

YOSEF TRUMPELDOR as a hero of the Russo-Japanese War and the defence of the Gallipoli and, later, Tel Hai? Gradeschool stuff! But what about Trumpeidor, accompanied by rocket-designer Dr. Alexei Zhidoff and his beloved daughter Perl aboard the jerry-built spacecraft *Freilich fun Brooklyn* ("Joy of Brooklyn") en route to the planet Sheigitz, ruled by the ever-rotten Pinkus the Pitiless, and populated by the "Florist people" and *Adler Menschen* ("Eagle men")?

Science-fiction writers have occasionally toyed with the concept of "alternate history", depicting the modern world as a result of the Nazi-Axis victory of World War II, the South's victory over the North during the American Civil War, or England's defeat by the Spanish Armada centuries before that. Few such visions have been as wild, however, as the film-transposition of Yosef Trumpeidor during the 1930s on Zionist folk-hero to "Scourge of the *Goytische* Spaceways."

How this nonsense came to pass was disclosed earlier this month in a Los Angeles-based amateur magazine boasting a circulation of a little less than 100. Issue 17 of the self-professed "crudzine," *Holier Than Thou*, includes the research of New York film historian Stuart Shiffman, documenting the film career of his grandfather's creation, the Yiddish-speaking, space-blastier-wielding, Zetz Tummelman.

TO FATHOM the creation of this composite of Flash Gordon/Buck Rogers/ Crash Corrigan/Yosef Trumpeidor Yiddish motion picture cliff-hanger action serial, one needs to go back to the Golden Age of the "chapter plays," or matinee serials of the Thirties.

More specifically, one needs to recall the creation of the little-touted "Yiddish Motion Picture Company" founded in the U.S. during the late Twenties to produce radical socialist (though non-Bolshevik) propaganda films for the Yiddish speaking-communities of New York, Philadelphia, Montreal, Eastern Europe, and London. The YMPC, says Shiffman, hoped to "inculcate their people with the straight goods on the class struggle and capitalist oppression."

But, fortunately for Zetz Tummelman and the evil Pinkus, "they went bust after producing one reel of *Die Kapitalism fun Wall Street* and the script of the utopian *Nayes fun der Tsukunft* (News of the Future). Short of ready cash, the fledgling film company was sold to a syndicate headed by garment manufacturer Abraham Seidleman and his gangster son Morris ("Bloody Sid") Sidney.

According to Shiffman, the papers were signed at Ratners, the renowned dairy restaurant on New York's Lower East Side over bowls of borscht and plates of cheese blintzes. "The socialists took their money and switched to union organization and more conventional means of dispersing information."

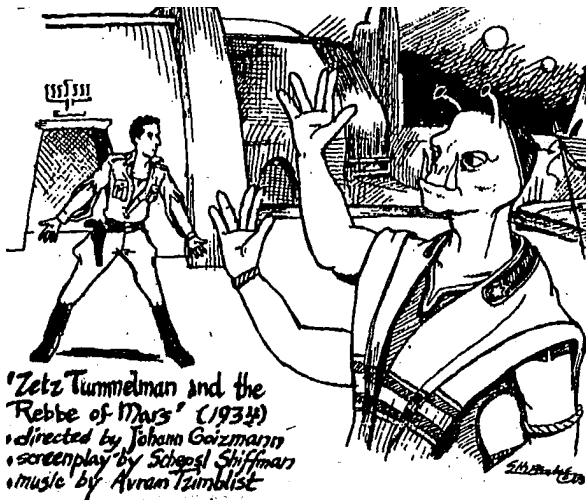
Seidleman and son then enlisted a front man, Mischa Herzog, who had worked in Yiddish theatre with the *Folksblene*, and with Fox and Cohen (eventual heads of what would become Twentieth Century Fox and Columbia) as projectionist and cameraman. Herzog promptly secured a warehouse and plot of land on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn to house the new studio.

HARDLY even a footnote in film history, Yiddish movies were generally renowned and quickly forgotten for the immense amount



YIDDISH IN SPA-A-A-CE

Fifty years before the first Indian cosmonaut stepped aboard the Soviet Soyuz, Zetz Tummelman was landing the asteroid Kugel and visiting on the planet Mars. **SHELDON TEITELBAUM** retells the saga of history's only Yiddish-speaking movie astronaut



*'Zetz Tummelman and the Rebbe of Mars' (1934)
directed by Johann Goizmann
screenplay by Schoel Shiffman
music by Avram Zumbist*

of eye-rolling and staggering with emotion so popular in the obsolete style of American film. There were, however, occasions of quality, if not excellence, including a 1939 adaptation of Shalom Aleichem's *Teyve*, with Maurice Schwartz starring and music by Shalom Secunda, *The Dybbuk* by Ansky, and an adaptation of Shalom Asch's *Uncle Moses*.

The Zetz Tummelman character, however, was hardly a product of classical Jewish literature. Rather, it was created by writer/cartoonist Schepse Shiffman in much the way Superman came into being as the brainchild of Jewish writers and artists Jerome Siegel and Joseph Shuster. Indeed, Clark Kent and Zetz Tummelman not only belonged to the same generation, but, by virtue of birthdates, were virtually classmates.

Tummelman, played by actor Anton Rokeach, first appeared in the YMPC's first productions, the 1930 *Die Arbeiter Shtimme*, a bizarre take-off of the *Jazz Singer* with the protagonist switched to a Jewish socialist and labour organizer in the pre-World War I Lower East Side. Rokeach's evocation, though not supplanting Georgie Jessel's or Al Jolson's in the original (though perhaps Neil Diamond's) led to the creation of a Kiall Kinnison reborn with a Yiddish accent.

Rokeach, Shiffman and director Johann Goizmann went on to produce a series of popular Yiddish films, including the musical *The Abraham Cahan Story* (based on the biography of the founder of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, *Baal Shem Tov* (1931) and *Der Yiddisher Cowboy* (1933), in *Die Zioniste*, also produced in 1933, the team featured Tummelman as Trumpeidor, organizing fellow-Zionist PoWs while held by the Japanese during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, and recreating the fall of Tel Hai, though without the ensuing massacre. Indeed, in this version, the Seventh Cavalry, or rather the *Shomrim*, ride to the rescue.

BUT IT WASN'T until 1934 that the first Yiddish motion picture cliff-hanger saw *The Adventures of Zetz Tummelman* vying with Commander Cody and Flash Gordon for a share of the box-office receipts. Tummelman's affairs on the Planet Sheigitz were depicted thanks to special effects provided by the animators of Fleischer Studios; and their theatres in Manhattan, Montreal, London, Vienna and Warsaw were swamped by Jews eager for the next chapter of Zetz's exploits.

Indeed, those who saw the serial at showings of Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* (redone in the Seventies as *Hester Street*) recounted that they had come for Zetz, and consequently booed a JNF short on Kibbutz Degania demanding a repeat of Zetz.

Repeat performances were held at the bijou *Bund Kinematpalats* in Warsaw, as they were at the Thomashefsky Theatre on Second Avenue.

Tummelman fans went completely wild later in 1934 with the release of *Zetz Tummelman und der Marzianer Rebbe*, a Jewish version of Edgar Rice Burroughs' Mars, or "Barsoom." The feature picks up the serial with Tummelman in Germany searching for spare parts for Dr. Zhidoff's rocket. Beaten into a stupor by a gang of Brownshirts, Tummelman sees the red planet in the night sky, and is instantly transported there. Lost in the ancient Martian city of Narhun, populated by huge green Martians called *Die Narhuner Griner*, Zetz soon meets

the Narhuner Gaon, Spurs Spulkus, and the red-skinned Barsoomian princess, Dejah Turres. The rest, as they say, is history.

This fabulously popular two-reeler was followed by the successful, though pedestrian, *Zetz Tummelman and the Lost Tribes of Israel*, who are located by Zetz, Zhidoff, and Perl Schoenkaynt in a Burroughsian hollow earth.

Pinkus the Pitiless makes a comeback in 1936 in another two-reeler, *The Haman of Space*, in which he cruises into Earth's star-system with evil designs, aboard his flagship, *Dersi Shlafmacher*. Pinkus is no match for Zetz, however, and our hero organizes the *Kuglmenshen* of the asteroid Kugel to fight a guerrilla war until Earth can demolish the invading flotilla. One notable scene deals with an athletic meet held by the Pinkusnik Sheigitzn, parodying the Berlin Olympics. The sombre tones of Nazism incorporated into the Pinkusnik costumes were the work of Miriam Richter, a German-Jewish set designer who had fled to the U.S.

Meanwhile, *The Haman of Space* saw a shake-up in the casting, with Munye Weisenfreund doubling as Pinkus and Zhidoff, and Perl played by someone listed in the credits as Karen Kayemet. The film also provided Zetz with a sidekick, Leibel "Lefty" Zalman, played by the Brooklyn-born Daniel Kaminsky.

A 1937 DUD about Christopher Columbus and his Marrano interpreter Luis de Torres (the team's first musical) was followed in 1938 by *Zetz Tummelman und die Shikerer Banditn*, this representing a breakaway from fantasy during a time when darker realities had come to the fore.

An even darker vision was presented in the final Tummelman adventure, the full-length *Against the Fall of Night*, which pitted Zetz against the might of the Nazis. Indeed, the film was shown in Warsaw, Lublin and Lodz only days before the Germans crossed the Polish frontier. In it, Zetz and Dr. Zhidoff attempt to rescue a scientist from the fictional concentration camp of Falkenhof, using the rocket *Freilach fun Brooklyn*. En route to the fictional kibbutz of Kfar Ramah in Galilee, they are confronted by a flying saucer over the Sudetenland. The experimental craft is piloted by the young Flight-Lieut. Hachmut von Kleinkopf and the ensuing dogfight ends with the latter plummeting to a painful death.

ACCORDING to Shiffman, the destruction of the Yiddish-speaking world led to the withering of the language, and the demise of Zetz Tummelman and the Yiddish Moving Picture Company, which folded in 1942. Director Goizmann served during the war with Frank Capra's army film unit, while Shiffman Senior served as a captain in the U.S. Army's Fine Arts and Monuments Section, tracking down valuable art objects pilfered by the Nazis during the occupation of Europe. Upon his discharge, he joined famed horror cartoonist Will Eisner of EC comics.

Rokeach, who was in Paris during the 1940 invasion, was killed in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Kaminsky worked for Samuel Goldwyn, and recently appeared in a contemporary TV drama, Karen Kayemet is said to be living under a different name, in Haifa. And *Sabraman*, Zetz Tummelman's cultural godson, vanished as recently as five years ago.

Menachem Golan, are you reading this? □