An American in Shtetl:
Seeing Yiddish Europe Through the Eyes of Molly Picon

by *Debra Caplan*

Abstract

In 1920, following their wedding and a devastating miscarriage, Molly Picon and Jacob Kalich traveled to Europe, where they spent the next several years performing before Yiddish-speaking audiences across the continent. At the time, Molly Picon was not yet a Yiddish theater star. She was a young, relatively unknown young performer who was trying to move from English-language vaudeville into Yiddish theater, encouraged by her new husband, a Yiddish theater impresario. Their biggest obstacle? Molly's lack of fluency in Yiddish. "I was a Yiddish illiterate," she later wrote in her autobiography. "The Yiddish I spoke was completely bastardized."

The goal of Kalich and Picon's European trip was for Picon to acquire a more sophisticated, authentic, "correct" Yiddish so that she would have a better chance of getting cast on Second Avenue when they returned to the United States. The pair began in Paris, then traveled throughout the cities, towns, and villages of Poland, and ultimately, across Austria, Czechoslovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania. Molly Picon was an American actress, but it was in Yiddish Europe that she first became a star.

This essay will consider Picon and Kalich's travels and performances across Yiddish-speaking Europe in the early 1920's through a close examination of Picon and Kalich's letters, reviews of Picon's performances in both Europe and the United States, and other contemporaneous accounts of the tour. Implicitly, the stated goal Picon and Kalich's tour positioned Europe as the keeper of Yiddish linguistic, theatrical, and cultural authenticity – even as New York had already succeeded Warsaw and London as the global capital of the Yiddish stage. How did a young Picon, a nascent Yiddish performer who had never left the United States before, understand the cultural landscape of a Yiddish Europe in which she spent her most formative years and became a global star? To what extent can we understand her subsequent career as an American Yiddish performer as influenced by the Yiddish Europe she encountered on this tour?

In 1920, in the aftermath of a devastating stillbirth, an aspiring actress hoping to get her big break in New York's Second Avenue Yiddish theaters set sail for Europe. She left Boston a former child vaudeville star whose English-language career had petered out; a Yiddish theater hopeful who could not get a decent booking anywhere in New York. Three years later, she returned to New York a household name and Yiddish theater's most promising young star.

The actress – Molly Picon (1898–1992) – and her manager-and-playwright husband – Jacob Kalich – would spend the next several decades as the darlings of the American Yiddish theater. During the 1930s and '40s, Molly Picon was arguably the most famous Yiddish actress in New York City. Molly's transformation from unknown Yiddish actress to Second Avenue fame did not take place in New York or in Boston, where she and her husband lived, or even in the United States at all. Her meteoric rise to American stardom happened on tour, in Europe.

Though born and raised in a Yiddish-speaking household, Picon went to Europe in order to develop a more "authentic" Yiddish. She saw herself as "a Yiddish illiterate" who spoke a "completely bastardized" form of the language.[1] Picon and Kalich both envisioned Europe, particularly Eastern Europe where Kalich had been born and raised, as the central site of Jewish cultural and Yiddish linguistic authenticity, in contrast to America, Picon's birthplace. The primary goal of Picon and Kalich's European travels was for Molly to acquire a more "proper" Yiddish so that she would have a better chance of getting cast in New York's major Yiddish theater houses, which tended to feature European-born stars.[2] The couple began in Paris, then traveled throughout the cities, towns, and villages of Poland, and ultimately, across Austria, Czechoslovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania. Throughout her career, including during this first European tour, Molly Picon was always regarded as an American actress. Upon her return to New York in 1924,

[1] Molly Picon with Jean Grillo, *Molly! An Autobiography*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 35.

[2] See, for example, David Mazower, "London – New York, or The Great British Yiddish Theatre Brain Drain," *Digital Yiddish Theatre Project* (November 2016). Accessed June 9, 2019. https://yiddishstage.org/london-new-york-or-the-great-british-yiddish-theatre-brain-drain

she was billed as "America's Foremost Jewish Actress"; by the 1940s, she was being billed as "America's greatest comedienne."[3] But Picon's career did not begin in Philadelphia, where she was born, or in Boston, where she and Kalich started their partnership, or in New York, where she tried and failed to get cast. It was on tour in Europe that she first became a star. Picon and Kalich's first European tour positioned the continent as the keeper of Yiddish linguistic, theatrical, and cultural authenticity – even though by the 1920s, New York City had already succeeded Warsaw and London as the undisputed global capital of the Yiddish stage.[4]

In this article, I will examine how Picon (who had never left the United States prior to this European tour) and Kalich (an American immigrant from Eastern Europe who had participated in Yiddish theater on both continents) experienced their encounter with Europe, the site of their most formative years as artists and the place where Molly Picon became an American star. Though Molly Picon was arguably the most iconic, famous, and influential Yiddish actress of the twentieth century, her career and its impact have been profoundly understudied. Other than Picon's autobiography and a few articles and book chapters (primarily on Picon's gender-bending roles), there is scant scholarship on Picon, and virtually no scholarship that seeks to explain her meteoric rise as an unconventional star.[5] I argue that Picon's career as an iconic American Jewish performer – the types of roles she became known for, her signature performance style, and her relationships with audiences and critics – was both enabled and profoundly shaped by her 1920s encounters with European theater makers, producers, and audiences.

Molly Picon was born in Philadelphia in 1898. She began performing at the age of five in response to a dare from a drunk on a trolley car, and soon began making a

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[3] Advertisement for *Yankele* in *The Paterson Evening News*, May 36 [?], 1924, 10; "Special Notices," *The Evening Sun*, July 14, 1945, 8.

[4] Edna Nahshon, "From the Bowery to Broadway," in *New York's Yiddish Theatre. From the Bowery to Broadway*, ed. Edna Nahshon, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 26.

[5] For Picon's autobiography, *Molly!*, see note 1 above. Warren Hoffman has a chapter on Picon's cross-dressing in his *The Passing Game. Queering Jewish American Culture,* (Stanford University Press, 2008); Eve Sicular has a chapter on Picon as a drag artist in Yiddish film in *When Joseph Met Molly. A Reader on Yiddish Film,* (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 1999); and Michele Aaron has similarly written on queerness in Picon's hit film *Yidl Mitn Fidl* in "The Queer Jew and Cinema: From Yidl to Yentl and Back and Beyond," *Jewish Culture and History* 3/1 (2000): 23–44.

name for herself on Philadelphia's vaudeville stages as "Baby Margaret." Alongside these English-language performances, Picon also occasionally performed minor roles in Philadelphia's Yiddish theaters, where her mother worked as a costume seamstress. However, it was in English-language vaudeville that Molly sought to build her career. At fifteen, she left high school to travel around the United States performing in a vaudeville act called The Four Seasons, where she played "Winter."[6] The Four Seasons mostly toured small-time vaudeville circuits – including the Gus Sun Circuit (midsize cities and small towns in New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio) and the Ackerman & Harris Circuit (Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, California, and British Columbia), also known as the "Death Trail" because it took acts a long time to travel between theaters – while they hoped for their big break and better bookings.[7] Performing alongside The Four Seasons were a trained seal act, an acrobatic troupe, and a rooster with a stovepipe hat that acted like a drunkard.[8]

Nearly broke from the tour, The Four Seasons arrived in Boston in the winter of 1918 only to find that every theater and store in the city was closed because of the Spanish flu pandemic. Every theater, that is, except for the Grand Opera House – a second-rate house surrounded by brothels that the authorities had forgotten to close down. The building hosted wrestling matches and fights during the week and Yiddish theater on Saturdays.[9] Stranded in Boston with no cash and no prospects for further vaudeville work, Picon ventured to the Grand Opera House, hoping to find a Yiddish actor colleague from her Philadelphia days who would lend her enough money to pay her train fare home. Instead, she met Jacob Kalich, the manager, director, and producer of the Yiddish theater company at the Grand Opera, who would become her husband, manager, and greatest champion. Kalich auditioned Picon, cast her in his Yiddish theater company, and convinced her that she could be a big success on the Yiddish stage. In love with Kalich and meeting

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[6] Picon, *Molly!,* 21.

[7] "Gus Sun Circuit" (883), "Ackerman & Harris Circuit" (4–5), and "Molly Picon" (467) in *Vaudeville Old and New. An Encyclopedia of Variety Performances in America,* eds. Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman and Donald McNeilly, (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[8] Picon, *Molly!,* 23.

[9] *Ibid.*, 23.

with some success as a Yiddish performer in Boston, Picon began to dream of becoming a Yiddish theater star.

Molly Picon was not a typical Yiddish theater actress by any measure. To begin with, she was exceptionally petite: at the age of twenty, she was only 4'11" and weighed less than 95 pounds. She was also far more experienced in English-language vaudeville than on the Yiddish stage, and according to Kalich, her American-born Yiddish fluency and accent left much to be desired.

But Kalich saw something in her, nonetheless– a talent and versatility that he thought could make her a success, despite her unconventional appearance. The standard pathway to stardom in the American Yiddish theater was clear: get booked and become popular on New York's Second Avenue, the Yiddish stage's equivalent of Broadway. But when Kalich tried to get Picon Second Avenue gigs, not a single producer was interested. According to Picon, "the New York managers wouldn't listen to him because, first of all, I wasn't big enough, I was a little girl. And the stars in those days were all buxom women."[10] Kalich tried to argue that a 95-pound star would be a novelty, but it was no use.[11] No producer on Second Avenue would book her.

Kalich came up with another idea. If Second Avenue producers refused to cast Molly in typical Yiddish theater leading lady roles, what if he wrote a play with a different type of part for her? Together, he and Molly developed *Yankele*: a musical comedy about a rebellious thirteen-year-old boy growing up in an Orthodox religious environment, with Molly playing the title role of the yeshiva boy. As would become typical in their early productions, Kalich developed the story and wrote the dialogue while Molly wrote the lyrics and music for most of the songs. To New York's Yiddish theater producers, *Yankele* was every bit as radical a suggestion as Kalich's insistence that a childlike 95-pound woman could carry a leading role. Yiddish theater did not regularly feature plays about child protagonists, nor did they routinely cast female stars in male roles. Kalich's pitch

[10] Molly Picon and Jacob Kalich, interviewed by Harry Flender, November 10 and 17, December 10, 1971, American Jewish Committee Oral History Collection, New York Public Library.
[11] Picon, *Molly!,* 27.

for *Yankele* starring Molly Picon was thus doubly disruptive to Yiddish theater norms – first by making a young boy character the star of the show, and second, by broadening the types of roles a Yiddish leading lady could play. Second Avenue theater producers were skeptical. "You want her to become a star with the role of a child, a thirteen-year-old boy," Kalich recalled theater producers asking him. "Who will come to see a whole play led by a child?"[12]

Molly Picon didn't fit into any standard "type" for an American Yiddish actress – so she and Kalich created their own template. Directors didn't want to cast her in traditional Yiddish theater roles for women – or at all? She and Kalich would write new types of characters and plays just for her. American Yiddish theater producers weren't interested in booking her in New York? She and Kalich would leave the country to establish Picon's reputation elsewhere first.

Jacob Kalich and Molly Picon were married in the back of a Philadelphia grocery store on June 29, 1919, with Molly wearing a dress that her mother had made out of an old theater curtain. After years of trying, Kalich still had no offers for his wife from the theater producers on Second Avenue. The couple began to discuss traveling to Europe to build her reputation abroad in order to circumvent Picon's complete lack of performance opportunities in New York.

A complication soon arose: Molly was pregnant; she and Kalich were overjoyed. They decided to stay in Boston for a time, where Kalich ran a theater that Picon could perform in and where Molly's mother could babysit while they pursued their careers. Everything changed in an instant, however, when Molly went into labor prematurely, seven months pregnant, and delivered a stillborn baby girl.[13]

Molly was devastated. When Jacob came in to see her after she woke up from the ether and understood what had happened, one of the first things he said was, "I'm turning the theater over to a new management, and I'm taking my little star to

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[12] Yankev Kalich, "Tsu *Yankele*'s zilberner bar mitzve: derinerungen," in *Teater heftn spetsieler Moli Pikon numer*, ed. Zalmen Zylbercweig, published by the Yidisher aktiorn yunion in Amerike, 9. Collection on Yiddish Theater, Museum of the City of New York.

[13] Picon, *Molly!,* 31–32.

Europe, where she will become a big star."[14] A few months later, when Molly's doctors told her that she could not ever have children in the future, she became even more depressed. Slowly, she recovered by throwing herself into preparations for the trip to Europe. "Yonkel's decision to take me to Europe was the incentive I needed to get well quickly," she later recalled.[15] For Picon and Kalich, the decision to perform in Europe was not only about Molly's career. It was a way out of a devastating chapter in their personal lives.

The stakes – for both their professional and personal lives – could hardly have been higher. Kalich was giving up his management of the theater in Boston, and with it, all of his hard-earned career stability. Their shared hope for a successful tour of Europe that would make her a star had brought Picon out of a deep depression over a traumatic pregnancy, stillbirth, and crushing news about infertility. Failure was not an option.

Born and raised in the United States, Molly Picon had never been abroad before. Her husband, on the other hand, had immigrated to America from Jewish Eastern Europe, and it was there that he believed his wife's reputation could be transformed from an odd actress who did not fit into Second Avenue leading lady roles to an international Yiddish star.

Kalich could not alter his wife's physical appearance, but he believed that there was another significant obstacle standing in her way to stardom: her Yiddish. Kalich considered his wife's Yiddish too American, and thus not authentic enough. Though Picon had been raised in a Yiddish-speaking family, they both considered her Yiddish to be "completely bastardized" because she grew up in an American Jewish environment.[16] Their plan for the trip, as Molly described it, was "for me to learn correct Yiddish with its soft, guttural European accent."[17] They both saw the tour as a way for Molly Picon to acquire the European-inflected

[14] *Ibid.*, 32.
[15] *Ibid.*, 34.
[16] *Ibid.*, 35.
[17] *Ibid.*

Yiddish that her husband already had a mastery of, the Yiddish that they both saw as the source of his gravitas and legitimacy in American Yiddish theater circles.

Years later, Kalich would compare the decision to take Molly to Europe to "improve" her Yiddish to sending a young opera singer on a European tour to develop operatic prowess. "Like opera singers, American-born Yiddish actors must earn their spurs in Europe, get a reputation there," read the copy in a 1930s souvenir program for the Kalich-authored bio-musical comedy *Oy is dos a lebn* (*Oh, What a Life*).[18]

Picon and Kalich's European tour aimed to do more than acquaint Molly with a pre-existing theater culture. Unlike an opera singer going to Europe, Picon was not setting her sights on a theater culture center but rather, trying to get away from one. As Nina Warnke writes, by the 1890s New York City had become the world center of Yiddish theater, "the fountainhead that fed Yiddish theatres worldwide."[19] Born in Eastern Europe, by the turn of the century Yiddish theater had seen its center shift to New York, with Eastern Europe relegated to the status of its "cultural colony."[20] The default path for Yiddish theater artists was first to establish themselves in the United States, then to tour Europe and rake in cash and acclaim. Molly Picon was not the first Yiddish theater performer to discover that Eastern Europe offered a way to further one's career outside the crowded New York talent market (but she was *one* of the first to discover this, after Clara Young had made a similar move about a decade earlier).[21] Unlike Young, however, Picon's European travels also created a pathway for her to defy the pre-existing norms of Yiddish theater culture and change them forever. As the historical birthplace of modern Yiddish theater, but no longer its cultural center of gravity, Europe gave Molly Picon a freedom that she could not have in New York City – the freedom to make a name for herself as a different kind of female performer than had ever been seen on the Yiddish stage.

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[18] *The Life of Molly* [Program], (New York: Program Publishing Company, 1942), Harvard Judaica Division.

[19] Nina Warnke, "Going East. The Impact of American Yiddish Plays and Players on the Yiddish Stage in Czarist Russia, 1890–1914," *American Jewish History* 92/1 (March 2004): 1.

[20] *Ibid.*, 28.

[21] *Ibid.*

In 1921, Molly Picon and Jacob Kalich sailed to Paris. Upon arrival, Jacob Kalich went straight to see the impresario of the Lancry Theater, and told him that he had come from New York with his wife, a young soubrette.[22] Of course, Picon had not yet managed to book a performance in New York, and Kalich's wife had not been accepted in American Yiddish theater circles at all, but the bluster was intentional. Kalich was marketing his wife and her unconventional performance style as something that American Yiddish theater producers and audiences had already embraced. If Kalich stretched the truth by pretending that Picon had already become a success in the much-vaunted Second Avenue theaters, the impresario would have little incentive not to book her in Paris. The impresario agreed, in fact, and booked Picon and the show on the spot.

The Lancry Theater was not an ideal space for Molly Picon's star debut.[23] It was more of an auditorium than a theater, and at the time, it had a fixed set made of iron. On one side, a house was painted; on the other, a garden. Kalich rewrote *Yankele* extensively to work with the less-than-ideal set and stage space, cutting out two entire acts and rewriting the show to set the entire operetta in a house and a garden.[24] As he and Picon traveled, Kalich would frequently restructure and refine their plays to suit new spaces and audiences.

When Kalich introduced Paris Yiddish theater critic Nisn Frank to Molly in anticipation of her first Parisian performance, Frank was shocked. Molly Picon looked nothing like the American Yiddish theater star that Frank had expected.

In a thin American coat was hidden a tiny, refined woman's head. The coat covered so much of the person inside that she was like a lost kitten inside it. Malkele, who would later be famous as Molly Picon, was lost in her coat.[25]

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[22] N. Frank, "Ven *Yankele* iz gekumen keyn Pariz," *Parizer Haynt*, December 24, 1931.

[23] On the Lancry Theater's layout and significance for French Yiddish theater, see Nick Underwood, "Théâtre Lancry. The Center of Yiddish Paris," Digital Yiddish Theatre Project (May 2017). Accessed Jun 10, 2019. https://yiddishstage.org/th%C3%A9%C3%A2tre-lancry-the-center-of-yiddish-paris

[24] Kalich, "Tsu *Yankele*'s", 10.

[25] *Ibid.*

Neither the impresario nor Frank believed that the guest artists would make much of an impression, and the plan was for a brief booking. But opening night of *Yankele* made them change their minds. The audience rose unanimously to its feet in "a thunderous ovation" for the title character, played by Picon. "That night," Frank wrote, "Molly Picon was born in Paris."[26]

Picon in *Yankele* was an instant sensation. It was a show like Yiddish audiences had never seen: a musical comedy starring a woman playing a boy and in a comedic role. Framed as an American success, Picon was embraced by European audiences, despite her unconventional style and role. *Yankele* was a hit, and as press about the show started to reach far beyond France, theater impresarios from across Europe began reaching out to Kalich with offers. Kalich was particularly enthusiastic about an offer for Picon to appear in Lodz, near where he grew up, so they packed their bags and went to Poland.[27]

As Picon and Kalich traveled throughout Europe, they kept their social and professional encounters limited almost exclusively to Yiddish-speaking circles. "We never mingled with people outside the Yiddish theater," Picon would later remember.[28] This marked a significant shift. In America, she had spent most of her career and personal life in English, speaking and performing in Yiddish only occasionally or with a few family members. Back at home in Philadelphia, Molly had spoken some Yiddish with her family, but had spent most of her life speaking English. Prior to meeting Kalich, she had also acted and performed primarily in English.

In Europe, however, Molly Picon arrived – under Kalich's tutelage – eager to improve and authenticate her Yiddish. It was there that she learned to live both her personal and her professional life in the language. Yiddish in Europe also became Molly's connection to new communities and audiences around the world, her home away from home in a series of foreign lands. "Yiddish was our center, our link, and I never felt like a complete stranger in Europe," Picon later recalled,

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[26] *Ibid.*

[27] Picon, *Molly!*, 36–37.

[28] *Ibid.*, 36.

"because I was always in the midst of a familiar language and heritage – the Yiddish world."[29]

Molly saw the tour as more than just an opportunity to build her reputation in Europe. Like Kalich, she too saw her American Yiddish upbringing and language as not authentically Jewish enough, and envisioned Europe as a place of opportunity to access a more genuine Jewish life. For Molly Picon, the European tour was a crucial part of her Jewish education, and it helped her to shape and deepen the Jewish characters she would play on stage for the next six decades. Indeed, many of her most famous characters (like Yankele the naughty yeshiva student, or Yenta the village matchmaker in *Fiddler on the Roof*) would be steeped in the Jewish religious and social contexts that Picon first encountered in Europe.

In letters to her mother and sister, Molly often described the Jews she met in Eastern Europe in great detail. In one such letter to her sister from Austria in 1921, Picon describes visiting a Hasidic Rabbi and his entourage as though it was a visit to a foreign country.

> Something funny occurred last week. We went to see a Rabbi! It's all so peculiar, but very interesting. [...] He was a little fellow, with a tiny white beard and pehes [sic] – piercing black eyes and he wore one of those funny shtreimels, you know those fur trimmed derbies, but his was a pointed one and it gave his face the appearance of having two beards, one on top and one below. The pointed shtreimel is worn only by a certain clan, because the Rabbis are just like kings, each one has his followers and certain distinguishing marks. They marry only into their own families and have all the pride of Royal blue bloods.[30]

Though Picon had grown up in a Jewish community, her family was so assimilated that she had rarely met a rabbi or a Hasidic Jew before traveling to Eastern Europe. In letters to her mother and sister, she frequently described the European Jews she

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Letter from Molly Picon to Helen Picon, March 28, 1921, Molly Picon Papers, folder 1061, American Jewish Historical Society.

encountered by comparing them to more familiar Western references. A Hasidic rabbi's hat was a "fur-trimmed derby," a Hasidic lineage like the British monarchy.

After Picon's successes in Western Europe and Poland, she and Kalich turned down offers to perform in Lemberg, Czernowitz, and Bucharest in order to spend Passover with Jacob's mother in the tiny village of Chabówka.[31] In his mother's house, which also served as the town's liquor and tobacco store, Jacob conducted a traditional Passover seder. Nearly everything was foreign to Molly: the tiny Polish town and its peasants, her new mother-in-law's Hasidic dress and customs, and most of all, the seder itself, since she came from a family that was not religiously observant in the slightest. When she didn't understand what was happening, Kalich recalled, Molly would ask him what to do in English. He stood beside her, secretly whispering instructions into her ear like a prompter in a theatrical performance.

> When we began to say the Hagada, I stood next to her and murmured, turn the page – next right – stop – start – turn the page again. Mama was so excited about Molly that at the table she said to her husband, did you see how Molly said the Hagada? Just like a man.[32]

Molly Picon would continue to draw on her encounters with Jews in Eastern Europe for the rest of her career. According to Kalich,

> The types of different women that she finally made into her parts in the Yiddish theatre, like Mamale, Die Meema Baile, Mein Malkele, all evolved as real Jewish characters because of the warmth and love in each one's heart and all somehow relating back to what she had seen in Europe, especially in Chabooka.[33]

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[31] Jacob Kalich, unpublished handwritten memoirs, 83. Seymour Rechtzeit Papers, box 24, folder 12, Harvard Judaica Division.

[32] *Ibid.*, 84.

[33] *Ibid.*, 86.

All that Picon had known of traditional Jewish life prior to visiting Eastern Europe was what she had seen in the Yiddish theater: the exaggerated stereotypes of religious Jews in plays such as Goldfaden's *Di tsvey kuni lemls* (*The Two Kuni-Lemls*), in which "modern" rational Jews are the heroes in sharp contrast to the comedic "backwards" Hasidic fanatics.[34] But in Chabówka and throughout Europe, Molly regularly encountered Hasidic Jews as they were in real life. These encounters stayed with her and influenced her future performances.

After Chabówka, the couple spent a couple of years traveling throughout Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania. When they arrived in Vienna in 1922, the city was in the midst of a prolonged economic downturn, and hunger was rampant among the actors they hired to work in their company. Yet this spelled out no limitation on Picon's success. Kalich would later recall grateful audiences bringing Molly what were then expensive gifts: liquor, hard-boiled eggs and other types of food after shows.[35]

In Vienna, they saw a new film, *The Life of Theodore Herzl*, and developed a plan to bring it to Boston. They invested heavily in the film, even hiring writers and a film director to add a Yiddish segment to the film featuring Molly, but then found out that the movie had already been brought to the United States by another actor. Picon and Kalich then lost most of the money they had earned thus far on their European tour. Their lawyer advised them to return to America immediately to try to market the film themselves faster than their competitor and thereby compensate for some of their losses. But Molly and Jacob decided to remain in Europe instead to continue building Molly's international reputation on what had turned into a highly successful tour. "Besides," Kalich wrote eventually in his unpublished memoirs, "she was still afraid of New York, and she also didn't have the desire to fight her way to stardom there."[36] To Molly, a major financial loss that came with the chance of achieving fame in Europe was preferable by far to fighting to get gigs as an unconventional performer on Second Avenue. Staying in

[34] *Ibid.*, 85.
[35] *Ibid.*, 92.
[36] *Ibid.*, 95.

Europe was the best – and perhaps the only – way towards achieving her goal of stardom in New York.

From Vienna, they ventured on to Krakow, where Molly's shows were so quickly sold out that residents took to knocking on their hotel room door and begging for extra tickets. A few weeks later in Lemberg, when Picon and Kalich departed, a crowd of more than 1000 people accompanied them to the train station and sang songs from *Yankele* as Molly and Jacob boarded the train for Romania.[37] They were booked in Bucharest for a long season and expected to stay for a while – so long, in fact, that they invited Molly's mother and sister to join them in Bucharest for this period. Everywhere she went in Europe, Molly Picon was no longer the unconventional tiny Yiddish actress who could not get a Second Avenue booking. She had become one of Europe's greatest Yiddish stars.

Molly Picon's American fame began in Europe. Indeed, there are scarcely any mentions of Picon at all in the American press in Yiddish or in English prior to her European tour, aside from a few brief notices and advertisements about her vaudeville appearances. There are no significant mentions of Molly Picon the Yiddish actress in American newspapers until 1923, when the Jewish Telegraphic Agency erroneously reported that Picon and Kalich had died in an automobile accident in Bucharest. The report was picked up by a handful of Jewish newspapers in Yiddish and English across the country, and it served as many readers' introduction to the couple.[38] "The German press in Berlin and Vienna have written a lot about them," stated *Der tog,* somewhat blandly, alongside the accident report.[39] Molly Picon and Jacob Kalich were so completely unknown among American Jewish readers that several of the articles falsely reporting their death contained other significant errors. *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*'s report ("Jewish Actor and Wife Reported Killed") scarcely mentioned Molly Picon at all,

[37] *Ibid.*, 105.

[38] "Idishe aktrise, Mali Pikon, un ir man getoytet in otomobil unglik in Bukharest," *Forverts,* February 20, 1923, 1.

[39] "Yankev Kalikh un Mali Pikon getoytet fun an oytomobil in Bukaresht," *Der tog*, February 20, 1923, 1.

and focused instead on Jacob Kalich as the actor who had supposedly tragically perished in an accident.

> The American Yiddish actor, Jacob Kalich, and his wife, Mollie [sic] Picon, also an actress, were killed in an automobile accident, according to a letter received here from Bucharest. Kalich has been in Europe two years in the company of his wife. ... His performances in Europe met with marked success.[40]

Her name misspelled, Picon is mentioned only as Kalich's wife. He is the successful writer and actor, the performer who charmed audiences across Europe. In actuality, of course, Kalich largely stopped performing when he met Molly and began managing her career, and she was unequivocally the star performer on their European tour. A few newspapers published a correction a month later, which suggested that the rumors about the accident had been invented by rivals in order to damage their reputation. The corrections also referred to Kalich as "the Jewish actor" and Picon as "his actress wife."[41]

By the time Picon and Kalich returned to the United States 18 months later, no American paper could ever again mistake Molly Picon for "also an actress." She was Yiddish theater's most fervently anticipated star.

While Picon and Kalich were largely successful in achieving their twin goals of Europeanizing (and thus legitimizing) Molly's Yiddish and attracting the attention of American journalists, producers, and audience members an ocean away, Picon's first European tour was not entirely smooth. Indeed, Picon and Kalich's decision to leave Europe and return to the United States was prompted by anti-Semitic riots at Molly's performances in Bucharest. One night, three hundred university students bought tickets for a performance of *Tsipke*, and when Picon appeared on stage, they started shouting and throwing cabbages and

[40] "Jewish Actor and Wife Reported Killed," *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, March 9, 1923, 3.
[41] "Report of Jewish Actors' Death is 'Greatly Exaggerated'," *The Sentinel,* April 6, 1923, 18.

eggs at her. Picon kept singing, but the theater erupted into a riot. As Picon later recalled in her memoirs:

> They threw cabbages and eggs and me, and I kept right on singing my first song and dancing around to avoid being hit by a cabbage. Zelmeister, our Polish impresario, came running onstage and yelling, "Jews, save yourselves – they're out to kill us all!'" The conductor grabbed the music, the prompter grabbed the script, and they ran, while the stage manager brought the curtain down. I was still out there, mad as a hornet, singing and dancing, when the stage manager grabbed me and literally carried me up the stairs into the flies.[42]

The Romanian military police arrived and escorted Picon and Kalich back to their apartment. The incident was followed by death threats. "We warn you categorically that we will take the most drastic measures against you if you continue your theatrical performances," read one anonymous threat, preserved by Molly in a scrapbook from the tour. "Your indescribable arrogance and scandalous impertinence will be punished with a pistol. Continue if you dare, but then say 'goodbye' to life."[43] Death threats at the theater were followed by the appearance of anti-Semitic mobs that ransacked the Jewish quarter. In response, the Romanian government closed the theater to quell the riots.[44] Picon and Kalich appealed for a reopening of the theater, but the authorities refused, and pressured them to leave Romania instead.[45] With nowhere to work and amidst ongoing attacks on the Bucharest Jewish community, the couple decided to leave Romania prematuretly and head back to the United States.[46]

Picon and Kalich might well have stayed in Europe indefinitely had they not encountered anti-Semitism in Romania. Ticket sales were strong and they were

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[42] Picon, *Molly!*, 42.

[43] Molly Picon Scrapbook, RG 738: Molly Picon Papers, box 4, folder 30, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

[44] "Militant Christianity," *The American Israelite*, Cincinnati, April 5, 1923, 1.

[45] "Foreign News," *The American Israelite*, April 12, 1923, 5.

[46] See "Moli Pikon muz farlozn Rumenye," *Dos naye lebn,* April 13, 1923, 2 and "Kalich and Picon in Vienna," *The American Israelite*, April 12, 1923, 7.

experiencing a level of success far beyond what they had hoped for. But the riots and the closure of their theater prompted them to take the leap back home to find out if Picon's European stardom was sufficient to give her a chance on Second Avenue.

"Seldom do people await the arrival of an actor or actress with so much impatience as the arrival of Molly Picon was awaited in New York," proclaimed the *Forverts* on Christmas Eve 1923, the morning before Picon's opening night performance in *Yankele.*[47] Picon was "a new star" whose name had become synonymous with fame "lightning fast" in Europe, the paper continued, informing readers of Picon's "tremendous reputation as one of the best Jewish soubrettes."[48]

Picon's stature as an acclaimed Yiddish actress in Europe translated into near-instant American stardom. As Kalich later wrote in his 1930s bio-musical about his wife, "Molly was a famous person on Second Avenue before she had ever appeared there."[49] No longer the unknown and unconventional actress who three years earlier had failed to book a single performance in New York, Picon was now a bonafide Second Avenue star – even before she completed her first stage appearance in the city. When ads for *Yankele* first started appearing in New York Yiddish newspapers, the producer was surprised to see the lines that began to form at the box office. As Molly recalled in her memoirs:

Edelstein couldn't understand why, so he asked some of the people, "Do you know her? Why are you buying tickets?" And they answered, "My uncle from Warsaw wrote me when Molly Picon appeared in *Yonkele* [sic] to go see her." Another customer added, "My cousin from Bucharest wrote me not to miss Molly Picon's *Yonkele*." It seems we had a subscription audience before I even started.[50]

Picon's reputation only continued to grow after performances began. "The arrival of the most gifted soubrette Molly Picon last night in the Kessler Theater marked

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47 "A nayer shtern bavayzt zikh haynt afn teater himl," *Forverts*, December 24, 1923, 2.

48 *Ibid.*

49 *The Life of Molly* [Program], Harvard Judaica Division.

50 Picon, *Molly!*, 43–44.

a new chapter in the history of Yiddish operetta," a *Forverts* writer crowed after seeing her perform in *Yankele*.[51]

Reviews of Picon's first performances in New York attest to the strong influence of her European tour on her meteoric rise to American stardom. In *Der tog*, A. Drazshner wrote, "From Boston, Molly Picon first had to wander across a substantial portion of Europe before she arrived as a 'star.'"[52] The seriousness and quality of Picon's artistry, Drazshner continued, were recognizable from the moment when the audience first heard her speaking. "So pure, so folksy, such true Yiddish."[53] The implication is clear: the clearest marker of the quality of Picon's acting was the purity of her Yiddish, "authentically" acquired in Europe.

A full year after Picon's New York debut in *Yankele*, the European tour was still regularly brought up by journalists. In the English-language paper *The Daily News*, a 1924 ad for Picon's newest musical comedy *Tsipke* billed the star as "The Greatest Sensation of Europe and America: MOLLY PICON."[54] More than a decade later, when Picon made her Broadway debut in Sylvia Regan's play *Morning Star,* her biography still made special mention of this trip ("a tour of the sources of Yiddish stage art – the towns and villages of eastern Europe") as a prerequisite for her success on Second Avenue and the moment when she became an authentic Yiddish star.[55]

Born in New York, Molly Picon became an American theater star in Europe, as the press from her tour echoed across the Atlantic. Over the next six decades of her career, Molly would regularly be praised by critics for her rich and "authentic" European-acquired Yiddish. The Yiddish humorist Moyshe Nadir described Molly's post-tour Yiddish as "pure," "a respite for my ears," "overflowing with clarity," "a refined festival Yiddish, not the workaday hot language babble

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[51] "Kesler teater hot oyfgeshturemt Nyu York mit Moli Pikon als Yankele," *Forverts*, December 26, 1923, 9.

[52] A. Drazshner, "Fun eyn teater aroys inem andern arayn," *Der tog*, December 28, 1923, 3.

[53] *Ibid.*

[54] Ad for Molly Picon in *Tsipke*, *Daily News*, December 4, 1924, 73.

[55] *Morning Star* [Program], 1940, box 33, folder: Morning Star Broadway, Coll. 7927, Abraham Ellstein and Sylvia Regan Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

of....well, of all Yiddish soubrettes except for this one."[56] At the start of her career, Molly Picon was perceived as unfit for the Yiddish stage in both her physical appearance and her Yiddish linguistic ability. After three years in Europe, she was accepted and embraced by the American Yiddish theater establishment as an iconic soubrette and an internationally renowned star of the highest caliber.

What does it mean that Molly Picon, an icon of the New York Yiddish stage, the woman who D.W. Griffith once called "the most interesting actress in America" and whom the *New Yorker* called "a phenomenon of the New York of today," could not be accepted as a Yiddish actress until she found fame in Europe?[57]

The response to Picon's European tour suggests that pathways to stardom in Yiddish theater were not always as localized as in other theater cultures. For most New York actors, the path to American theater stardom ran through their city, or perhaps through out-of-town tryouts in Boston or Baltimore or Detroit. Travel was not a prerequisite for success, nor did it often establish actors in their home environments. But for Yiddish theater stars operating in a transnational, traveling theater culture, the "local" theater scene also included cities around the world. This environment enabled more pathways that enabled actors to disrupt theatrical norms. An actor like Molly Picon could go around the existing theater structures of their city or country while still remaining part of the same theatrical scene.

As one theater critic wrote of the couple's reasons for setting out on this tour:

> Kalich understood that nobody can become a prophet in their own comfortable circle, so he set out with her around the world. He didn't neglect to pack a whole bundle of the Torah of Barnum in their luggage, but Molly herself was the best advertisement. [...] From city to city and

[56] "Vos shrayb Moyshe Nadir vegn Moli Pikon," *Molly Picon y Jacobo Kalich Tournee America del Sud* (Pamphlet), Buenos Aires, 1932, box 31, folder: Programs and Clippings From Tours and Shows with Molly Picon, 1932–1937, Coll. 7927, Abraham Ellstein and Sylvia Regan Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

[57] "Molly Picon Internationally Famous Comedienne," box 31, folder: Programs and Clippings from Tours and Shows with Molly Picon, 1932–1937, Coll. 7927, Abraham Ellstein and Sylvia Regan Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

> from country to country, her name grew more and more resonant, and its echo could be heard all the way in New York.[58]

In America prior to her trip, Molly Picon had been completely shut out of New York's Yiddish theaters. Traveling internationally, however, she and Kalich could create their own opportunities with a bit of sleight-of-hand. In Europe, Kalich marketed Picon as though she had already been embraced as an American star. Upon returning to America, Picon was marketed as a successful European star. In this way, Picon and Kalich masked how they were disrupting Yiddish theatrical norms. On both sides of the Atlantic, audiences, critics, and producers were aware that Molly Picon was a new kind of Yiddish leading lady, but they were intentionally led to believe that the unconventional star had already been accepted elsewhere first. In fact, it was the very *framing* of Picon as an accepted star on her travels that enabled her to alter the expectations for women on the Yiddish stage.

Kalich and Picon were disruptors in Yiddish theater who radically altered the norms of the medium by upending accepted wisdom about the kinds of roles that actresses could play. Their early 1920s trip to Europe was the linchpin that enabled them to enact this theatrical transformation.

Debra Caplan is Associate Professor of Theatre at Baruch College, City University of New York. Her book, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy*, won the 2019 George Freedley Memorial Award from the Theatre Library Association. Her work on Yiddish theater has been published in *Theatre Journal, Modern Drama, Theatre Survey, New England Theatre Journal, Aschkenas, American Theatre, Pakn Treger,* and *Comparative Drama*.

Keywords: Yiddish Theater, Travel, Actors, Fame

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[58] Volf Merkur, "Pikant," box 53, folder 1066, P-38, Molly Picon Papers, American Jewish Historical Society.

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