

Conversation With:

MOLLY PICON and JACOB

Interviewed by ISIDORE HAIBLUM

HAIBLUM: Molly Picon, you've appeared in over a hundred plays and musicals. In fact, they call you the "Queen of the Yiddish stage." You began when?

MOLLY: I began when I was a little girl of five, not because I wanted to be an actress, but because we were very poor and we lived with our grandparents and we had to make some money. I was a precocious kid and I used to sing and dance and stand on my head (which I'm still doing—I don't want to tell you how many years later) and my mama was a seamstress, a dressmaker as it was called in those days. Of course, she sewed for actresses and one of them said to her, "Why don't you put her on the stage; she's a talented child." So mama thought that was a good idea and she asked how to start and they said, "Well, you start in the amateur night." They used to have amateur nights for children in those days and if you won the first prize, you got \$5—a \$5 gold piece. So mama dressed me all up and we boarded a trolley car (we were living in Philadelphia at that time) to take us to the Bijou Theater, which was a burlesque house, but ran amateur nights for children. On the car, there was a drunk who asked, "Where are you going all dressed up, little girl?" and I said, "I'm an actress and I'm going to sing at the Bijou." He said, "No, you're not," and mama said, "Show him." So I got up in the trolley car and I did my whole repertoire. The drunk passed around a hat and collected over two dollars in coins, so I count this as my first professional appearance.

The story goes further though—it goes to the Bijou Theater, where I appeared in the amateur night and won the first prize, which was a \$5 gold piece and the coins that the audience threw at me (which they were in the habit of doing in those days) and together we brought home \$10. Ten dollars! And we put them on the kitchen table and grandma said, "Vey iz meer, how did she do it?" And mama told her the story of the trolley car and the Bijou Theater and the coins and so forth, and mama said, "You know what I'll do? Every week I'll take her to another theater and she'll win the first prize and we'll be able to get an apartment of our own." So my grandma said, "Look, Clara, in Philadelphia they're only five or six theaters. Why don't you keep her on the trolley cars?" And that is the beginning of my career.

HAIBLUM: Yonkiv Kalich, you started as a yeshiva "bokher" and since then you've done just about everything in the theater—director, producer, writer and star. How did a good yeshiva "bokher" become a director, writer and actor?

JACOB: Well, mine is also a long story, but not like Molly's. Actually, we yeshiva *bokherim* were Hasidim—that's where I come from, the Hasidic background—the Hasidim really are actors. We dance and sing when we pray. I inherited this from my childhood: I developed a love for theater. As a beginner at the yeshiva, they used to call me up to tell stories, and read chapters from the Bible. It developed a sense of theater in me which I still have. At that time, I was studying in Bahush (Buhusi) near Rumania with the Bahusher rabbi, who was one of those wonder rabbis; and in that little town, there arrived a company of actors and I was already known in the yeshiva as "the actor." Those actors wanted to put on a Jewish "King Lear," and they needed a *kapote*—you know what *kapotes* are, what King Lear wears—



(Photo: Courtesy, Molly Picon)

MOLLY PICON in a characteristic early role.

HAIBLUM: Long black garments.

MOLLY: Actually a kaftan.

JACOB: A kaftan and *shammes*—so they knew of me and they approached me: Could I get them some of those *kapotes*? I was very excited that I could help out actors, so I didn't pick just ordinary *kapotes*, I picked the one that the rabbi used to wear on Saturdays—on holy days, which was silk and satin—very beautiful. So they put on the show—the King Lear—and afterwards, those Rumanian Jewish actors realized that the *kapotes* were worth more than what they were taking in at the box office and they left town with the *kapotes*. I followed them to Bucharest—I finally found them—and they talked me into staying; they said, "What are you going to do with those *kapotes* back at the yeshiva? Join the troupe, be an actor!" So I became an actor and that's how it all started.

HAIBLUM: Molly, you began on the English stage.

MOLLY: Yes, I started in the amateur nights and then I went into the nickelodeons. At that time, you paid a nickel to see a silent movie, a two-reeler actually, and an act. I was the act. Molly Picon, they said was not a good name, nobody would remember it, so they called me Baby Margaret. I was Baby Margaret until I was about sixteen. In my act, they called me "The International Comedienne," because I did an American song, a Dutch recitation and a Russian dance. I've got to confess that it was the same Russian dance I did in "Milk and Honey" about eight or ten years ago.

HAIBLUM: But you switched over to the Yiddish stage, actually, I believe at your husband's urging.

MOLLY: Well, I didn't switch at Yonkel's urging—I hadn't met him then, I was only six or seven years old and he wouldn't have married me at that tender age. No, I went to the Yiddish theater because mama eventually became a wardrobe mistress in the Yiddish theater—sewing for the actresses—and she used to take my younger sister, Helen, and myself along to the theater at night because there were no baby sitters. And while we wandered around backstage and around the theater, the manager said, "Well, why don't you put them on the stage? We'll give them fifty cents a night." So both of us became Jewish actresses. But I was in and out of the American theater all through my childhood. There were stock companies in Philadelphia at the time—the Chestnut Street Opera House was one of them—and I would get a week's work there. I'd work in English and then I would come back to the Yiddish theater and work in Yiddish. I've been bilingual all my life—I speak neither language correctly.

HAIBLUM: It's true though that your husband was instrumental in getting you to play in the Yiddish theater again.

MOLLY: This is another long story, and the story which brought us together. I was about seventeen or eighteen at the time and I was in a vaudeville act—an English vaudeville act called the "Four Seasons." I was "winter" because I could do a Russian dance. We traveled from coast to coast with the "Four Seasons" and finally were booked in Boston when the first Spanish influenza broke out—this was in 1918 and closed all the theaters. But somehow, Yonkel at that time, was running a Yiddish theater in Boston. What happened that they didn't close your theater, Yonkel?

JACOB: My theater they didn't close because nobody knew it was open.

MOLLY: Well, anyhow, there we were, stranded. This was an act of four girls and we never had enough money to go from one town to another without getting our salaries. I knew that there was a Yiddish theater there and I knew some of the actors because I had played with them as a child in Philadelphia. So I thought I'll go over and they'll lend me some money and I'll get home to Philadelphia. I went and the first one I met was Yonkel. He looked at me and said, "What are you doing here?" and I said, "I'm from the English theater." I was very royal and high and mighty at the time with my broken-down "Four Seasons" act, and I said, "But unfortunately, they've closed the theaters," and I was speaking with a real Shakespearean accent to impress him, because he at the time had his own Galitsyaner accent which he still retains a little. Now I must tell you a funny story about Yonkel's accent, apropos of nothing. Yonkel has done "The Education of Hyman Kaplan" on television. He was the original Hymie Kaplan in Studio One and he made a very big hit with it so they hired him for more television shows. And he was on about his fifth or sixth show and using his regular accent which was the charm of Hymie, (because it was natural) when the director said to him, "You know, Yonkel, I don't think I like that accent on this part." This show was called "The Littlest Leaguer" and Yonkel was the grandfather of a little boy who played baseball. The director said "It should be a little different—not so Brooklyn, but not so New Yorkish either." Yonkel says, "Look, I've got only one accent—Westchester."

Well, there I was in Boston in 1918, trying very hard to impress this young manager of the Yiddish theater. I told him that I was on my way to the Palace—God knows where, Broadway—but I had no money. I said, "I'm going to ask the actors to lend me some," and he said, "Well, why should you do that? Instead of borrowing the money, why don't you just stay a few weeks and work with us?" I said, "Well, how much would you pay me?" He said, "Thirty-five dollars." That was what I was getting in vaudeville. I said, "Well, that isn't very much, but I'll take it, you know for a few weeks." And so I took the \$35, and I took Yonkel.

HAIBLUM: Yonkel, we left you in Europe and now you're in America. You were an actor in Europe and suddenly you're managing a theater. How did this remarkable transition come about?

KALICH

MOLLY PICON is the acknowledged Queen of the Yiddish stage. For more than fifty years she has charmed and delighted audiences the world over, from Second Avenue to Broadway, Europe, Africa and Korea appearing in over a hundred plays and musicals.

Her husband and guiding spirit, Jacob Kalich, is one of the most distinguished and versatile figures of the modern Yiddish theatre: he has been producer, director, playwright and star.

Miss Picon was born in New York City and began her stage career at the early age of five. She divided her time between American vaudeville and the Yiddish theatre until 1919, when she met and married Jacob Kalich; she then turned her attention more fully to the Yiddish stage.

Mr. Kalich was born in Rymanov, Poland, in 1891 and stems from a family of rabbis; he himself studied for the rabbinate but switched to the stage when a travelling troupe of Yiddish actors visited his home town. He came to this country in 1914.

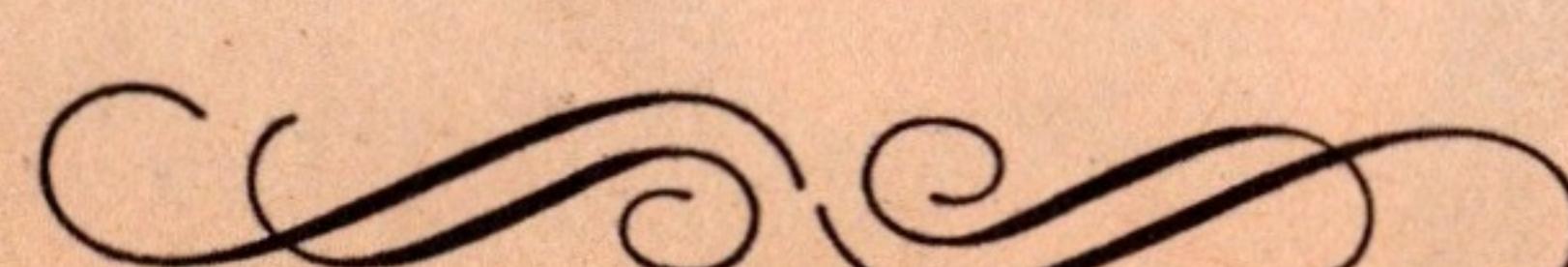
The collaboration of Molly Picon and Jacob Kalich has proved a stunning success story. Together they gave us a host of plays, musicals and reviews including: Yonkala, Sholom Aleichem's Motl Peyse dem khazzen's and Oy iz dos a labin, Mr. Kalich's stage biography of Molly's life.

During the war years they toured a string of Army bases and afterwards entertained in a number of refugee camps.

No stranger to the screen, Molly starred in the silent film *Mazeltof*. In 1936 and 1937, under Mr. Kalich's direction, she took the lead in *Yiddle mitin Fiddle* and *Mamala*. Currently she is appearing in the film version of the much-acclaimed *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Her Broadway smash hit musical, *Milk and Honey*, won her countless new friends and admirers.

Miss Picon and Mr. Kalich have appeared often on radio and television. Both have contributed extensively to the Yiddish press and periodicals, Miss Picon penning a series of columns and travel pieces, Mr. Kalich turning out many novellas, sketches, travel series and poems. In 1962 Messner published Molly Picon's *So Laugh a Little*, a biography of her grandmother. Mr. Kalich is now at work on his wife's biography.



ISIDORE HAIBLUM, a freelance writer who specializes in the field of Yiddish language, literature and culture, is a critic, essayist and interviewer. When not engaged in matters Yiddish, he has been known to write mystery stories, humor and science fiction. His *The Tsaddik of the Seven Wonders*, a humorous science fiction novel on Yiddish themes which combines a number of his special interests, is due for publication at the end of the year by Ballantine books.

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JACOB: Well, when I arrived here, the law at that time in the Hebrew Actor's Union, was that you had to belong to the union to play theater. To play theater, you had to first join the union. You couldn't join the union if you hadn't acted before. Besides, you had to pay \$150. At that time, if I had \$150, I would probably have become some kind of manufacturer. But the law also stated that if you were a manager, you could act on the stage—so I became a manager to be able to play Jewish theater. And that's how I became an actor.

Of course, like all young people, I was a little bit avant garde and I wanted to bring in other young people to the theater, so I organized this troupe in Boston and in my company at that time was, Molly, Paul Muni, Menashe Skulnik, Herschel Bernardi, who played—

MOLLY: Not Herschel, his father—

JACOB: His father, mother and the whole group. That was my young company and with all these stars, I lost money.

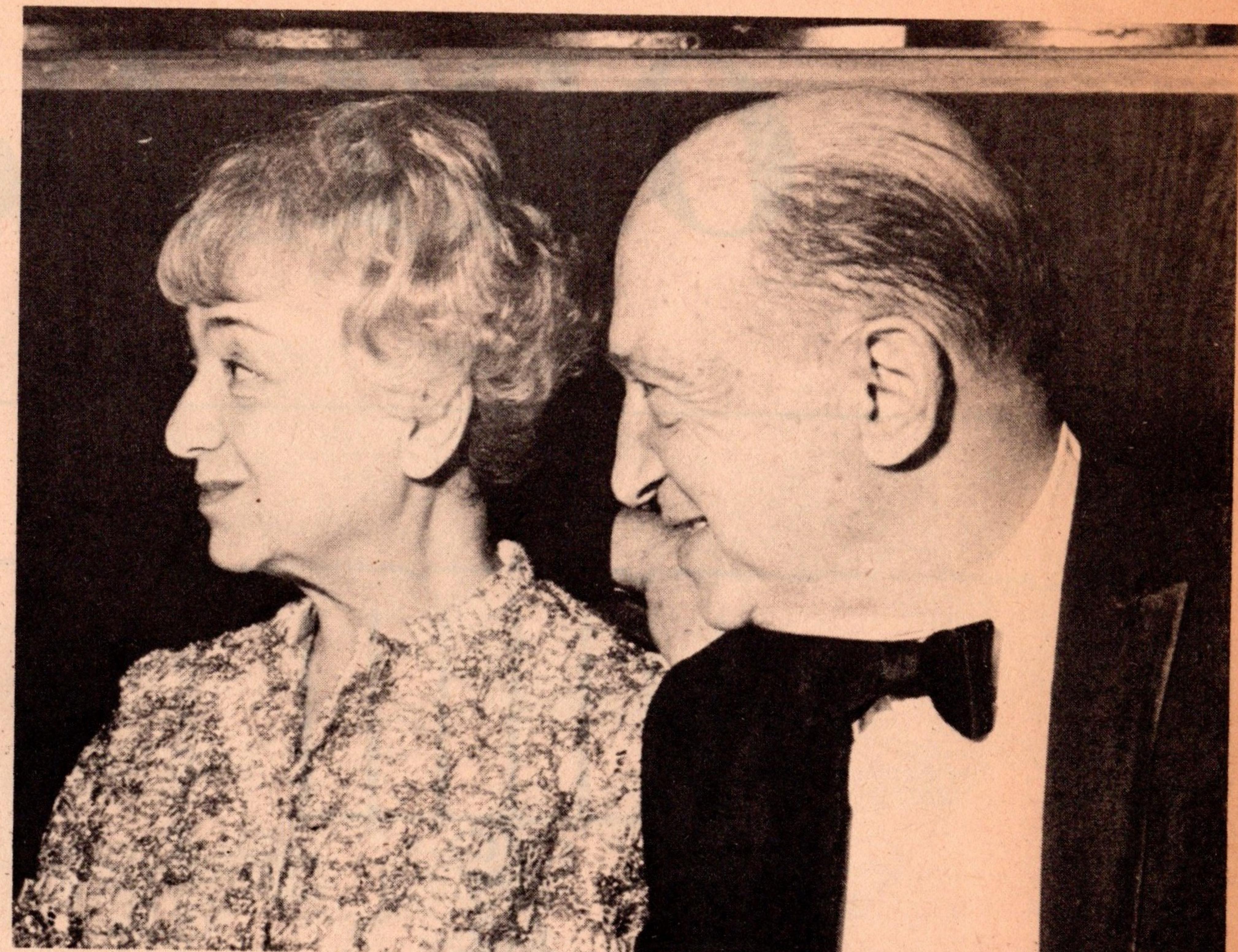
HAIBLUM: We should here interrupt for a special question. You two have had a rather wonderful marriage for quite a few years. Do you happen to have a recipe for marital happiness?

MOLLY: It's very difficult to pin down—

JACOB: Tell them that we celebrated our golden wedding anniversary—fifty-two years.

MOLLY: Almost fifty-two. In June, it will be fifty-two years. As I started to say, it's hard to pin down the reason why a marriage lasts or doesn't last, especially in the theater, which is a difficult profession to start with. I suppose we must begin with "somebody up there loves us." We had some *mazel*: we chose each other and our relationship in the theater was such that there wasn't any jealousy between us, as there might be between a man and wife in the theater when each one wants to be the star or the leading figure. Yonkel was a famous young director and writer and he didn't especially want to act. He's a very good actor, but he doesn't especially care about acting, so he left the acting to me. You know, leave the driving to us. I drove, but he was the one that was behind it all. And I suppose it was just the give and take between us that kept us going through the difficult years, because there were ups and down, as there are in every person's life. We had good times and bad times. Actually, when we first left Boston after playing there two years, one of our very dear friends said to us, "I wish you a lot of luck and a lot of success and a little failure, and if you have that combination, you will be straightened out." And this is what we've had all through our lives: we've had ups and downs and glorious moments and very difficult moments. But we've had each other and this, I think, has been the leveling-off sort of experience between us: we could rely on each other for advice, for help and for love, which is important too, and somehow or other we've just laughed it out and it doesn't seem like fifty-two years to me at all—it seems more like fifty-three!

HAIBLUM: I know that when you wrote a book a few years ago, Molly, the dedication was to your husband, "without whom neither this book nor Molly Picon would have been possible."



MOLLY PICON and **JACOB KALICH**, on the occasion of their 50th wedding anniversary, were honored by Women's American ORT at its 20th Biennial Convention in New York in 1969.

MOLLY: Un-huh.

JACOB: The book's name is *So Laugh a Little* and the dedication I wrote.

MOLLY: That is the one thing in the book he didn't write! Most of the book was composed of Yonkel's stories; he developed them because he has such a great sense of theater. He takes everything from life—all the basic stories are true, but they are a little theatricalized. It's Yonkel's great quality. So that most of the book is Yonkel's. It should have been by Molly Picon and Yonkel Kalich and I wanted that from the beginning, but the publishers thought differently. But the one thing he did not write, I insist, was the dedication.

HAIBLUM: Molly, you've performed not only in Yiddish and English, but also in German and French.

MOLLY: I played in German in Vienna when we were doing "Yonkela" there, the first play that Yonkel wrote for me. They came and asked me to appear at the Maksa Moritz, which was a nightclub: I said, "In what language?" and they said, "Anything you know"—so I appeared in what was supposedly German. But I knew some German because I had studied it in school in Philadelphia. My French, however, was a different story. I was engaged to play at the Alhambra, which is a very big vaudeville theater in Paris, for Passover, and the director knew that there were a lot of Jews in Paris at the time and that they would come. I said to him, "How am I going to work?" and he said, "You do your English act. You do one chorus in French and that will be enough." I was on the bill at the time with Sophie Tucker at the Palace Theater and I told her, "Sophie, I got an engagement to play in Paris," and she said, "What language are you going to work in?" and I said, "In English." She said, "They'll murder you; they booed me off the stage," because she had gone through the same experience. You see, when you're a singer, that's one thing, but when you're a comedienne, they have to understand you.

So I went to a French teacher in Greenwich Village. I said, "I'd like to learn French quickly." He said, "I'll give you the stuff. Come in." And so I went there every day and I took lessons with him. By the time I was ready to go to Paris, I had enough French to be able to study my songs which were easy and also enough to fill in verbally, if I had to, which I did in my first song. This was a laugh song here in America and I sang it in Paris in what I thought was very good French, but I got no laughter. It seems the audience was so fascinated with my accent that they were busy listening to it and didn't laugh. But I stayed on for many weeks there, was a big hit, and ended up doing my whole act in French.

HAIBLUM: Molly, you've played all sorts of roles on the Yiddish stage, including a number of little boys; when you were quite young, you played Jacob P. Adler's mother.

MOLLY: Well, the Yiddish theater was a repertory theater. We were trained from our early childhood to play all kinds of parts. One night you would do a little boy and the next night, an old woman. And this was part of my training. But the reason I came to New York as a little boy star in "Yonkela," Yonkel will tell you.

JACOB: Well, in those days, it used to be that a star in the Jewish theater, especially a woman, had to weigh at least 250 pounds. And she had to be a big, buxom woman. And here, I've got Molly. So whenever I wanted to put her back into a New York theater, I used to approach a manager and he would look at her and say, "This is a star? Only five feet?" So I turned the table around and I created children's parts for Molly, almost like Peter Pan. "Yonkela" is a sort of a Yiddish Peter Pan. Peter Pan doesn't want to grow up; Yonkela wants to grow up and do something for his people. And that's how it started. Molly's first starring part was "Yonkela" (who was a bar mitzvah boy) and she made a fantastic success of that role all over the world. Molly played Yonkela over 3,000 times. We played it in Vienna 108 times; in Buenos Aires, eight months; in Bucharest, eight months. So all the other parts followed in the same way. It was Little Bedel and Little Molly and Little Mother.

HAIBLUM: Is "Yonkela" your favorite play?

MOLLY: Either "Yonkela" or "Schmendrick." I haven't quite made up my mind. "Schmendrick," of course, is the traditional Jewish fool, like Dumer Augustine or Simple Simon. In our literature the only fool that we had was written by Goldfarb many years ago as a comedy. Goldfarb was the father of the Yiddish theater; that's where Yonkel started, in Bucharest, in the Zjignitz Theater and they were doing the Goldfarb repertoire at the time. And "Schmendrick" is a funny little boy and was always played by a man, but in searching for parts, Yonkel discovered that I would be a good "Schmendrick." Actually, I think I am a very good "Schmendrick." And so "Schmendrick" is one of my favorite parts and "Yonkela," too. They're two little boys, quite different, but little boys who're full of mischief, humor and laughter. They're very gay and happy children and I love happy children.

(Continued on page 14, col. 1)

"...every time we're just as excited and enthused and inspired..."

(Continued from page 9)

We just had an experience: we've just come back from Israel, you know. We went to a nursery there of Oriental Jewish people and the children were from two to four years old, black-eyed, curly haired and the happiest children that I've ever seen in all the world. There were about eighty or ninety of them. And when we came in, they all yelled, "Shalom, shalom, shalom" and they sang and danced for us and I danced for them and we've never spent a happier hour. I've always loved children and, of course, we don't have any of our own, but we have five adopted children.

HAIBLUM: You came to America, Yonkel, with the help of Ber Borochov, a name that isn't really known to many Americans. He was a Yiddish linguist and Zionist theoretician of outstanding ability. How did you meet him? What sort of man was he?

JACOB: Besides being a great intellectual and linguist, he was one of the kindest persons I have ever met. I was at that time in Milano, Italy and I was, so to speak, arrested as a political prisoner; Borochov was there studying languages in the Milano museum. He was always very interested in the development of languages, and he found me there and had known me from before. I used to go to his lectures in Rumania quite a lot. I had been introduced to him previously. He was told that I was a good speaker and a good scholar. You know, in those little towns when one's name becomes familiar and popular, well they exaggerated a little to Borochov about me and I really fell in love with this man and he with me too, so he said. And that was when the war broke out. He was supposed to leave Milano the next weekend. And if he didn't leave then, it could mean that he wouldn't be able to leave till the war was over.

MOLLY: Tell them which war, honey, we've had a few.

JACOB: It was the war before I married Molly—the first war, 1914. And when Borochov saw me there, he said "Have you got money to pay for the boat?" I said, "No." He said, "Do you have a passport?" I said, "No," because I didn't have. You know, in those days, you were just going around from one country to the other. And he said to me, "Don't worry. I will not leave Italy until I take you along with me to America on a boat."

He was connected with a secret organization at the time, the Provodny Company in Milano. They were making tires, but actually they were a Trotskyite group. He knew them and we went to the manager and he told him about me and he asked him to help me out with 200 lire. The manager did so immediately. Now came the problem of a passport. Well, in those days, especially the Trotskyites had plenty of passports, so they picked a passport for me with the name of Abram Revutsky. And I studied the whole night to write it in Russian.

I finally came to America under the name of Abram Revutsky. I landed here, but two weeks later, I decided I'm going to stay so I'd better declare that I came here under an assumed name. I went up to the City Hall, took out my first citizen papers and they read, "Landed as Abram Revutsky. Real name, Jacob Kalich." But here comes the funny part of it. Two years later, the Bolshevik Revolution breaks out in Russia and we read in dispatches from there, "Abram Revutsky became Prime Minister of the Ukraine!"

HAIBLUM: In those days you were active in Zionism.

JACOB: Poale Zion, yes.

MOLLY: Maybe you should explain that for those who don't understand.

JACOB: It was the Borochov party—the labor party of Zionism—because Borochov was really its head man.

HAIBLUM: And then in 1933, you toured Palestine together. Come to think of it, you've just now returned from another visit to Israel. What changes have you seen in all these years?

MOLLY: What changes have we not seen? We've seen miracles. When I say we've seen miracles, I'm reminded of Ben Gurion who said, "Anybody who doesn't believe in miracles is not a realist." Actually, in Israel you see miracles; you see the desert blooming; you see the swamps drained and fertile fields; you see buildings growing up like mushrooms; you see immense projects in the planning stage one year—when you come back next year, they're all up; they're standing there. They've grown and you don't know how and where and when. And this goes on all the time. We go year after year and every time we're just as excited and enthused and inspired as we were the last time. But our first trip was in 1933—and at that time we were in Carlsbad, Czechoslovakia. It was the twelfth Zionist Congress. Weizman was presiding then and had been elected President. We went and gave a concert and Bialik (the Hebrew poet) was there and he came to hear our concert; he was rather impressed with us. He said to Yonkel after the concert—some of my material was the old Jewish kind of vaudeville thing—and he said "Zi makht fun a pedeshve ayngemakhts."

HAIBLUM: Could you translate that for our readers?

MOLLY: "Out of the sole of a shoe, she makes jam or jelly." It doesn't sound as good in English as it does in Yiddish. But Bialik was so impressed with our performance that he said, "You must come to Israel and be my guest for Passover." And so we packed our bags and we went to Israel. We were his guests for the seder. We met Henrietta Szold in Jerusalem and we were there, I suppose, at the beginning of Youth Aliyah.

Through the years, we have been active in all the organizations that support Israel and the movements throughout the world. So that was our first trip, and our last trip occurred just recently. We had adopted four children in Israel and another one in Brussels, who is a professor of physics in the University there. Our last daughter, Myra, was married in February and we went to Jerusalem to the wedding. You say, "A wedding in Jerusalem?" Would you believe that this bride wore a white velvet gaucho suit and white leather boots and a Spanish mantilla and she looked like a little Yemenite doll. It was a beautiful wedding and it went on and on for over a week. Hundreds of people participated in the simcha; it was really so exciting that we still can't calm down.

(This interview is in two parts. In the concluding installment, which will appear in our next issue, Molly and Jacob talk about among other topics, Israel, ORT, their friendship with Dr. A. Syngalowski, and experiences filming Fiddler on the Roof.)

"Fiddler" to Perform for ORT

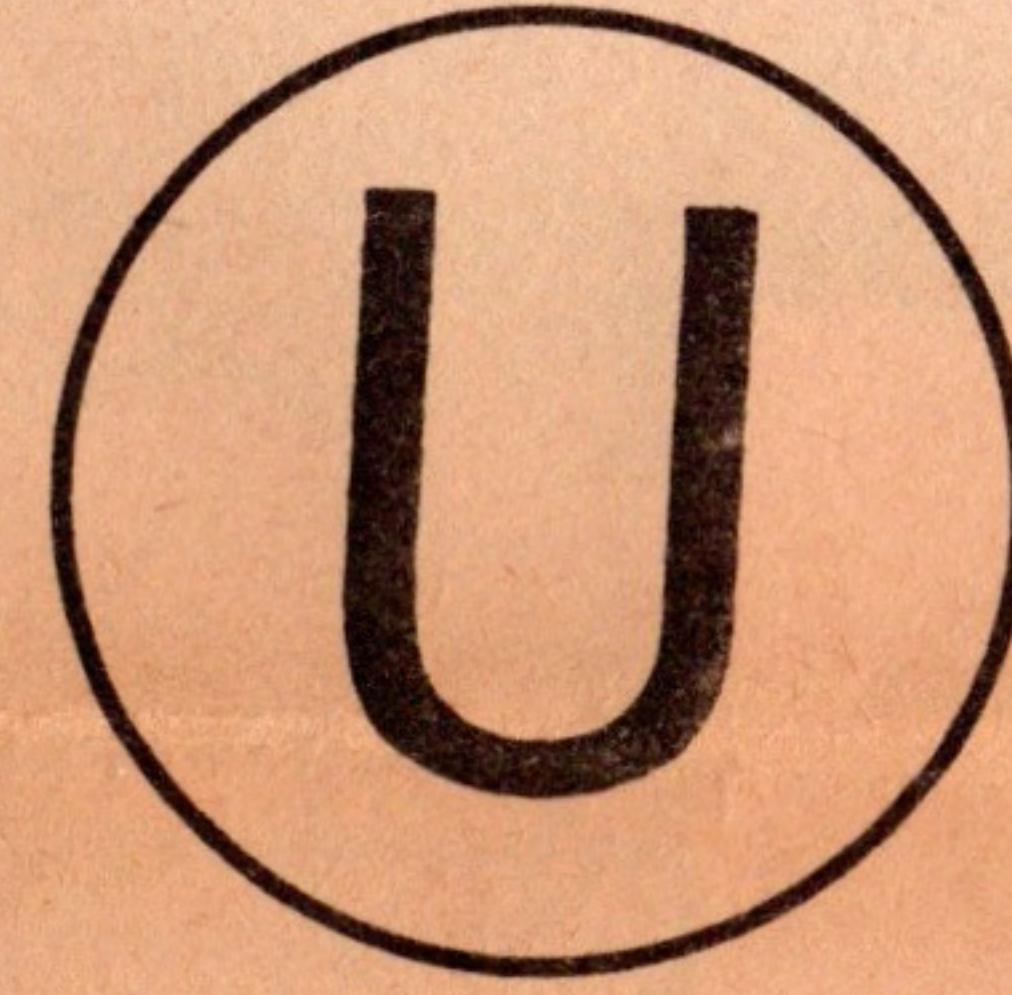
NEW YORK—The ORT School of Engineering at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem will be aided by WAO-sponsored benefit performances throughout the country of the long-awaited film version of the Broadway musical hit, *Fiddler on the Roof*, starring Israeli actor Topol and Molly Picon.

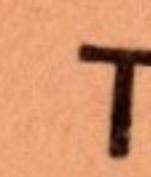
Women's American ORT, one of the few organizations selected to participate during the film's initial two week premiere run, will hold its benefit performance at the Rivoli Theater here Nov. 10, soon after the official opening on Nov. 3.

Following the performance, Molly Picon will be guest of honor at a gala reception for patron ticket holders in the Tower Suite of the Time-Life Building. Eleven New York - New Jersey metropolitan area regions and two chapters-at-large are sponsoring the Nov. 10 performance.

After the November premiere in New York, the film will open in the following months in major cities across the country. Women's American ORT sponsored premiere showings are already scheduled in a number of cities, among them San Francisco and Los Angeles.

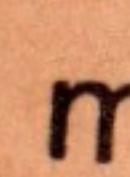
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