

An HOW Empire THE of JEWS Their INVENTED Own HOLLYWOOD

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Introduction

Russian-Jewish immigrants came from the *shtetls* and ghettos out to Hollywood. . . . In this magical place that had no relationship to any reality they had ever seen before in their lives, or that anyone else had ever seen, they decided to create their idea of an eastern aristocracy. . . . The American Dream—is a Jewish invention.

JILL ROBINSON

They [the Jews of Hollywood] not only believed in the American Dream, rather than see it fail, they tried desperately and successfully to manufacture the evidence for its survival . . . and for its existence.

HY KRAFT, SCREENWRITER

THIS BOOK BEGINS, AS HOLLYWOOD itself did, with something of a paradox. The paradox is that the American film industry, which Will Hays, president of the original Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, called "the quintessence" of what we mean by "America," was founded and for more than thirty years operated by Eastern European Jews who themselves seemed to be anything *but* the quintessence of America. The much-vaunted "studio system," which provided a prodigious supply of films during the movies' heyday, was supervised by a second generation of Jews, many of whom also regarded themselves as marginal

men trying to punch into the American mainstream. The storefront theaters of the late teens were transformed into the movie palaces of the twenties by Jewish exhibitors. And when sound movies commandeered the industry, Hollywood was invaded by a battalion of Jewish writers, mostly from the East. The most powerful talent agencies were run by Jews. Jewish lawyers transacted most of the industry's business and Jewish doctors ministered to the industry's sick. Above all, Jews produced the movies. "Of 85 names engaged in production," a 1936 study noted, "53 are Jews. And the Jewish advantage holds in prestige as well as numbers." All of which led F. Scott Fitzgerald to characterize Hollywood carpingly as "a Jewish holiday, a gentiles [sic] tragedy."

The real tragedy, however, was certainly the Jews'. Their dominance became a target for wave after wave of vicious anti-Semites—from fire-and-brimstone evangelicals in the teens and early twenties who demanded the movies' liberation from "the hands of the devil and 500 un-Christian Jews" to Red-baiters in the forties for whom Judaism was really a variety of communism and the movies their chief form of propaganda. The sum of this anti-Semitic demonology was that the Jews, by design or sheer ignorance, had used the movies to undermine traditional American values. As one antagonist put it, "It is only because they [the Hollywood Jews] are outside the moral sphere of American culture that they blunder so badly that they require periodic campaigns such as that of the Legion of Decency [a Catholic reform group] to set them right." Ducking from these assaults, the Jews became the phantoms of the film history they had created, haunting it but never really able to inhabit it.

What deepened the pathos was that while the Hollywood Jews were being assailed by know-nothings for conspiring against traditional American values and the power structure that maintained them, they were desperately embracing those values and working to enter the power structure. Above all things, they wanted to be regarded as Americans, not Jews; they wanted to reinvent themselves here as new men. The movie Jews were acting out what Isaiah Berlin, in a similar context, had described as "an over-intense admiration or indeed worship" for the majority, a reverence that, Berlin also noted, sometimes oscillated with a latent resentment too, creating what he sympathetically called a "neurotic distortion of the facts." Hollywood became both the vehicle for and the product of their distortions.

The Hollywood Jews, at least the first generation that built the industry and form the core of this book, were a remarkably homogeneous group with remarkably similar childhood experiences. The eldest, Carl Laemmle, was born in 1867 in Laupheim, a small village in southwestern Germany. His beloved mother died shortly after his thirteenth birthday, and he prevailed upon his father, a penurious land speculator, to let him come to America to seek his fortune. He would eventually found Universal Pictures.

Adolph Zukor was born in a small Hungarian village in the Tokay grape district. His father died while Adolph was in infancy, his mother a few years later, and Adolph was bundled off to an uncle nearby, a steely, bloodless rabbinical scholar. Lonely, independent, and unloved, Zukor, like Laemmle, petitioned to leave for America and a new life. He would later build Paramount Pictures.

William Fox was another Hungarian. In his case his parents were the emigrés, but his father was shiftless and irresponsible (William would spit on his coffin during the funeral), and the boy was forced to become an entrepreneur, hawking soda pop, sandwiches, and chimney black. He would parlay these experiences into the Fox Film Corporation.

Louis B. Mayer said that he had forgotten exactly where in Russia he had been born and on what day. (He would later appropriate the Fourth of July for his birthday.) He settled with his parents in maritime Canada, where his father established a junkyard and salvage operation. By his teens, Louis was bristling at his father's authority, and he left for Boston, where he tried setting up a junk and salvage operation of his own. He would, of course, head the greatest studio of them all, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Benjamin Warner left his wife, son, and infant daughter in Poland while he followed relatives who had sought their fortune in America. After two years as a cobbler in Baltimore, he had earned enough to send for his family and promptly began increasing their number. For years, he roamed the East and Canada, peddling notions from a wagon, before finally settling in Youngstown, Ohio, and it was there his sons, Harry, Sam, Albert, and Jack, decided to pool their resources and buy a broken movie projector. The result was the eponymous company, Warner Brothers.

The most striking similarity among the Hollywood Jews, however,

wasn't their Eastern European origins. What united them in deep spiritual kinship was their utter and absolute rejection of their pasts and their equally absolute devotion to their new country. For immigrant Jews to want to assimilate, particularly when they had been victimized in their home countries, was nothing exceptional. But something drove the young Hollywood Jews to a ferocious, even pathological, embrace of America. Something drove them to deny whatever they had been before settling here.

One common, undeniable factor was a patrimony of failure. All had grown up in destitution. All, with the exception of Zukor, who had no father at all, had *luftmenshen* for fathers, men who shuttled from one job to another, from one place to another. Those fathers who emigrated found themselves unable to adjust to America. Some, like Jacob Mayer, sought solace and stability in religion, becoming a *macher* at the new synagogue in St. John, New Brunswick. Others, like William Fox's father, sought refuge in women, drink, and cards. Judging from the children's lives and words, this failure had a profound effect on them. The sons, who speak so lovingly of their doting mothers, are pointedly silent or even hostile toward their fathers. At best, the men are adjudged to have been kind—a left-handed compliment from individuals who venerated mettle.

One hesitates getting too Oedipal here, but the evidence certainly supports the view that the sons, embittered by their fathers' failures, launched a war against their own pasts—a patricide, one could say, against everything their fathers represented. To escape their fathers' fate meant escaping the past: the European roots, the language and accents, the customs and the religion. The past exerted a hold, fashioned a style. One had to erase it, as Mayer erased his birthdate, and adopt a new style—a style for America. America was the baptism to cleanse and renew.

The Hollywood Jews embarked on an assimilation so ruthless and complete that they cut their lives to the pattern of American respectability as they interpreted it. To enter America and be accepted there, as Americans, however, was a formidable challenge in the early part of this century when nativism and xenophobia were rampant. The same impulse that drove the Jews to assimilate drove self-appointed defenders of America to prevent Jews from assimilating and, in their

view, tainting the country. Beyond the barricades erected by America's guardians, the Jews saw an America of gentility, respectability, and status, but they were prohibited from entering those precincts. "That's the important thing," said one Jewish producer who knew the so-called moguls. "The motion picture hierarchy felt that they were on the outside of the real power source of the country. They were not members of the power elite. They were outside of that New England-Wall Street-Middle West money." And that is where the movies came in.

The movie industry held out a number of blandishments to these Jews, not the least of which was that it admitted them. There were no social barriers in a business as new and faintly disreputable as the movies were in the early years of this century. There were none of the impediments imposed by loftier professions and more firmly entrenched businesses to keep Jews and other undesirables out. Financial barriers were lower too, and that attracted Jews and other immigrant entrepreneurs. In fact, one could conceivably open a theater for less than four hundred dollars.

The Jews also had a special compatibility with the industry, one that gave them certain advantages over their competitors. For one thing, having come primarily from fashion and retail, they understood public taste and were masters at gauging market swings, at merchandising, at pirating away customers and beating the competition. For another, as immigrants themselves, they had a peculiar sensitivity to the dreams and aspirations of other immigrants and working-class families, two overlapping groups that made up a significant portion of the early moviegoing audience. The Jews were their own best appraisers of entertainment. "They were the audience," a producer told me. "They were the same people. They were not too far removed from those primitive feelings and attitudes."

But in order to understand what may have been the chief appeal of the movies to these Jews, one must understand their hunger for assimilation and the way in which the movies could uniquely satisfy that hunger. If the Jews were proscribed from entering the real corridors of gentility and status in America, the movies offered an ingenious option. Within the studios and on the screen, the Jews could simply create a new country—an empire of their own, so to speak—

one where they would not only be admitted, but would govern as well. They would fabricate their empire in the image of America as they would fabricate themselves in the image of prosperous Americans. They would create its values and myths, its traditions and archetypes. It would be an America where fathers were strong, families stable, people attractive, resilient, resourceful, and decent. This was *their* America, and its invention may be their most enduring legacy.

It was also, if one examined it, a fictive rehabilitation of the moguls' own lives—lives where fathers had been weak, families destabilized, people unattractive, doomed, impractical, and indifferent. But the rehabilitation wasn't only fictive. While they were mythologizing America on the screen, the Hollywood Jews also set about redesigning themselves. Their own lives became a kind of art, and the process affected every aspect of Hollywood. They lived in large, palatial homes that imitated (some would say "vulgarized") the estates of the eastern establishment. They became members of a lavish new country club called Hillcrest that mimicked the gentile clubs that barred them. They subscribed to a cultural life, centered around the Hollywood Bowl, that simulated the cultural life of the eastern aristocracy. For their social life, they organized a system of estates, a rigid hierarchy, that could easily have been modeled after the court of Louis XIV. For their politics they forsook the Democrats, for whom the overwhelming majority of their coreligionists voted, and swore fealty instead to the Republicans as American aristocrats did. Guilt ran too deep for them to disavow Judaism entirely, but the religious community to which they contributed came awfully close; by its lights, Jews were to be seen and not heard. As the rabbi who guided the Hollywood Jews put it, "For God's sakes, I'm living in America. I have to be part of my environment. I don't want any ghettos here for myself."

In short, like Disraeli, another Jew who felt alienated from and patronized by a class-conscious society, the Hollywood Jews would hope through "a sustained attempt to live a fiction, and to cast its spell over the minds of others." What is amazing is the extent to which they succeeded in promulgating this fiction throughout the world. By making a "shadow" America, one which idealized every old glorifying bromide about the country, the Hollywood Jews created a powerful

cluster of images and ideas—so powerful that, in a sense, they colonized the American imagination. No one could think about this country without thinking about the movies. As a result, the paradox—that the movies were quintessentially American while the men who made them were not—doubled back on itself. Ultimately, American values came to be *defined* largely by the movies the Jews made. Ultimately, by creating their idealized America on the screen, the Jews reinvented the country in the image of their fiction.

How they did so, why they did so, and what they gained and lost by doing so is the story of this book.