

My Life (Mayn Lebn), by Bertha Kalich, Found in Translation **Amanda (Miryem-Khaye) Seigel**

Description: The memoirs of Bertha Kalich (1874-1939) constitute an important primary source for research in Jewish studies, gender studies, and theater history. Bertha Kalich was among the first actresses to publish her memoirs in Yiddish, serialized in the newspaper “Der Tog” in 1925 under the title, “Mayn Lebn” (My Life) and microfilmed by The New York Public Library. Amanda Seigel has translated Kalich’s memoirs and subsequently published excerpts from the translation, revealing a treasure trove of information and insights. From her childhood in Lemberg (today Lviv, Ukraine), to her ascent on the early Yiddish stage in Eastern Europe and then America, to her crossover success in English, Kalich describes key moments and personalities in the early Yiddish theater and the struggles she faced as a Jewish woman. Join us for an illustrated exploration of her incredible life, now accessible for reading and study in English.

Amanda Seigel is a librarian in the Dorot Jewish Division of The New York Public Library and a member of the Digital Yiddish Theatre Project. She is co-author of *Jews in America: From New Amsterdam to the Yiddish Stage* and frequently writes and speaks on topics in Yiddish and Jewish Studies research.

Introduction

Bertha Kalich published her memoirs in 1925 in the Yiddish daily newspaper *Der Tog*, with writer Tsvi-Hirsh Rubinshteyn. Kalich was one of the first Yiddish actresses to publish her memoirs and they are a rich source of information about the early Yiddish theater, what it was like for Jewish women at that time, the various personalities she encountered, and major achievements in her life and work. I’ll read translated excerpts from her memoirs and provide background information about her experiences and her career trajectory.

“Sha, be quiet!”

From all sides, heads turned toward a table in the middle of a garden theater on Jagelonska Street in Lemberg and looked angrily at a little girl with dark, sparkling little eyes, who in the very middle of the third act of Goldfaden’s “Kishef-makherin” [The sorceress], burst out with a cry and wanted to go onstage.

“I can sing, too!” sobbed the little girl and stamped her feet...[The audience] soon began grumbling in earnest, and her embarrassed parents had to take their stubborn and spoiled child home.

That very girl, as you can probably see for yourself, was me.

Thus begin the memoirs of Bertha Kalich (born Beylkele Kalakh), one of the most important Yiddish, and later English, actresses of the late 19th and early 20th century.

She was born in 1874, just two years before Abraham Goldfaden officially founded the Yiddish theater in Iasi, Romania. Beylkele grew up in a close-knit Orthodox Jewish community in Lemberg, Galicia (formerly the Austro-Hungarian empire, today Lviv, Ukraine). She was the only child in a family of modest means - her mother was a seamstress and her father worked in his family’s brush factory. She went to shul with her father and grandfather, briefly attended kheyder (but after the rabbi beat her for laughing when another student played a trick on him, she refused to return). Later, she attended public school and conservatory. Beylkele was extremely smart, confident, and strong-willed; she had a powerful sense of her own talent and beauty, and always felt she was destined for something big.

Somewhat unusually, her parents supported her pursuit of a stage career. Her assimilated uncle, who was a regiment doctor in the Austro-Hungarian army, initially ridiculed the idea of her becoming a Yiddish prima donna, while her parents’ friend, Mrs. Shapiro, a proto-feminist and the first midwife in Lemberg, encouraged her. Throughout her life, Beylkele had to deal with complex societal expectations about her behavior and aspirations as a Jewish woman.

Early teens

In her early teens, Kalich joined the chorus of the Polish Skarbek theater, where she met and befriended two very important people, Regina Prager and Yankev-Ber Gimpel.

Regina Prager (b. 1866) was Kalich’s friend and sometimes her rival. Known for her outstanding singing voice, Prager was introverted, modest and religious, and she disliked the theater scene. Kalich and Prager became Yiddish actresses around

the same time, thanks to another chorus member, Yankev Ber Gimpel. Kalich writes:

“A certain Yankev-Ber Gimpel...turned to the city government for a permit for a Yiddish theater in Lemberg.

It was only thanks to the fact that he had served in the Polish theater for 40 whole years, that the board did not interfere ... No Jew in Lemberg other than Gimpel would have gotten such a permit, and besides that, it would not have occurred to anyone that it was possible to have a Yiddish theater in Lemberg, and that it would pay.

As soon as the news spread that we would have a Yiddish theater in Lemberg, a tumult arose in town. The religious fanatics absolutely did not want to allow such a desecration of the divine name, and they threatened with violence (lit., a pogrom) if someone would dare to make fun of Judaism in such a “brutal” way.”

Among the Jewish audience, a curiosity grew to see theater in Yiddish. In Russia, performances were already being played, and ...from the songs that were brought over the Russian border from the first Goldfaden operettas, the Lemberg audience saw that Yiddish theater must be very beautiful. They sung the songs in the streets, and we had much, much pleasure from them.”

The works of Abraham Goldfaden formed a central component of the repertoire at Gimpel’s theater. Often using themes from biblical history, his “operas” featured many beautiful songs that endure even today. The Yiddish theater provided new opportunities for men and women, and was part of a modern movement to develop Yiddish literature, culture, and the press.

Gimpel’s theatre opened in 1889, when Kalich was about fifteen years old. She describes it:

Our theater was in a garden. [There were] Long benches with numbers and only for the first two rows did Gimpel supply folding chairs. Upon these benches sat the aristocrats who could afford to pay more for a ticket, and on the simple benches sat the simple folk.

The stage in the garden was as big as a yawn. The boards of the floor shook and squeaked, and the several oil lamps that had to throw light upon the actors on the stage gave off more smell than illumination. The soot from the lamps filled the

nostrils of everyone who performed on the stage....All of the curtains were painted green...to symbolize trees, a forest, or maybe a green river. For a scene in a house, they let down a type of curtain with a table, a chair, armoire and a window.

Yoyl [the stage manager] was not only the curtain raiser, but also...the set painter, prompter, stage builder, publicist, janitor and dresser...Yoyl had all kinds of instruments to make a storm backstage: a drum, cymbals, pieces of iron, and ...he manufactured such realistic thunderclaps that it seemed like it was really raining outside.

And it actually happened for real... When Yoyl began thundering backstage, a hard rain began in the garden where we were performing. I had to sing an aria, and the rain was pelting as though we had arranged it. The audience became a bit impatient. They opened their umbrellas and I could no longer see an audience before me, just tiny black eaves over which the rain poured. In the middle of the aria I suddenly heard a bang and the curtain went down. Gimpel got onstage with an umbrella over his head and told the audience that when Yoyl began thundering backstage, the angel of rain in the sky heard it. And since the angel didn't understand jokes, it opened up the faucet, and "plyukh!". Gimpel asked the audience to please swim over into the hall next to the garden, and there we would end the performance.

At age 17, Kalich traveled with her parents to Budapest to perform at the Imperial Theatre, run by a Mr. Kohn. Budapest had never seen Yiddish theater, and she was wildly popular. According to the local laws, they were only allowed to do one act of the play (Shulamis) in between sets in a cabaret setting. She also toured Galicia with a troupe and returned to Lemberg.

Around this time, she married Leopold Spachner. Her new in-laws were opposed to her theater career and felt that a wife should stay at home, cook, and bear children. For a time, they prevented her from working as an actress. She writes: *"I... must confess.. that I was not among the most famous housewives. My abilities were somewhat strained in that area, and believe me, it was easier for me to perform four acts of "Shulamis" than to cook up a borsht.*

Her colleagues finally convinced her in-laws to allow her to return to the stage and she continued to perform, including while she was pregnant. Kalich had a daughter, Lillian. Later on, Lillian and Kalich's husband remained in Lemberg with the in-laws, while Kalich went to Bucharest to perform at the Jignitsa theater.

Among Kalich's many admirers was a young actor from Lemberg, Itsikl Goldenberg, for whom she also had some feelings. Throughout her career, Kalich was careful always to have a female chaperone and not to openly reject men. Although her interactions with Goldenberg remained platonic and largely not reciprocated, Kalich's husband was violently jealous of him and of the other male admirers that surrounded her. Although Kalich was unhappy at times and even mentioned divorce, it seems that she stayed with him mainly because of their child. In Bucharest, Kalich was very well received at the Jignitsa theater, except for one thing:

Romanian Jews had one complaint about me, that was perhaps justified, though I didn't see this at the time. It was about my broad pasekh and my "narrow" segol. To me it was "gay and shtay" and to them - strange!- "gey and shtey". ...even today I sometimes pronounce a word with a real Galician [accent]. I haven't forgotten the land where my cradle stood.

Yom Kippur

Kalich also sang for Yom Kippur services in Bucharest, with her colleague Segalescu. She called this "*A day that tortured my body and tormented my soul*". Segalescu led the services as khazn and Kalich sang "Yaaleh" and "Haben Yakir Li" from behind a curtain, to the accompaniment of an organ. There are many interesting aspects to this episode and you can read more about it online.

The organist for this service was Dovid Hirsch, who worked for the Romanian National Theatre and wanted to see Kalich perform there. Through his efforts, Kalich was invited to audition for the Romanian National Theatre. Some Romanian nationalists wanted only Romanians to perform there, while others were open to having performers of different nationalities, ethnicities and religions. Kalich did get in, and played a role in the opera *La dame blanche*, successfully mastering the Romanian pronunciation in a short time, but she was threatened and harassed by her co-workers and expected to be attacked by the public. Fortunately, her performance was well-received, and instead of rotten onions, the audience threw flowers. At the same time, American impresario Joseph Edelstein recruited her for the Thalia Theatre in New York. The combination of this offer with the anti-Semitic threats against her in the theatre led her to flee right before she was scheduled to perform for the royal family. You can also read this episode online.

America

In America, Kalich was well-received and commercially successful, but artistically unsatisfied. She writes:

“I must confess that I looked down on the Yiddish theater and considered it a step backwards artistically for myself.”

Kalich worked mainly for the Thalia Theatre and the Windsor Theatre, and did some management, directing, adapting and casting plays, in addition to acting.

But Kalich wanted to do serious dramatic roles, not just sing and dance.

The repertoire was largely Goldfaden and other operettas, especially hastily slapped together adaptations/plagiarizations of world dramas by Joseph Latayner, who was known more for the quantity, rather than the quality, of his work.

Kalich pursued Jacob Gordin to write her a literary drama. Gordin represented a new era and a new repertoire in Yiddish theater. The actors in Gordin’s texts spoke in a more natural Yiddish rather than the fake Germanized language that most playwrights used, and Gordin expected them to stick to the script rather than constantly improvising and bursting into song and dance. She writes:

“Together with Gordin there came onto the Yiddish stage the realistic drama [which was] naturally closer to my heart than the most beautiful operetta. I longed to perform as a person and not constantly be the princess that was in love with her prince and could not marry him until much, much later, until the end of the fourth act. “...

It happened that Gordin did write a play “especially” for me and as long as I will live, I will always recognize and honor the great Jacob Gordin for his plays “Sappho” and “Kreutzer Sonata” which were written just for me.

Both of these plays drew on themes in world drama and starred strong women characters grappling with modernity. With Gordin came other playwrights such as Leon Kobrin and Zalmen Libin that focused on serious drama.

Eventually, her acting in these more serious dramas, and the crossover success of Jacob P. Adler, who played Shylock (in Yiddish) on the English-language stage, paved the way for her English career.

“It seems that Rose Pastor Stokes once described me as the “Rachel of the Bowery”. I don’t know if I earned that name, but I do know one thing, that with my “Sappho” and “Kreutzer Sonata” I elevated myself to an artistic high point, as never before in my career...The people only then saw that besides a couplet and

silly jokes, besides teary trembling, and melodramas that shouted to the heavens, there exists another appeal to the human soul, another sort of life, that elevates and purifies and refines the human heart.

“The managers noticed ...me and several began making advances to charm me... I won't deny that my ambitions lay in Broadway, from the day when I decided that America was my home. I began thinking about the English stage. Obviously, I told no one of my ambitions, because I was afraid they would laugh at me. Quietly, though, I learned the English language with such passion just as though I would be taking a language exam.

She did much of this through reading. She writes of her love of literature - a nice thing for librarians to hear!

I love books. ...The book is my best friend in life... which lends itself to be utilized greatly, that elevates and refines human knowledge, that enriches and beautifies the soul...

If in my home the classics of world drama were discussed, I could take the floor in the debate, and the critics were astounded by my knowledge not only of dramatic literature, but also of general literature in several languages.

Finally the day came when I...agreed to perform on the English stage... I was to appear in Sardou's "Fedora".

I played not only well, but indeed outstandingly, and not only the Yiddish press but even more so the English press granted me much attention. I suddenly grew a hundred heads taller to my Jewish audience. The theater profession began to view me with more respect than before. Bertha Kalich became a great name among the non-Jews and such people as Belasco [a prominent American theatrical producer, impresario, director and playwright] began to consider me as the upcoming star of Broadway.

Kalich became a well-known and successful actress on the English stage with roles that included the aforementioned *Fedora* by Sardou, *Kreutzer Sonata* (in English), *Mona Vanna*, and *Jitta's Atonement*, which all offered very strong leading roles for women and had a more modern approach. She continued performing on the Yiddish stage as well, but is known as the first Yiddish actress to make the successful transition to the English stage.

Visit Yiddishstage.org to read excerpts and watch for the forthcoming volume, *Women on the Yiddish Stage*, edited by Alyssa Quint and Amanda Seigel, for more excerpts and many other interesting articles and memoirs by and about Yiddish actresses



Bertha Kalich - Image from Billy Rose Theatre Collection, NYPL - digitalcollections.nypl.org

**My Life (*Mayn Lebn*), by Bertha Kalich, Found in Translation
Presentation at Association of Jewish Libraries Conference, Boston, MA, June 19, 2018
Amanda Seigel, Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library - amandaseigel@nypl.org**

Bibliography

Kalich, Bertha. *Mayn leben* [lebn]. *Der Tog*. New York. March 7-Nov. 14, 1925. Microfilm. Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library.

Kalich, Bertha. “A day that tortured my body and tormented my soul: Bertha Kalich’s Kol Nidre in Bucharest”. Translated by Amanda (Miryam-Khaye) Seigel. Digital Yiddish Theatre Project <https://yiddishstage.org/a-day-that-tortured-my-body-and-tormented-my-soul-bertha-kalichs-kol-nidre-in-bucharest>

Kalich, Bertha. “I would have run away, but there was only one path for me - onto the stage”: Bertha Kalich at the Romanian National Theatre. Translated by Amanda (Miryam-Khaye) Seigel. Digital Yiddish Theatre Project [In two parts] <https://yiddishstage.org/i-would-have-run-away-but-there-was-only-one-path-for-me-onto-the-stage-bertha-kalich-at-the-romanian-national-theatre-part-i> <https://yiddishstage.org/i-would-have-run-away-but-there-was-only-one-path-for-me-onto-the-stage-bertha-kalich-at-the-romanian-national-theatre-part-ii>

Kalich, Bertha. *Bertha Kalich Papers*. Billy Rose Theatre Division, Performing Arts Library, New York Public Library. <http://archives.nypl.org/the/21830>

Kalich, Bertha. *Shabes, yontev, un rosh khoydesh*. [Song by Abraham Goldfaden from the play *Shulamis*] Recorded on *Di eybike mame: women in Yiddish theater and popular song, 1905-1929*. (Schott Wergo SM 1625-2; Mainz 2003)

Quint, Alyssa, and Seigel, Amanda, ed. *Women on the Yiddish Stage*. Forthcoming: Syracuse University Press, 2020.

Soyer, Daniel. "Bertha Kalich, 1874-1939". Jewish Women's Archive.

<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kalich-bertha>

Zylbercweig, Zalmen. *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*. New York: Farlag Elisheva, 1931-1969. Volume 4, pp. 2425-2458.