circus clown named Tony Pastor decided that the minstrel shows, then hugely popular, were inappropriate for large numbers of potential audience members. Pastor wanted to provide a place where the entire family could go, so he opened a variety theater and began the tradition of door prizes – usually giving away silk dresses or sacks of potatoes. Pastor allowed only family entertainment. Eventually, he took his show on tour and was quite successful.

Building on Pastor's insights and certain variety-show aspects of [27] minstrel shows, vaudeville emerged in the mid-1880s. B. F. Keith and Edward Franklin Albee staged a variety show in Boston in 1885, made sure all acts were completely suitable for the family, and eventually began expanding, calling their variety shows "vaudeville." This would not be the Albee family's only great contribution to the American theater. Edward Albee's son Reed was the father of an adopted son, the playwright Edward Albee.

The word vaudeville evidently came from the Vau de Vive, a valley of the Vive River in Normandy. The valley inspired French drinking songs,

and the word itself was transformed to *voix de ville*, meaning street voices.

Keith and Albee developed a circuit, a group of theaters in the East where performers worked. There were also minor circuits with a central booking office and a few locally operated theaters.

The most famous vaudeville house, the Palace, opened in New York on March 24, 1913. It quickly established itself as the venue every vaudevillian aspired to play. There was even a spot on Forty seventh Street in front of the theater where vaudevillians would congregate, waiting for their next booking, trading gossip, exchanging and stealing jokes, wishing and vowing to play the Palace themselves one day.

There were eventually hundreds of vaudeville houses throughout the country, some of which still survive as theaters for plays or films. It was often a major cultural event for audiences to attend a vaudeville theater. For example, the Paramount Theatre in Seattle opened in 1928 and was among the most ornate. For the fifty-cent admission price, audience members were led by uniformed ushers past figurative adornments and iron handrails, past the floral gold patterns on the walls and the chandeliers with 3 million glass beads to one of the three thousand seats. Performers, however, had far less plush surroundings. The backstage was cramped and little money was spent on the performances apart from some props, [28] musical accompaniment, and some simple and easily assembled materials for shows. There was a single entrance door leading from backstage to the main stage.

The Paramount, like many other theaters, has often been called the secular counterpart to a house of worship in appearance and function. In a secular age, the need for pageant required a majestic setting, a ritualized order of performance, performers to lead the communal "service," and a sense of drawing emotion from the performance – in a theater's case pleasure rather than spiritual solace. Experiences were sought that provided such pleasure.

For the secularized Jewish community, the comedians were especially important as secular rabbis, providing both meaning and a way into

American society. This importance would be even more pronounced as the Jewish community itself became more assimilated, but even in the era of vaudeville, some Jewish audiences saw the Jewish comedians as role models for achieving success and providing an identity apart from religion.

The world of vaudeville included people with a variety of different jobs. An agent represented the actors and made arrangements with bookers who signed the actors for performances. Managers ran the actual vaudeville houses and were principally concerned with the box office receipts rather than the quality (or ethnic background) of the actors.

The typical vaudeville show varied, with a brief show consisting of five acts, and a longer one, lasting two hours, made up of eight or nine acts. The opening act in vaudeville, called a "dumb act," didn't include speaking. It might be a trick dog, cyclists, or acrobats, for example. This act was a minor one used to allow late comers to get to their seats. It was also important for those in the audience who couldn't speak English. No language skills were required to laugh at amazing animals or jumping humans. The aim of vaudeville, after all, was to provide enjoyment for everyone who [29] could pay the twenty-five-cent admission price. In fact, successful opening acts did comparatively well economically. Many of the acrobats were paid \$150-200 a week.

The second act might be a dancing number or a comedy act, usually performed in front of the curtain. This allowed the scenery to be set up behind on the main stage. A musical or comedy production number followed. The next to last act of the first half was a major star, and the final act of the first half was the headliner, a popular and successful entertainer. After intermission, another number went on to settle the audience. This was followed by another production number, quite often an actor or actress performing a dramatic reading or scene from a play. No matter how many acts there were, the next-to-last spot in the second half was the crucial spot. Because vaudeville audiences loved comedians, a comic often occupied that spot. The show ended with some action, a showy bit that was loud so the audience wouldn't be disturbed by other members of the audience who were leaving.

Each performer, depending on status, went on for about seventeen to twenty minutes. Shows went from early morning until late at night. Performers had the same act, which they simply kept repeating in each city. Because they were on a circuit, it was often the case that they didn't return to a city for a year. Performers thus led nomadic lives, always traveling, performing, preparing to perform, or trying to get bookings. Their private lives therefore inevitably intermingled with their occupation. Marriages were difficult; quick affairs or single encounters with professionals were common and accepted. Economically, the stars of vaudeville did very well, with the very top stars earning as much as \$1,500 a week.

By the turn of the century, vaudeville had firmly replaced the minstrel show as the chief form of American entertainment in part because it provided the emotional response to a crisis in American culture, a massive demographic and economic dislocation. The [30] growth of industry had brought to the cities more and more Americans whose principal concern was how to adjust to urban life. Many people were bored by their jobs and worn out at home. They wanted an escape, in a crucial sense from the arc of their own lives.

The very nature of vaudeville, with its quick succession of images and sounds, mimicked urban life and therefore gave audiences an increasing sense of laughing at themselves, their new urban culture, and the emerging revolutionary technologies. The lonely city became considerably less lonely when audience members could be entertained along with others. The sense of rootedness and control that emerged from such laughter provided much-needed emotional security. In mimicking urban life, though, vaudeville also contributed to the subverting of traditional rural values. The focus, by definition, was on immediate sensual pleasure as opposed to delayed gratification. In many ways, then, vaudeville helped usher in modern American life.

The Jews played a prominent role in vaudeville, which made it easier for Jewish comedians to be accepted. There were many Jewish booking agents, stage managers, and theater owners in the new vaudeville industry, and most booking offices were in New York where, of course, a lot of Jewish performers lived. William Hammerstein (father of the

lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II), for example, managed the most successful vaudeville house in the country, the Victoria Theater in New York. William Morris (who would later create the hugely powerful talent agency that today still bears his name) was a major booker of talent. Additionally, the entire vaudeville ethos was one of judging talent rather than background. Finally, Jews particularly went into comedy because humor was one of the few acceptable roles available for them. Audiences were used to laughing at ethnic stereotypes, including Jewish stereotypes. The door may have been open for the wrong reasons, but [31] many Jews recognized that at least the door was open, and they walked right in.

The stereotypes, though, were hurtful, focusing on alleged dubious Jewish business practices, a lack of hygiene, and sexual desire. A standard joke about Jews might be one partner saying to the other, "Goldberg, I heard you had a fire last night." The partner then says, "Ssh. It's tomorrow." "Hebrew" masks were sold so people could mimic the dialect-laden ethnic humor at home.

But in time, the complaints against ethnic humor added up. Fanny Brice refused to sing songs she considered as reinforcing anti-Semitic stereotypes. Milton Berle and others of his generation refused to make jokes that mocked Jews. Their decision was important because Jewish comedians were the ones with the license to tell these jokes, and when popular Jewish comedians didn't tell them, the jokes themselves were vastly reduced in number. Also, Albee and Keith had realized that the accumulated complaints (made also by Irish groups) could hurt business. Voluntary restraint began and, over time, offensive humor began to disappear. Clearly, the reduction of such jokes immensely aided Jewish acceptance in the broader culture.

Most important to the Jewish success was the subtle understanding by audiences – Jewish and non-Jewish – that the Jewish experience could provide insights into their own predicament. The journey from farm to city for an enormous number of Americans was traumatic and required a massive effort to adapt. The Jews were rightly seen as the masters of adapting to traumatic change, the veterans of and experts at being uprooted. Jewish comics were accepted because they had gone through a

similar experience, and urban audiences knew that the guidance they provided would be invaluable.

A model was thus established for Jewish comedians. When Americans felt uprooted – which they did often in the century – [32] they found in Jewish comedians people who could simultaneously help them laugh at and therefore control that feeling but also, based on their history, be emotional pioneers, guides to the new frontiers of American life. A new humor was needed, and new people who had actually undergone comparable experiences were needed to perform that humor. The Jews were among those who could fill that need. They weren't the only ones, of course. Will Rogers was so enormously popular because he tied the older western humor to the new experience, an effort that continues to this day through such performers as Garrison Keillor. But after Rogers, this older school of American comedy rarely achieved wide success and even more rarely was able to provide comic solutions to America's very uncomic problems.

George Burns may have been the most successful Jewish entertainer in vaudeville, but he was not the first. There were, for example, earlier comedians who specialized in Jewish dialect comedy. One prominent Jewish dialectician was Joe Welch, whose opening line was, "Mebbe you tink I am a heppy man." His distraught face, long beard, and derby hat made it obvious that he was not a happy man at all. Many audiences liked caricatures not only of Jews but of all immigrant groups. Stereotypes were the heart of much of the comedy, and Welch was important because he would do whole scenes in dialect as opposed to the single jokes others did.

Joe Sultzer and Charlie Marks became famous as the inspiration for Neil Simon's play and the movie *The Sunshine Boys*. Sultzer and Marks met when they got into a bicycle accident and began arguing. Someone told them they sounded like the hugely popular vaudeville team of Joseph Weber and Lew Fields and that they should go into show business. They began singing in saloons. Sultzer and Marks took the name Smith and Dale because Sultzer's brother found a printer with extra calling cards for an act named Smith and Dale whose partners had changed their names. [33]

Using Jewish accents, they created a variety of well-received skits, the most famous of which involved Dr. Kronkhite (kronkeit is a Yiddish word meaning "illness") "Dr. Kronkhite and His Only Living Patient" included very corny exchanges such as:

DALE (AS THE DOCTOR): You owe me ten dollars.

SMITH: For what?

DALE: For my advice.

SMITH: Well, doctor, here's two dollars. Take it. That's my advice!

DALE: You cheapskate! You come in here—you cockamamie—

SMITH : One more word and you only get a dollar.

DALE: Why—

SMITH : That's a word. Here's the dollar.

In fact, Smith and Dale differed somewhat from Weber and Fields, who were essentially physical comedians. Among their innovations was the poke in the eye, used so widely later by such teams as Laurel and Hardy and the Three Stooges. But they also further developed the use of twisted language and satiric malapropisms. (Probably their most famous routine included the single vaudeville exchange many people still know: "Who was that lady I saw you with last night?" "She ain't no lady; she's my wife.")

Weber and Fields's physical comedy was certainly influential. The success of knockabout, or slapstick, comedy presaged the American audiences' desire for "action," an entertainment euphemism for violence in sports, in dramatic movies and TV shows, and even in some forms of comedy.

Comedic violence, whether linguistic as in insult humor or physical as in slapstick, is valued by some audience members as an expression of their own emotions. It is misleading, though, to suggest that linguistic violence is completely distinct from physical [34] violence. The Three Stooges (all of whom were Jewish), for example, made clever use of language in addition to purely physical humor. There is a small strain of such physical comedians among Jews, a strain that includes, for example, Soupy Sales, but this physical approach, even when combined with language, never achieved widespread use among Jewish

comedians. People of the book, and therefore the word, Jews seemed uncomfortable with the simply physical – which is one reason they were so absent from the silent movies that had begun to compete seriously with vaudeville.

Thus, the Jewish entertainers whose fame outlived vaudeville's were much more focused on language, character, and situation than ethnicity. Many of them, like George Burns, started when they were young.

At age eight, Phil Silvers sang at a stag party for a local hoodlum. Silvers was in the middle of his song when one of the gangsters was shot dead. The man fell at Silvers's feet. At twelve, Silvers sang in Gus Edwards's troupe of young performers – until his voice changed and he was forced to enter comedy.

One of George Jessel's grandfathers was a tailor who would bring out his young grandson to sing while his customers waited to have their pants pressed. From there, Jessel went to his grandfather's lodge meetings, where, again, the child was warmly received. Jessel's mother was a cashier at the Imperial Theatre. At her son's insistence, she talked the owner into hiring Jessel at age nine, after his father had died. Jessel sang with the Imperial Trio at the Imperial Theatre and at a local nickelodeon. Walter Winchell was another member of the trio. Jessel was also a batboy for the New York Giants. If the Giants won, he would sing in the clubhouse. If they lost, Jessel recalled, the Giants' manager, John McGraw, would say, "Get out of here, you little Jew." Jessel (and Winchell) also joined Gus Edwards's company, the most famous vaudeville [35] children's troupe and, teamed with Eddie Cantor, stayed until his voice changed when he was sixteen.

One afternoon, sitting with friends and anguished at his continuing inability to identify some act he could do, Jessel called his mother and told her stories about the day in a comically exaggerated way. His friends immediately encouraged him to use talking on the telephone to his mama as the center of a new act. The humor seems more strained now, but the sentiment comes through.

Hello, Mama. Georgie. Georgie. Your son, from the money every

week. How are you feeling? You still see spots before your eyes? Have you got your glasses on? They're on your forehead? Well, how long does it take to get them down? You got them down ... You see the spots better now.

Say, Mom. How did you like that bird I sent home for the parlor? You cooked it! That's a fine thing to do. That was a South American bird ... He spoke four languages. He should've said something?

Jessel's "mama" routine, unsurprisingly taken from his real life, reflected the special relationship in Jewish life between mother and son, revealed the strategies Jewish sons used in reviewing their lives for their mothers, gently mocked the mothers in a loving way, and reflected the audience's yearning for such a relationship themselves. In vaudeville, the Jewish mother was the very soul of warmth, kindness, and love. She came to symbolize the love that was missing in so many lives of those in the audience.

Jessel had a more serious side, too. He starred in *The Jazz Singer* on Broadway and never forgave Al Jolson for, as he saw it, stealing the part in what would be a historic film. Jessel gave a powerful performance. George Burns recalled crying when he saw it. [36]

Many comedians and other performers could easily identify with its story of a voyage away from Judaism to show business.

Jessel also was among the first of his generation of Jewish comedians to be attracted to film, appearing in 1911 in one of Thomas Edison's experimental short films. Off camera, he would later become famous as "Toastmaster General" of the United States, never missing a chance to speak, with funerals his specialty. In the 1950s and '60s, he also raised a large amount of money for Israel. In one story, Jessel was supposed to have combined these passions by speaking at a funeral for the actor James Mason's departed cat. After the speech, Jack Benny joked that he hadn't known that Mason's cat had been so generous to Israel.

Ed Wynn knew at age nine that he wanted to be a comedian. He was

first onstage at the age of twelve when he went up to assist a magician and announced that he could do the trick; he couldn't, but he acquired a taste of how it felt to get an audience's approval. He ran away from home when he was fifteen, joining a repertory company as a utility boy. Once in a while he did small bits onstage. Eventually, the company failed, and Wynn returned home to Philadelphia to sell hats.

Wynn ran away again, this time to New York where, after success at a benefit, he teamed up with Jack Lewis to enter vaudeville. By nineteen, he was headlining. In 1914, at age twenty-eight, he joined Ziegfeld's Follies. Ultimately becoming known for corny inventions (such as an 11' 4½" pole for those audience members who wouldn't touch something with a 10' pole) and silly puns, Wynn had a clear affection for his work and his audience. His infectious giggle, his glasses on an expressive baby face, totally clean material free of suggestiveness and ethnic or racial stereotyping, and use of costumes vastly amused audiences.

Wynn, called "the Perfect Fool" from his role in a play of that name, drew his silly stage character from Yiddish culture. His [37] most important contribution was that he presented his character as fully American, refusing to use dialect. But he was consciously introducing a Jewish character type (with an American accent) to the audience.

The most famous characters of Yiddish folklore are the fools of the town of Chelm. Chelm, a real town, became mythologized as the home of stupid but innocent and self-delusional people. It is crucial to note that the Chelm characters, like Wynn's fool, were seen as foolish but were liked for it. The audience is led to understand that but for the gift of common sense, they, too, might be fools. The compassion for all people, even the simple, even as they are laughed at for their silliness, explains the way vaudeville and later audiences reacted to Wynn.

Yet, Wynn was serious underneath. He was one of the leaders of an Actors' Equity strike in 1919. It was his suggestion that the actors join the American Federation of Labor, and Wynn was the one selected to approach labor leader Samuel Gompers to achieve that goal. Wynn was blacklisted for his union activities, but that did not prevent his continuing success. He was too funny and too popular to keep off the stage.

Eddie Cantor practiced his mimicry at Surprise Lake Camp (his grandmother had had to petition the Welfare Board to send him there) and in the streets. He made his first dramatic appearance at Miner's Bowery Theatre, a place well known to be quick and harsh in its judgment of talent. Buoyed by his success there, Cantor became a singing waiter and, while guests threw bottles at one another, he was paid three dollars for each performance. (Jimmy Durante was the pianist, and the two performers formed a close friendship.)

Cantor's first stage job was in burlesque, a minstrel show offshoot that had evolved into a combination of comedy and women in various stages of undress. Cantor became famous for an act that [38] used a variety of ethnic accents. Florenz Ziegfeld saw him perform in 1917 and offered a tryout, leading to great success in the Follies for the next several years. Cantor's standard opening was to come onstage holding a deck of cards. He'd then request volunteers. Four or five people would be chosen. Cantor would give them each some cards. He'd then tell them to stand up at their seats and hold the cards over their heads with the warning not to let him see any of the cards. Once they had done this, Cantor would then ignore them and continue with his act, especially singing a strange song. Eventually, the audience realized there was to be no card trick, and, as this reality dawned on them, they began to laugh.

Cantor used the stereotypes popular in American entertainment but built on them. Like many other performers of the time, he appeared in blackface, though, with verbal wit, he gave his characters an intelligence missing from the minstrel show.

The blackface tradition had endured for a long while in American culture. Indeed, minstrel shows were the first entertainment form widely seen and admired by Americans. Popular from the 1820s, the minstrel show consisted of white men blacking their faces with burnt cork and speaking in dialect. They portrayed African Americans as happy, carefree, and anxious to entertain white audiences. The shows were psychologically valuable for whites in justifying the continued mistreatment of slaves and, after the Civil War, in justifying continued racial segregation. Minstrel shows typically consisted of three parts. The first part had all the performers in the show onstage in a semicircle. The

group would sing, tell riddles, and generally joke around. The second part, called olio, was a variety show, with a great many different acts. The third part was a skit, often a parody of popular plays or music.

The attractions of blackface for immigrant white audiences were different from the attractions for the earlier white generations. The author Michael Rogin has interpreted the blackface, and more [39] tellingly its removal, as a step these performers took as they went from being immigrants to being fully American.

White immigrants (and rural Americans who had moved to cities) were anxious about their status as "real" Americans. This was particularly true of Jews. As James Baldwin once acutely noted, "Jews came here from countries where they were not white, and they came here in part because they were not white." Although relatively few of those performers who put on blackface were Jewish, Jews became well known for doing so. Al Jolson was the most famous of those who used blackface. Besides Cantor, Fanny Brice, Sophie Tucker, George Burns, and George Jessel also less famously blackened their faces. Jews and other immigrants had to acquire "whiteness" as part of their new American identity. The fear of being discovered as not white, as foreign, gave blackface comedy a psychological dimension. The blackface comedian or performer appeared to be black but was really white. This was exactly the message immigrants wished to convey to white Americans. Laughing at a blackface comedian allowed immigrant white audiences simultaneously to convey that message and to laugh at their own fears and anxieties. Surely, however, African American audiences (and some performers) must have been far more troubled by such blackface antics.

Besides his blackface act, Cantor also portrayed Jewish characters that were, through a contemporary lens, unflattering. One character, for instance, was a Jewish aviator. This aviator, trying to emulate Charles Lindbergh, named his plane the Mosquito—Spirit of New Jersey. He admitted that he couldn't copy Lindbergh, because he couldn't eat a ham sandwich en route as Lindbergh had done.

Cantor had a particularly close relationship with his audience, which was the real secret of his success. Cantor's unending pep was a variation of

the nervous energy of Eastern European Jewish life [40] as transplanted to the Lower East Side. His obvious will to please, his nonstop action, and his sense of proximity to the real feelings of those who watched made him popular. Audiences enjoyed his numerous and funny ad-libs and his visible enjoyment of his job. He also took advantage of new technology, in his case the record player. Many of the songs he sang in his career became wildly popular, such as "If You Knew Susie," "My Baby Just Cares for Me," and "Making Whoopee."

The Three Stooges, who would become much more popular in short comedy films, also started their slapstick work in vaudeville. Moe Howard (born Moses Horwitz) was a childhood friend of Ted Healy, a comedian and singer who asked Moe to work with him in 1922. Three years later, Moe's brother Shemp (Samuel Horwitz) joined the team. Later that year, the three were in a theater in Chicago when they saw the wild-haired Larry Fine (Louis Feinberg). The act was set; Healy had what he called his "stooges." Moe had started in films made at the Vitagraph Studio in Brooklyn, playing tough guys and, in so doing, creating his on-screen character. When yet another brother, Jerome Horwitz, better known as Curly, joined the act, it was Healy who insisted he shave his head. The Stooge act in vaudeville depended on a physical violence, marked by eye pokes, double face slaps, kicks, and various objects used as improvised weapons.

At age fifteen, Bert Lahr was in a child act named the Seven Frolics. He soon became successful and developed a variety of interesting routines, some risqué. His most famous bit was as a drunken policeman waiting to arrest an attractive dancer (played by Mercedes Delpino, Lahr's wife at the time). The officer began talking to the young lady, who would then say, "Are you speaking to me?" Lahr would then look at her ample body and say, "Yeah, to you." Then, he'd shift his glance and add, "To you too." In another sketch he tried to lure a young woman out of a tent at the beach [41] when she had no clothes on. Despite these bawdy examples, much of Lahr's unique gift came from wringing pain from his lines. Lahr's sad face was among the most expressive in the business, and his playful work with the sounds of words as he twisted them added a remarkable melancholy to his humor. He also was crucial in extending bits so that they weren't simple jokes, but fitted together in a coherent

story line.

The Marx Brothers entered vaudeville in large part because of the drive and vision of their mother, Minnie. In 1905, Minnie saw an ad for a singer in a touring vaudeville act. She convinced the fifteen-year-old Groucho to try out for the job. (The Marx Brothers did not yet have their nicknames, which are used here.) The job called for someone who could also dance, but Groucho couldn't dance at all. Minnie ignored that minor deficiency and told Groucho that he could, indeed, dance. He got the job. On his first trip, he was abandoned in Denver, where his landlady gave him two dollars and got him a job driving a grocery wagon, which he did for two months until he had saved enough money to get back to New York. As soon as he got back, Minnie saw a job for an actor, explaining to Groucho that anyone can act.

Eventually, starting in 1907, Minnie decided the brothers needed their own act. Groucho and Gummo joined with Mabel O'Donnell (or, by other accounts, a woman named Jenny) to create the Three Nightingales. Mabel was a singer who had a glass eye (or, by different stories, a wandering eye or just a bad squint). To hide this, Minnie had Mabel wear a wig with hair long enough to cover the eye. When that didn't work out, Minnie hired another singer named Lou Levy.

At thirteen, Harpo had been a bellhop at the Hotel Seville on East Twenty-eighth Street, but Minnie didn't think that was an appropriate occupation for him. At age fourteen, he was playing piano at silent movies. His repertoire was limited to just a few [42] songs, but Harpo played them with gusto to reflect the action on the screen. With Harpo's addition, Minnie changed the group's name accordingly to the Four Nightingales. The group encountered one failure after another, but Minnie refused to quit. Once, a fire broke out on the stage, and Harpo, unsure what to do, began to recite his bar mitzvah speech in a high voice. They knew they needed an act.

With help from Minnie's brother, the vaudeville comic Al Shean, the brothers in 1910 developed a skit modeled after the sort of juvenile revue pioneered by Gus Edwards. The skit was called "Fun in Hi Skule." Groucho played the teacher. Harpo played a role modeled on Patsy

Bolivar, a theatrical country bumpkin popularized especially in shows on riverboats. Harpo practiced a moronic stare and began to, as they put it, "throw" his "Gookie." He puffed out his cheeks and crossed his eyes. There are various stories about the origin of the face. One of the stories is that, as a child, Harpo had seen such a face made by a cigar roller as he worked in the window of a cigar store on Lexington Avenue. The cigar roller's name was Mr. Gehrke, which Harpo transformed into "Gookie." Harpo also slowly developed his character. A reviewer for a Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, paper wrote: "He takes off on an Irish immigrant most amusingly in pantomime. Unfortunately, the effect is spoiled when he speaks." From that review on, Harpo remained silent onstage and on-screen. When Groucho had been a delivery boy for a wig company, he had brought home a box of wigs and the boys had tried them on. Harpo tried one for the act. Gummo was pleased with the result, so their aunt Hannah made a wig. Harpo also played the harp, an idea developed by Minnie.

The lines in the "Fun in Hi Skule" skit were invariably corny. For example, at one point in the skit Groucho says to student Gummo, "What are the principal parts of a cat?" [43]

Gummo answers, "Eyes, ears, neck, tail, feet, et cetera, et cetera."

"You've forgotten the most important," Groucho would say. "What does a cat have that you don't?" Groucho would then hint at the answer expected by moving his fingers along his lips, indicating that whiskers was the right answer.

Gummo, though, simply said, "Kittens."

It was in Galesburg, Illinois, possibly on May 15, 1914, during a poker game, that the Marx Brothers acquired their nicknames. By then Chico had joined the act, and they had broadened their repertoire. Art Fisher, a headlining monologist (a performer who today would be called a stand-up comedian), saw their act there. He loved their loud, confident manner; Fisher, who followed their act, immediately knew that in the future he should precede them. Fisher had developed a habit of nicknaming people in the style of a popular comic strip called

"Sherlocko the Monk." Harpo's nickname came, of course, from his playing the harp. Groucho was named because of his quarrelsome personality (though Al Shean and Harpo, at least in his autobiography, maintained that Groucho's name came from the "grouch" bag vaudevillians hung around their neck to protect money or other valuable items). Gummo's name came from the gumshoes (the name then for the rubber coverings for shoes when it rained) he always wore. Another story is that he wandered around backstage sneaking up on people like a "gumshoe," a detective. Chico was named because of his penchant for chasing chickens, as young women were then called. Therefore, the correct pronunciation of his name is Chick-o, not Cheek-o, though such a pronunciation became common after a typesetter made a mistake and printed cards with "Chico" rather than "Chicko" on them and even more so when Chico created his Italian character—with an accent taken from a barber he knew. (In private, the brothers continued to pronounce the name as Chicko.) Zeppo was named later, perhaps from the zeppelin or perhaps, as [44] Harpo suggests, after Zeppo, the trained chimpanzee, since Zeppo did acrobatics and looked simian in his efforts. After Gummo was drafted into the army, Zeppo replaced him. The four other brothers reportedly appeared at a recruiting station in Chicago but were all rejected. But their career in vaudeville, meteoric as it was, didn't last. They had quit the Albee circuit to sign up with the Shuberts, but soon the Shuberts decided to abandon vaudeville and Albee would not take them back. Luckily, Chico ran into someone in Philadelphia who needed an act, and soon an agreement was reached. After a year in Philadelphia, the show I'll Say She Is! came to Broadway in 1924. The play came from a failing show called Love for Sale written by Will B. Johnstone and his brother Tim. An extremely positive review by Alexander Woollcott, part of the famous Algonquin Club Roundtable, guaranteed the brothers' success. During the run of I'll Say She Is! Woollcott asked the brothers why they still used their real names instead of the much funnier nicknames. They expressed concern about retaining their dignity. Woollcott was astounded at the reaction. "Dignified? You?" he responded. They changed the billing. Even as early as this show, Groucho's character was set. In one scene, Groucho played Napoleon and Lotta Miles played Josephine. The interplay between them is vintage Marx Brothers.

NAPOLEON: Forgive me, my queen. I don't doubt your love.

When I look into your big blue eyes, I know that you are true to the army. I only hope it remains a standing army ...

JOSEPHINE: Napoleon, when you go, all France is with you.

NAPOLEON: Yes, and the last time I came home all France was with you, and a slice of Italy, too.

The wild romps of the Marx Brothers had a particular Jewish [45] flavor. Like the Keystone Kops and similar American antic comedians, the brothers were wild, but the Kops were – at least presumably – on the side of the law. They may have been comically inadequate, but they were not subversive. The Marx Brothers, though, were directly challenging the forces of social order. They deliberately wished to subvert power and the controlling forces of society; they acted out against authority in a way their Eastern European Jewish ancestors daydreamed of doing but were unable to do in reality.

Jack Benny began his relationship with music when he got his first half-size violin on his sixth birthday, a gift from his parents, who dreamed of a career in classical music for their son. He hated to practice, but he did like to perform. At age fifteen, he began to play the violin at the Barrison Theatre in Waukegan, skipping school on matinee days. In 1911, the Marx Brothers played the theater, and Minnie Marx (then known professionally as Minnie Palmer) was impressed enough by young Benny to offer him a job as a violinist in the pit for their act, but Benny's father refused to let him travel.

When Benny was seventeen, the theater closed, and Cora Salisbury, the Barrison's pianist, decided to go back to vaudeville. She invited the young Benny to form an act with her. This time, he did leave home – after Cora Salisbury promised that young Benny would keep kosher. He eventually got a new partner and then joined the navy, applying to enter the theatrical company.

Up until then, Benny's act was entirely musical. He didn't think of himself as or try to be a comedian. In the navy, though, he began to tell jokes when David Wolff, another sailor, urged him to save a failing violin performance. (One writer suggests that the actor Pat O'Brien, rather than Wolff, was the one who did the urging.) The sailors had

booed, and Wolff went out onstage in the middle of the performance and told Benny to talk to the audience. [46]

Benny reacted by telling a few jokes. Warming up, he continued, "I heard that you sailors complain about the food. Well, I want to tell you that the enlisted men get the same food as Captain Moffett gets ... only his is cooked." The audience loved it, and Benny, surprised by their warm laughter, suddenly found himself with a new career.

He left the navy and began reading humor magazines for jokes, gradually using his violin less and his jokes more. He was using the name Ben K. Benny, but someone with a similar name complained. Sailors had a habit of calling each other Jack, so Benny adopted it as his own first name.

Benny became famous for his opening. He'd walk out onstage, go up to the musical conductor, and ask, "How's the show so far?" The conductor would say the show was fine. "Well," Benny would respond, "I'll fix that." This self-deprecating trait, later displayed on his radio and television shows by allowing himself to be the butt of jokes and by giving the other actors wonderful lines, may have emerged from Jewish humor. As noted earlier, Benny later became famous for his persona as a cheapskate, a popular anti-Jewish prejudice. In fact, Benny's cheap character didn't come from Jewish life. The cheapskate was a stock vaudeville persona, and, like Burns, Benny was simply modifying the template with a small dollop of Jewish sensibility, or Yiddishkeit.

Fanny Brice, at age thirteen, was used to singing for customers in her parents' saloon and with local newsboys in poolrooms. The newsies convinced her to enter an amateur contest at Keeney's Theatre, a famous vaudeville house in Brooklyn. Fanny won the ten-dollar first prize. (The audience liked her so much, they threw money onstage, and she collected an additional three dollars this way.) Fanny began to enter other amateur shows and always did well. She got a job as a chorus girl but was fired by George M. Cohan after he saw her dance. At nineteen, Fanny was given a [47] song called "Sadie Salome" by Irving Berlin. Berlin suggested she sing it with a Yiddish accent, and it was a great success. In 1910, she appeared in the Ziegfeld Follies and spent more than a decade in each of the annual Follies, which she supplemented with vaudeville and other

work. Hers was a face that could traverse the range of emotions that vaudeville audiences found so enticing. Brice never thought of herself as pretty, but her drive to perform, her effervescent enthusiasm, and her sheer charm always radiated through during her performances. She was a first-rate satirist with a great gift for caricature, and until her later radio career, Brice was clearly immigrant and Jewish, her humor often revolving around her inability to grasp English correctly.

Fanny Brice was one of several prominent women performers in vaudeville. Sophie Tucker, like Brice a singing comedian, grew up washing dishes in her family's restaurant. She met actors traveling in the area who came into the restaurant for a meal, and she saw show business as an escape from what looked like a suffocating life. She had liked singing and been successful at amateur concerts. Her excessive weight seemed to add rather than detract from her performance. Eventually, Tucker left her marriage, gave her son to her mother, and fully entered the vaudeville world. Though constantly unhappy about it, she was forced to wear blackface for a long while. Tucker sang songs that were frank about sex and often humorous. She gained the most fame for her song "My Yiddische Mama."

There were other singers with a comedic touch as well as Yiddish actresses who sometimes did comic roles, such as, most famously, Molly Picon. But the social roles assigned to women precluded large numbers of talented women from entering show business.

Milton Berle's fame as a television performer was built on his radio career, and that, in turn, was built on his vaudeville career. As [48] a boy he had been a model in Buster Brown shoe advertisements and worked in silent films at the Biograph Studios in Fort Lee, New Jersey. He was invariably accompanied by his mother, not just at these early efforts but for every one of his performances until Sadie Berle's death in 1954. Berle worked in "kid shows" modeled after Gus Edwards's efforts. He became increasingly popular during the 1920s for a variety of acts that were not great models of comic sophistication. His most famous bit involved meeting a young woman on the stage that was set up with water and a phony dock. The young woman then told Milton that she was planning to kill herself. Milton made an earnest effort to relieve her

of such urges. She would begin to flirt with him, eventually coaxing him to give her all of his money. Then a second woman would appear, and she, too, would tell of her plans to commit suicide. Berle would then push her into the water.

Far from being embarrassed about his background, Berle was proud to be a Jew. Once in 1925, a popular comedian named Frank Fay and Berle were on the same bill. Fay was annoyed that Berle was standing in the stage entrance and told the stage manager to "get the little kike out of the entrance." Berle's mother, a strong woman and brilliant at defusing problems with improvisation, told an angry Milton that "maybe he said 'tyke.' Why don't you go back there tonight and listen again." Berle did just that and heard Fay say to the manager, "I told you to keep that little Jew bastard out of the wings." A furious Berle physically attacked Fay, sending him to the hospital.

Berle's encounter with Frank Fay, though, illustrates the situation that American Jews found themselves in during the 1920s. It was an era of increased anti-Semitism reflected in job discrimination and in many other ways. For example, Harvard University's president, A. Lawrence Lowell, limited Jewish enrollment to 10 percent, in order, he claimed, to prevent anti-Semitism. *Variety* [49] included an ad for ushers that required applicants to have blond hair and "straight noses." The Ku Klux Klan, revived in Dallas by a dentist in 1922, had grown in 1924 to a group with a membership of more than 4 million people in forty-three states. The anti-Semitic forgery Protocols of the Elders of Zion was serialized in Henry Ford's *Dearborn Independent*, which by 1925 had a circulation of seven hundred thousand. Ford made his dealers distribute a monthly quota of his paper. The anti-Semitic campaign lasted for ninety one issues, eventually charging that Benedict Arnold had been "a Jewish front." Anti-immigration laws were enacted that would have a profound and horrible effect in the 1930s when Hitler came to power.

Anti-Jewish sentiment was ironically increasing as the secularization of American Jews dramatically continued. From 1914 to 1924, for example, consumption of kosher meat fell by 30 percent. The generation that came of age in the 1920s was a transitional one that felt neither fully Jewish nor fully American. Immigration had itself weakened families because of

separations, desertions, and the inevitable temptations the New World offered. Contrary to popular mythology, prior to World War I, the Jews had the highest divorce rate in New York City because of the tensions of immigrant life and the long separations. Jews felt a sense of their own Jewishness, but they weren't quite sure how to define the content of that identity. Increasingly, popular culture became the most crucial bond uniting the varying segments of the Jewish community. In particular, it was the comedians who helped Jews deal with the world.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Jewish comedians who thrived in vaudeville and survived to be remembered were specifically the ones who did not do "Jewish" bits. Joe Welch, Smith and Dale, Weber and Fields, and other Jewish dialect comedians such as Benny Rubin are not as widely recalled and did not define American [50] culture nearly as much as George Burns, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, and the Marx Brothers. These successful comedians provided an assimilationist model based on a subtle contract offered by the culture: Jewish comedians, more specifically male comedians, were fully accepted so long as their humor was, or seemed to be, universally applicable. This message, combined with the anti-Semitism of the era, made the Jews of that generation uncertain of their own identity.

They wanted American approval, but they deliberately chose not to discard their Jewishness. They hid it, but did not surrender it. These immigrant Jewish comedians developed a "double consciousness," a sense of being Jewish but having to hide it to win approval and a sense of being American, but not fully so. Such a "double consciousness" in many ways defined American Jewish life and the Jewish comedians who found success in America.

World War I and its aftermath added to everyone's uncertainty. The effect of the war, coupled with the dislocations of urbanization and the adjustment to new technology, was devastating. Suddenly, the future didn't seem so clearly headed toward progress. Putting off pleasure was chancy and immediate satisfaction much more attractive. The Roaring Twenties unleashed a pent-up sexual energy held down by Victorian morality and a belief in progress. Women, who had finally been given the vote in 1920, were joined by men in seeing evolving sexual attitudes

as a new freedom in America.

By the time the 1920s ended with the stock market crash, the whole of American life was about to change. The economic collapse, the technology that led to radio and sound films, the emergence of a new generation, and the rising horror in Europe all combined to make the 1930s and 1940s an entirely new world. By the 1930s, vaudeville would be dead, fatally wounded by the skyrocketing popularity of radio and sound motion pictures. Jewish [51] comedians did not play a major role in silent films or in radio much before 1930. And as the 1930s dragged on, the smiles on Jewish faces would emigrate when faced with the reality of the Nazi menace. When those smiles returned, they would be newly haunted not just by the centuries of hatred of the Jews but also by the unspeakable memories summoned by a single word: "Holocaust." [52]

“Theater of the Mind: Radio's Finest Hour”: 55-78.

Early in 1932, Jack Benny decided to take some time off from his vaudeville act to learn about radio, the new guest being invited into the homes of an increasing number of Americans. "I'm going to study this thing backward and forward," he said. "The big future in our business is the radio."

By March 29, Benny was ready for his first appearance, as a guest on Ed Sullivan's show. His initial words were: "Hello, folks. This is Jack Benny. There will now be a slight pause for everyone to say, 'Who cares?'" The self-effacing jokester actually was not the Jack Benny who emerged later in radio. That character would take time, even after Benny began his own program on May 2.

As he developed his character and shaped his program, Benny [55] saw radio a vaudeville extension sent into living rooms rather than being performed in theaters. The gags, puns, and quick patter of repartee and the reliance on a "stooge" (often an announcer) to feed the comedian straight lines worked well enough, but Benny saw – in a way others didn't – that the new medium had its own environment, one that made change necessary.

All the performers were shocked at radio's requirements. In vaudeville, a comedian could survive on a single twenty-minute skit. The comedian would go from theater to theater around the country repeating the same routine. By the time a comedian returned to a city, the audience had long forgotten the skit or remembered it with enough fondness to want it repeated, and so the whole process could begin again. Radio was completely different. A skit done once could not be repeated the following week; new material was needed all the time.

Struggling to deal with such a reality, the comedians found several potential solutions. Some added variety to their comedy shows, effectively copying a vaudeville program by having a singer perform during the comedy show. Some tried to keep repeating material and failed. Almost all quickly realized they would need writers to create the jokes. Experts at quick gags found themselves in high demand. A generation of writers who had planned to be the next Hemingways decided that their creative urges could be much more lucratively satisfied by turning to radio.

Many of these humor writers were Jewish as well. The widespread perception that Jews were the masters of comedy writing is illustrated by a perhaps apocryphal but nonetheless telling story as told by George Burns. An advertising agency supposedly sent a memo to a producer of a show: "We suggest you hire several [56] young writers to work on the show." The producer fired back his own memo: "I'll be glad to hire as many young writers as you like, but if you want the scripts done on time, I also need two old Jews and a typewriter."

Part of Jack Benny's special genius is that whereas many comedians famously maltreated the writers who labored long and hard to create jokes for them, Benny just as famously had a special relationship with his writers. When Groucho Marx once refused to follow the script the writers had prepared, Benny declared that Groucho simply would not be a guest on the show. Benny's support produced not just loyalty but also an atmosphere in which inspired work could be produced. Benny served as a comedy editor, going painstakingly through each show with a perfect ear. He knew, as the writer George Belzer once put it, that "every line has a rhythm." Benny's musical training was invaluable, as was his

comic sense. He trusted his own sense of humor, once expressing gratitude that he hadn't gone to college because doing so would have robbed him of the same sensibility as the common listener. Benny timed jokes, silences (which he called "waits"), and laughs, and lines were written based on the voice rhythms of the actor. Over many years, Benny made character comedy central and put his character in a variety of situations. A continuing cast, with each actor having identifiable characteristics, was assembled. A conversational style that increasingly de-emphasized jokes was developed.

Stinginess was the most famous part of the Benny persona, one that he often claimed had been invented accidentally because audiences had laughed at some "cheap" jokes, and so they were added. But, as noted, the stinginess was not based on a Jewish stereotype. (It's unnerving to watch Benny out of his character in the early movie short *A Broadway Romeo* [1931] pursuing a young woman and mocking a Scotsman who is reluctant to buy a magazine at a [57] stand Benny is caring for.) The most famous of Benny's cheap jokes involved a robbery. The Benny character was walking home at night. There was a sound effect of footsteps behind him. A man's voice asks for a match, and Benny says he has one. Then the man's voice gets harsher.

"Don't make a move. This is a stickup."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Mister, mister, put down that gun."

"Shut up. Now come on. Your money or your life."

Benny paused, and the thief said, "Look, bud, I said your money or your life."

"I'm thinking it over!" Benny replied in what might be the most famous comedy line in radio history.

Many people mistakenly believe that this joke got the longest laugh in all of radio, or at least the longest laugh Jack Benny ever got. Benny himself recalled the laugh going on in waves. But listening to the March 28, 1948, show is illuminating. The laughter is loud but lasts for just seven seconds, a good laugh but hardly historic. Evidently, the legend began because John Crosby, a well known radio columnist, was a guest on that show, liked the joke, and wrote about it several times, giving publicity to an individual joke that eventually took on mythic proportions.

Jack Benny is justly famous for his timing. He very frequently asked writers to insert unfunny words into the dialogue, words that could easily be removed. Benny used these weak lines to measure laughter or applause (he called the time for such laughter and applause the "spread"). If the laughter was weak, Benny could say the next line quickly to get on to the next gag line. If the laugh was strong, Benny would say the line more slowly, giving the audience a second's pause so he wouldn't trample on the laughter for the next line. [58]

Listeners loved the Benny character. Once at a nightclub (variously reported as Earl Carroll's or the Moulin Rouge), Benny gave a large tip to the hatcheck girl. She returned it and said, "Please, Mr. Benny, leave me with some illusions."

In developing the cheap character, Benny showed his genius by making himself the scapegoat. In this way, Benny could not be accused of ascribing cheapness to an ethnic group or to another person. More important, by making himself the object of derision, he created a character who could be put in a variety of situations, with a distinct personality that could carry over from situation to situation and thus from show to show. Had the butt of jokes remained a stooge, such a character would be used sparingly and could not, in any case, carry the entire program.

The attraction of such a character during the depression is obvious. Economic necessity made many radio listeners cheap themselves. They had to be very careful about how they spent their money. Such cheapness, though, brought with it guilt, emotional depression, and

anger. Parents believed they were unable to provide for their families. Those out of work worried about whether they'd ever get a job again. Even those who survived comfortably were worried about how widespread the depression would become and how long it would last, concerned that their own comfort might evaporate. The Benny character helped audience members laugh at that frightening part of themselves. Additionally, because of his exaggerated stinginess, Benny made "normal" cheapness much more sensible. He was giving his listeners emotional permission not to feel bad about watching their money. As Benny himself put it, "My character sustained ... because I played a character who had all the faults and frailties of mankind.... Every family has that kind of a person."

The cultural historian Susan J. Douglas makes an astute observation that the Benny character had what at the time were considered [59] feminine traits – vanity about age and appearance, regular giggling, and a lack of sexual assertiveness. Douglas reads the character as an attack on both masculinity and upper-class pretensions. Upper-class males, the rulers of America, had failed their country by leading it into the depression. The anger that audiences felt toward such a group was palpable. That audience was made up of unemployed men who blamed either themselves or the government for their predicaments, and their families who simultaneously wanted to blame the male head of the household but did not do so in order to keep the family together. The Benny character subtly attacked the leaders without ever being political. Audiences may not have realized the emotional effects the character was having, but they recognized that they felt better after the program.

Of course, Benny himself was Jewish, and cheapness was a characteristic that anti-Semites ascribed to Jews. Worse still, anti-Semitism was growing in America and dramatically so in Europe. Benny also mocked his own prowess with a violin, a musical instrument widely identified with Jews, and the Benny program produced two Jewish ethnic stereotypes as characters, Mr. Kitzel and Schleppeerman.

But the Benny character did not encourage anti-Semitism. People liked Benny as a performer and found his character weaknesses endearing and personal rather than venomous and applicable to an entire group. The

audience response was more empathetic than antipathetic, and empathetic laughter doesn't go well with prejudice.

Audiences found Benny's incompetent violin playing to be funny and not self-hating. (He was so well known for his lack of ability that he once approached the White House gate with his violin in a case. As he approached, a marine guard stopped and asked him what was in the case. Benny responded that it was a [60] machine gun. The marine smiled and said, "You can pass, then. For a minute I thought it was your violin.")

Also, it is unclear how many Gentile listeners even knew Jack Benny was Jewish. Indeed, a young Tommy Smothers was among those listening to Benny and learning the lessons of comic timing without ever realizing that the hilarious Benny was Jewish. Those who did know could find comfort in Benny, whereas others might also find it comforting that so many people did not seem to care or know what Benny believed in.

In addition, in limited number and in small doses, audiences enjoyed the clearly Jewish characters on the shows. Mr. Kitzel was illustrative of this point. His cry of "mit a pickle in the middle" became a national catchphrase. On one program Benny encountered Kitzel rooting at a baseball game.

"I didn't know you liked baseball so much, Mr. Kitzel," Benny said.

"Like baseball, Meestah Benneh? I'm crazy about this national pastime, what you call. In fact, I'm telling you something, Meestah Benneh, in my youngeh days, I was a professional player. I used to pitch baseball."

"I didn't know that, Mr. Kitzel."

"Once I even had a no-heet game."

"What was the score?"

"Twenty-six to zero. We lost."

"How could you? I thought you pitched a no-hitter."

"I did—but hoo hoo HOO—deed I walk them!"

On another occasion, Benny encountered Mr. Kitzel at Union Station in Los Angeles and asked him where he was going.

"Gung? Who's gung? I'm waiting. A train I'm meeting, Meestah Benneh. I'm waiting for mine son to come home from college."

"And what college does he attend?"

"Southern Methodist, Meestah Benneh."

(To Benny's surprise, [61] he got letters from Jewish students who actually attended Southern Methodist University. Several hundred Jewish students were enrolled there, and there were two Jewish fraternities; one of the fraternities invited Mr. Kitzel's son to pledge.) Kitzel's habit of ascribing Jewish names to people (Nat King Cohen, for example) was another source of great humor for audiences.

It wasn't just with regard to Jews that Benny realized playing to humorous stereotypes opened the door for more progressive reconsiderations. The use of white actors for African Americans, most famously in the Amos and Andy Show, was radio's substitute for blackface. Nevertheless, radio was a rehearsal for desegregation. Benny hired Eddie Anderson, an African American actor, to play his servant Rochester. Anderson had permanent laryngitis as a result of yelling as a youngster selling newspapers to support his family, and his distinctive voice was what attracted Benny. Until 1943, the Rochester character was filled with stereotypes. He gambled, he drank gin, and he went after women. However, even then, Rochester was an equal in mocking the Benny character. This was crucial because a servant—a black servant—was given lines putting down his white boss with the same verve and skill as others in the cast. Benny once said, "I never felt and I do not feel today that Rochester and Mr. Kitzel were socially harmful. You don't hate a race when you're laughing with it." Indeed, Benny

seemed to resent the charge: "Everybody loved ethnic humor during vaudeville and often the people who were being ridiculed most enjoyed the kind of ethnic humor aimed at their own group. During World War II, attitudes changed. Hitler's ideology of Aryan supremacy put all ethnic humor in a bad light. It became bad taste to have Jewish jokes." Benny even saw a socially redeeming purpose in ethnic humor: "I think it was a way that America heated up the national groups and the ethnic groups in a melting pot and made one people of us – or tried to do so." [62]

Benny countered any anti-Jewish elements in his character by being quietly but unmistakably Jewish in his personal life. He married a Jewish woman in an Orthodox ceremony. When he and his wife wanted to adopt a baby, they went to a Jewish agency. One Sunday afternoon, Benny was preparing for his show that would be finished by four o'clock in Los Angeles, before sunset and the beginning of Yom Kippur. Benny was concerned by the fact that on the East Coast the program wouldn't air until after sundown and listeners might believe it was a live show. He told an assistant that he didn't "want people to think I'm desecrating this holiday by working on it." The assistant joked that all the Jews on the East Coast would be in synagogue. Benny shook his head and said, "I wasn't thinking of the Jews. I wouldn't like the Gentiles to think I didn't respect my religion."

Benny also used his influence to confront anti-Semitism. In 1939, at the New York World's Fair, Eddie Cantor gave a speech while holding a photograph of a check given by the German American Bund to an American who, according to Cantor, was "playing footsie with the Nazis." The courageous Cantor specifically named Father Coughlin as the recipient. Headlines that evening read "Comedian Blasts Priest," and Cantor's radio program was canceled the next day. Cantor was out of work for a year until Jack Benny personally intervened. Benny called up the advertising agency Young and Rubicam. "If radio's going to go on, Eddie Cantor must be part of it.... Why should he be punished just for having more guts than the rest of us?" Shortly thereafter, Cantor was back on the air.

In 1948, Cantor would again call on Benny, this time to give to the State of Israel, then fighting its War of Independence. Golda Meyerson (later

Meir) met with a group of people at Cantor's house, seeking the desperately needed funds. Benny sent over a signed check with the note: "Eddie, fill in this check for whatever [63] you need." Cantor filled the check in for twenty-five thousand dollars, which he knew was the minimum Benny would have given.

But most of these Jewish commitments were made as private figures, not public celebrities. If later Jewish comedians would be Jewish and demand that audiences accept that identity, radio Jews were trying to forestall criticism by accepting the stereotypes themselves.

This East European-like passivity in the face of authority was a clear indication of how uncertain American Jews felt in their new land. Their sensibilities could be unleashed only subtly, as Benny did. They could use language as a weapon, but only within carefully restricted American subject matter. The structures of Jewish comedy could be seen in Benny's parodies of movies or Cantor's quick patter. But the full gift of Jewish comedy could not be used on radio.

There had been specifically Jewish characters on radio. One famous one was Mrs. Nussbaum (played by Minerva Pious on Fred Allen's show) who also did dialect and gave Jewish names to clearly non-Jewish people, even enemies (such as Emperor Shapiro-hito). But whereas a small number of clearly Jewish types were encouraged, they were—except for Gertrude Berg playing Molly Goldberg—not accepted as leading actors. The Jewish character actors had foreign accents and engaged in silly behavior. They were harmless and peripheral. Smart and skilled Jewish characters, fully integrated into the spotlight of American society, would have been far less tolerated. Such a reception gave Jewish entertainers such as Benny a cruel choice: consciously suppress their Jewishness and Jewish involvements or lose an audience. The comedians mostly conformed to audience desires. A lot of the Jewish comedians changed their names; presented themselves as non-Jewish (as mentioned earlier, many people thought George Burns was Irish; Groucho Marx believed audiences thought the Marx Brothers [64] were Italian); were careful to avoid overtly Jewish content, which, however, did sometimes appear in many subtle ways; married Gentile women or, more commonly, several serially; and in other ways tried to purchase some insurance

against failure by assimilating into the society and being recognized only as an American by their audiences.

Still, even if their gifts were restrained, Jews made enormous contributions to radio. Here, after all, was a medium entirely built on sound and voice, and talent in radio comedy was based on verbal wit. Jews, more than any other ethnic group, had relied on language as the basis for their religion, as a source of the humor that sustained them, and as a weapon. Radio seemed built for Jewish comedians. It is unsurprising that they succeeded both as writers and as performers.

Much has been made of radio as a "theater of the mind," with audience members as coproducers of the show, supplying the images that went along with the voices and sound effects that constituted radio reality. Television, on the other hand, required a minimum nod to reality, if only because the images had to be actually seen by the audience, and therefore sets had to be built. Partially for this reason, almost every radio comedian who made a successful jump to television, including both George Burns and Jack Benny, found radio better despite the fact that they couldn't use facial gestures or props or funny costumes developed in vaudeville.

The humor of radio, as in vaudeville, frequently focused on puns. Ed Wynn was the master. His show, on at 9:30 P.M. on Tuesdays, at one point drew 74 percent of those listening to their radios. "I was just carrying a jar of jelly wrapped in newspaper when it fell on the floor and broke. You should see the jam Dick Tracy is in today" was a typical Wynn routine. Eddie Cantor, another punster, talking about bullfighting with the Mad Russian, a character on his show: [65]

"So what happened?" Cantor asked.

"The bull ran towards me."

"He lunged?"

"Lunged? He looked like he didn't even have breakfast."

Though silly, puns are also subversive. They undermine the authority of

language by ignoring certain rules as well as emphasizing the way language can be twisted to impart surprise. In addition, they illustrated the postimmigrant generation's inability to speak English correctly (a clear symbol of their continuing outsider status), and served as a way station to later generations that handled English well. One additional important reason that puns were so prevalent is that radio comedians were severely restricted in the material they could use. Sponsors had ruled out controversy and ethnic jokes. Censorship rules eliminated obscenity or overtly sexual material. Given the particular audience and these many restrictions, puns were the safest, surest way to construct jokes. However, to many contemporary ears, a series of weak, obvious puns seems inferior comedy.

With its mass audiences, radio homogenized taste. Listeners in Dubuque and Brooklyn alike laughed at Jack Benny. And the pervasiveness of radio – by the mid-1930s, three out of four homes had at least one – its relatively cheap cost, and the comic qualities of its programs eventually doomed vaudeville. The three hundred vaudevillians who quit the circuit in 1929 knew that radio was the future and vaudeville the past. Their departure signaled the end of vaudeville's power but simultaneously fed a lot of talent into radio.

The radio audiences may have been large, but methods to ask them about their tastes were rudimentary and relied on memory rather than tracking during the actual listening to the program. Not knowing how mass audiences would react, advertisers were understandably cautious. Sponsors insisted on clean, inoffensive material. Perhaps the depression and the eventual world war also [66] made audiences themselves seek the safe comfort of familiar material rather than wanting to explore the new. Additionally, the experiences of motion picture scandals (from Fatty Arbuckle being accused of mutilating an actress to a deaf audience lip-reading actors in a silent film and uncovering a common practice – the actors passed the time not speaking the dialogue but swearing at each other) and the emergence of the Hays Office provided a sobering lesson to radio producers.

There were, of course, numerous prominent Gentile radio comedians, such as Fred Allen, Edgar Bergen, Bob Hope, Jimmy Durante, Bob and

Ray, Abbott and Costello, Fibber McGee and Molly, Freeman F. Gosden and Charles J. Correll (who played Amos and Andy), and many others. Some of these comedians relied on standard American humor, especially tall tales and folksy, warm sentiment. But the prominence of Jewish comedians served to expose large numbers of Americans to Jewish sensibilities, and by and large they found those sensibilities congenial indeed.

Not every Jewish vaudeville star made a seamless transition to radio. Ed Wynn, for example, suffered from "mike fright." When he spoke on the radio, his voice sounded more like a shriek. His nervousness made him perform in costume in front of radio audiences and in makeup; he was the first performer to do so. His mimicry of the vaudeville performance, of course, was sad, and he once admitted, "I simply cannot work unless there is a theater atmosphere."

George Jessel was also lost in the new medium. He loved to ad lib, and vaudeville audiences were used to his doing so. Like Groucho Marx, he resented the time limitations imposed by radio, limitations that made it necessary to stick to a carefully crafted script, which had been tested against the clock. In addition, too many ad-libs interrupted the tenuous reality that scripts established. Jessel would wander away from the microphone and ignore [67] the strict time constraints. Jessel's overt Jewishness, illustrated by his New York-centric humor, was also unappealing to audiences outside New York. The mass audience demanded that performers lose their specificity and find subjects and personae that could be understood, appreciated, and, most important, laughed at by enough Americans to attract advertisers. Jessel's career withered. Milton Berle frequently ad-libbed in such a way as to break the rhythm of the script, which contributed to his failure to master radio even though he was so gifted a comedian. Eddie Cantor was an ad-libber who succeeded on radio because he was able to keep the lines both brief and relatively few in number, and he intuitively or consciously knew not to interrupt the script at the wrong time. But much of Cantor's appeal, so obvious to vaudeville audiences, rested in his skipping and hand clapping as he sang. All this energy and charm was lost on the radio. His voice was thin and high, neither strong nor distinctive, especially in comparison with the more recognizable voices radio produced. The

comedy was there, but even that was merely good, not original.

Even the Marx Brothers were unsuccessful on radio. Their first show was titled *Flywheel, Shyster, and Flywheel*; it lasted for only one season, 1932-1933. Though unpopular, the radio show nonetheless proved fruitful; fifteen routines from the series later wound up, in one form or another, in their film *Duck Soup*. (The Flywheel name also was later used in *The Big Store*.) The humor was classic Marx Brothers – without, given radio's limitations, a place for Harpo.

GROUCHO: This is an outrage, Ravelli – locking us out of our own office on Christmas Day... A fine Christmas this is. When I woke up this morning I looked in my stocking and what do I find? Your foot.

CHICO : Ah, what'sa matter? You gave me that stocking. [68]

GROUCHO: I gave you that stocking?

CHICO: Sure, lasta night. I ask you what you give me for Christmas, and you say you give me a sock.

GROUCHO: Just for that, Ravelli, you get no present from me.

CHICO: You got a present for me, boss? At'sa fine. What is it?

GROUCHO: I can't tell you, Ravelli. It's a secret.

CHICO : Ah, I no smoka segrets. I smoka cigars.

GROUCHO: One more crack like that and you'll get cigars. Scars all over your body.

The better-known comedians succeeded in radio by learning to adapt. No one did this as well as George Burns. At one point, Burns noted that his ratings were slowly falling. He knew that a large ratings drop in a single week was less troublesome because it indicated another event was taking place. Incremental, small drops were more dangerous. Concerned, Burns turned to friends such as Jack Benny and Eddie Cantor for advice, but no suggestions seemed to help. Then, one night, unable to sleep, he found the problem. He and Gracie were married and older, and their humor was that of a young, unmarried couple. He simply went on the air and told the audience that from then on the characters would be a married couple. The ratings rose, and Burns and Allen never looked back.

Growing as characters over their radio careers, Burns and Allen learned

from Jack Benny that gags had given way to character and what would later be known as "situation comedy." Those who couldn't grasp this, or couldn't develop a likable character to put in a variety of situations, eventually lost their audiences.

Milton Berle had an energetic but too eager-to-please radio voice. Berle, unlike Benny and Burns, did not do character comedy but relied on an endless supply of one-liners. If an audience didn't like a particular gag, another one was right behind it: [69]

For some reason I can't forget my school days. What memories. I can still remember that little black schoolhouse. It was in Pittsburgh. I may not have been the smartest boy in the class, but I wasn't far away from the smartest—about three seats away. How we kept the teacher on her toes. We put tacks on her chair. Mathematics was a pipe for me. One and one is two, and two and two is four, four and four is eight, eight and eight is sixteen, sixteen and sixteen—and then there's geography.

The Jewish women comics of the era were generally less successful, less accepted by audiences. The most important exceptions were Fanny Brice and Gertrude Berg.

Fanny Brice's most successful character was Baby Snooks, a four and-a-half-year-old child she played with a cute, easily recognizable voice. The character was based on a bit of improvisation done by Brice at a party in 1921 and had been used in sketches on Broadway. The choice to speak through the voice of a little girl was especially clever, for such a character could deflect the troubles audiences had in accepting Jewish women as comics, and, like the puppet Charlie McCarthy, a child had permission to make comments that would be offensive or cruel if said by an adult. There is the natural human tendency to see in childhood a lost freedom from responsibility, even from reason, that is not acceptable in adults.

For Jews, though, there were special anxieties about growing up in a world long hostile to Jewish interests. The ability to utter truths without serious repercussions – a luxury available to child characters such as

Baby Snooks – had often been denied to Jews through much of their history. The literal safety afforded by childhood, coupled with a release from economic hardships and dealing with anti-Semites, made feeling like a child emotionally attractive. Moreover, Jews sometimes had to withhold their real intelligence and feelings to survive; they had to pretend that they had a stunted [70] intellectual and emotional growth.

In this sense, Jewish performers pretending to be children metaphorically represented their ancestors' very real acting in everyday life. It was against such a background that Fanny Brice succeeded in creating her Baby Snooks. A typical show had the child annoying her father by getting into trouble and then getting out of it. The plots were thin and the jokes were relatively weak:

(A phone rings)

SNOOKS: Hello.

MAN: Hello, I want to talk to Mr. Higgins.

SNOOKS: He ain't here. Who's calling, please?

MAN: This is Mr. Mudge from across the street. Who is this?

SNOOKS: This is Hortense, the maid.

MAN: Well, listen, Hortense. You tell Higgins to call me as soon as he gets in, see? It's about that brat kid of his.

But the humor did not come from the cleverness of the writing; rather, it rested almost entirely on the comic inflections and sound of Brice's voice.

If Brice's gift was a child's voice, Gertrude Berg's gift was a warm, motherly voice. Berg's creation, *The Goldbergs*, stood out in being a clearly ethnic comedy, with a woman as the moral head of a household and a Jewish woman as writer, director, and producer of the show. Indeed, the early shows (when the program was named *The Rise of the Goldbergs*) focused on humor that emerged from the Yiddish-induced mangling of English. The sentiment was as thick as the accent.

Originally, *The Goldbergs* didn't have a sponsor; the network broadcast it whenever space in the schedule needed to be filled. Yet, *The Goldbergs* survived. In part this was a tribute to Berg's great energy, drive, and genius. [71]

Berg's rise to radio began at Fleischmann's, a resort hotel in the Catskills that was run by her father, Jacob. After writing skits there, she wrote a five hundred-word script, filled with dialect, but didn't know what to do with it. She called all her friends, but no one had a connection to someone in radio. Berg's husband, Lew, knew Herman Bernie, the brother of the comedian Ben Bernie. Berg finally got up the nerve to call him, and he agreed to read the script. Herman Bernie called a Mr. Schwartz, who was then in charge of programming at WMCA. Schwartz got Berg a job doing a commercial for a Christmas cookie. The commercial was supposed to be read in Yiddish, but Berg couldn't read the language so she memorized the commercial, establishing the voice that would work so well for her.

Berg went to CBS Radio in 1929 with a new script. Her show got on – and was immediately canceled after the first broadcast. Someone at CBS didn't like it.

Soon after the stock market crashed, NBC asked for a copy of a new script Berg had written called *The Rise of the Goldbergs*. Bill Rainey, the program director, asked Berg to read the script for him. He then gave Berg a four-week contract. A week later the show was on the air.

Berg developed an interesting mix, creating a show that was a cross between a situation comedy and a soap opera. Each show skillfully wove together laughter, some sadness, and a moral lesson. A principal strategy was to have strife between the immigrant generation played by Berg and the new, more fully American generation. There was a perceptible difference over the years, with Molly Goldberg and her husband, Jake, subtly losing some of their thick Yiddish accents. Finally, the show changed its setting, having the Goldbergs move out of New York.

The secret of Berg's appeal was rooted in the warmth she projected. She was the mother audience members had or wished they [72] had. It was an era in which Jewish mothers were the models of perfect mothers, sacrificing all for their children's happiness. The warmth of Yiddish, as constructed by Berg, was infectious.

MOLLY: Reading the paper, David?

DAVID: What else?

MOLLY: So read me.

DAVID: Listen. A gangster shot a man in the telephone booth and left him standing.

MOLLY: Yeah? What'll we have for supper, David?

DAVID: Whatever.

MOLLY: I thought maybe noodles—soft—it shouldn't be too hard for your new teeth ...

DAVID: For me you don't have to bother.

MOLLY : For who else would I not bother?

Many of Berg's common phrases were copied nationally, such as "So who's to know?" or her opening call to a neighbor, "Yoo-hoo, Mrs. Bloom." Berg also used Yiddish intonations with English words, an especially clever strategy because it Americanized the language just enough while keeping the humorous charm of the original:

MOLLY: Jake, it's Shabbes. You must go to voik also today?

JAKE: Molly, how many times must I tell you. I go to beezness, not to voik.

MOLLY : But Jake, don't you always tell me you're voiking hard?

JAKE: Yes, Molly, bot vhen it's for yourself, it's beezness.

Berg clearly and unabashedly presented the Jewish struggle to succeed, and she had the charm and skills to make audiences see that a story about Jewish immigrants in New York trying to adapt [73] was a perfect symbol of the American people struggling to survive in the depression. Berg's nonthreatening warmth and clear lack of any assertiveness made her acceptable to American audiences. Radio comedians were not only valuable to the country in dealing with the depression, but also vital as America entered World War II. By the early 1940s, about 90 percent of American families had at least one radio in the home and listened to the radio for, on average, between three and four hours a day. The popular shows had 30 million listeners. (There were then about 130 million Americans.) Working with the War Advertising Council, a strategy known as the Network Allocation Plan was developed. Sponsors and advertisers were to have a message about the war on every fourth show.

Daily shows had a message biweekly. One example of the coordination between the government and radio comedy had to do with wartime gasoline rationing, which was introduced because there was a shortage of rubber. Reduced driving, it was believed, would reduce the need for tires. Whereas in the past there might have been a strictly comical sketch about the hardships, audiences now heard the following exchange among Eddie Cantor, Jack Benny, and Gracie Allen:

CANTOR: Gracie, haven't you heard that gasoline is being rationed?

GRACIE: Well, of course I know gasoline is being rationed. My goodness, what do you take me for, a dunce? I've read all about it. You're only allowed one cup a day.

CANTOR: Gracie, that's coffee.

GRACIE: Eddie, don't be silly. A car won't run on coffee...

BENNY: Gracie, look. What they're really rationing is mileage. The less we drive our cars the more rubber we save. And the rubber we save is vital to essential industries and to the army. [74]

GRACIE : The army? Uses rubber?

BENNY: Sure.

GRACIE : Gee, wouldn't you think with all the modern weapons that soldiers wouldn't have to sling shots?

Jack Benny was, of course, a natural to do material on rationing.

DON WILSON (BENNY'S ANNOUNCER): Well, Jack, gas isn't the only thing being rationed nowadays.

BENNY: No, there are a lot of things, Don. A half pound of sugar a week, no whipped cream, one cup of coffee a day, a meatless Tuesday ... But we'll have to get used to it.

MARY LIVINGSTONE (BENNY'S REAL-LIFE WIFE): Get used to it ... You've been rehearsing for this all your life.

Radio comedians traveled to various military bases and broadcast from them. They went on tours to entertain troops in Europe and the South Pacific, putting on live shows. They actively promoted the sales of war bonds and appeared at events to raise funds for the United Service Organizations (USO) and Red Cross. The comedians were even called upon to deliver messages prepared by the Office of War Information

telling Americans about the war effort.

And they were eager to help. Jack Benny donated a violin that was auctioned for funds and at the end of his show reminded audience members to buy war bonds and delivered messages from the Office of War Information. He began camp shows in 1942, traveling Mondays through Thursdays and flying back to Hollywood for rehearsal and to broadcast his show. Benny's own experience in the navy gave him key insights. "I knew that the basis of all military humor is griping – about the food, K.P duty, weekend passes and the brass," he said. Benny also walked through hospital wards, [75] telling jokes, just talking, and playing his violin, especially his theme song, "Love in Bloom." In 1943, Benny made his first USO tour overseas. In Benghazi, in North Africa, a B-17 crew painted some words on a bomb: To ADOLF HITLER – WITH LOVE IN BOOM. In Ismailia, Egypt, Benny searched out a kosher restaurant. He also traveled to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, then under British control. The next summer he went to the South Pacific, and after the war, in 1946, Benny met with General Eisenhower in Berlin.

Even more than Benny, Eddie Cantor was explicit in attacking the Axis powers. Indeed, Variety published a letter from him on January 14, 1942, saying that after Pearl Harbor, all humor was political. "High spirits," he wrote, "are one of this country's first priorities." On one show, in a German accent, he said there was "no food shortage in Germany. Last night we had a big wienie roast. The Allied planes came over and cooked Frankfurt." On another show he announced confidently, "They'll never bomb this studio. [There is a sound of bombs.] Why can't I keep my big mouth shut?" On January 29, 1944, Cantor broadcast for twenty four straight hours over KPO in San Francisco in order to sell war bonds. He sold \$37.6 million worth.

George Burns recalled in a later interview with the American Jewish Committee the effect that Hitler's coming to power had on him: "I found myself getting very Jewish when that happened. I imagine that affected everybody the same way." He and Gracie had traveled to Poland before the war, where they saw many Jews in their beards and hats. This made him comment later that when Hitler started the war, "It was so easy to find them [the Jews], it was so easy to locate them. Half of them would

have been saved had they taken off their hats. But they died with their hats on." Burns admired the Jews' stubborn pride and fierce loyalty. Though he couldn't understand religion and had never tried to raise his children as Jews, he nonetheless retained a clear sense of Jewish [76] identity: "I've always felt Jewish ever since I can remember, and I'll always feel the same way. I've never tried to be anything else."

Milton Berle claimed to have flattened a Nazi sympathizer in Chicago and said in a 1977 unpublished interview, "I'm a proud Jew. I'm glad that I'm a Jew.... I feel more Jewish today than I ever felt."

The Nazi regime and its treatment of the Jews provided a unique situation and obligation for Jewish comedians. Although the Holocaust's scope and its unbearably horrific details were not fully known to the general public until after the war, the Nazi mistreatment of Jews and others was obvious from the moment of Hitler's emergence as chancellor in 1933. If the Jewish comedians had trouble conceiving of genocide as a real possibility, the more conventional elements of anti-Semitism were all too familiar.

The sad fact is that the comedians were limited by their lack of political knowledge; their reliance on hostile, indifferent, or silent American officials to provide that knowledge; and their concern to stay popular and not be too obviously Jewish, especially before the war when isolationism was popular and American Jews were frequently accused of fanning a war fever. Humor was their most potent weapon. Mel Blanc played Hitler on a Jack Benny program as a crazed maniac chewing a rug. But that was about as far as any of the Jewish – or, for that matter, non-Jewish – radio comedians went.

The support for the war effort was certainly crucial. Yet, there was no concerted effort by comedians on radio to alert the country to the full nature of the Nazi menace. The comedians' desire to be accepted by audiences restrained them from confronting European anti-Semitism. The comedians were a symbol for all American Jews, unbearably worried about Nazism, trapped in a society that didn't fully trust Jews and was reluctant to go to war. The comedians wanted continued success and American Jews wanted social [77] acceptance, and that

meant staying quiet. In 1936, even Eddie Cantor, who would later do so much for the war effort, sang an isolationist song called "If They Feel Like a War, Let Them Keep It Over There" on the *Rudy Vallee Show*. One of the lines he sang was: "Our job is to protect our loved ones over here." The war changed Cantor as it did others, but the focus was on Americans alone and did not include reference to the Jewish victims in Europe. The jokes during the war changed comedy and led to the acceptance of topical humor after the war, but for the victims and survivors of the Nazis the sounds of American laughter were hollow indeed.

And whatever Jewish comedians joked about after the war, their own smiles, whether consciously or not, would be haunted by the comedic failure to confront the anti-Semitism of American society and the genocidal plans of a madman. [78]

“Laughing in the Dark: Films”: 79-103.

The oldest comedic gag on film, in a French short film, was one in which a child steps on a garden hose. The water stops running and so the man holding the hose looks into the nozzle. The youngster then lifts his foot and water squirts out. The aggressive nature of film comedy and its ability to release tensions were immediately made evident. It is also telling, of course, that the humor was physical and at least marginally cruel.

Jewish characters were present in motion pictures virtually from the invention of the art form. Early one-reelers about Jews focused on Jewish stereotypes. Jewish characters were identified by their long beards and heavy mustaches. They were pawnbrokers, tailors, con artists, and cowards. [79]

The film critic Leonard Maltin has suggested that because pantomime and visual comedy were not their strengths, Jewish comedians did not go into silent films. But there were still some Jews who made it onto the silent screen. The Jewish vaudeville team of Weber and Fields was in various films. Max Davidson played Izzy Davidson, a lazy and clearly Jewish character in a series of films for Hal Roach Studios. Sammy

Cohen, a comic actor with a very large nose, had a perfect appearance for the exaggerated Jewish characters he played.

George Sidney, born Sammy Greenfield, was the most important Jewish comedian in the silent era. He began his screen career in 1915 after a time in vaudeville, where he became famous for the character of Busy Izzy. The character lent his name to the title of Sidney's first film. He then made *In Hollywood with Potash and Perlmutter* and *Partners Again, with Potash and Perlmutter* for Samuel Goldwyn and appeared most famously in *The Cohens and the Kellys* (1926) and its six sequels. Once again, the characters Sidney played were stereotypical. The Sidney character, Jacob Cohen, was overweight, wore an ill-fitting suit, had constantly moving hands and a large nose, and was unshaven. He was socially inept. He cheated at business.

Silent film obviously emphasized physical appearance and physical movement. By definition, it could not include verbal humor, the Jewish comedians' strength. Given the demands of the medium, the Jewish comedians of the silent era simply did not have the talent of those comedians whose fame has survived. Silent film comedy's greatest stars were all Gentiles and include, most prominently, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. A few commentators claimed that Chaplin was himself Jewish. Clearly, his tramp character could be seen as Jewish, though Chaplin was generic enough in appearance so that the tramp could be from any ethnic group. Still, the gossip about his being Jewish and his clearly [80] sympathetic portrait of put-upon immigrants contributed to a sense of accepting Jews and other immigrants as comic figures not through stereotypes but through sheer talent. Both Keaton and Chaplin, though, were essentially physical comedians. Chaplin's economic movements, his uncanny use of props, and his brilliant ability to top one sight gag with another all stemmed from a physical not a verbal wit.

There were more prominent Jewish comedians in the early era of talking pictures. In *It Might Be Worse* (1930), George Jessel wants to kill himself and is even called a *schlemiel*. Smith and Dale made a series of films including *What Price Pants?* (1931), about a boss who is tricked into giving his worker a piece of the business when the worker tricks him into believing the worker has gotten a huge inheritance. Jack Benny,

Milton Berle, George Burns, Fanny Brice, Bert Lahr, and Ed Wynn all appeared in film comedies, but none that were memorable.

And then there were the Marx Brothers.

It may well be the case that no group of movie comedians was more difficult to work with than the Marx Brothers. Chico frequently couldn't be found for a scene. While frantic searches were being undertaken for Chico, Groucho and Harpo would wander off. Zeppo was perpetually late. Harpo enjoyed setting up elaborate practical jokes much more than rehearsing scenes or even showing up on the set.

This free-spiritedness, though, belied a tremendous work ethic. The brothers had spent years traveling around the country with their mother from city to city, perfecting their act. Groucho, in particular, was endlessly exploring alternative lines, sometimes settling on the first one but only after convincing himself that the other options were less funny. He was terrifically demanding, mostly of himself. When he saw a Sunday matinee of *The Cocoanuts*, the Marx Brothers' first feature film, he was so [81] dismayed he left, planning to buy back the film. Groucho approached Walter Wanger, who represented Paramount in New York, but it was too late. By then the reviews were in, and the movie was on its way to success. (Movie exhibitors, who had originally complained that audiences wouldn't understand the film because Groucho talked too fast, smiled as audiences returned again and again simply to make sure they got all of Groucho's witticisms.)

The Cocoanuts, made in 1929, was based on the huge stage hit of the same name, and was filmed while *Animal Crackers*, the Marx Brothers' newest Broadway show, was still running. Because the Marx Brothers were so familiar with the material, filming began with no rehearsals. That soon had to be changed; the crew laughed too hard hearing the lines and watching the antics for the first time. The film was a potpourri of pretty women in bathing suits, musical numbers, Marx madness, and a flimsy plot. There were also Yiddish words and slang, much more than in any other Marx Brothers movie. Some of these terms were so deeply hidden they almost constituted a secret language available only to Jewish audiences. The most subtle occurs when Chico and Harpo are planning to

sign into the hotel. Groucho shows them the register and says: "Now step this way, boys, and just put your moniker on there and everything will be A.K." Instead of saying "O.K.," Groucho says "A.K.," an abbreviation for the Yiddish phrase "*alter kocker*," which is usually used to describe an old, crotchety man. Its literal meaning is more vulgar. *Alter* means "old" and *kocker* means "human waste."

In another scene, Groucho says: "All along the river, those are all levees." Chico says, "That's the Jewish neighborhood," and Groucho responds, "Well, we'll pass over that." Such an interplay was at least more obvious to urban audiences who had met Jews named Levy and understood that Passover was a Jewish holiday. Rural audiences, though, were probably much more confused by the talk.

Chico is involved in other Jewish references. When leaving a [82] detective, Chico mutters, "Ah, *shalom*." Chico is introduced as "Señor Pastrami" as he prepares to play the piano. Chico says to another character, "Bravo, *Galitzianer*." A *Galitzianer* is a Jew from Galicia, a province in Poland (later Austria) as opposed to a Litvak, or Lithuanian Jew. The two were often at odds.

These minor linguistic additions were prizes offered to Jewish audiences as well as a small number of outsiders. The outsiders in society were able to put one over on society by communicating without the "other" understanding.

The Marx Brothers were never religiously Jewish. Their Jewish identity was familial, ethnic, urban, and linguistic. They took being Jewish for granted but were quiet about it. In an effort to blend into American life, they had traditional Christmas trees in their homes to celebrate what they considered an American not a religious holiday. Groucho's character was not even originally Jewish. Only when the Germans sunk the *Lusitania* in 1915 did Groucho, then in vaudeville, change his character from a German to a Jewish one. Groucho was as cynical about religion as he was about all else. When his son Arthur was married in a Jewish ceremony, Groucho went up to the man performing the marriage and said, "Is it true you fellows breed like rabbis?" Indeed, nothing of a spiritual nature appealed to him. One of Groucho's wives took him to a

psychic. Groucho was told she could answer any question. He turned to her and said, "What's the capital of North Dakota?" He was asked to leave.

But whether religious or not, the brothers could not avoid all anti-Jewish sentiment. There was a famous Groucho story about his son (or, in other versions, one of his daughters) at a "restricted" club, being told that he could not use the swimming pool. Groucho's reply was that since the child was only half-Jewish, could he walk in up to his knees?

The other brothers had comparable experiences. Chico and his [83] family were once refused a room at a hotel near Lake George in upstate New York. On another occasion, Harpo arranged to stay at a hotel in Montauk, on Long Island. The hotel wired him back saying, "RESERVATIONS CONFIRMED. TRUST YOU ARE GENTILE." Harpo was furious, but he didn't want to upset the two men who were traveling with him, so he didn't send a wire back to the hotel. Instead, he went to the hotel, his pants rolled above his knees, a tam-o'-shanter on his head, holding a crooked cane, smoking a pipe, and registered himself as "Harpo MacMarx." Over dinner, he told the others what had happened, and they insisted on leaving. As they were checking out, the manager came over and Harpo said, "Lad, could ye dir-r-rect me to the near-r-rest Jewish temple?" Harpo then threw a Gookie, and they left.

Much of the Marx comic genius – and its religiously subversive nature – can be seen in such anecdotes. The Marx Brothers showed an intense willingness to mock the very society they wished to enter. In doing so, they changed the rules for future Jewish comedians who wished to entertain American audiences.

In contrast to comedians such as George Burns, Jack Benny, and Ed Wynn, who were models of assimilation, the Marx Brothers sought not to change themselves but rather to change the audience so that it could understand secular but distinctly Jewish sensibilities. The Marx Brothers' revolution was incomplete, and it included retreats. Over time, they reduced the number of Jewish references in their films, but they maintained their commitment to alter the traditional materials at which audiences laughed. They lived their lives and they made their films on

their own terms. Society would have to accept them for what they were – poor children of immigrants struggling to understand and adapt to the wider American culture. After the Marx Brothers, Jewish comedians would be freer to be themselves. [84]

The Marx Brothers' revolution began with their characters. Groucho was irreverent, a cynical trickster who shamelessly sought money by seducing wealthy and dignified widows, a con man who ridiculed all he saw. He talked so quickly that his targets were still trying to understand the last insult while Groucho had uttered two more. Groucho inverted the Jack Benny approach of providing appropriate audience pauses. When some in the audience complained that the laughter in the theater prevented them from hearing the next line, Groucho refused to retreat. The fast-talking urban wisecracker became an American comedy type and allowed generations of Jewish comedians through the door.

Groucho's unbridled verbal attacks undertaken at breakneck speed were supplemented by his appearance. Unlike Burns or Benny, Groucho created his character by using exaggerated visual effects. His greasepaint mustache and eyebrows, his cigar, his bent way of walking, and his energetic dances made him funny in appearance and voice. Groucho's mustache, glasses, and cigar are a sort of mask hiding his real self from outsiders and a sign of insecurity about being found out. As with all the Marx Brothers, Groucho was an outsider, even when his character was president of a country or president of a college. He didn't belong in any social environment. Harpo and Chico also wore disguises. The masks and disguises represented immigrants having to disguise their true identity, sometimes grotesquely, to adapt to life in the Golden Land. Immigrant audiences could find their own emotional identity in the Marx Brothers wearing masks precisely because the immigrants were fearful that their foreign nature might emerge and betray them, unmasking them as foreigners and making them feel like failed Americans. In wearing the masks, the Marx Brothers allowed audiences to laugh at themselves and their most deep seated anxieties. [85]

Fear of the exposure of the real self was most famously portrayed in the film *Duck Soup*. In a classic scene, Harpo is trying to hide from Groucho. Harpo breaks a mirror and, to continue hiding, pretends he is

Groucho's reflection. Only Chico's entrance ruins Harpo's brilliant imitation. The scene made exquisite psychological sense to an immigrant audience. Harpo was trying to hide by imitating someone else, just as many immigrants and their children believed they had to hide their true selves to imitate Americans. Yet, the outsider also could find himself on the inside, as a hotel manager or doctor, for example. The two brothers, that is, portrayed the anguish of assimilation; the self that felt outside society and the self that felt inside society faced each other with the insider attempting to outwit the outsider, but with the outsider, for a time, keeping up. The pain of having both sides, with the outside self trying desperately to mimic the inside self, was thus made palpable. Many of the Marx Brothers' routines were about those on the outside trying to get inside by seeking the key. Consider, for example, "The Password" routine from *Horse Feathers*.

CHICO: Who are you?

GROUCHO: I'm fine, thanks, who are you?

CHICO: I'm fine, too, but you can't come in unless you give the password.

GROUCHO: Well, what is the password?

CHICO : Aw, no! You gotta tell me. Hey, I tell what I do. I give you three guesses ... It's the name of a fish.

GROUCHO: Is it Mary?

CHICO: Ha! Ha! Attsa no fish.

GROUCHO: She isn't. Well, she drinks like one ...

CHICO : Now I give you one more chance.

GROUCHO: I got it. Haddock. [86]

CHICO : Attsa funny I gotta haddock too ... You can't come in here unless you say "swordfish." Now I give you one more guess.

GROUCHO: Swordfish ... I think I got it. Is it swordfish?

Again and again, questions of welcome and entry come up in the Marx Brothers' movies. In *Monkey Business*, the brothers are stowaways struggling to get into the country. In one scene, Harpo and Chico can't get in a door to a party. Harpo and Chico are also stowaways in *A Night at the Opera*.

And their plight wasn't just about Jewish immigrants. Chico's character was an Italian immigrant who held a variety of jobs, mostly of an

extremely modest nature. He sold fish or peanuts. He tried to peddle toosy-footsy ice cream or dirty postcards. He struggled, that is, for a living even as he schemed to improve his life. He also always defended the innocent Harpo, perhaps the most extreme symbol of the immigrant who cannot speak the language. Chico was the interpreter of Harpo for the world. Chico sometimes pretended to be stupid, a strategy that often worked because people confused his appearance, accent, and seeming ignorance with a lack of cunning and intelligence, both of which Chico had in ample supply. Chico's assimilationist strategy was similar to Groucho's in the acquisition of a disguise but the opposite in how he handled language. Groucho became a master of English, whereas Chico pretended he couldn't use it well.

Chico was often crucial, though by no means alone, in emphasizing a common emotion of immigrant life: the desire for food. His first question in *Animal Crackers* concerns finding the dining room. In *Monkey Business*, he, along with Groucho, steals the captain's lunch. In *A Night at the Opera*, Groucho orders a meal that Chico also eats. A central part of *Room Service* involves the struggling acting troupe's attempts to get food. Harpo is also frequently [87] portrayed as hungry. In *A Night in Casablanca* he tries to bite Chico's thumb. This constant theme of needing food reflected not only the Marx Brothers' real early life, but the underlying anxiety of the immigrants who still felt uncertain that their next meal would be forthcoming.

Harpo embodied a third linguistic strategy: silence. Harpo's silence in the face of humiliation and hunger and his innocence in a corrupt world made him embody the pure goodness of those who don't fit into society. He gave hope and dignity to those who continued to feel like outsiders. His seeming innocence was balanced by his physical chasing of women. Here the childlike Harpo shows grown-up desires, though ones not typically satisfied. In chasing the women, Harpo complicates the tradition of Jewish comedians playing characters who are children or childlike such as Fanny Brice playing Baby Snooks. Harpo played a childlike character, but he let his mask down and revealed himself to have very adult desires. In partially revealing his adulthood, Harpo was a perfect representation of America's Jews, who were just beginning to feel comfortable in revealing their true selves to Americans. Of course,

the Marx Brothers' playful, anarchic childishness also served as an outlet for the simple human desire to be freed from social inhibitions.

On the economic ladder, Harpo was even below Chico. Harpo was a bum. With Groucho as a con man or fraud, Chico as a vendor, and Harpo as a tramp, the Marx Brothers stood outside normal commercial life. In their portrayal of economic outsiders, they reflected the common feelings, especially of immigrant Jews but also of all immigrants, that they were not being allowed into the wider society.

Many Americans in the 1930s felt locked out not just from economic life but also from social life. The depression had made them lose confidence in the institutions that made up society. The Marx [88] Brothers mercilessly lampooned those institutions that had so deeply disappointed Americans, thus allowing audiences to vent their anger on the institutions that had failed them (the government) or that ignored or condescended to them (the wealthy and powerful). This attack, though, was skillfully controlled, the anger rationed out as carefully as gasoline or coffee would later be during the war. Groucho spoke on behalf of the audience. Harpo suffered on behalf of the audience. Chico struggled on behalf of the audience. If audiences were hungry, so would the Marx Brothers be hungry. If audiences believed they were without power, so, too, would the Marx Brothers have that belief. The brothers' funny costumes and props were exaggerated examples of their being outsiders.

Like Jack Benny, who was so cheap that no audience member who had to save money could be as cheap, the Marx Brothers were so outside society by their looks and behavior that no audience members could feel more outside. By serving as comic exaggerations, the brothers made audience members feel more like insiders. This can be seen, for example, in the various ways the brothers help troubled romantic partners find true love, whereas they generally, but not always, are deprived of such love. Harpo must always chase the blondes. Groucho must always woo not because he truly loves the woman in question but because of her wealth and status. Both of these pursuits, in turn, reflect aspects of Jewish assimilation: pursuit of the non-Jewish mate (the blonde) and the non-Jewish social class. It should also be noted that Zeppo, who wore no mask or disguise, often found love in the films.

The Marx Brothers, in this respect, mirrored Jewish life. They were outsiders who didn't feel comfortable or fit into the wider society or, more commonly in Jewish history, weren't let into the society. Their assault on the kinds of political and social institutions that had been historically hostile to Jews was so fervent because the desire to attack them had been repressed for so long. [89]

Jewish audiences, then, could emotionally identify profoundly with the various assaults of the Marx Brothers. In ways they perhaps didn't understand, mass film audiences were beginning to absorb and appreciate a Jewish sensibility and see that its concerns were their own. The emotions unleashed by Jewish comedians strangely met the needs of American audiences. Those American depression audiences could suddenly understand the Jewish experience with poverty and feelings of powerlessness.

By their third film, *Monkey Business*, there was the first clear indication of a decline of overtly Jewish elements. The brothers do hide in barrels of kippered herrings, but Yiddishisms are gone. Even more critical, at one point Groucho turns to the audience after one of Chico's remarks and says, "There's my argument. Restrict immigration." That's a remarkable line in a film in which restrictions on immigration are being mocked, but it indicates the slow move in the films away from ethnicity and toward straightforward humor.

Horse Feathers, their next feature, with its satire of higher education and college sports, was clearly aimed away from urban audiences and more toward middle Americans who would enjoy mocking college life and watching a bit of funny football. During the filming of the football game, Harpo noticed an adorable little girl, three or four years old, on the sidelines. She was part of the local population used to make up the crowd at the game. Harpo found the girl so cute that he offered her parents fifty thousand dollars if he could adopt her. The parents replied that their daughter could not be bought. Whatever the ethics, Harpo certainly had a good eye: The girl was Shirley Temple.

Duck Soup is often considered one of the best of the Marx Brothers' films. Leo McCarey, the man who had suggested that Stan Laurel and

Oliver Hardy form a team, primarily provided the antiwar, antigovernment political sensibility of the film. Groucho [90] thought McCarey was the only great director they ever had. Chico liked him because they could gamble. (Once, Chico brought a bag of walnuts and bet a hundred dollars he could throw a walnut farther than McCarey. The director, not knowing that Chico was a huckster's huckster, agreed, and threw his walnut about a hundred feet. Chico then picked one up and tossed it much farther. The impressed McCarey paid up, not knowing that Chico had filled his walnut with lead.) The Margaret Dumont characters in the films were the embodiments of the upper crust of American society, struggling to resist the entreaties of those who sought to seduce them. In *Duck Soup*, Groucho continued his assault on Margaret Dumont and what she stood for. "I welcome you with open arms," she says, to which he replies, "Is that so? How long do you stay open?" Sometimes Groucho's assault lasts longer:

DUMONT: I've sponsored your appointment because I feel you are the most able statesman in all Freedonia.

GROUCHO : Well, that covers a lot of ground. Say, you cover a lot of ground yourself. You'd better beat it. I hear they're going to tear you down and put up an office building where you're standing. You can leave in a taxi. If you can't leave in a taxi, you can leave in a huff. If that's too soon, you can leave in a minute and a huff. You know you haven't stopped talking since I came here? You must have been vaccinated with a phonograph needle.

Duck Soup also took on political structures. In one scene the minister of war speaks about "taking up the tax."

GROUCHO: How about taking up the carpet?

MINISTER: I still insist we must take up the tax. [91]

GROUCHO: He's right. You've got to take up the tacks before you take up the carpet.

This mockery of taxes continued with Chico and the Minister of Finance:

MINISTER: War would mean a prohibitive increase in our taxes.

CHICO : Hey, I got an uncle lives in Taxes.

MINISTER: No, I'm talking about taxes, money, dollars.

CHICO: Dollas! Thatsa where my uncle lives. Dollas, Taxes.

After *Duck Soup*, the Marx Brothers left Paramount for MGM, and more particularly for the producer Irving Thalberg, the man F. Scott Fitzgerald had nicknamed the Boy Wonder. Thalberg developed a clear plan for the Marx Brothers: more of a story line and fewer gags. The result was what may be their best film, *A Night at the Opera*. In this film, Groucho could mock high art ("On account of you I nearly heard the opera"), lawyers, and spoiled celebrities. Here was subject matter that average American audiences could enjoy. The sparkling dialogue is illustrative of the enormous contributions made by the brilliant writers who tried to work with the Marx Brothers – "tried" because the Marx Brothers frequently changed the dialogue. But George S. Kaufman (who found Margaret Dumont for them), S. J. Perelman, and others made vital contributions. One scene in *A Night at the Opera* involves a contract Groucho wants Chico to sign. This is a frontal assault on lawyers:

GROUCHO: Now, pay particular attention to this first clause because it's most important. Says the, uh, the party of the first part shall be known in this contract as the party [92] of the first part. How do you like that? That's pretty neat, eh?

CHICO : No, that's no good.

GROUCHO: What's the matter with it?

CHICO: I don't know. Let's hear it again.

GROUCHO: Says the, uh, the party of the first part should be known in this contract as the party of the first part.

CHICO : That sounds a little better this time.

GROUCHO: Well, it grows on you. Would you like to hear it once more?

CHICO : Uh, just the first part.

GROUCHO : What do you mean? The – the party of the first part?

CHICO : No, the first part of the party of the first part.

GROUCHO: All right. It says, the, uh, the first part of the party of the first part should be known in this contract as the first part of the party of the first part should be known in this contract ...

Look. Why should we quarrel about a thing like this? We'll take it right out, eh?

The scene continues, with Chico being opposed to the sanity clause because he knows "Sanity Claus" doesn't exist.

There were also more explicit emotional elements in *A Night at the Opera* than in earlier films. For the first time, Harpo was hit in a film. The childlike innocent evoked instant sympathy and made identification of a villain easy. There was even indirect reference to urban life, with its crowds, cramped conditions, and hunger in the famed stateroom scene when Groucho and three stowaways are joined by the engineer, the manicurist, the engineer's assistant, a woman looking for her aunt Minnie, a woman who wants to mop the floor, the steward and his assistants, and Margaret Dumont who opens the door, causing all inside to fall out. [93]

Thalberg allowed the brothers to try out comic bits in front of live audiences, vastly improving some of the scenes. The stowaway scene developed its crucial elements before live audiences prior to filming. Although this cost a lot of money, Thalberg correctly surmised the film would be field-tested in a unique way.

A Night at the Opera was the peak for the Marx Brothers. Never again were they as vital in their films, though they were often extremely funny.

The Marx Brothers were not the only Jews to succeed once the movies had sound. Eddie Cantor made some one-reelers, such as *Getting a Ticket* (1929), which is essentially an excuse to film a vaudeville skit about a police officer who wants to give Cantor a ticket unless Cantor can prove he is really Eddie Cantor by singing a song. In *Whoopee!* (1930), the first of six films he made for Samuel Goldwyn, Cantor sang songs and appeared in blackface. He wore a disguise as a Native American, one who spoke in a Yiddish accent and identified himself by saying "Me Big Chief Izzy Horowitz" in a distinctly Jewish chant. *Whoopee!* was quite successful in New York, but less so in such places as Chicago, Louisville, and Seattle; Cantor's reliance on his clearly Jewish character was inhibiting his wider approval. So, like the Marx Brothers, over time Cantor steadily de-emphasized the Jewish aspects of his film personality, a process the social critic Irving Howe called "de-Semitization." This attempt at assimilation, which producers forced to try to sell pictures to wider audiences, became more and more pronounced.

Whoopee! dealt with intermarriage. The Jewish Cantor character, Henry

Williams, is in love with his Gentile nurse, whereas the other white female is in love with Wanensis (whom she believes to be a Native American). The Jewish-Gentile relationship was in fact common in popular entertainment and reflected a widespread belief that in the melting pot that was America, love was more important than ancient religious traditions. [94]

Jewish audiences found this premise troubling. In the 1930s and '40s, very few American Jews intermarried. Jewish comedians, on the other hand, frequently married Gentile women (for example, George Burns, George Jessel, Phil Silvers, all the Marx Brothers, and Bert Lahr). Had the American Jewish community known that Jewish comedians were prophetic in their romantic attachment to Gentiles, perhaps the concerns would have been greater, but interfaith marriages did not rise precipitously until the beginning of the 1960s; by 1990, more than half of Jews who were getting married chose a Gentile partner. The comedians did not see themselves as romantic Jewish forerunners. They saw themselves as Americans and did not want to endanger their assimilationist success by reverting to a traditional pattern of Jewish life. Not always handsome, Jewish male comedians found themselves able to date and wed beautiful Gentile women. The lures of Gentile America were powerful indeed.

At the end of *Whoopie!* the white-Native American romance is able to proceed only when Wanensis's Native American parents reveal that their son is actually white, that he was left as a baby and raised in the tribe. This retreat from confronting a difficult issue takes away from the power of the film, but clearly raises the question of what exactly the melting pot is willing to melt. *Whoopie!* also contains a scene that, in retrospect, is quite disturbing. At one point Cantor crawls into an oven and comes out in blackface, enabling him to sing. The blackface remains offensive, but the scene of a Jew in an oven is horrifying after the Holocaust. Amazingly, a similar scene is in the later Cantor film *Kid Millions* (1934). The first time Cantor appears he is hiding in an oven – and he has a brother in the film named Adolf. Cantor also appears in blackface in this film during "Minstrel Night." The plot, about Eddie's character inheriting \$77 million, is weak. Eddie plays a reluctant groom ("A wedding is a funeral where you smell your own flowers"). [95] At one

point, he does say to an Arab sheik, "Let my people go," but that is about the only Jewish reference.

Like the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges also reflected immigrant life. But whereas the Marxes tended to band together to fight the outside world, the Stooges turned inward. They used their physical antics, the face slaps, nose punches, and hair pullings, on each other. That is, theirs was a sadder comedy because they showed that the much touted closeness of family life brought tremendous internal strife. Audiences uncomfortable with their spouses, their siblings, their parents, or their children could find a family replicated in Moe the parent and Larry and Curly (and later Shemp and others) the children. The themes of close family, confusion about a place in society, and feeling like a victim were tangibly Jewish in origin. And the American laughs at the Three Stooges are releases from family tensions, aggression sublimated to humor, anger let out in art so that it is not let out in life.

The Stooges exaggerated the attacks with clever sound effects. When a character sat on a flame, the sound used was butter that was being fried in a pan. The plucking of ukulele strings aurally enhanced an eye being poked. A whip was cracked to add an effect to a slapped face. A cloth was ripped to accompany a shock of hair being pulled. When someone was knocked out, there was often the sound of a bird chirping.

Sizzling butter and cracking whips weren't the only Stooge sounds; there were also a few Yiddishisms. In *Hokus Pokus* (1949), they generously applied a talcum powder named Schlemiel Number Eight. In *Malice in the Palace* (1940), they struggled against the emir of Shmow, a term that later applied to a train car in *Cuckoo on the Choo Choo* (1952). (Schmo is not actually a Yiddish word, but a combination of Yiddish and English. It is a more polite substitute for the obscene Yiddish word *schmuck*, which can refer to a [96] *schlemiel*, the way schmo does, but more literally refers to the male organ.)

Danny Kaye made several movie shorts during 1937 and 1938, but his major movie career developed in the mid-1940s by making a series of films for Samuel Goldwyn. Kaye had, like so many comics, left school, and, after working in the Catskills, he gained fame on Broadway in *Straw*

Hat Revue. He then starred, also on Broadway, in *Lady in the Dark*. Goldwyn enjoyed the show and wanted to sign Kaye but didn't like the young man's looks. His large nose, Goldwyn thought, made him look too Jewish. Goldwyn settled for just having Kaye dye his red hair blond.

Kaye was a great mimic and master of language. Expert at "scat" songs, which sounded like jazz music but contained syllables that made no sense, he was also impressive in singing complex, funny lyrics often written by his wife, Sylvia Fine. Kaye's intelligence was always evident as was his charm and emotional vulnerability, all of which made audiences feel close to him. Kaye represented not the literal outsider, as did the Marx Brothers, but the confused insider. In this, Kaye was a transition figure for Jewish comedians. He felt much more fully American than the Marx Brothers, but his role was not yet clear.

One aspect that some critics have noted is the sexual nature of some of his unmasculine characters, which enabled Kaye to present an alternative mask to the one the Marx Brothers wore. The Jew could enter the society but not fully as a man. The American identity, that is, is not yet fully formed even in Kaye's movies.

Kaye's films, beginning with *Up in Arms* (1944), were generally unremarkable except for Kaye's vocal manipulations. That movie – a remake of *Whoopie!* – is a love story set during World War II, but on the Japanese front. The movie, that is, avoided directly dealing with the sort of Jewish issues that the original version tackled. In that, *Up in Arms* was like much of the rest of Hollywood. Ironically, [97] just as the Jews of Europe were disappearing from the Earth, the Jews of Hollywood – as characters, if not performers – were vanishing.

Despite the popularity of the Marx Brothers, Cantor, and others, the number of Jewish subjects in Hollywood films dropped dramatically in the 1930s. In the 1920s, there had been numerous Jewish-related films, including some about Jewish treatment under the czars. As the film historian Patricia Brett Erens notes: "Beginning in the thirties, Jews were pushed off center ... although they remain as identifiable minor characters in many films up through 1933. From 1933 to the end of the decade even these types disappear. Thus from 1933 to 1940 few stories

about Jews and Jewish life are filmed." Erens does not believe that any studio had a policy effecting this diminution. Leonard Maltin is not so sure. He recalls speaking with the comedian Benny Rubin, who claimed that he was blackballed. According to Rubin, a meeting of the movie moguls (most if not all of whom were Jewish) took place in the late 1930s after the anti-Semitism in Germany grew worse. The moguls, Rubin believed, decided they would no longer put Jewish characters on screen. Maltin doesn't know if such a meeting did actually take place, but he says there is supporting evidence in the fact that, as Erens suggests, the characters simply disappeared. Maltin notes other ethnic stereotypes – the Irish cops and the Italian organ-grinders, for example – were still present in consistent numbers, whereas the Jewish characters disappeared. Tom Tugend also reports hearing about the meeting in which the moguls purportedly agreed to "one, keep Jewish names off the screen; two, all Jewish executives to sell their Cadillacs and Rolls Royces; and three get rid of their *shiksa* [Gentile] mistresses." The most charitable reading of any such effort is that these policies were meant to avoid providing ammunition to the anti-Semites who complained about Jewish influences in Hollywood. [98]

There are other possible explanations for the disappearance. Corporations had gained control over the film studios that had been privately owned. The corporations, aiming for a national audience, downplayed Jewish elements. This move fit seamlessly into efforts to remove Jewish stereotypes. The Hays Code, beginning in 1934, added to the blandness and the desire to avoid offense.

There are, though, more troubling possible motives. By the mid-1930s, the major studios in Hollywood received 30-40 percent of their gross revenues from distributing films overseas. In 1939, about 150 million Europeans went to see an American-made film every week. The studios were concerned that by angering the Nazis they would lose this business. Louis B. Mayer of MGM went so far as to ask William Randolph Hearst to speak with Hitler to protect the studio's German film interests. Hearst did so.

The Nazis placed restrictions on the content of the films they imported, and most studios seemed to comply, although by 1940 only three studios

(MGM, Twentieth-Century Fox, and Paramount) were allowed to export their films to Germany, and this permission ended in September of that year.

The Hays Office, concerned about the economic consequences of angering the Nazis, and deeply influenced by the isolationism at home, pressured filmmakers to resist making any "propaganda" films. Indeed, from September 15, 1939, until January 1940, the Hays Office explicitly banned the production of anti-Nazi films. The State Department, which favored neutrality, supported the idea that studios should not make films that would anger any other country.

Whatever the real causes for the decline in Jewish characters, Hollywood reacted to the emerging anti-Semitism with silence. Michael Birdwell, in his book *Celluloid Soldiers: The Warner Bros. Campaign against Nazism*, argues that Harry Warner created anti-Nazi [99] films, though disguised as allegory. Birdwell sees, for instance, Warner pictures that focused on organized crime actually as attacks on fascism and suggests that Errol Flynn as Robin Hood was metaphorically fighting against the Nazis. Birdwell notes the general silence of the other major studios, seeing Warner as a brave and lonely figure.

There were, in fact, some real and rare exceptions, films that did not hide behind metaphor. Charlie Chaplin's *Great Dictator* (1940) was the first film made in Hollywood to attack Nazi anti-Semitism. Despite the comedic elements, the film remains a powerful indictment of Hitler. Chaplin received a large number of threatening letters during the film's production.

It is a startling fact that Moe Howard of the Three Stooges was the first American actor to portray Adolf Hitler. The Stooges made three anti-Nazi films. In *You Nazty Spy* (1940), cabinet members in the Kingdom of Moronica want power but need someone "stupid enough to do what we tell him." They settle on Moe Hailstone, a paperhanger. As the cabinet members try to convince Moe, a black feather appears and lands on his upper lip, making him a Hitler look-alike. With Curly functioning as Field Marshal Herring and Larry as the minister of propaganda, Moe functions as a ruthless dictator. At the end of the film,

all the Stooges end up thrown into a lion's cage. The film was probably prompted by the Warner Brothers film *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, released in 1939, which, in keeping with the mood of the industry, opened with a disclaimer: "Any resemblance between the characters in this picture and any persons living or dead is a miracle."

I'll Never Heil Again (1941) was a sequel to *You Nazty Spy*. Once again, Nazi cruelty is ruthlessly portrayed. For instance, Curly as field marshal reports to Moe as dictator: "We bombed fifty-six hospitals, eighty-five schools, forty-two kindergartens, four [100] cemeteries, and other vital military objects." The dictator Moe and his supporters become trophies for the true ruler of Moronica at the end of the film.

Back from the Front (1943) has the Stooges in the merchant marine. Their boat explodes and the three end up on a Nazi warship, the *SS Shickelgruber* (Hitler's real family name). Moe disguises himself as Hitler and then orders the ship's officers to shoot themselves. Moe then sneezes, dislodging his fake mustache. In the resulting panic, the Stooges knock out all the members of the ship's crew. Their anti-Nazi attack is direct. When they salute German officers they say, "Hang Hitler!"

Unfortunately, the Three Stooges' audiences were not in politically, socially, or economically important positions, and a reputation for what some critics considered sadistic physical comedy prevented the Stooges' message from being heard. On the other hand, perhaps because critics or influential audiences did not take them seriously, they were free to do what other stars were not.

The only important Hollywood comedy about the Nazis was *To Be or Not to Be*, which was made in 1941 and released the next year. That is, planning and production took place before the United States entered the war, making director Ernst Lubitsch more daring than if he was simply supporting an ongoing American war effort. Jack Benny, in what he called "the best picture I ever made," starred as Joseph Tura, a Polish actor whose Warsaw troupe plans to put on an anti-Nazi play titled *Gestapo* just as the Nazis are entering Poland. This fact is unclear at the beginning of the film when we see the troupe rehearsing. For moviegoers, it first appears as though Benny is portraying a Nazi. He wears a Nazi

uniform and says "Heil Hitler" fully six times. Indeed, when Jack Benny's father saw the film for the first time, he walked out after one minute, as soon as he saw his son give a Nazi salute and say "Heil Hitler." Benny wrote to his father about the incident, but Meyer [101] Kubelsky didn't answer. The comedian called, but his father never would come to the phone. Then one night he answered the phone himself.

"Hello, Dad," Benny said to him. His father didn't answer. Benny went on. "This is Jack—your son."

His father exploded. "You're no son of mine! I got nothing to discuss with you."

Confused, Benny asked what he had done.

"You gave the salute to Hitler is what you did."

Benny then asked him, "Did you stay for the whole picture?"

"I should stay for such a picture? I was never so ashamed in my life. I don't tell people anymore I'm the father of Jack Benny."

Understanding the problem, Benny said, "But that was only the beginning of the picture. If you had waited you would see that I'm against the Nazis. I'm fighting them. Please go back and see it all the way through."

Jack Benny's father went on to see the film forty-six times.

Meyer Kubelsky was not the only critic of *To Be or Not to Be*. Many people saw the film as being in bad taste in trying to extract humor out of horror. Using farce to depict dangerous killers was to deflate what was really serious. There are some lines that are comic but chilling in retrospect. For example, in one scene Benny is pretending to be the Gestapo leader "Concentration Camp" Ehrhardt and says, "We do the concentrating, and the Poles do the camping." At one point Carole Lombard, who plays Benny's wife, notes the fancy dress she will wear

"in the concentration camp scenes."

Besides *To Be or Not to Be* and the Three Stooges, there was little in the way of Holocaust-related films from Jewish comedians. The Marx Brothers did make *A Night in Casablanca*, which was distinctly anti-Nazi. A Nazi who utters openly sadistic statements such as "It would soothe me to see someone in pain" strikes Harpo. At the end of the film Groucho mocks "the Master Race." This [102] might have been a daring film had it not been made in 1946 after the war's end....[103]

