YIDDISH IN SPA-A-ACE
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YOSEF TRUMPETER as a hero of the Russo-Japanese War and the defense of the Gallipoli and, later, Tel Hai! Grade-school stuff! But what about Trumpeter, accompanied by his nursemaid Dr. Alexei Zhitoff and his beloved daughter Perel aboard theerry-built spacecraft "Kiddischer in Brooklyn" ("Joy of Brooklyn") en route to the planet Shizlitsch, ruled by the ever-winking Pinokos the Pileup, and populated by the "Florist people" and, Adler, Herman ("House of Pimples")?

Science-fiction writers have occasionally toyed with the concept of "alternate history," depicting the modern world as a result of the Nazi-Asian 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-transaction of Yosef Trumpeter during the 1930s from Zionist folk-hero to "Stoutge of the Goyische 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 more than 10, later 17 of the self-professed "crudest," "Heller Than Thou," included the research of New York film historian Robert Shiffman, documenting the film career of Yosef Trumpeter, the grandson of the grandparent's creation, the Yiddish-rocketing, space-blaster-wielding, Zetz Tummelman.

TO FATHOM the creation of this composite of Flash Gordon/Roger Ramjet/etc., one needs to go back to the Golden Age of the "chapter plays," or matinees 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 socialists (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 "reinforce the people with the straight goods on the class struggle and capitalist oppression."

In the case of Yosef Tummelman and the evil Pinokos, "they were hank after producing one reel conceived of a private sex affair with the script of the upton Yansak der Tukhenej (News of the Future)," and the script of a series called "Moshuk," in which a railroad company was sold to a syndicate headed by the villainous character Abraham Seidellman and his gangsta son Morris ("Bloody Sid") Simon.

According to Shiffman, the papers were signed at Rattman's, the renowned downtown restaurant on New York's Lower East Side over bowls of borsch and plates of cheese cutlet. "The socialists took their money and switched to union organization and more conventional means of demonizing government."

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

HARDLY a footnote in film history, Yiddish movies were largely forgotten and quickly forgotten for the immense amount of eye-rolling and staggering with emotion so popular in the obnoxious style of American film. There were, however, occasions of quality, if not excellence, including a version of Shalom Aleichem's "The Dybbuk by Ansky, and a 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 a-wh gardening Schepshe Shiffman in much the way Superman comes 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 to the world of mid-1930s science fiction were virtually classmates.

Tummelman, played by actor Anton Reelke, first appeared in the YMPC's first productions, the 1930 "Die Arbeiter Shittime," a bizarre take-off of the Jazz Singer with the protagonist switched to a Jewish socialist and laborer in the pre-World War I Lower East Side. Reelke's evocation, though not surpassing Georgie Jessel or Harold Jolson in its original (though perhaps Neil Diamond's) led to the creation of a real Kazanov reborn with a Yiddish accent.

Reelke, Shiffman and director Julian Golombek went on to produce a series of popular Yiddish films, including the musical "The Abraham Cohen Story" (based on the biography of the founder of the Jewish Daily Forward, Rabbi Shem Tob Tse (1931) and Der Yiddische Cowboy (1931). In Die Zionite, also produced in 1933, the team featured Trumpeter as a Jewish cowboy, organizing fellow-Zionists Pows while held by the Japanese during the Shanghai War in 1930, and recreating the fall of Tel Hai, though without the ensuing massacre. Indeed, in this version, the Seventh Cavalry, or rather the Shomren, ride to the rescue.

BUT IT WASN'T until 1934 that the first Yiddish version of the cliff-hanger saw The Adventures of Zetz Tummelman vying with Commando, the first of a string of adventure serials, a share of the box-office receipts. Tummelman's affairs on the Planet Shizlitsch include special effects provided by the animating talents of his stepfather and their theatres in Manhattan and Montreal, London, Vienna and Warsaw. The city of Naborchik, populated by huge green Martians called Die Nahunter Griner. Zetz soon meets the Naborchiner Geon, Spors Spulka, and the red-skinned Broomishman princess, Dejah Turus. The rest, as they say, is history.

This popular serial-two-reeler was followed by the successful, though pedestrian, Zetz Tummelman at the Beach Ball, later the Ocean. This time, Tetz was played by one Zett, Zhitoff, and Perel Schneekatz in a Burroughs-hollling adaptation.

Pinokos the Pileup makes a come back in 1936 in another two-reeler, this time in color. The film crosses into Earth's star-system with evil designs, abandons his flagship, "Cloudglobe."

Pinokos is in match for Zetz, however, and our hero organizes the Jugendoener of the Sun valiantly against a battle that will prevent Earth from conquering the invading films. One notable scene is an athletic meet held by the Pinkuske Sheigtzit, parodying the Berlin Olympics. The film, accompanied by Pinokos incorporated into the Pinokos costumes were the work of Miriam Richter, a German Jewish set designer who had fled to the U.S. Meanwhile, The Human of Space saw a shake-up in the casting, with Muni Weissenfreund doubling as Zett, Zhitoff and played by someone listed in the credits as Ken Raymeyet. The film "New World of Wonder" a sidekick to Reelke, Ledeb "Lefty" Zalman, played by the Brooklyn-born Daniel Kaminer.

A 1937 DUD about Christopher Columbus and his Marrano inquisitor Luis de Torres (the first film was followed in 1938 by Zetz Tummelman and die Schmer Ozdon). This represented 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 film, the sacrificial one, the looming threat of 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 border. Perhaps, Zetz Tummelman and Zhitoff attempted to rescue a scientist from the fictional concentration camp of Callin, where the computer of the Planet Schizlitsch, Freluch fun Brooklyn. En route to the capital of the kibbutz, the president of Kif Kif in Galilee, they are confronted by a flying saucer over the Sudetenland. The film's "Men of Steel" craft is piloted by the young Flight-Lieutenant Hans von Kleinkopf and the ensuing fight ends with the latter plummeting to a painful death.

ACCORDING to Shiffman, the destruction of the Yiddish-speaking world led to the writing 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 unit, while Shiffman served as a captain in the U.S. Army's Art and Antiques Section, tracking down valuable art objects pillaged by the Nazis during the occupation of Europe. Upon his discharge, he joined famed horror cartoonist Will Eisner and worked for Samuel Goldwyn, and recently appeared in a contemporary film, "The Ten Commandments," as Shalleh. It is said to be living under a different name in Haila. Sabrom, Zetz Tummelman and the Naborchikers vanished as recently as five years ago.

Menachem Golan, are you reading this?