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Major Trends in Yiddish Parody

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

THE JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW, Vol. 94, No. 1 (Winter 2004) 109–122 Major Trends in Yiddish Parody
DAVID G. ROSKIES TO GROW UP YIDDISH WAS to grow up with parody. The moment one left the charmed circle of other Yiddish-speakers—in my case, the moment I crossed the street—one entered a world where the very sound of Yiddish evoked laughter, was itself considered comical, retrograde, or obscene. Bad enough when your French Catholic neighbors were the ones to laugh; worse yet, when the outer circle was populated by Jews, either those who carried their Jewishness with pride (except that Yiddish for them was an ideological affront), or Jews who in casting off their Jewishness despised the immigrant tongue. So self-contained were my Jewish worlds growing up in Montreal, that I faced off against the Hebraists only in Camp Massad. When, in the wake of the Six-Day War, I made my first trip to Israel, the Sabras all looked at me as if I were mad and their parents were only somewhat more forgiving. Fortunately, Yiddish contained a powerful antidote to those who vilified the sound of the mame-loshn. It was called “Di zhiduvkes” (The JewGirls), one of close to a hundred satiric and parodic songs that my mother remembered from her nights spent at the

various cabaret theaters in Vilna between the years 1921 and 1930. A transcript and full set of taped recordings of these songs are housed at the YIVO Institute. They were recorded in the summer of 1973 as part of a research project directed by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett on “The Performance of the East European Yiddish Folk Song in its Social Context.” For a preliminary sketch, see David G. Roskies, “Der mames lider: A kapitl moderne yidishe kultur-geshikhte,” *Di pen* 31 (February 1997): 1–21. Since the focus of the YIVO study was performance, in all its particularities, I have retained my mother’s Litvish pronunciation. The Jewish Quarterly Review (Winter 2004) Copyright © 2004 Center for Advanced Judaic Studies. All rights reserved. 110 JQR 94:1 (2004), ° aærPç aæ yz yîyb zya çylyyP . ° aæz [s waym aæ zya çydy .y (Oh these Jew-girls, they’re ever so stubborn. / They speak Polish relentlessly. / So nobody should ever tell / they’re a gaggle of Jew girls. / Polish by them is a true-blue tongue. / Yiddish—as ugly as sin.) The lyrics satirized the young Jewish women who spoke Polish on rakhmoñes (relentlessly), in the hope that no one would recognize who they were, ostentatiously quoting from Przybyszewski and other highbrow Polish authors, never from Peretz or Sholem Asch, until finally, in the last stanza, one piece of their physiognomy—their Jewish noses—gives them away, and they are forced to acknowledge the true worth of their mother tongue. Many years later, when I sang this song in Lublin before a circle of Polish philo-Semites, I discovered that what made the song parodic were the melody and rhyme scheme, which were lifted from the Polish cabaret. Through the melody, the singer revealed herself to be completely at home in contemporary popular culture. Through the lyrics, she upheld with fierce pride the rights of a Jewish minority within a multinational state. In order to win that struggle, however, the first enemy to be vanquished was the enemy within. What better way of closing ranks, of asserting one’s cultural autonomy, than by means of Yiddish parody? But my coming of age through Yiddish parody had only just begun. One day my sister Ruth, fresh from Columbia University with a master’s in Yiddish and comparative literature, let me sit in on one of her classes at the local Y, where they just happened to be studying Peretz’s “Bontshe the Silent.” This story was a staple of the Folkshule, the Yiddish-Hebrew Day School, which...

Major Trends in Yiddish Parody

DAVID G. ROSKIES

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בי די זשידווקעס און דאך טרױם עקסטות.
זױ רעדן פילױש אן רחמנות.
מע זאל זױ טיש דערקענען,
די זשידווקעס וואָס זױ זענען.

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