Scholar draws on cartoons in the Yiddish press

Artists were pivotal helping newcomers understand America

Edward Portnoy, a doctoral candidate at the Jewish
Theological Seminary, speaks about the history of caricatures
and humorous cartoons in the American Yiddish press March
4 at Rutgers University. Photo by Debra Rubin

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Comic caricatures and cartoons in the Yiddish press were pivotal in helping masses of
Jewish immigrants to address political and social concerns and adjust to life in America.

Such cartoons took on the czars, class conflict, religious reform, immigration, and
Zionism in an age when millions of Jewish newcomers were flooding into the country.

Edward Portnoy — speaking March 4 at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, where he
will be teaching Yiddish language and literature next semester — said the images were
"enormously important" as tools for furthering assimilation.

"In the 1890s the Yiddish press reached tens of thousands," said Portnoy, a doctoral candidate at the Jewish Theological Seminary and a frequent writer on Jewish culture. "By 1910, it was up to hundreds of thousands. The Yiddish press still holds the record for being the largest immigrant press in the United States."

Edward Portnoy presented this 1911 cartoon featuring Rabbi Solomon Schechter, which, he said, decries the immigrants' abandonment of Jewish tradition.

In the papers, immigrants were "taught about American politics. There were advice columns. It was a guide to their lives," Portnoy explained in the program at Rutgers' Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.

By the turn of the last century, cartoons in the Yiddish press assumed a more political bent. Thousands of them took up the plight of sweatshop workers and the growing concern that the younger generation was falling away from Jewish tradition and practice. They also lampooned Jewish writers alive and dead, the Yiddish theater, synagogue politics, and Jewish political leaders.

"America provided an entirely different paradigm because there was no censorship," said Portnoy, as he displayed examples of the cartoons. "In Eastern Europe there were limitations to what you could publish because there was severe censorship."

A 1902 cartoon hailed the power of Jewish women who had organized a successful boycott to protest a spike in meat prices.

A law that required immigrants to pay $25 to enter Ellis Island — a tremendous sum in those days — was satirized in a 1909 cartoon in Der Groyser Kundes (The Great Prankster). It featured President William Taft demanding the fee from Christopher Columbus.

One particularly provocative cartoon appearing in a 1914 issue of Der Groyser Kundes showed a giant figure, representing Jewish youth, with a baseball for a head and holding a bat, dwarfing an Orthodox rabbi. As the rabbi implores the boy to return to his religious studies, the boy responds, "Get out of here you kike, or I'll hit you."

The Yiddish Gazette transformed this anti-Semitic cartoon, first published in the humor magazine Puck, into a celebration of Passover.

"There's a real element of self-hatred in the cartoon," said Portnoy. "The younger generation wants nothing to do with traditional Judaism. It really shows how American immigrants were coming to terms with Jewish tradition."

Another 1911 cartoon showed Rabbi Solomon Schechter, a seminal figure in the Conservative movement. Schechter is operating a meat grinder into which Eastern European immigrants were being tossed, emerging from the other end as American rabbis holding a Bible in one hand and a ham sandwich in the other.

"Those that worked in the Yiddish press all went to heder and yeshivas," said Portnoy. "They were not religious men, but had a substantive knowledge of Jewish texts and held Jewish tradition very dear."

A 1914 cartoon that appeared in *Der Groyser Kundes* humor magazine shows a giant figure, representing American Jewish youth, dwarfing an Orthodox rabbi trying to lure him back to Jewish studies. Courtesy Edward Portnoy

THE ESTIMATED two million Jewish immigrants — largely from Eastern Europe — who arrived on American shores between 1881 and 1914 not only swelled readership of the Yiddish press, but spawned a spate of anti-Semitic cartoons in the English-language press, according to Edward Portnoy.

"Hairy people with thick lips and big noses were very common in the American press," he said. In addition to other groups — the Irish, Italians, Asians, blacks — "the Jews were often brutally caricatured."

One such cartoon appeared in the humor magazine Puck, showing a mass of apparently Jewish immigrants coming through a parted ocean in an obvious takeoff on the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. A boat whose sails form a star of David is pictured with an Uncle Sam standing above.

In the caption the word "persecuted" appears in quotes "as if they weren't persecuted," said Portnoy.

But context is everything. That same cartoon, despite its overtly anti-Semitic images, appeared three years later in a special Passover edition of the Yiddish Gazette. Puck's caption was replaced with "Next year in Jerusalem," and a Zionist poem appeared underneath.

    — DEBRA RUBIN