

ONE From the Mainstream to the Margin, 1920–1929

Pretty soon Jewish broadcasting stations will be opened and mother will hear all the cantors and rabbis and Jewish actors through the very same radio.

Editorial, *Jewish Daily Forward*, 3 August 1924

One cannot print a magazine for a dozen readers, nor can one broadcast for two hundred listeners, generally speaking. . . . The program will have to appeal to a vast army of listeners, and a proportionately wide range of tastes.

Carl Dreher, radio critic, 1925

By the time the first Yiddish program aired, in 1926, Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants had been listening to radio for at least three years; Yiddish newspapers had been publishing daily radio listings, advertisements for radio receivers, and articles about radio; images of radios had been appearing in advertisements for other products; and the radio had become a feature of novelty recordings and other works of art and popular culture. As radio gained in popularity, advertisers, retailers, and manufacturers of receivers began paying special attention to the Jewish immigrant market, targeting them as a discrete audience and consumer base. Owing in part to these efforts, by the end of the decade urban immigrants were among the most likely Americans to own a radio. That there were no Yiddish-language radio programs did not prevent a culture of Yiddish radio from taking root. Instead of an independent industry or

a cultural practice born out of linguistic necessity, Yiddish radio grew out of the listening habits of immigrants developed while they tuned in to radio in English. Radio's penetration of Yiddish popular culture indicated that immigrants were involved in mainstream American culture and did not seem to mind that it spoke English exclusively, even while they imagined what Yiddish radio might sound like.

This means that Yiddish radio did not emerge as a thing apart from English-language radio but as an extension of it. Beholden not only to the broader framework of radio as it evolved in the early 1920s but also to the tastes for programming that its intended audience had begun to develop, Yiddish-speaking broadcasters found themselves in a peculiar situation. An audience of Yiddish speakers was in place, but broadcasters still had to develop ways to draw them out of and away from the mainstream audience. In contrast to standard narratives of assimilation that chart the movement of immigrant populations from the margin to the mainstream, the dynamics of Yiddish radio meant a movement from the mainstream to the margin. The development of an audience for Yiddish radio programs meant cultivating a sense of membership in a common audience among listeners who had grown comfortable tuning in to English programs. When they listened, why they listened, what they expected to hear, and what they heard is addressed in detail in the chapters that follow. Here I want to focus on the formation of a culture of Yiddish radio—when Jewish immigrant listeners embraced radio even before radio uttered its first Yiddish word.

LEARNING TO LISTEN TO ENGLISH

Most historians date the beginning of American broadcast radio to November 1920, when Frank Conrad, a radio hobbyist, aired results of that year's presidential election from the roof of a Westinghouse store in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.¹ Before Conrad, radio was used mainly by the military or by hobbyists tinkering with kits in their garages and basements. Anyone with a little scientific inclination, some spending money, and some leisure time could assemble a radio set that both broadcast and received signals, like a wireless telephone. Conrad's broadcast has

become a fulcrum of sorts in American radio history, signaling a shift from radio as wireless telephony to broadcasting. Whether Conrad or Westinghouse should be properly credited with this shift is a matter of historiographical debate. But what is clear is that in the wake of this broadcast, companies such as Westinghouse and Philco began producing and marketing radio receivers for people wanting to hear what all the fuss was about.² In four short years the radio moved from a novelty to a phenomenon and from an esoteric hobby to a national industry. And this despite the fact that there was still very little to hear. In 1920 radio set sales generated \$2 million. Four years later they accounted for \$350 billion in sales. In 1922 the radio industry reported the sale of some 60,000 receivers. By January 1925 annual sales topped 3.7 million.³

Jewish immigrants, for their part, participated in the radio boom as actively as everyone else. Though no specific statistics exist for who bought radio sets, the majority of Jewish immigrants lived in urban areas, where radio signals and sales were strongest. Moreover, Jewish immigrants generally participated in popular culture more broadly, omnivorously consuming news from Broadway, Hollywood, and Tin Pan Alley. Jewish-owned phonograph shops sold recordings of the opera stars Enrico Caruso and Luisa Tetrazzinni, in addition to 78s of Yiddish theater performers and popular cantors. By the 1920s, nickelodeons, which could be found on almost every street on the Lower East Side, had begun to give way to more lavish movie palaces uptown, and younger Jews leaped at the chance to laugh at the antics of Chaplin, Arbuckle, and other stars on screens far larger and more glamorous than they had previously known.⁴ Around this same time, Coney Island offered immigrant workers an affordable retreat from city heat, and New York's Hippodrome gave working boys and girls a place to socialize, dance, and spend whatever money their parents surrendered (or they managed to sock away).⁵ As the prevalence of newspaper advertisements and listings indicate, Jewish immigrants spent their leisure time and disposable income on the new medium. Stars like Rudy Vallee and Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel became household names both in Yiddish and in English.

By mid-decade, most Jewish immigrants had developed a facility in English that would have allowed them easy access to radio programming. In 1925, the social scientist Mordecai Soltes surveyed readers of the

Yiddish press and found that a significant percentage read and understood English newspapers. Two-thirds of his respondents read English newspapers in addition to Yiddish ones, and another 20 percent could read English but did not read newspapers. Only 13 percent responded that they did not read English at all.⁶ If two-thirds of those surveyed could *read* English, then an even greater percentage could *listen* to English-language radio programs, especially since much of radio broadcasting during the mid-1920s featured musical performances.

But Jewish immigrants' acceptance of English as the primary language of radio did not come without some self-consciousness. When the first programs with Jewish content aired in fall 1923, the *Forward* quickly noted that although the programs were Jewish, the medium still was not. These programs, sponsored by United Synagogue, the organizational body of Conservative Judaism in America, commemorated the High Holidays and featured an explanation of "the significance of [the] impending Jewish festivals or holidays, a rendition of the complete musical ritual of the particular service by a leading cantor and choir, and the recital of an appropriate Jewish legend or folk tale from the Talmud."⁷ David J. Putterman, "the youngest and only American trained cantor," and his accompanist, Abraham Ellstein, the son of Jewish immigrants and a Juilliard-trained pianist, who were featured on the Yom Kippur program, represented a new generation of American-born Jews who could perform an ideal synthesis of American Judaism.

Despite the programs' significance for Jews, their timing was off. Because Jewish law prohibits the use of electricity on many holidays, neither of United Synagogue's two programs aired on the holidays themselves but a few days before, prompting the *Forward* to comment, "It's a bit too early, but after all, it's a *goyishe* [non-Jewish] station."⁸ But would a Jewish station broadcast *on* Yom Kippur in violation of religious law and custom? The newspaper's humorous criticism echoed a sense that even though mainstream, English-language radio could address Jewish subjects, it remained culturally *goyish*. Ironically, the only time the newspaper found radio's *goyishness* important enough to mention was with respect to these two—and at this point, the only two—Jewish broadcasts. Otherwise, radio remained simply radio.

While the *Forward* labeled the medium culturally non-Jewish, at least one other listener recognized something else on the air. Saul Birns, a New York phonograph dealer and Jewish immigrant, heard in the High Holiday programs the possibility for Jewish broadcasting. Already one of the first dealers to advertise radios in the Yiddish press, he ran small bilingual Yiddish-English advertisements that accompanied the *Forward's* radio listings. They read, "If you took benefit from the aforementioned programs, buy a radio on cash or installments from Saul Birns." The coincidental appearance of Birns's advertisements and the first radio listings suggests that he paid for the listings himself in an attempt to increase interest in the new medium and move more product.

Not content to sell radio receivers, Birns published a full-page advertisement in the *Forward* in October 1923 in which he laid out his vision of a Jewish radio station "through which the millions of Jews who live in New York and in the hundreds of cities and towns around New York City will be able every day to hear on their radio Yiddish music and songs, Yiddish lectures, popular science and all sorts of musical programs" (see figure 1).⁹ Thanks to "special permission" from the Department of Commerce in Washington, Birns planned to open "the first and only foreign language broadcasting station," which would carry programs in German, Russian, Polish, and Yiddish. From his yet-to-be-completed studio in the heart of the Jewish East Side at 109 Second Avenue, he predicted that the "Saul Birns radio station [would become] the center of Jewish cultural life in America," adding, "When the Saul Birns radio broadcasting station is finished, it won't only be a mirror for the Jewish East Side, but for the Jews all over the country." As a "center of cultural life," Birns hoped his radio station would be Jewish in both content and context.

Birns's vision for the his Yiddish radio station was not merely one of entertainment or edification; he wanted to facilitate Jewish communal activity nationwide. Birns believed that Jews needed their own radio station that could speak directly to them in their own immigrant tongues. Much like his Progressive counterparts, who believed that radio could unify and uplift the citizens of the United States, Birns believed that his radio station could organize American Jews by providing a singular cultural voice. How much of his message could be attributed to busi-

The image shows a page from the "Saul Birns Bulletin" (פארװערט) announcing the opening of the first Yiddish radio station. The page is dated October 6, 1923. The main headline is "סאָל בירנז פֿורעמט" (Saul Birns will soon open). Below it, a sub-headline reads "פֿירשטע ייִדישע ראַדיו סטאָנציע" (First Yiddish Radio Station). The page features a portrait of Saul Birns in the center. The text is in Yiddish, with some English words interspersed. The page number "25" is visible in the top left corner.

Figure 1. The "Saul Birns Bulletin" announces, "Saul Birns Will Soon Open the First Yiddish Radio Station." *Jewish Daily Forward*, 6 October 1923, 7. Courtesy of the Forward Association.

ness acumen and how much expressed an honest assessment of the American Jewish population cannot be precisely identified. Nevertheless, his announcement certainly made clear that from the earliest echoes of American radio in Jewish immigrant communities, broadcasters held themselves responsible for providing content and also a community service. Moreover, Birns expressed a sense that English-language radio programs, regardless of content, could not adequately meet the needs and desires of Jewish audiences. For that, Yiddish-speaking audiences would need Yiddish-language programs, even if, for the time being, radio continued to speak English and Jewish audiences continued to listen.

Unfortunately, Birns's dream for radio would have to wait—but not on

account of language. A few months later, Birns surrendered his vision, blaming his inability to organize a broadcast station on the “radio trust.”¹⁰ Although not, strictly speaking, a “trust,” the coordinated interests of General Electric, Westinghouse, RCA, and AT&T effectively directed the growth of the industry and even, eventually, the laws that governed it.¹¹ Birns returned to his roots as an appliance dealer and wasted no time reminding his customers that “soon, practically no families will be able to get by without a radio, just like no civilized American can understand how one could live without a telephone, electric lights, automobiles, a phonograph, and so on.”¹² As a businessman, he reverted to the idea that the real money could be found in selling broadcast hardware, not content, but that in order to sell radios he had to first sell the idea of radio generally and of Yiddish radio specifically. Birns’s failure reinforced the fact that if Jewish immigrants were listening to radio, they were listening in English.

Birns, however, was not the only Yiddish speaker to imagine the possibilities of Yiddish radio. A few months before Birns tried to cash in on the radio boom, Baruch Charney Vladeck, managing editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, tried to arrange for the construction of a radio station at the Forward Building, the newspaper’s Lower East Side home. “My father thought,” recalled Vladeck’s son, Stephen, “that the circulation then, which must have been about a hundred and fifty thousand, would wane and therefore the *Forward* needed some other way of communication.”¹³ In August 1923, Vladeck penned a letter to his friend David Sarnoff, chairman of RCA, asking for his assistance in arranging for a broadcast permit: “I am contemplating a broadcasting wireless station for the Forwards [*sic*] Building. I have been told that some kind of a permit is necessary for the erection of such a station and I wish to ask you to inform me of how to go about it.”¹⁴ Vladeck’s request went unanswered, but it, along with Birns’s advertisements in the Yiddish press, indicated that the culture of Yiddish radio had begun to take root some two and a half years before the first Yiddish-language broadcasts, and it developed in conjunction with a broader acceptance of English as the primary language of radio in America.

While Birns and Vladeck toyed with the idea of a Yiddish-speaking radio station, other writers addressed the medium’s emergent popular-

ity and reinforced the primacy of English. In 1924, when the *Forward* published its first full article about radio in the lives of Jewish families, it did so as a column on the newspaper's English-language page, a weekly feature that primarily addressed the English-speaking children of its Yiddish-speaking readers. The article posited the dilemma facing a poor immigrant family: should they buy a radio or a phonograph? "The proper thing," concluded the article, "is to get both a radio and a victrola. The former keeps one in touch with the daily world, the latter affords an opportunity to listen to the world's classics as often as one desires. The older generation could listen to heart's content to Jewish tunes and pieces by Jewish comedians. The younger set could get in touch with any broadcasting station and open floodgates of noise and merriment and fill themselves with dancing to physical exhaustion."¹⁵ The depiction of the conflict between Yiddish-speaking parents and their English-speaking children reaffirmed the primary association between English and radio. Though the author imagined a future for "Jewish broadcasting stations," he never imagined them outside radio's primary function as a source of entertainment for a younger, English-speaking audience.

This attitude found additional support in Yiddish as well. When the New York radio station WHN hired a new announcer who spoke seven languages, including Yiddish, the newspaper treated it as little more than a publicity stunt, commenting, "[He is] the chairman of the air in seven languages—but you still can't understand him."¹⁶ Perhaps most tellingly, when the *Forward* began publishing radio listings in 1923, it tended to give Yiddish transliterations of English program titles. Then, toward the end of 1924, the newspaper started printing its radio listings in English, a practice it continued for a number of months before reverting to transliterations.

Elsewhere, the *Forward*, ever conscious of its mission to help immigrant Jews learn to live in America, promoted the medium through a series of brief articles that explained what a radio set did and how it worked. The articles supplied diagrams of how to build a radio set, explained the difference between a crystal set and a tube set, provided instructions on how to install an antenna, and gave other suggestions about how its readers might enhance their enjoyment of the offerings of

the new medium. Like the diagrams of baseball games or voting booths that the *Forward* famously used to teach its readers about life and customs in America, these columns taught readers how to take advantage of new technology so as to keep up with American popular culture.

As radio gained popularity and an audience among Jewish immigrants, it began to appear in other areas of Yiddish culture. In 1924 the B. Manischewitz Company, the matzo baker and producer of kosher food products, used the image of a radio in a series of print advertisements. One advertisement depicted a large globe with the horn of a radio peeking out from the lower right-hand corner (see figure 2). In large lettering, the advertisement boasted, “A name renowned the world over.”¹⁷ Despite the fact that few radio stations had the capability to broadcast more than thirty-five miles or so, Manischewitz’s vision of itself as a “global brand” matched perfectly the imaginary power of radio that the company hoped to ride into Jewish homes “around the whole world.” The combination of radio’s wide recognition and its technological promise made it too potent a symbol for advertisers to resist.

Writers and performers began taking advantage of radio’s popularity, too. In 1923, Rubin Goldberg, a minor performer in the Yiddish theater and future star of Yiddish radio, recorded a novelty record titled *Shloyme afn radio* (Shloime on the Radio), which likely poked fun at the idea of broadcasting in Yiddish.¹⁸ Three years later, the Yiddish poet and author Avraham Reisen turned to the metaphor of radio as a source of comfort and a cure for isolation:¹⁹

It will fill your heart with pride
To hear London playing in New York

(London, too, at the same time
will be hearing the jazz that’s played here . . .) . . .

Abundance for the rich people,
Only a song for the rest.

Maybe you’re lonely like a town
The radio has something joyous for you

Listen to a little speech
And it will bring you a little happiness.

קוין חלק פון דער סעודה. אין די מיינסטע פאלען העלפט אזא אנלערנונג און די מאלפע געוועהנט זיך צו טאן איהר ערעלע פליכט אלס פאקעל-טרענערין אהן „מאנקי ביוזנעס“...

טען פעברואר, 1925, דאן וועלען זיי ביידע מאכען א ריזע נאך אייראפא און זיי וועלען ווידער זיין צוזאמען, ביז וואר נען זיי וועלען דערפיהלען די נויטוועג דינקייט פאר א נייעם „וואקיישאן“.

א נאמען וואס קלינגט איבער דער גאנצער וועלט

The B. Manischewitz Co.
CINCINNATI, O.
NEW YORK OFFICE: 13 UNIVERSITY PL. TEL: SPRING 8784

Figure 2. Advertisement for the B. Manischewitz Matzo Company. This is one of the first advertisements to use the image of a radio to promote another product. The text reads, “Manischewitz, a name that’s heard around the whole world.” *Der tog*, 5 March 1924, 10.

By the time radio entered the metaphoric vocabulary of this Yiddish poet, it had spoken its first Yiddish words, yet it had already been speaking powerfully to Jewish immigrants for years, whether it carried messages of music or matzo.

Radio began to make its presence known in the realm of politics as well. A political cartoon from 1924 featured an image of a radio set to comment on a well-publicized speech by Louis Marshall, president of the American Jewish Committee (see figure 3).²⁰ In a speech carried by one of the New York stations, Marshall spoke in English about the plight of European Jewry in the wake of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, which effectively put an end to immigration from Eastern Europe. The following day, *Der tog* responded with a cartoon depicting a man sitting by a radio listening to Marshall's appeal. The man, identified as "American Jew," held a "radio music program" on his lap and listened attentively to the words calling for donations of "\$500,000 to save Jewish refugees from disaster" coming from the radio's speaker. The caption read, "The music that must arouse [its listeners]." An editorial accompanying the cartoon linked Marshall's speech to the power of radio to mobilize American Jews in support of their friends and relatives in Europe. The global scale of the issue and the popular fantasies of radio intersected to give this columnist an opportunity to urge his audience to act. The columnist concluded, "The radio brought the moving words of Louis Marshall to the ears of American Jews. And if they cannot again say as they used to—*na'aseh venishma* [lit., "we shall perform and we shall hear"; Exod. 24:7]—so they'll instead say—*nishma vena'aseh*—when they've already heard—now they should do something."²¹ By reversing the biblical injunction, he reinforced the ability of radio to speak to Jews and Jewish communal concerns while still primarily speaking English.

The appearance of radio in newspaper articles, advertisements, and entertainment, though they did not add up to a single Yiddish word, cumulatively captured two trends that began to take hold among Yiddish-speaking Americans. First, by the mid-1920s, Yiddish-speaking immigrants embraced radio at a pace similar to their English-speaking counterparts. A set of cultural meanings and habits began to accrue around radio, and the medium began to settle in to the lives of Jewish



Figure 3. Cartoon commenting on a speech by the American Jewish leader Louis Marshall about recent legislation restricting the immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe. The back of the chair reads, "American Jew." And the cartoon is titled "The Music That Must Arouse." *Der tog*, 20 November 1924, 4.

immigrants. Second, a language barrier did not exist. Jewish immigrants embraced radio and participated in it as an English-language medium. Though some writers and businessmen certainly considered the possibilities for radio that spoke specifically to a Jewish immigrant audience, most imagined themselves into the broader emergent American audience, willing to accept English without question, at least for now.

Radio's English roots, in combination with listeners' facility with English, meant that even when Yiddish programs appeared, for most listeners Yiddish remained a choice, an idea captured by a new crop of movies and recordings. *The Lunatic*, a 1927 Yiddish silent film, featured a telling scene in which a couple (played by Ludwig Satz and Paula Klida) argued over what they should listen to.²² Satz wanted to listen to a Yiddish program; Klida preferred an English one. The dispute concluded in typical vaudeville fashion, as the couple made up in time to perform a musical duet. The following year, Rubin Goldberg adapted *The Lunatic* for a novelty record titled *Moyshe koyft a radio* (Moishe Buys a Radio).²³ Goldberg, who had recorded a similar side in 1923, updated the joke to echo radio's bilingualism. In the recording, Goldberg plays Moyshe, who bought a radio for his wife in honor of her birthday. Turning on the radio to find Caruso, his wife objects, claiming that it sounds too much like the "world to come." He tries a number of other stations before landing on a fictional Yiddish station whose call letters are aleph beis gimel dalet (the first four letters of the Yiddish alphabet), just in time to hear a short speech about why it's better to be a fool than a wise man. This sketch, too, concluded in typical vaudeville style, in a hurry and without much regard for plot development, with Goldberg and his partner performing the popular Yiddish number "Lomir zikh iberbeten" (Let's Make Up).²⁴

In theater, radio was the central plot device in Joseph Rumshinsky's 1929 operetta, *Dos radio meyd* (The Radio Girl), which starred Lucy Levin and Molly Picon (see figure 4). The show was a typical Yiddish melodrama about love, confusion, identity, and just deserts. Levin played a popular radio singer whose voice caused a young gentleman to fall in love with her without ever having seen her face. The young man seeks out the object of his affection but mistakes Picon for Levin, and the three spend the remainder of the show straightening things out. The

show opened at the Second Avenue Theater on Friday, 18 October 1929, and in a stroke of early cross-promotion, Picon and Levin made a guest appearance on WBBC a week before opening night.²⁵ But even a real radio broadcast could not save the show's unfortunate timing: the stock market began its slide the following Monday, and by Friday, the bottom had fallen out and the Great Depression had begun. To blame the depression for *Dos radio meydl's* failure would be unfair, however, as it met with lukewarm reviews, although Picon, as usual, stole the show.²⁶

This second wave of the use of radio in other media illustrated not only how deeply and how quickly Jewish immigrants accepted radio but also that radio was no easier to decipher once it began speaking Yiddish. If anything, radio became more complicated, as families and audiences now had to choose between English and Yiddish programs. Jewish immigrants were not agitating for Yiddish radio entertainment, but people like Birns and Vladeck saw in them a potential audience and hoped that once radio could speak Yiddish, the audience would materialize.

A Y I D I S H K O N T S E R T

Audiences, retailers, manufacturers, and Jewish newspapers were so tuned in to English programs that the first Yiddish program passed almost without notice. Buried in the broadcast schedule for Wednesday, 27 January 1926, the *Forward* included a small item about a concert that would air that evening on WHN.²⁷ This "Yidish kontsert" featured a Rabbi Shumovitch, a Cantor Shteinberg, and a "guitar duet." *Der tog* did not mention the program. The concert proved successful enough to become a short-lived series, and each Wednesday evening for the next few weeks WHN treated listeners to fifteen minutes of Yiddish entertainment. Whether or not Shumovitch spoke Yiddish or the guitar players performed arrangements of music from the Yiddish folk or theater tradition, the broadcast marked the beginning of a new phase in Yiddish radio culture. Unlike the novelty of a multilingual announcer or an English-language High Holiday program, this represented something different: it was, according to the Yiddish newspaper, a "Yiddish concert."

Figure 4. Newspaper advertisement for Joseph Rumshinsky's musical *Dos radio meyd*. The show featured Lucy Levine as the title character and Molly Picon in a supporting role. *Jewish Daily Forward*,¹³ October 1929, II:21. Courtesy of the Forward Association.

Yiddish had become an adjective, not a noun. It was not a guest appearance or a onetime “song in Yiddish” or a gimmick. In this instance, Yiddish-as-adjective signaled the concretization of an aural culture that preceded Saul Birns and that would continue to evolve on America’s airwaves throughout the remainder of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The culture had begun to take shape, and only now, after radio had thoroughly penetrated the everyday lives of Jewish immigrants, could something called a “Yiddish concert” appear. This concert hinted at a new cultural formulation that described something greater than content, a performer’s ethnicity, or even the language used. It implied that the culture of radio that had taken form in English up to this point had begun to develop a Yiddish accent.

After the appearance of WHN’s “Yidish kontsert,” other Yiddish programs could be found around the radio dial. Just two weeks later, the Yiddish Art Theater purchased fifteen minutes on New York’s WRNY to promote its production of the Yiddish writer and folklorist S. An-Ski’s play, *The Dybbuk*.²⁸ In the weeks that followed, audiences in New York could have heard Cantor Dan Fuchs sing arias and folk songs, a lecture about Jews, an appearance by “well-known Jewish actors,” another concert of unspecified “Yiddish music,” and a performance by the “Jewish-English” actress and singer Bertha Kalish. During the next two years, audiences in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles would also hear the first programs in Yiddish.²⁹

Los Angeles heard its first Yiddish radio shows in January 1928, with ninety minutes of unspecified “Jewish programs” on KTBI. Although they did not survive the decade, they opened the door for others, such as *Negina*, which was sponsored by Abraham Brodies, a butcher, and the Chicago Drug Store, and debuted on KELW in 1931. The Los Angeles Anglo-Jewish press welcomed *Negina* into the city’s multiethnic radio lineup: “To the broadcasting arts of different nationalities of the city of Los Angeles was added a rare novelty art. The lovers of radioland will have the pleasure to listen to the ‘Nagenoh’ [*sic*] hour; when pure and rare Jewish music which is so popular for the “Echo of the Jewish heart.”³⁰ The article continued by inviting listeners to submit requests for music. *Negina* was joined soon after its debut by the *Jewish International*

Hour, which offered community announcements, music, and “Jewish news” and aired regularly through the late 1930s.³¹

In Chicago, Yiddish broadcasting began in April 1927 with the *Yiddish Hour* on WEDC.³² The *Yiddish Hour* quickly disappeared, but shortly thereafter WMBI began carrying Friday night services every other week, and WCFL, the station of the Chicago Federation of Labor, added its own Yiddish programs.³³ Meanwhile, Philadelphia’s Yiddish newspaper, the *Idishe velt*, launched its eponymous program on WCAU in January 1928 with a thirty-minute concert starring Cantor Moyshe Oysher and the cellist Samuel Geshikhter, who played Kol Nidre.³⁴ The newspaper supported its program with front-page articles that announced or reviewed the most recent shows. One such article mentioned a “report”: “Hundreds of readers have written to us saying that they are anxiously waiting to tune in so that they can hear the program of modern Jewish music.” In a prescient cross-promotional move, Shuman Brothers, a local radio dealer, took out an advertisement in conjunction with the program’s debut that promised, “We guarantee to deliver and install any radio you buy from us in time to hear this wonderful concert.”³⁵ These relationships between newspapers, radio stations, and radio dealers strengthened the material dimension of this aural culture and gave the structures of feeling routed through radio yet another manifestation.

As it emerged in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and New York and, later, in cities such as Baltimore and Cleveland, Yiddish radio programming relied on delicate networks of relationships among Yiddish-speaking performers, Jewish-owned stores, the Yiddish press, and locally owned radio stations. The one exception to this rule made its debut in 1928, when *Der tog’s Yiddish Program*, a weekly Sunday afternoon radio revue sponsored by the Yiddish newspaper, appeared on New York’s WABC. At the time, Alfred Grebe, a local businessman, owned the station, which he hoped would anchor the burgeoning network that he called the Atlantic Broadcasting Company. Before Grebe could launch his ABC, however, William Paley, who had recently begun to organize his Columbia Broadcast System, bought WABC with the intention of turning it into his network’s flagship station. Paley, more concerned at this point with signing up stations to participate in his network than with the

quality or tone of his programming, simply transferred WABC's existing lineup to his new network and carried *Der tog's Yiddish Program* as part of his network's weekly programming until 1930, making this the only Yiddish program to be carried on a national network.³⁶

A RACE FOR FIRST PLACE

In mid-1926, only a few months into the life of Yiddish-language radio programming, the *Forward* found itself behind in the race for a radio audience. Since Vladeck's failed attempt to secure permission for a radio tower for the Forward Building, the newspaper seemed resigned to play a supporting role in the development of radio by printing advertisements, schedules, and articles about the industry and its stars. Meanwhile, in spring 1926, just up the Lower East Side from the Forward Building, local businessman Max Bernstein completed construction on the Libby's Hotel and Turkish Baths.³⁷ Named after Bernstein's mother and featuring a portrait of her in the lobby, Libby's promised to become one of the most prominent buildings in the neighborhood, with a lavish ballroom, guest rooms, kitchen, and elaborately appointed baths. Bernstein celebrated the opening in grand fashion. He announced the hotel as "a step in 'the redemption of the ease [*sic*] side'" and hailed it as a "milestone in the history of New York Jewry."³⁸ *Der tog* and the *Forward* focused their coverage on the building and its facilities, but one week earlier, a small article in the *New York Times* had reported an aspect of the hotel that had escaped New York's Yiddish newspapers. The headline read simply, "To Broadcast in Yiddish."³⁹

This news did not sit well with the people at the *Forward*. While Bernstein finished construction on his new building and broadcast facilities, the *Forward* hastily put together a "radio concert" to broadcast on New York City's municipal station, WNYC, on Friday, 2 May—a week *before* Libby's scheduled its inaugural broadcast. Courting a broad, not exclusively Jewish audience, the *Forward* bought a series of small advertisements in the *New York Times* to promote the program. But in its own pages, the Yiddish newspaper was a little less modest. A front-page headline urged readers, "Listen to it with a neighbor if you don't have a radio at home!"⁴⁰ The article that followed explained that the Stringwood

Ensemble would play one piece by Mozart and another by Tchaikovsky and that Isa Kramer, a star of the Yiddish stage, intended to sing one song each in Russian, English, and Yiddish, as Abe Cahan, editor of the *Forward*, presided over the evening's festivities.

On the Sunday following the *Forward radio kontzert*, the newspaper reported, "First 'Forwards' Radio Concert a Great Success." A front-page article observed, "Readers make parties in houses to hear the program," and reported that in Monticello, New York, a crowd gathered in the town square to hear the concert over a loudspeaker.⁴¹ The remainder of the coverage paid lip service to the concert itself and offered faint praise for the evening's "moving performances," focusing instead on the sizable Jewish audience that the program managed to attract. Although not the first Yiddish program, the *Forward's* account of listening parties and public gatherings represents the first report of an actual audience for them. The programs that preceded the *Forward's*, despite the cultural shift they represented, may or may not have managed to actually attract listeners. While the *Forward* clearly had good reason to exaggerate the size of its audience, the report nonetheless captured a moment in which the audience proved more newsworthy than the program. And, perhaps more important, this moment saw the coalescence of a discrete audience for Yiddish programming.

Ironically, the *Forward's* emphasis on its audience inadvertently sealed its own fate as a broadcaster. For all the fanfare in print, no *Forward radio kontsert* broadcast the next week or the week after, due to "arrangements (pending) with another station." The *Forward* finally returned to the air on Sunday, 13 June 1926, on WMCA, but not even a concerted promotional effort and the appearance of Tosha Seidel, "The Magician of the Fiddle," could save the series, and it quickly disappeared again. The *Forward* admitted that its primary problem lay in the fact that it committed to broadcasting on Friday evenings, noting that it received many requests from "*Forward* readers who are also radio listeners" to change the day and time of the program because Fridays still belonged to the Yiddish theater.⁴² The *Forward*, for its part, bet that the allure of radio would be an alternative, and possibly even a challenge, to the dominance of the theater. However, the newspaper underestimated the power of that institution and overestimated the attraction of the still-new radio as a viable

alternative. Yet its failure was a result not just of poor planning but of an emerging and still quite complex constellation of forces that the newspaper only barely understood. Its newfound radio audience represented a significant advance in the culture of Yiddish radio, but it misjudged the power and momentum of cultural practices that their audience, or the audience they hoped to carve out, also already participated in. People habituated to attending the theater or listening to English programs would not necessarily shift their attention and their behavior just because Yiddish programming became available. Just because people *could* hear programs in Yiddish did not mean that they *would*.

Even with the widespread popularity of radio, the relative acceptance of English as the language of radio, the comfort of immigrant Jews with English, and the availability of Yiddish programs, developing and attracting an audience remained a challenge. And for all the fanfare in print, the *Forward* understood that in order to cultivate an audience for Yiddish programs, the newspaper—or any broadcaster, for that matter—would have to rely on an existing base of listeners. This became clear when the *Forward* tried to relaunch its concert series later that year. In a full-page advertisement, the newspaper asked its readership:

Do you already have a radio at home?
Do you have the same pleasures as other people?
Have no fear of radio—it is really a new invention
Open your home to the wonderful invention of our time.⁴³

The advertisement did not mention Yiddish but focused instead on selling radio to readers. It intimates the *Forward's* understanding that Yiddish programming alone would not be enough to draw people away from phonographs or live performances, nor could it exist without the widespread acceptance of radio generally. Like Saul Birns, the *Forward* understood that there had to be listeners before an audience could be drawn from among them. If Yiddish-language broadcasting was going to succeed at all, the advertisement suggested, it would have to carve an audience of Jewish immigrants out of radio's general listenership.

While the *Forward* floundered, a few blocks away Libby's prepared itself for its radio debut. In a half-page advertisement in the *Forward*, elec-

tric letters splayed across an image of the hotel's facade exclaiming, "The First Yiddish Radio in the World in Libby's" (see figure 5).⁴⁴ A businessman, not a broadcaster, Bernstein did not buy his own radio station but rather made arrangements to broadcast over WFBH, a small New York station that broadcast from the top of the Hotel Majestic, an Upper West Side hotel. Bernstein spared no expense, hiring as his musical director Josef Cherniavsky, the former cello soloist of the Petrograd Imperial Opera House, leader of the Yiddish-American Jazz Band, and widely known as "the Jewish Paul Whiteman." Cherniavsky, coming off a successful national tour, brought a softer, smoother, "pop" sensibility to the music of Jewish immigrants by adding American-style orchestrations and more danceable rhythms than the typical Jewish wedding bands of the time. Blending American style and Jewish melodies, Cherniavsky promised to provide the perfect sound track for Libby's radio show.⁴⁵ Bernstein matched his Americanized musical pitch with a lineup of Jewish stars with crossover appeal in mainstream American entertainment and invited performers such as George Jessel and Molly Picon to appear on the program.

Unlike the *Forward radio kontsert*, which challenged the institution of the theater, the *Libby's Program* complemented it and thus managed to attract and sustain an audience. Airing on Sunday afternoons instead of Friday nights and featuring a more Americanized sound, *Libby's* supplemented existing patterns of Yiddish entertainment and, in so doing, expanded them. More important, however, *Libby's* patterned itself on an already successful English-language protogenre: The hotel-hosted, star performer-oriented variety program. Though it aired in Yiddish, *Libby's* did not distance itself from emergent English-language musical variety programs like *Goldie and Dusty*, *The Gold Dust Twins*, or the *Cliquot Club Eskimos* that also took their names from their sponsors, according to the advertising convention of the time. *Libby's* modeled itself on its English counterparts by presenting a variety program that featured a house band—Cherniavsky in place of the "Eskimos"—and supporting an eclectic roster of performers each week. On the strength of its successful combination of American and immigrant taste, the *Libby's radyo program* became the first truly successful Yiddish program and eventually expanded to two broadcasts each week for two seasons.



Ironically, Max Bernstein did not launch the *Libby's radyo program* because of a passion for radio. Unlike Baruch Charney Vladeck or Saul Birns, both of whom shared a fascination with the new medium and understood its broader cultural and communal potential, Bernstein started his program in order to promote the facilities of his new hotel. But the program proved more successful than the hotel, and by June 1929, the building was in foreclosure, having fallen prey to the changing demographics of Jewish New York.⁴⁶

Structurally, the early success of the *Libby's radyo program* established the presence and interest of an audience of Jewish immigrants that realized the hopes of Birns, Vladeck, and Cahan. In terms of content, it set the rhythm for the aural culture that would come to characterize Yiddish radio during its development over the next twenty or so years. Modeling programs and performances after English-language shows and complementing Yiddish performances with arrangements drawn from American popular music would become two of the central aesthetic conventions of the medium. Its ability to fit Yiddish content into existing listening habits succeeded—accidentally or otherwise—where the *Forward* failed. By presenting a sound that suited Jewish immigrant ears both as members of the general radio audience and as immigrants, *Libby's* amplified the possibility that Yiddish-language radio programming could thrive. Both structurally and aesthetically, *Libby's* solidified the audience that the *Forward* identified but never developed.

Once the audience took shape, the airwaves opened up. In the wake of *Libby's*, programs began to appear more regularly, and Yiddish-speaking broadcasters wasted no time turning Jewish religious and cultural life into mass entertainment. Beginning in 1927, Yiddish radio programs celebrated practically every Jewish holiday on the calendar. Passover, Purim, Hanukkah, Shavuot, and especially the High Holidays elicited

Figure 5 (opposite). Advertisement for the debut of the Libby's Hotel Program, the first successful Yiddish radio program. Note the radio towers to the left and right of the image and the "electric" lettering. Performers on the debut include Mashka and Cantor David Roitman. Note also pictures of Libby's owner, Max Bernstein; the hotel's musical director, Joseph Cherniavsky; and the building's facade. Jewish Daily Forward, 22 May 1926, 4. Courtesy of the Forward Association.

an outpouring of programming, including broadcasts described by the *Forward* with Yinglish adjectives—“Kol nidreish” (from Kol Nidre, the opening hymn of Yom Kippur) and “Yom toverdiker” (Holiday-like)—suggesting the evocation but not necessarily the observance of particular holidays.⁴⁷ In addition to holidays, Jewish religious and cultural life offered an almost endless array of opportunities for Yiddish speakers to adapt for broadcast. Following the successful formulas of Yiddish plays and musicals, which often included dramatizations of life-cycle events, Yiddish radio entrepreneurs found they were able to up the ante. Because radio broadcast “live,” announcers did not have to limit themselves to dramatizations, and they eagerly began airing real ritual events and gravitated toward those with the greatest sentimental and communal resonance.

Weddings provided much popular fare for broadcasters during the late 1920s. The Yiddish-speaking radio star Rubin Goldberg broadcast his own nuptials on WABC in 1928, complete with the full sponsorship of Branfman’s Kosher Sausages and supported by an advertisement featuring photos of Goldberg and his bride alongside Mr. Branfman.⁴⁸ On the *Libby’s Program*, Max Bernstein hosted a contest that promised the winners “a million guests,” a free “wedding with all the trimmings,” and a set of furniture in exchange for the opportunity to broadcast their wedding. The winners, Ms. Mirl Treiber and Mr. Benjamin Alperovitch, happily aired their nuptials in June 1926.⁴⁹ Other ritual broadcasts served even deeper communal purposes, such as WRNY’s broadcast of a bar mitzvah celebration, hosted by Rabbi J. Hopman and his choir, while Jewish orphans’ homes from around the city broadcast their own *b’nai mitzvah*, inviting listeners to fill in for the orphans’ absent families.

But the appearance of a virtual family of listeners, or the presence of “a million guests” at a wedding, could not replace the largely face-to-face interactions of a community. “Listening parties” could not fulfill the religious obligations of guests at Jewish life cycle events. Listening was one thing, but participating in ritual was another, and audiences, especially religious audiences, felt this tension keenly. While radio broadcasters frequently blurred the lines between audience and community for publicity purposes, the actual experience of listening to religious



Broadcasting a Jewish Wedding

Reb Yankev Leib is torn between conflicting emotions: Should he say "Amen!" or applaud the cantor's fine singing?

Figure 6. Cartoon from the Forward's English Page highlighting some of the contradictions between ritual and entertainment that the invention of radio fostered. Jewish Daily Forward, 4 July 1926, 4. Courtesy of the Forward Association.

rituals on the radio often complicated or confused their meanings. While Yiddish-speaking broadcasters and American Progressives still invested radio with every manner of hope that it could ameliorate social ills and inequalities while strengthening a sense of national belonging, within the Jewish community radio occasionally seemed to raise more questions than it answered.

A month after the *Libby's* wedding broadcast, the *Forward* ran a cartoon depicting Reb Yankev Leib, an elderly Jew standing over a radio with the Hebrew words, “Borei Pri Hagafen”—the blessing over wine—emerging from the radio’s horn. The cartoon’s English caption read, “Reb Yankev Leib is torn between conflicting emotions. Should he say ‘amen’ or applaud the cantor’s fine singing” (see figure 6).⁵⁰ Although the fictional rabbi heard the blessing over wine, he could not determine what he had heard; was it a performance or a ritual? What would be the proper response to a real blessing, spoken as part of a real ritual, heard over the radio by a man accustomed to sacralizing a blessing by responding to it in person? Just because radio broadcast religious content did not mean that the audience received the same, and just because the radio spoke Yiddish did not mean that its audience understood what it was saying or what it meant.

Though sometimes confusing, misunderstandings or mistranslations were part of the culture of Yiddish radio. Whereas more didactic venues like the answers to letters printed in the popular Yiddish advice column, the *Bintl briv*, newspaper editorials, or even advertisements tried to explain America to their immigrant audiences, radio programs invited listeners to translate both the languages and the cultures in which they were now living. English, Yiddish, American, and immigrant all combined to create radio’s aural culture, where translation of both, rather than fluency in one, became a listener’s most valuable skill. Already a historical fact of Jewish life, radio required Jewish immigrant listeners to recalibrate this skill with respect to a mass medium. By the end of 1926, radios carried programs in Yiddish and English, but although they were bilingual, radios could not translate. Making sense of these programs and the cultural changes they wrought lay in the hands, heads, and ears of their audience.

The culture of Yiddish radio took root among Jewish immigrants well in advance of the first Yiddish programs. Novelty records, advertisements, and radio listings appeared before radio's first Yiddish word. When the first programs did appear, they both relied on and mobilized the broader apparatus of mainstream radio to support their endeavors. Meanwhile, Yiddish-speaking immigrants learned how to attend to radio through their experiences of the Yiddish theater and press and by becoming consumers of radio programs in English. As immigrant consumers of English-language programs, they seemed to fit the audience profile of radio's Progressive idealists, as well as that of Secretary Hoover, who hoped that radio would unify the nation and its interests. Radio, they argued, could teach English and American culture to its immigrant listeners. However, everyone underestimated the powerful affective allure of Yiddish programming and how bilingualism informed the creation of a listening audience and an ethnic community.

Always engaged in acts of cultural and linguistic translation, Yiddish radio listeners inadvertently challenged the subtle nationalist narratives that drove radio regulation during the 1920s. Instead of presenting American culture for immigrants to consume and assimilate wholesale, radio opened up avenues for expressions of immigrant American identities both outside of the audible mainstream and in conversation with it. This dynamic both reinforced and undermined the sense of a particular community of Yiddish speakers that participated in radio in both Yiddish and English. From behind the microphone, early Yiddish-speaking radio broadcasters worked within the structures and strictures of the emergent medium as they learned to extract an audience from one already tuned in to English-language programs. Audiences, meanwhile, grew comfortable with radio both any listening in English and by encountering it in other cultural areas as well. The emergence of programming in Yiddish relied on programming in English and on an audience of Jewish immigrants who had, by 1926, learned how to listen but were still trying to figure out the meanings of what they heard.