

Hi everyone,

First off, thank you for sharing your time with me by reading this piece. This paper is adapted from a small section of my dissertation, which explored patrician-immigrant romances on the radical left in early twentieth century America. I argued that intimacies between Anglo-American men and East European Jewish women helped produce new images of Jewish femininity, while also demonstrating that Jewish women often function differently from Jewish men in public discourse. I think this section was arguably the weakest, and as I begin revising my dissertation as a book manuscript, I'm hoping to draw Sonya Levien - a remarkably understudied woman given her career - more to the center of the story. I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Kindly,

Ashley

“Scripting the East European Jewish Woman: Sonya Levien and the Creation of a Cultural Mythology”

When Sonya Levien’s star began to rise in Hollywood in the 1920s, she made a habit out of talking about her childhood in the small village of Panemunek in the Ukrainian region of the Russian empire. She described scenes fit for a film script. Her hometown boasted no more than fifty houses tucked into a barren landscape where Jews and gentiles endured harsh winters and poverty alike. She recalled the tall, dark woods that encircled the village, where wolves peered through the trees with “their shining, yellow eyes.” Against the backdrop of cold and poverty, there was joy too. The monotony of the long and difficult winters was attenuated by holiday festivals, which included singing, deep drinking, and brightly embroidered costumes.¹ Spared from the combustible religious and ethnic tensions that plagued Jewish life elsewhere in the Russian Empire, Jews and gentiles lived peacefully, which Levien attributed to mutual respect and engaged communal leaders, in addition to close economic ties and shared poverty.²

The American press quickly recognized that this immigrant child of tsarist autocracy and her subsequent climb out of the Lower East Side to Hollywood’s A-list made for good copy. Her advantageous marriage to Carl Hovey, a wealthy scion of distinguished Bostonian stock, provided ample fodder for newspapers, who were eager to relay this quintessential tale of immigrant pluck and courage, replete with beauty, romance, and glamour.

¹ Alida S. Malkus. “She Came to America From Russia: The Story of Sonya Levien,” *Success*, Jan 1925 (55-57,121). Sonya Levien Hovey Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA (SLHP). For information about the town of Panemunek, see M. Bakalczuk-Felin, ed., *Yizkor-bukh fun Rakishok un umgegnt* (Johannesburg, 1952), 374.

² Sonya Levien, “Letter to Father James Keller (M. M. Director, The Christophers),” January 24, 1952, Box 24, SLPH. See also, Father James Keller, “Letter to Sonya Levein,” January 17, 1952, Box 17, SLPH.

By the time Levien arrived on the scene, the image of an ambitious East European Jewish woman making good by marrying a patrician-born, Anglo-American man had already been cast. Although romances between native-born Americans and East European Jews were unusual at the time (only two to three percent of Jews living in the US intermarried, compared to twenty percent in Germany prior to the 1930s), such intimacies were becoming an increasingly common occurrence on the left, and the American public was increasingly taking notice.³ On April 6, 1905, newspapers exploded with news of the engagement of the fabulously wealthy James “Graham” Phelps Stokes, a University Settlement worker and the most prominent of the “millionaire socialists,” to Rose Pastor, a twenty-five year old Jewish factory worker turned journalist from the Polish regions of the Russian Empire. Headlines read, “Millionaire J. G. Phelps Stokes Will Make Poor Jewess His Wife,” “Pretty Charity Worker Wins Heart of Millionaire,” and “East Side Rejoices with Stokes and Bride,” underscoring the vast material, racial, and religious differences between Pastor’s and Stokes’s origins.⁴

The Pastor-Stokes marriage managed to color all subsequent unions between working-class Jewish women and patrician-born American men. For example, when author Anna Strunsky and “millionaire socialist” William English Walling announced their engagement from St. Petersburg the following year, the press forewent the factual details of their courtship and instead opted for the by now well-scripted contours of an interclass, interracial settlement romance:

³ Keren R. McGinity, *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 20.

⁴ “Millionaire J. G. Phelps Stokes Will Make Poor Jewess His Wife,” *Heart’s Boston American*, April 6, 1905; “Pretty Charity Worker Wins Heart of Millionaire,” *Chicago Examiner*, April 6, 1905; “East Side Rejoices with Stokes and Bride,” *The Journal* (New York City), 1905. An extensive collection of clippings about the Pastor-Stokes engagement, including the ones cited above can be found in Box 75, James Graham Phelps Stokes Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Columbia University (JGPS).

wealthy patrician spouse weds a poor and deserving Russian Jewess. It did not matter that Strunsky was neither poor, nor had she ever been associated with the settlement movement.⁵

While real-life intermarriages captivated the American imagination throughout the early decades of the 20th century, fictional accounts of intermarriage abounded, the most successful being Israel Zangwill's *The Melting Pot* (1908). In 1917, the same year that Levien married Hovey, aspiring novelist Anzia Yezierska and Columbia University philosopher John Dewey embarked on their ill-fated romance, which provided ample fodder for Yezierska to later write a scathing indictment of interethnic romance in her novel, *Salome of the Tenements* (1922).⁶ Three years later, Elizabeth Stern, an East European-born Jewish writer, published her own semi-fictional account of intermarriage in America unapologetically titled, *I am a Woman - And a Jew* (1927).⁷ Both novels convey a portrait of intermarriage as a fraught process of Americanization based upon material comfort and social acceptance. The price was often nothing less than the complete erasure of the immigrant woman - that is their ethnic and class origins - inevitably provoking the female protagonists into open rebellion. Both novels abound with intertextual references to their real-life models, grounding fictional accounts in a widely publicized phenomenon.

As Levien's personal life fell into an increasingly well-established template of intermarriage coupled with social climb and professional success, she embraced it. As an aspiring author soon to recast herself as an up-and-coming screenwriter, she recognized that her personal life and the broader message it conveyed about immigrant success in modern America made for great

⁵ "Chicago Millionaire's Courtship of Poor Russian Jewess Outrivals Famous Stokes-Pastor Romance," June 16, 1906, Box Acc 1994-M101, Folder 10, Anna Strunsky Walling Papers, Sterling Library, Yale University (ASWY). See also, "Inside Story of the Romance of Two Settlement Workers," unknown, Box Acc 1994-M101, Folder 10, ASWY.

⁶ On the short-lived Yezierska-Dewey romance, see Mary V. Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey* (New York: The Free Press, 1988). See also, Anzia Yezierska, *Salome of the Tenements* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1995).

⁷ Leah Morton (Elizabeth Gertrude Stern), *I am a Woman - and a Jew* (New York: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1986).

material, on and off the screen. Many of Levien's early screenplays are romantic stories about immigrant daughters who intermarry just like herself. By looking at the characters she created, as well as how she built her own personal brand accordingly, it is possible to see how Levien constructed an endearing image of East European Jewish femininity that challenged 1920s postwar reaction and anti-immigrant sentiments. As an astute observer of American tastes, Levien's personal brand was arguably one of her most successful character creations and one that signaled a radical departure from the socialism of her youth and an embrace of American liberalism. Levien's presentation of herself in the public eye offered an idealized portrait of female immigrant potential in the early 20th century US, and as a result, Levien helped breathe new life into a cultural mythology of the East European Jewish woman as both desirable and an exemplar of postwar liberalism and American femininity.

The evolution of a cultural mythology.

The character of the enticing Jewess occupied a unique place in Western culture, and by the time Levien arrived on the scene in postwar America, the image of the Jewish woman had already undergone a series of transformations in the popular imagination. Literary scholar Louise A. Mayo explains that in nineteenth-century Anglo-American literature, Jewish women assumed a more favorable persona than their male coreligionists. Lacking the indelible physical markings and economic malice associated with Jewish men, female characters were free to affirm their Jewish identities while also possessing the enticing potential of redemption via conversion. In fact, the young Jewess's most redeemable trait was her convertibility, and frequently, a Christian hero carried her off to a better life. Moreover, Jewish women were often imbued with a dark and

alluring sexuality, one that was denied to their Christian counterparts.⁸ Most crucially, intimacies with Jewish women did not transgress the legal and social boundaries of race in America's black-white divide. Jewish woman's exoticism along with their potential for conversion/erasure rendered Jewish women particularly appealing and malleable in the American imagination.

The arrival of twenty million immigrants to the shores of the United States between 1890-1920 provoked the anxieties of a nation already grappling with major economic, social, and cultural change. Americans understood the enormous potential of these new arrivals to reshape the contours of society, and they sought to define the parameters of citizenship accordingly. Unsurprisingly, these debates were inflected with the broader gendered discourses of the time, and as numerous scholars have demonstrated, the resulting immigration legislation served to re-inscribe categories of gender, sexuality, and race in American society. Regardless of where one fell on the ideological spectrum, almost everyone could agree that a good immigrant and future citizen was one that adhered to normative gender roles.⁹ It is within this context that perceptions of East European Jewish women took on new urgency in the minds of Americans.

The rise of mass immigration in the early twentieth century, public attentiveness to white slavery, the "free love" politics of foreign-born anarchists like Emma Goldman, and the public performances of Jewish actors such as Sarah Bernhardt, further fueled perceptions of unorthodox

⁸ Louise A. Mayo, *The Ambivalent Image: Nineteenth-Century America's Perception of the Jew* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988), 40-51.

⁹ Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 26. Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Katrina Irving, *Immigrant Mothers: Narratives of Race and Maternity, 1890-1925* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

sexualities.¹⁰ As Sander Gilman and Shari Rabin have argued, images of Jewish women are “multivalent,” “complex,” and “deeply rooted in social and cultural context.”¹¹ The qualities traditionally attributed to the oriental Jewess fueled new and evolving perceptions of Jewish femininity, which assumed new meanings for a new age by imbuing the character of the East European Jewess with an air of cosmopolitanism and intellectuality derived from their ties to European culture and socialism.

The interest in Jewish immigrants in the early twentieth century US spoke to a wider existential crisis preoccupying American-born intellectuals and writers in the early 1900s. Those who had rejected the Victorian values of their parents, “its stodgy bourgeoisie art, its sexual prudery, and smothering patriarchal families,” sought to create a new order that celebrated authenticity in democratic spaces. In lieu of the reserve and sentimentality of their parents’ generation, they increasingly valued expressiveness, passion, and original thought.¹² Many young, university-educated men and women were drawn to the settlement houses popping up in immigrant neighborhoods where they could live, work, study, and associate with the immigrant poor, attempting to improve the rather dire living and working conditions.¹³

Young American thinkers and writers were particularly drawn to the Lower East Side because of its intellectual and artistic energy and heated exchanges in a multitude of languages.

¹⁰ On Jewish prostitutes, see Egal Feldman, “Prostitution, the Alien Woman and the Progressive Imagination, 1910-1915. *American Quarterly*, 19, No. 2, Part I (Summer, 1967), 192-206; Leslie Fishbein, “Harlot or Heroine? Changing Views of Prostitution, 1870-1920.” *The Historian* 43, No. 1 (Nov. 1980), pp 23-35.

¹¹ On images of the Jewess in Western thought, see Sander L. Gilman, *Love + Marriage = Death: And other Essays Representing Difference* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 65-90; Shari Rabin, “‘The Advent of the Western Jewess’: Rachel Frank and the Jewish Female Celebrity in 1890s America,” *Nashim*, No. 22 (Fall 2011), pp. 111-135; Joyce Antler, ed. *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1998).

¹² Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Co., 2000), 1.

¹³ On the settlement movement, see Allen F. Davis, *Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); Gerald McFarland, *Inside Greenwich Village: A New York City Neighborhood, 1898-1918* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005); David Huyssen, *Progressive Inequality: Rich and Poor in New York, 1890-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

Historians Christine Stansell and Tony Michels underscored the significance of the close proximity and accessibility of the Lower East Side for Greenwich Village personalities, which possessed its own bohemian personalities and ideas of modernity. To American intellectuals, “the actors in the Yiddish and Italian theaters, East European revolutionaries, street hustlers, and loud-mouthed market women were picturesque characters, not squalid lowlifes,” explained Stansell. The Lower East Side, with its combination of intellectual and artistic energy and heated conversations in Yiddish, Russian, French, and German, “represented a democratized high culture” in which American intellectuals were eager to take part and associate themselves.¹⁴ Historian David Hollinger wrote that for American intellectuals, Jewish immigrants provided a model of the “cosmopolitan ideal.”¹⁵

Additionally, many settlement workers, public intellectuals, and Greenwich Village personalities were newly minted members of the Socialist Party, and they were deeply enthralled by the drama playing out across the ocean in tsarist Russia.¹⁶ Michels explained that Jewish radicals comprised a transnational revolutionary network spanning from New York to St. Petersburg and, consequently, the Lower East Side served as “a virtual outpost of the Russian revolutionary movement” on American soil. All of this elevated the prestige and allure of immigrant Jews on the left.¹⁷ Moreover, interethnic and interclass romances between East European Jewish women

¹⁴ Stansell, 16-26. Tony Michels, “East Side Meets Greenwich Village,” in *Choosing Yiddish: New Frontiers of Language and Culture*, eds. Lara Rabinovitch, Shiri Goren, & Hannah S. Pressman (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 2012).

¹⁵ David A. Hollinger, “Ethnic Diversity, Cosmopolitanism and the Emergence of the American Liberal,” *American Quarterly*, 27, No. 2 (May 1975), 140.

¹⁶ On American intellectuals and the Russian revolution, see Michels; Arthur W. Thompson and Robert A. Hart, *The Uncertain Crusade: America and the Russian Revolution of 1905* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1970); See also, Arthur Thompson, “Reception of Russian Revolutionary Leaders in America,” *American Quarterly*, Vol 18, No. 3 (Autumn 1966), 452-476; and Christopher Lasch, *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962).

¹⁷ Michels. Of the similar interest shown by English intellectuals toward Russian Jewish immigrants in London, see Galya Diment, *A Russian Jew of Bloomsbury: The Life and Times of Samuel Koteliansky* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011).

and Anglo-American men on the left spoke to a particular cultural moment where love and marriage were laden with far more than matters of the heart.¹⁸ For male and female protagonists, intimate communion with people from disparate backgrounds who desired a revolutionary future unmarred by class, racial, and religious differences, marriage was a way to put words into practice at the deepest level.

These high profile romances and the activist work many of these women undertook in the public eye provided prewar America with an abundance of romanticized portraits of East European Jewish women. Growing interest in these women coincided with the growth of a syndicated press that was eager to publish public interest pieces, and it was this development in particular that helped transform East European Jewish women into a consumable commodity among the Anglo-American public. Although many Americans looked at immigration from Eastern Europe as a scourge on the nation, many others were intrigued by the young and enchanting women hailing from the east. Favorable portrayals of Jewish women in the press were a common feature until the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 put the wheels of reaction into motion.

As a result, the hegemony of accommodationist personalities like Mary Antin versus the anarchism of Emma Goldman, were challenged by alternative models of Jewish femininity - most notably that of Rose Pastor. From the moment the world learned of her engagement to a millionaire, Pastor reached far into the American imagination and provided a framework for understanding other Jewish women. While Pastor's appeal was rooted in her youth and beauty, not

¹⁸ Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as Social Type* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 1997), 90. Leon Fink. *Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 147. Stansell.

to mention her Cinderella-like marriage to an American aristocrat, it was also a product of her initial willingness to play along with American ideals of immigrant womanhood defined by marriage, motherhood, and domesticity. However, as Pastor's radicalism matured, and she became more willing to challenge the bounds of the acceptable, the favorable public perception of her gave way to a more malevolent image of her as a threat to the nation. Levien would watch with keen interest and sympathy as the public support her close friend had once enjoyed gave way to widespread hostility and a governmental witch-hunt.¹⁹

Jews have always played an important role within national discourses during periods of immense dislocation and anxiety.²⁰ By exploring portrayals of these women in the public eye, we can appreciate how Americans articulated a sense of crisis through the language of desire. But that is not to say that Jewish women lacked agency or a voice in the matter. As a new cohort of East European Jewish writers like Anzia Yezierska and Elizabeth Stern emerged in the 1920s, in addition to the screenplays about immigrant daughters and intermarriage that Levien wrote as a rising figure in early Hollywood, East European-born Jewish women began to articulate their own experiences and convey their own subjectivities as immigrant women for a broader American audience. These women would go on to fashion a new model of East European Jewish women's femininity, one that melded preexisting images of marriage, motherhood, and domesticity with more complicated portrayals of modern American women in the making. While Pastor

¹⁹ Adam Hochschild, *Rebel Cinderella: From Rags to Riches to Radical: The Epic Journey of Rose Pastor Stokes* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020); Arthur Zipser and Pearl Zipser, *Fire and Grace: The Life of Rose Pastor Stokes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990); Robert Dwight Reynolds, Jr. "The Millionaire Socialists: J. G. Phelps Stokes and His Circle of Friends" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1974).

²⁰ See Ronald Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representations of Jews in France, 1715-1815* (Berkeley: University California Press, 2003); Jonathan M. Hess, *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English literature and society: Racial representations, 1875-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Chad Alan Goldberg, *Modernity and the Jews in Western Social Thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

may have provided a palatable household image of East European Jewish femininity in the early years of her marriage, Levien helped construct a more endearing image of East European Jewish women at a time when the United States was digging its heels into a postwar era of reaction.

Levien's story.

On December 25, 1888, Julius and Ida Fanny (Shapiro) Opeskin welcomed their first child, Sara (Sonya), into the world.²¹ Born in the small village of Panemunek, it was the birthplace of no less than three prominent Hollywood personalities: talent and literary agent Adeline Jaffe; screenwriter and director Robert Milton; and, of course, Levien. Despite its size, the village's strategic location on the Dvinsk railroad made it an important transit point for surrounding environs. Professions were largely limited to trade, shopkeeping, peddling, and farming.²² Levien described her village as a place where Jews and gentiles lived peacefully, which she attributed to mutual respect, engaged communal leaders, and close economic ties.²³

A few years after Levien's birth, imperial authorities exiled her father to Siberia for circulating agitational literature.²⁴ In her father's absence, Levien, her mother, and her two brothers went to live with her paternal grandfather, a Hebrew scholar, who served as the town's adjudicator and doctor. He provided a traditional religious education for the children, including Levien, in addition to instruction in Hebrew, Russian, French, and German.²⁵ In the 1890s, Levien's father fled from Siberia and traveled to London where he assumed the surname Levien after the Ger-

²¹ Sonya Levien, "Biographical materials," Box 32, Folder 1, Sonya Levien Hovey Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA (SLHP). Sonya would later claim the year 1898 for her birthdate, making herself ten years younger than she really was.

²² M. Bakalczuk-Felin, ed., *Yizkor-bukh fun Rakishok un umgegnit* (Johannesburg, 1952), 374.

²³ Sonya Levien, "Milk" (1918), Box 24, SLHP.

²⁴ Larry Ceplair, *A Great Lady: A Life of the Screenwriter: Sonya Levien* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996), 4.

²⁵ Sonya Levien, "The Frank's Case Makes me Wonder," *Hearst's International*, (December 1924), Folder 7, SLHP.

man Jew that had helped him escape. The rest of the family soon followed. They remained in London for a couple of years before immigrating to New York in 1896.²⁶

Living on the Lower East Side, Levien managed to complete public schooling through the eighth grade before going to work in a feather duster factory for four years. During this time, she became a regular attendee of the University Settlement where she befriended Pastor, who was working as a journalist in New York and being courted by Stokes. Hoping to escape the factory, Levien borrowed money from a school board member and paid her way through secretarial school. Afterward, Pastor and Stokes hired her as their secretary, which afforded her the financial security and leisure time necessary to complete her high school diploma and put herself through New York University's Law School.²⁷

Levien initially chose to study law because it promised a steady source of income, but she always harbored a strong desire to write. As a law student, she supported herself by writing short quips for *Life* magazine from the perspective of a drunken but comical Irishman.²⁸ In 1907, Samuel Merwin, the editor of *Success* magazine, hired Levien as his secretary, and she undertook various editorial tasks. When the magazine folded four years later, Levien briefly assumed an assistant editorship under Alice Stone Blackwell at *The Women's Journal*, the central publication of the woman suffrage movement. Due to personality differences between leadership, less than a year later, Levien was back in New York working for the prestigious *Metropolitan* magazine under its co-editor, Carl Hovey. In her free time, Levien volunteered at the People's Institute, and

²⁶ Ceplair, 6.

²⁷ "Class of '08," N.Y.U. Law School; "Sara A. Levien, For Admission to the Bar," Box 32, Folder 1, SLHP.

²⁸ Diane Heckert, "Prize-Winning Movie Scripter Tells of Law-to-Writing Switch" Box 32, Folder 8, SLHP.

she served on its movie review board, demonstrating an early interest in film.²⁹ And she wrote. She wrote fiction, journalistic pieces, and op-eds. Occasionally, she sought to humanize the suffering of the Lower East Side by offering vivid portraits of her own difficult childhood.³⁰

While Levien struggled to place her fiction in top literary magazines, film producers were eager to have them, and in 1918, movie studios began purchasing her stories about the romantic trials of immigrant daughters. Hollywood was a uniquely positioned space to project idealized visions of the US, especially from the perspectives of those who existed at the fringes of American society. Journalist Neil Gabler conveys the central paradox of early Hollywood, that it quickly assumed the mantle of “the quintessence of what we mean by America,” yet it was founded and operated for more than three decades by East European Jews who were “anything *but* the quintessence of America.” The Jews who made movies and comprised an overwhelming majority of the industry possessed the unique ability to shape the values and myths, traditions and archetypes of American culture. “By making a ‘shadow’ America,” Gabler explained, “one which idealized every old glorifying bromide about the country, the Hollywood Jews created a powerful cluster of images and ideas – so powerful that, in a sense, they colonized the American imagination...” Theirs was undoubtedly a middle-class vision of America - the very antithesis of their own early lives.³¹ It was against this backdrop that Levien cut her teeth as an aspiring screenwriter.

²⁹ J. G. Phelps Stokes, “Letter to Charles Sprague Smith,” July 30, 1909, Box 4, JGPS. On the history of the People’s Institute, see Robert Fisher, “Community Organizing and Citizen Participation: The Efforts of the People’s Institute in New York City, 1910-1920,” *Social Service Review* (Sep 1, 1977), 51. See also, “The People’s Institute” (brochures), Box 4, JGPS. Of Levien’s work at the National Board of Censorship, see Larry Ceplair, *A Great Lady: A Life of the Screenwriter Sonya Levien* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996), 22-23.

³⁰ Sonya Levien Hovey, “Milk,” Box 24, SLHP.

³¹ Neil Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 1-7. Emphasis in original.

Ever the astute reader of public taste, Levien understood the demands of writing for a popular (middle-class, white) audience, as well as foreign-born Hollywood studio executives who had little tolerance for anything other than the complete satisfaction of its viewership. Industry leadership and the consuming public both required that she embrace a vision of the US that differed from her personal experiences as an immigrant immersed in the leftist politics of the Lower East Side. Levien's biographer, Larry Ceplair, suggests that in order to achieve success, she rejected the socialism and feminism of her youth and maintained very few political commitments for the rest of her life. The characters she created bore little resemblance to the type of women she had known or the type of woman she had been. Ceplair concludes, "The Hollywood studio system offered little room in its genres for the political and gender consciousness she had once exemplified, and Levien was either not clever enough to figure out how to infiltrate Levien-type women into her scripts or too insecure to try."³²

Historian Nancy Rosenbloom came to Levien's defense by arguing that Ceplair's "unsatisfying portrait prejudices the extent to which her strengths rather than her weaknesses informed her ability to thrive in a male-centered industry and minimizes the extent to which Levien remained true to the core values that motivated her throughout her life." Ceplair's misrepresentation of her stems from a misunderstanding of her political views and her evolution over the years as a prominent editor in New York, which Rosenbloom refers to as her "literary apprenticeship." Instead of placing Levien in the rigidly defined camps of "socialist" and "feminist," Levien never comfortably identified as either. Instead, she came to embrace a pluralist conception of American citizenship - one that bridged the gender, class, and ethnic divisions in a deeply divided

³² Ibid, viii.

country - a view similar to that of the patrician intellectuals with whom she later associated and even married.³³

Well aware of the expectations of interwar America toward immigrant women, Levien set out to craft stories that resonated with audiences, largely based upon the romantic lives of immigrant daughters. For example, Levien's first film credit was for *Who Will Marry Me?* (1919) about a young Italian immigrant girl named Rosie Sanguinetti.³⁴ On her wedding day, Rosie flees an arranged marriage and moves into a settlement house where she meets a wealthy young man, Jerry Van Tyne. In a drunken state, he proposes to her, but soon after retracts his proposal. In the wake of the fallout, which is spurred by his family's disapproval of the immigrant girl, Jerry's former girlfriend is accused of murder. He takes the blame to protect her, convincing Rosie of his good nature. She, in turn, lies to save him from prison, and in the end, the two marry.³⁵ In May 1921, Levien received a second credit for *Cheated Love*, a remake of Sydney Goldin's 1913 film, *Heart of a Jewess*.³⁶ It tells the story of Sonya, a Jewish immigrant who is loved by a settlement worker, David, but is really in love with Mischa, a doctor and an immigrant from Odessa. She works in a Yiddish theater to help support the doctor financially, but, in the end, he marries a wealthy heiress. During a performance at the theater, a boiler explodes. Sonya calms the audience, and David comes to her rescue. The two marry.³⁷ *Moving Pictures News* reviewed the film

³³ Nancy Rosenbloom, "From Greenwich Village to Hollywood: The Literary Apprenticeship of Sonya Levien," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14 (2015), 80-103.

³⁴ "Who Will Marry Me?," directed by Paul Powell (1919; Universal Film Manufacturing Company); silent, black and white.

³⁵ Ceplair, 53.

³⁶ "The Heart of a Jewess," directed by Sidney M. Goldin (1913; Victor Film Company); silent, black and white.

³⁷ "Cheated Love," directed by King Baggot (1921; Universal Film Manufacturing Company); silent, black and white.

favorably, noting “the careful selection of topics to interpret the story,” and the *Motion Pictures News* described it as “a slice of life as it is lived in New York’s teeming East Side.”³⁸

That same year, Famous Players-Lasky purchased two stories from Levien. Her story, “The Heart of Youth,” eventually became *First Love* (1921), a romantic comedy about a factory girl, Kathleen, who falls in love with, Harry, an ambulance driver and a con man. While Kathleen’s friends and family are well aware of Harry’s nature, it takes a group effort to reveal to the young girl the character of the man she loves. At the end of the film, the audience discovers that the former employer and the owner of the factory is in love with her.³⁹ The following year, Levien’s story “Baby Doll” was adapted as *The Top of New York* (1922). It tells the story of a young working-class girl supporting her family (a brother confined to a wheelchair and her maiden aunt), with an underlying romance described as, “love sought them out on a tenement roof.”⁴⁰ Reviews for both of these films implied that the stories were based on Levien’s own life, again conflating fictionalized portraits of working-class, immigrant women with the author who wrote them.⁴¹

In 1924, Famous Players-Lasky approached Levien about adapting Anzia Yezierska’s novel, *Salome of the Tenements*, for the screen. Levien agreed and set about changing the plot drastically. While Sonya Vrunsky’s deviousness remained a central driver of the plot, Levien made the millionaire and settlement director, John Manning, far more sympathetic. She likewise reduced the part of the immigrant-turned-fashion mogul, Jacques “Jaky” Hollins. The central

³⁸ Ceplair, 53.

³⁹ “First Love,” directed Maurice Campbell (1921; Realart Pictures Corporation (Paramount Pictures)); silent, black and white.

⁴⁰ “The Top of New York,” directed by William D. Taylor (1922; Realart Pictures Corporation (Paramount Pictures)); silent, black and white.

⁴¹ Ceplair, 54.

drama of the film, instead, revolved around Sonya's entanglement with the pawnbroker. When Manning discovered the scheme, he blackmailed the usurer, paid off the loan, and forgave Sonya. Unlike in the novel, the husband-and-wife are reconciled.⁴²

Throughout the 1920s, Levien continued to churn out screenplays, a handful of which returned to the tried-and-true topic of the immigrant. With success came increased notoriety in the public eye and Levien mounted a deft public relations campaign to help guide her rising star. She scripted her own biography as an immigrant woman who achieved success according to the themes that resonated so well in her films. She understood the romantic screenplays she wrote about immigrant women and the way she packaged her own rags-to-riches story to be mutually constitutive - fact and fiction lending credence to one another in the creation of a cultural mythology about East European Jewish womanhood and immigrant success in America. To ensure that her life was represented accordingly, Levien guarded her public image closely, and she was careful to comply with the prevailing mood in the country. In a fast-paced industry with little tolerance for unconventionality, her career and her family's livelihood depended on it. As a result, themes of marriage, maternity, and domesticity were seamlessly woven together with the thrill of social mobility and the glitz and glamour of Levien's life in early film industry.

Levien was an enticing subject for the American public given the unlikely trajectory of her life from East European village to Hollywood. She was attractive with reddish brown hair, dark eyes, and light skin. Intelligent and well-spoken, she retained a faint accent all her life.⁴³

Her advantageous intermarriage, adorable American children, and lavish lifestyle complete with

⁴² "Salome of the Tenements," directed by Sidney Olcott (1925; Paramount Pictures), silent, black and white. About Levien's adaptation, see Ceplair, 61. See also, Alan Robert Ginsberg, *The Salome Ensemble: Rose Pastor Stokes, Anzia Yezierska, Sonya Levien, and Jetta Goudal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016)

⁴³ Flora Merrill, "Women Must Choose 'Babies or Business,' Says Noted Author - Wife of Boston Editor," July 5, 1925, *Boston Sunday Post*, 86.

stunning Beverly Hills and oceanfront properties provided idyllic portraits of success and good taste. Nowhere did the press acknowledge the challenges of being a female screenwriter or sexism in early Hollywood, nor did they broach the radical politics she had left behind.

In a dramatic profile of Levien published in *Success* magazine in 1925, the author highlighted the contrast between Levien's life in Eastern Europe and her success in Hollywood:

The story of Sonya Levien! Romance, poignant memories of the harsh yet colorful life of Russia, tragedy, Siberia, loom in the background like the great dark nights of snow-swept steppes. Out from the mystic melancholy of the black forests she came, to a land where fortune waited with exacting hands to reward the gifts she brought. Imagination, creativeness, the almost childlike simplicity of the Slav, were hers, and a great warmth of heart. But the way I like best to think of Sonya Levien, the way that makes her success shine with a tender radiance, is as [a] mother...⁴⁴

Most of the existing biographical treatments of Levien in the American press underscore potential conflicts between a career-oriented woman and her marital, domestic, and maternal obligations - tensions that Levien was quick to allay. While Levien and Hovey seem to have avoided public interest in their marriage and family life in 1917, once her star began to rise in the 1920s, the press was eager to take a second look.

When asked about her marriage to a man from a Protestant family, Levien explained the evolution of her romantic interests. In her early years, she never could have seen herself marrying outside the faith. "During those years... it would have been difficult for me to marry because of the conflict between the Jews and Gentiles," she explained. Over time, however, she began to feel quite the opposite, citing that Jewish men felt more like "brothers" and no longer held any romantic appeal. When asked whether hers and Hovey's different ethnic and religious backgrounds impeded their marriage, she explained, "My husband and I have never had any race feeling between us, because we have known we were pulling for the same ideals..." To inject a little

⁴⁴ Alida S. Malkus, "She Came to America from Russia: The Story of Sonya Levien, As Related to Alida S. Malkus," *Success*, January 1925, 55, SLHP.

comedic drama into the story, Levien told the reporter that her family initially objected to the marriage, but “when they found that he wasn’t going to beat me the way the Christians had the Jews in Russia... they gave their consent.”⁴⁵

Portraits of Levien in the press underscored the happy marriage between the two. One journalist noted, “Their names are synonymous among their friends for an ideally happy and congenial match.” Part of what made their marriage a success, surmised the journalist, was that Levien kept her ambitions in check, explaining that her “husband’s work was just as important as [Levien’s] and besides, a woman has no right to interfere with her husband’s work.”⁴⁶ In all actuality, Levien’s ambitions played a significant role in the deterioration of Hovey’s career and served as a source of friction between the two, but neither Levien nor Hovey would ever admit to it publicly. Financial stresses in the Hovey marriage were periodic, and it is unclear how precarious their situation ever really was. When Hovey and Levien both found themselves unemployed in 1924, the move to Hollywood may have been dictated more by financial need than by a desire to actually live there. After they settled on the west coast, however, Hovey was unable to secure steady employment, and Levien bore the brunt of supporting the family. Given her emerging reputation as the person who could fix any script, Levien commanded one of the highest screenwriter’s salaries in the industry, even during the Depression. In her semi-autobiographical novel, *Among the Survivors*, Tamara Hovey portrayed her mother as intensely concerned with keeping steady work in order to maintain their lavish lifestyle and keep up appearances.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Merrill, 86.

⁴⁶ Malkus, 57.

⁴⁷ Tamara Hovey, 10.

At thirty-four, Levien was among the most successful and highest paid motion picture writers in the country, but for those writing about her, her real achievement was her children. Levien was fond of telling journalists that she would like a large brood of children, but given the difficulty of balancing a professional life with babies, it was unlikely.⁴⁸ She was open about the fact that she did not struggle with leaving her children to go to work. She justified her absence by stating, “There are some advantages to a mother in not being with her children every minute of the day. I’m a holiday to them, received with shouts of joy. And they’re a treat to me...”⁴⁹ Elsewhere, Levien noted that during their precious little time together, she liked to teach her children rhymes in Russian.⁵⁰

Levien mounted an astute defense of her professional career lest anyone judge her choices as selfish, unfeminine, or not in the best interests of her children. “My ambition was born of necessity,” she explained. “We came from Russia to New York’s East Side, and if you are not ambitious and get out of the East Side, you sink into it.”⁵¹ Placing her own life within the rather unenviable dichotomy of immigrant ghetto or Hollywood glamor, her story played into timeless tropes of the American dream. Moreover, Levien was open about the fact that a material desire had drawn her to Hollywood in the first place. In an autobiographical piece, Levien wrote that she did not go “to Hollywood to improve the movies...” On the contrary, she writes, “My dreams were avaricious and consisted of a low racing car... of so many glad rags that I could go forth on a rainy morning dressed in the raiment of a Joseph and defy the sun and my friends on Fifth Av-

⁴⁸ Merrill, 86.

⁴⁹ Malkus, 121.

⁵⁰ Merrill.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

enue when it cleared up in the afternoon."⁵² As Rosenbloom noted, “the narrative of upward mobility in America sits at the center of the scripted life Levien chose to tell about herself.”⁵³

Press coverage of Levien’s success as a Hollywood screenwriter were frequently coupled with portraits of her domestic life, another arena in which Levien mounted a deft defense of herself as a wife and career woman. Levien explained to a journalist from the *Boston Sunday Post*, “It is in connection with our homes that we professional women are so often misjudged. Just because I am not a good cook or fond of seeing and prefer going out and doing that for which I am infinitely better suited doesn’t mean that I am indifferent to my house...” Journalists tended to agree. In one assessment of the “Beautiful Sonya Levien - otherwise Mrs. Carl Hovey, fascinating Russian-born wife of a New England editor...,” she was no “cook or stitcher, but loves home.”⁵⁴ Another journalist noted that in addition to her screenwriting, Levien continued to publish articles and short stories, while also supervising the care of her home and two young children. The real *pièce de résistance*, according to the author, was that she still manages “to bake a batch of his favorite pie for her New England husband.”⁵⁵

To further crystallize the family image of herself, Levien was careful to distance herself from the seamier side of Hollywood, portraying herself as a part of it, but naturally inclined to remain at a distance. She explained, “the truth of the matter is, that I never was a movie fan. Before I got into the profession I had dragged myself to about half a dozen movies in as many years...” She was also open about the challenges of working in the film industry. She explained that she was often homesick for her family, and she was emphatic in her descriptions of the end-

⁵² Sonya Levien, “My Pilgrimage to Hollywood,” Box 32, Folder 8, SLHP.

⁵³ Rosenbloom, 99.

⁵⁴ Flora Merrill, “Women Must Choose “Babies or Business.”

⁵⁵ Libbian Benedict, “The Story of Sonya Levien,” *The American Hebrew*, Box 35, Folder 9, SLHP.

less demands placed upon screenwriters.⁵⁶ All the while, Levien betrayed a modesty and wonder at her success, writing that she could hardly believe her surroundings. Perhaps her sentiments were sincere. To rise from a remote East European village to Hollywood's A-list was no small feat, yet modesty spoke well to the brand she had carefully crafted as an immigrant woman's success story.

Conclusion.

Levien's success stemmed in large part from her willingness to adapt to prevailing national sentiments throughout her long life and career. By scripting and also performing the image of the desirable East European Jewish woman, Levien helped shape a cultural mythology based upon American values of liberalism, materialism, and femininity. Levien was an astute reader of American tastes and understood that to script her own biography according to the image of a Cinderella-like, rags-to-riches immigrant story was to elevate her own brand in the competitive marketplace of early Hollywood. By telling her story accordingly, she gave credence to the myths she helped script by providing a living, breathing example of it.

Yet, not everything was as it seemed. Tamara Hovey's semi-autobiographical novel, loosely based on her parents' marriage, implies a different story. In the novel, her daughter described an overbearing mother figure whose intensity stemmed from the unusual coupling of the "frenetic world of first names and celluloid, of vast temperamental emotions and of millions of dollars spent and earned," which had followed "a childhood of tenement misery, beauty-starved, on the East Side of New York, and a struggling girlhood spent at factory jobs by day and writing

⁵⁶ Sonya Levien, "My Pilgrimage to Hollywood," Box 32, Folder 8, SLHP.

at night...”⁵⁷ In the novel, her mother’s life shatters into pieces when her husband has an affair with his young secretary. There is no indication that Hovey ever did the same. The happy face put on by Levien and the intense privacy with which she guarded her personal life, are a striking contrast with the unpleasant tensions and anxieties depicted by her daughter. The truth probably lies somewhere in between.

⁵⁷ Tamara Hovey, 7.