

# Pageants and Patriots: Jewish Spectacles as Performances of Belonging

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The night before Independence Day in 1933, something unprecedented occurred.<sup>[1]</sup> As part of Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition, "Jewish Day" was celebrated, culminating in a record-breaking performance that garnered an audience of between 125,000 and 150,000 spectators crammed into Chicago's Soldier Field, causing massive traffic jams before and after.<sup>[2]</sup> While some of Chicago's other immigrant ethnicities were represented as part of the Expo, Jewish Day and its show-stopping finale were the most notable ethnically-oriented events of the entire fair. So impactful was the performance, *The Romance of a People*, that not only did it receive twelve columns of coverage in the *Chicago Tribune* the following day, but an encore performance was sponsored by the *Tribune* three nights after the initial performance. Ultimately a bold Zionist affair, raising money for creating the would-be Jewish refuge of Palestine, *The Romance of a People* combined spectacle and politics in a remarkably successful performance as Hitler was coming into power.

A decade later, in the midst of World War II, another Jewish pageant of massive scale graced the city, but after ten years of atrocities, the motives and emotions were much different. Well into wartime, 1943 brought the New York-originated pageant, *We Will Never Die*, to Chicago as part of a nationwide tour. While still promoting the increasingly insistent need for a government-sanctioned nationhood (the demand which transformed Palestine into Israel five years after the Chicago performance), the pageant, as evidenced by its title, spoke to the threat to Jewish life and identity by the Nazis. Even more than in *The Romance of a People*, *We Will Never Die* carried the fear of genocide. A somber tone and a tocsin of impending death replaced the patriotic and inclusive hunger for recognition evident in *The Romance of a People*.

Another decade later, as series of smaller individual performances were organized as part of a nationwide Jewish-American celebration: the American Jewish Tercentenary. Commemorating three hundred years of Jewish presence in America, the year-long event was held from 1954 through 1955, and boasted "forums, exhibitions, pageants, musical festivals, and public dinners organized by local committees in at least four hundred cities and towns."<sup>[3]</sup> While these three decades of pageants bore similarities in theme and in production elements, their execution and tone differ drastically, speaking to the radically different times in American history for Jews and America's relationship to the Jews.

In our examination of these pageants, we understand them to be historically contingent, site-specific, and temporally-bounded events. Each of these Jewish-American pageants relied on its historical specificity and locale, while these elements also contributed to their lack of performance longevity. But it is in their nuanced, culturally-reflective status that we find these pageants compelling—they are historical artifacts

that didactically perform their own contextually-contingent ideologies. Furthermore, as we focus on each of the three decades of pageants in the paper that follows, we contend with the ways in which their varying degrees of site-specificity are also intricately bound within a broader American network, reflective of both Jewish American microcosms and the macro-national level.

## Pageants and Politics

We use twentieth-century Jewish pageants to argue that the pageant form of theatre is an ideal forum by which to make claims about citizenship and political engagement. While these pageants differ from traditional theatre in terms of their fluid scripting, grand scale, and limited potential for extended performance runs, they nonetheless resemble normative theatre in that they are specific, performed events with beginnings and endpoints, they feature performers enacting a narrative upon a stage, and they rely heavily on the audience-performance dynamic that is live theatre's hallmark. That said, however, by virtue of the extent of its stagecraft, audience, and ambition within the public sphere, the pageant form, as distinct from the routinely-performed play, expresses the perspective of a segment of the population. This was particularly important from the end of the Civil War to the 1960s, a period of extensive immigration, during which the issue of accepting and integrating ethnic immigrants was salient and "patriotic pageants became a popular form for promoting the assimilation of the immigrant into American society."<sup>[4]</sup> Pageants reached their apogee in the first half of the twentieth century, playing off the desire to solidify an American tradition, but this was necessary precisely because of the migrants who had to demonstrate that, despite diverse customs, religions, and beliefs, they belonged to—and were fervently patriotic towards—the American nation. Explicating this sentiment, albeit baldly, Esther Willard Bates describes this integration in her pageantry how-to guide, *The Art of Producing Pageants* from 1925: "pageantry is more than an end; it is also a means. . . . It teaches our late-comers the story of the nation in an imaginative manner, and when they act [as] our fore-fathers and speak their very words, they become part-owners in our traditions."<sup>[5]</sup>

The ethnic pageant, and in this case the Jewish-American pageant, was designed to meet this need but was also situated in light of the political needs of the community, as defined by organizations with the resources and authority to create extensive performances, requiring personnel, locations, and the activation of audiences. Pageants are not merely a means of displaying nationalism and tradition but also an occasion on which community resources are expended to set a political agenda.

America's longstanding tradition of using spectacle and pageantry for the formation and assertion of "Americanness" can be traced back to the earliest years of the American republic. Colorful, boisterous, and clear in message, pageants of early American history fostered community among America's ethnic, religious, and social groups, simultaneously unifying them under a single banner of American identity and mobilizing as a vehicle for hybrid American-ethnic identity formation. S. E. Wilmer traces this long history of America's theatricalized nationalism in *Theatre, Society and the Nation*. "Particularly in times of national crisis," he states, "the theatre has served as a political and ideological tool to help reconfigure the [American] nation," defining or challenging "national values and the notion of the nation," and "reformulating concepts of national identity" that even predate Germany's nationalistic theatrical Romanticism.<sup>[6]</sup>

While the American-Jewish relationship to pageantry reflects these community—and nation-building—protocols, by the twentieth century pageants changed in their focus. Pageants became strategic

attempts at persuasion, both within the community and beyond. American perceptions of Jews, both American and international, have also altered greatly over the course of the twentieth century, and the changing approaches to Jewish-American pageantry are as much a reflection of this shift in perception as of the changing relationship of American Jews to both America and assimilation.

In *American Historical Pageantry*, David Glassberg describes the legacy of early American pageantry, its heyday in the first decades of the twentieth century, and its ultimate decline after the late-1920s. In its prime, historical pageantry played a major role in American celebrations and festivals, showcasing “the belief that history could be made into a dramatic public ritual through which the residents of a town, by acting out the right version of their past, could bring about some kind of future social and political transformation.”<sup>[7]</sup> Reiterating both American pride and the possibilities of growth of the town, neighborhood, or ethnic association, these productions presented an idealized vision of past and future through “the use of historical imagery to discover or invent an appropriate tradition in support of reform.”<sup>[8]</sup>

In addition to Glassberg’s and Wilmer’s book-length studies on historical American pageantry, from early to mid-century American works, Richard M. Fried’s *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians are Coming!: Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold-War America* examines national patriotic activity and efforts executed through theatrical pageantry and ritual, implemented through federal-level initiatives, as a means of reasserting national identity during troubling political times, particularly focusing in on Cold War-era “patriotic and civic pageantry.”<sup>[9]</sup> While the book does not focus closely in on them, Fried also acknowledges the plethora of more localized, group-specific pageant performance traditions from the turn-of-the-century onwards.

Additionally, a number of articles focus specifically on minority-driven American political pageants, including those by Stephen J. Whitfield, Robert Skloot, and Lauren Love, that individually explore two of the pageants discussed within this article, examining the pageants’ “civic purpose” and ability to activate Jewish solidarity.<sup>[10]</sup> Likewise, in “Performing the Polish-American Patriot,” Megan E. Geigner similarly examines theatrical pageant performances that serve to reiterate hyphenated other-American identity as a means of galvanizing patriotic kinship.<sup>[11]</sup> In this same vein, Martha S. LoMonaco’s work on nineteenth-century Mormon pageants looks at historical pageantry as creating a foothold in American historical narrative through performance.<sup>[12]</sup>

Taken together, recent scholarship displays a clear interest – albeit a diffuse one – in the performance practices of minority groups in America who used pageantry as a means of articulating their hyphenated American identity. While this article seeks to add to this body of literature, our goal is also to further that discussion by including the ways in which mid-century Jewish-American pageants built upon such an American tradition, while, conversely, discussing how we can use these past pageants as a way to explore the turns in performance practices in moments where Jewish and American-Jewish identity are in jeopardy. Our approach offers a macro view of how pageants were utilized as a means of identity production and group unification spanning three decades.

Despite the overall decline in popularity of the pageant form across America, the mid-century Jewish pageants we discuss display a continuation of those same ideologies fostered by the American pageant tradition, but with particular, persuasive goals sensitive to the situation of American and global Jewry. While small towns no longer emphasized the performance of patriotism, this became increasingly

important for urban Jews. For the Jewish community, the pageant both energized the community and spoke to the wider American public through the media representations of the large gatherings. Though the American pageant form by this point had morphed into the “folk play, the restored museum village, or the annual historical festival . . . depict[ing] the past as a separate world from the present,” Jewish American pageants before, during, and after the Second World War successfully bridged the gap between the ethnic enclave and the Christian public.<sup>[13]</sup> Employing familiar techniques and tropes that were long central to American civil religion,<sup>[14]</sup> these pageants continued the American pageantry legacy while utilizing the theatrical form as a successful way to assert an overtly didactic message: Jews are a unique and worthy people, they lack a homeland (*Romance of a People*), they are threatened with destruction from un-American enemies (*We Will Never Die*), and they share core American values while contributing to national history (the Tercentennial pageants). Each moment of pageantry had its own agenda, but the overall message—the insistence that Jews were worthy and patriotic Americans—remained throughout. By performing these Jewish narratives within but not eclipsed by an American narrative, these pageants performed Jewish difference, thereby drawing attention to specifically Jewish issues before Jewish and broader audiences.

Furthermore, these pageants also represent a unique moment in the American pageantry legacy, as they also interpolate its historical tradition of ethnic subsumption into a homogenous (Anglo-)American, nationalist narrative. These three mid-twentieth-century pageants allow Jews to represent themselves (i.e. prominent Jews in American history) while still arguing for their Americanness and adopting a stance that hybridizes the American aesthetic and American nationalism. Additionally, we examine the ways in which these Jewish-American pageants are responsive to their contemporary moment in explicit and didactic ways that limit their potential for longevity but that offer themselves up to historians as illuminating points of reference into their cultural and political contexts. We examine each of these pageants, describing their content and how they situated the Jewish community in light of contemporary issues that a large, well-attended performance could address.

### **1933: *The Romance of a People***

*The Romance of a People* was a three-hour pageant of epic proportions: a program “which symbolize[d] four thousand years of colorful history—history high in its drama, packed with pathos, terrible in tragedies, glorious in its victories.”<sup>[15]</sup> The pageant featured 3,500 cast members, including singers and dancers reminiscent of a Greek Chorus on a massive scale, nearly all of whom were local residents of Chicago and members of the Jewish community.<sup>[16]</sup> To prevent chaos and cacophony from the humongous cast, director Isaac Van Grove opted to amplify mechanically the speeches and songs of the cast from a room hidden beneath the stage. Covered in a *Chicago Daily Tribune* article that ran the day after the initial performance, columnist Virginia Gardner’s discussion of the methods utilized by Van Grove for the production, and the fact that it merited newspaper coverage at all, provides evidence of its remarkable execution. “The control room and amplifying system made possible what Van Grove described as ‘the effect of an intimate theater two blocks long.’”<sup>[17]</sup> The marriage of artistry and technology not only assisted in executing the mass theatre in which Van Grove openly believed, but also aligned with the Century of Progress mission to promote technology unimaginable in the previous hundred years.<sup>[18]</sup> Van Grove is credited for pioneering amplified sound for a theatrical production, as he did in *The Romance of a People*.<sup>[19]</sup>

Across all press reports and published material about *The Romance of a People*, it is evident that the

public reception was strong. The word “colorful” appears a dozen times throughout the pageant’s press coverage, as do accolades about the audiences’ upturned faces and positive Jewish attitudes and self-opinion, such as in David and Goliath allegories.<sup>[20]</sup> The positive perception of the extravagance at Soldier Field is clear but seems largely to pertain to the material only aesthetically. While the production aimed to educate for the purposes of the Zionist cause, Van Grove and his producers spared no expense to generate entertainment and to immerse the audience in the spectacle.

Six months earlier in December 1932, Chicago audiences had an early taste when a massive Chanukah holiday pageant, also directed by Van Grove (and similarly produced by Meyer Weisgal), was staged at the Chicago Stadium, entitled “Israel Reborn.”<sup>[21]</sup> Though the cast size and audience numbers were more than doubled for *The Romance of a People*, the previous Jewish “theatrical spectacle” was heralded as a performance that “one sees once in a generation.”<sup>[22]</sup> Van Grove knew going into the colossal Soldier Field production what had worked so triumphantly only half a year prior for a similar Chicago audience. Van Grove was a staunch believer in the opportunity to create theatrical impact that “mass spectacle” afforded.<sup>[23]</sup> To Van Grove, the possibilities for emotional gravitas were substantially higher when utilizing pageantry and grand-scale spectacle, rather than realism that he considered “passé.”<sup>[24]</sup> It was the power of thousands of bodies in coordinated movement that Van Grove believed could elicit the vital response *The Romance of a People* needed.

While the pageant aimed to garner support and attention for the Zionist cause, it also allowed an emotional appeal to non-Jewish audience members. The pageant strove to engage Jews and Christians alike, so much so that it was commented on in nearly all reviews of the pageant production. Perhaps the *Chicago Daily News* reporter, S. J. Duncan-Clark, put it most poignantly in his pageant review that ran 5 July 1933, highlighting the community forged through pageantry:

There was laughter and weeping among the thronging spectators for the floodtide of emotion had been released. Christians and Jews grasped hands with a new sense of spiritual kinship. There were thousands of Christians present. All Christian creeds had joined in approving and promoting the magnificent project of their Jewish neighbors.<sup>[25]</sup>

While Duncan-Clark recognizes the pageant’s message of Jewish distinctiveness in order to highlight the specific plight of its people, he rightly points to the pageant’s goal of community orientation—attempting to bring others into the fight for Jewish lives abroad.

Regardless of, or perhaps due to, the diversity of the audience, the pageant itself was both a dramatic and edifying affair, chronicling notable events in Jewish history. The pageant depicted “forty centuries of religion” in the form of six episodes with two interludes, starting with a dramatization of the religion’s formation.<sup>[26]</sup> A 27-foot idol of the god Moloch surrounded by 500 slaves and worshippers set the scene for Judaism’s rejection of the false god, thereby depicting “the birth of true religious concepts.”<sup>[27]</sup>

Furthermore, this attempt at monotheistic universality is mentioned in the pageant’s program “Greeting and Tribute” penned by producer and script-writer Meyer Weisgal. Hailing the presumed diversity of the crowd, Weisgal declaimed, “Among you are representatives of all the races and creeds which are incorporated in the structure of the American Republic. The composition of this assembly bears equal witness, therefore, to the spirit of fellowship and mutual respect among diversities of faith and race.”<sup>[28]</sup>

While his program greeting closes with a reminder of the pageant's Zionist cause, Weisgal's preamble anticipates what would later be the American Jewish Tercentenary's purpose: realigning Jewishness within an American historical context and within a multiethnic community.

The pageant consisted of a prologue, six episodes, and two "interludes" (performed transitions) that outlined widely-known moments from "biblical and historical records," from ancient to present times.<sup>[29]</sup> Beginning with "The Creation," a scene depicted the first lines of the Torah (the Jewish Bible) and the creation of humanity, using chaotic lights and sound to represent "the morning of Creation, the freshness of the world as it came from the hand of the divine Artificer."<sup>[30]</sup> This scene was followed by the aforementioned birth of Judaism and Abraham's covenant with God after denouncing the impending sacrifice to a false god, the escape from slavery in Egypt, the building of the first temple and its subsequent destruction, exiles wandering in search of a new homeland, and finally, deliverance to a new Israel.

Part of the pageant's power comes not from the scenes depicted, but rather the sheer scale of the production itself. The thousands of bodies onstage before gigantic scenery, depicting, at turns, false idols, the temple in Jerusalem, and finally the future homeland, constituted a remarkable spectacle. The use of amplified sound enabled giant choreographed movement onstage to take place without worry about carrying noise, while the stereophonic voice-acting of forty or so actors depicting The Voice of God, Abraham, and other significant figures were hidden beneath the stage, merging media and performance technologies to enable unimpeded spectacle.

The production set for the pageant was claimed to be "unquestionably the most elaborate stage ever built" at Soldier Field.<sup>[31]</sup> A "mammoth" four level, 200-foot long, 150-foot wide set filled much of the stadium. "Fashioned to look like stone, the set, on the one hand, suggested the use of ancient materials, substantial enough to endure for thousands of years into the future. On the other hand, solid but blank, this place's history was waiting to be inscribed."<sup>[32]</sup> The tiered stage accommodated a chorus of 1,500 and an orchestra on a single level, with ample room left for the action of the performance,<sup>[33]</sup> with the temple at stage center, adorned with a Star of David.<sup>[34]</sup> Advanced coverage in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* raved of the pageant's precedent-breaking visual spectacle, including embedded floor lighting, four 35-foot lighting towers, and a giant glass "curtain" (35 feet long by 25 feet high) onto which colorful light effects would be projected.<sup>[35]</sup> These lights were used with great dramatic effect for the final stage picture: a single light blazed from darkness to illuminate the temple's star, as the sung prayer "Shema Yisrael/Hear, O Israel" brought the pageant to a close.<sup>[36]</sup>

The production's playbill also reflected the high level of community interest and involvement. Featuring advertisements and well-wishes from organizations and businesses citywide (both Jewish and secular), the program itself enacted a coherent community voice vouching support of the production, albeit a commercially motivated one.<sup>[37]</sup> The program serves as a material testament to the city's vested interest in the Jewish community's patronage. The range of pageant-specific advertisements include a message in handwritten Yiddish from Sophie Tucker of The 225 Club, a note to the "Jews of Chicago" from D. L. Toffenetti of the Triangle Restaurants franchise, and an ad from Flashtrac Sign Works, creators of "One of the Most Outstanding Features of Jewish Day," the illuminated Star of David used in the production.<sup>[38]</sup> The playbill, therefore, performed the same integrated community mentality that the pageant itself asserted and reflected a desire for its success from community supporters.

In his history of Soldier Field, Liam T. A. Ford notes that “rather than promoting assimilation into America’s melting pot, [*The Romance of a People*] helped make pride in being Jewish more acceptable to non-Jewish Chicagoans and at the same time, helped define what being Jewish would mean for generations of American Jews.”<sup>[39]</sup> Ford’s assertion as to the pageant’s reverberating impact on public performances of Jewishness in America in the generations to come certainly rings true when considering the next generation’s overlapping uses of spectacles for asserting Jewish-American acceptance. That said, the pageants in the decades that follow *The Romance of a People* differ in important ways, reflecting their altered political and cultural circumstances.

### 1943: *We Will Never Die*

World War II created a new context for Jewish-American pageantry. A decade after *The Romance of a People*, the fate of European Jews was desperate, survival in the balance, while at the same time the might of the American military was arrayed against their tormentors. Though, perhaps, saving Jews was not a prime motivator of American military involvement, the vicious anti-Semitism of the Nazis was used to justify the war effort, leading to sympathy for Jews and a rejection of the more overt forms of prejudice in the United States.

The 1943 pageant, *We Will Never Die*, was produced at a moment in which wartime patriotism was linked to a hatred of anti-Semitism, and the pageant built on this connection. *We Will Never Die* premiered at New York’s Madison Square Garden, emphasizing that preserving Jewish culture and community was consistent with American values, and it featured a laundry list of theatre-celebrity involvement, including direction by Moss Hart, script by Ben Hecht, music by Kurt Weil, and was produced by Billy Rose. As their titles suggest, the decade between *Romance of a People* and *We Will Never Die* dramatically altered the substance of these theatrical narratives.

While both pageants featured distinctly Jewish narratives, *The Romance of a People* represented hope and galvanization, whereas 1943’s *We Will Never Die*, facing the grim realities of Nazi crimes, presented a desperate plea for Jewish safety and mobilization to assure it. Both pageants were attended by both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences,<sup>[40]</sup> and each addressed the future of Jewish inclusion and preservation. While *We Will Never Die* was more didactic, both pageants played off ethnic distinctiveness—Jews as a special category of “Americans”—in gaining the attention of an audience that accepted the legitimacy of that difference. Perhaps the pageants had limited effects in changing American policy, but in performance, they made the case that Jewish interests were American interests.

*We Will Never Die*, performed on 9 May 1943 at the Chicago Stadium, proffered similar themes as *The Romance of a People*, but with darker, more somber tones. The pageant was a “memorial to the 2,000,000 Jews” that the producers stated had already been murdered in Europe, and was penned by acclaimed Jewish-American playwright and screenwriter, Ben Hecht.<sup>[41]</sup> *We Will Never Die* used vastly disparate tactics from *The Romance of a People*, and was credited as the first wide-scale dramatic presentation of the destruction of the Jews in Europe.<sup>[42]</sup> Contrary to the optimism of the 1933 pageant, *We Will Never Die* threw violent, gory details at audiences, hoping to make viewers incensed at the slaughter, rather than to convince the crowds of the goodness and godliness of the Jewish people.

*We Will Never Die* featured a cast of 1,000 and garnered a Chicago audience between 15,000 to 20,000.<sup>[43]</sup> It was treated as a critical step in advancing the cause of the Jewish people. The *Chicago*

*Daily Tribune* titled their review, “Pageant Stirs 15,000 to Vow: Jew Must Live.”<sup>[44]</sup> Using high praise, the *Tribune* reviewer, Edward Barry, wrote,

From a majestic stage flanked by representations of the tablets of the law and the star of David, 1,000 American Jews last night delivered a plea to an audience of 15,000, and thru these 15,000 to the world, to heed the plight of the Jews of Europe before the last remnants of the race there are sacrificed to the Nazi fury.<sup>[45]</sup>

In contrast to the 1933 review by James O’Donnell Bennett, who reviewed *The Romance of a People*, Barry does not differentiate the Jews and gentiles in the audience, perhaps indicating the unifying, humanist appeal of the material.

Unlike the historical epic of *The Romance of a People*, *We Will Never Die* opted for relative naturalism in the script. Though the production set consisted of “two towering Tablets containing the Ten Commandments loom[ing] at the back of the stage,” much of the dialogue is realistic and personable, albeit didactic, and often gruesomely so.<sup>[46]</sup> The show begins with the Kol Nidre chant from Yom Kippur,<sup>[47]</sup> a shofar is blown, and a rabbi emerges from between the two tablets to introduce and honor the plight of “the two million who have been killed in Europe.”<sup>[48]</sup> The rabbi gives the stage over to two narrators who begin a series of short episodes, each addressing the Jewish plight. The first of four episodes begins with a “roll call” of important Jewish contributors to American and global life—somewhat foreshadowing the Tercentenary narratives—including a disparate collection of individuals, such as Luis Ponce de Leon, Benjamin Disraeli, Marcel Proust, and Samuel Gompers. The second episode chronicles one Jewish-American soldier’s wartime experience and urgent telegraph home on the brink of his death during American defeat in the Philippines. Episode Three chronicles the struggle and uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto,<sup>[49]</sup> and the pageant closes with an episode entitled, “Remember Us,” consisting of the dead announcing their gruesome ends at the hands of the Nazis, while beseeching the audience not to forget them.

Closing with two narrators urging American involvement in the Jewish plight, the pageant used the rhetoric of the American ethic:

We [Americans] have brave soldiers who are fighting to victory. But the massacre of the unarmed civilians is beyond the reach of their guns. The desert and the Mediterranean are the battle front and they are honorably engaged on it. The massacre in Europe is our battle front—and we are not honorably engaged on it.<sup>[50]</sup>

Then, making a greater, global claim, a second narrator decries, “the crime of Europe calls for the mobilization of every shred of righteousness and spiritual power left in the world.”<sup>[51]</sup>

While *We Will Never Die* offered a persuasive cry for a cohesive front and fight against the Axis and Nazism in order to rescue the remaining European Jewry, support from American Jewish organizations was spotty. Though Ben Hecht, the pageant’s scriptwriter, presented a work-in-progress to garner financial support from the Jewish community, “with representatives of nearly three-dozen Jewish organizations,” the groups “could not agree to work together in support of the forthcoming pageant. Even

when Hecht . . . offered to withdraw the formal endorsement of the controversial Committee for a Jewish Army and to work only behind the scenes, the others declined to sponsor *We Will Never Die*.”[\[52\]](#)

Furthermore, the pageant attempted not only “[t]o heighten concern for doomed coreligionists . . . it was also targeted at public opinion and at the nation’s capital. Hecht and his collaborators . . . wanted to stimulate a change in policy.”[\[53\]](#) This ambitious goal was also ultimately unattainable. As Whitfield argues in “The Politics of Pageantry, 1936-1946”:

Perhaps none of these pageants was great enough, soaring enough, memorable enough . . . but there is a more likely explanation. It asks too much of art to expect it to halt the juggernaut of tyranny. Nazism and fascism were too powerful for that. . . . Neither masterpieces nor spectacles could influence geopolitics; and the lesson that many Jews learned is that, while art can enhance and illuminate and expose power, only countervailing force can effectively confront it. . . . That realization meant consolidating a sense of peoplehood, instilling in American Jewish audiences a sense of transatlantic solidarity.[\[54\]](#)

While transatlantic solidarity was important during the war years due to the threat to Jewry in Europe, other issues took priority during the 1950s as Jews attempted to demonstrate their bona fides as “Americans.” Whitfield points toward what would become the strategy of the yearlong American Jewish celebration to follow a decade after *We Will Never Die*.

### **1954-55: A Return to Different Roots**

After the war, like so much else, the politics of American-Jewish pageants were indelibly altered. During the 1950s, rather than reaching outward, emphasizing a “transatlantic solidarity,” the 1954-55 Jewish-American Tercentenary pageants focused inwards, emphasizing the particularly Jewish role in the development of American life and culture over the past 300 years. These pageants were intended to incorporate Jews into American collective memory, perhaps given the concern about seeing Jews as Communists.[\[55\]](#)

With the existential threat to Jewish life resolved in Europe, the next challenge for American Jewry was to demonstrate to fellow citizens questioning their patriotism that Jews had long been integral to American life. American-Jewish pageantry turned to its local soil to advance a narrative of Jewish “Americanness,” which became further emphasized as the Cold War tensions increased and questions of loyalty became salient. Post-war Jewish-American pageantry presented a narrative of long-standing Jewish commitment to America since its founding, no longer suggesting that the United States must do something for Jews, but instead that Jews have done something for America. The culmination of this assimilationist, hybrid-identity of Jewish-American status was the year-long American Jewish Tercentenary celebration, occurring from September 1954 through May 1955. Celebrated nationwide, the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jewish American presence was memorialized through publications, celebratory events, television and radio formats, and pageant spectacles.

The Tercentenary was well-timed for this assertion of the embeddedness of Jews in American life. The specter of Communism conjured a need to perform a non-threatening—solidly American—Jewish identity, and a choice was made to create a celebration that publicly proclaimed this allegiance. Unlike the massive

spectacles in the 1930s and '40s, these Tercentenary pageants were on a smaller scale,<sup>[56]</sup> a function surely of a decline in large-scale pageants, and perhaps a reaction to large-scale rallies in Germany and the Soviet Union. These pageants were performed in cities across the country but with more modest casts and in smaller venues. With their local orientation, these pageants had a different position in creating public awareness and perception than the highly successful mass pageants that had taken place previously and were centered mainly in Chicago and New York, with subsequent tour stops at other urban centers, including Detroit and Washington D.C. Although hints of the post-war assimilationist movement could be seen in sporadic pageants and publications from the immediate post-war years through the early nineteen-fifties, the Jewish Tercentenary was distinct: it hoped to include every Jewish community, large or small, in the national celebration of Jewish influence on American life and democracy.

Founded in 1953, the American Jewish Tercentenary Committee (AJTC) was formed to promote and establish the commemorative year of anniversary celebrations, building on the tercentennial theme of "Man's Opportunities and Responsibilities Under Freedom." To this end, numerous pamphlets were published under the auspices of the organization, created to aid and encourage Jewish communities and organizations taking part across the country. Explicit in their intended goals, the materials from the AJTC provided a clear set of instructions to follow for all manner of anniversary celebration attempts nationwide. In their clarity, these instructional booklets asked that a certain ideal narrative be followed and performed across all related performance platforms. That narrative not only asserted the early and unchanging importance of Jews in America but also their unceasing dedication to the American way of life, emphasizing democratic governance.

In the numerous texts published by or with the support of the AJTC, American democracy is central. The texts didactically indicate Jewish involvement through centuries of American politics and patriotism, including one text referencing Oscar Straus's contention that the "Hebrew Old Testament" influenced America's foundational democratic ideals.<sup>[57]</sup> What is abundantly clear in this heavy-handed commentary is that the Jewish organization saw a need to counter the association of Jews and Communism, a perspective widely accepted in the Depression years but receding in the post-war period.<sup>[58]</sup> The culmination of the Tercentenary celebration contributed to delinking Jewishness from Communist associations in the minds of the American public, despite the continuing presence of Jews in the shrinking Communist movement.

Even prior to the Tercentenary celebration, the American Jewish Committee was laying the groundwork for the later message of Jewish-American involvement in foundational American democracy. A pamphlet published in 1950, written by David De Sola Pool, chairman of the American Jewish Historical Society provisional committee for planning the tercentenary project, addresses these themes. In the pamphlet's culminating page, De Sola Pool lists the "Fruits of the Tercentenary Celebration," providing insight into his, and presumably the committee's, goals for the tercentenary celebration year. Heralding the coming reinvigoration of Jewish presence within American society, De Sola Pool states that the tercentenary celebration "carried out in this broad national way will make vivid for all Americans, Christians and Jews alike, how deep and centuried is the stake of the Jews in the United States," and furthermore, that the tercentenary "will further devotion to the Hebraic ideals of democracy that have helped to mold American democracy."<sup>[59]</sup>

In 1954, a reissue of the 1905 events of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary was published by the American Jewish Tercentenary Committee, seemingly as another means of naturalizing the occurrence of the 300<sup>th</sup>. In

1905, the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Jewish settlement in the US was celebrated on Thanksgiving Day, in an effort to “make the celebration a truly national event,” underscoring the centrality of American secular holidays and nationalism within Jewish-American identity.<sup>[60]</sup> The official celebratory proceedings for the opening event included addresses from the Catholic Bishop Coadjutor of New York, David Greer, as well as secular figures such as former president, Grover Cleveland, governor of New York State, Frank Higgins, and Mayor of New York City, George McClellan. The ceremony closed with an audience rendition of “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.”<sup>[61]</sup> This pan-religious, nationalist service was designed to establish Jewish Americans’ place within the cornucopia of American identities. However, the vast historical distance between the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the tercentenary couldn’t possibly have been anticipated, and the Tercentenary events had to take into account the changes in America and globally that had occurred during the past half-century.

Within her pamphlet outlining Tercentenary pageant guidelines, Adele Gutman Nathan echoes the linking of Jews and early American democracy: “From the time the Jewish pilgrims arrived in 1654 at the little port of New Amsterdam . . . Jews as individuals and as groups have participated dramatically in each step of the creation of our nation, in its never-ending search for true democracy.”<sup>[62]</sup> With one small exception,<sup>[63]</sup> she fails to mention the enormous Jewish pageants of the past two decades within her description of previous American pageantry, though she mentions other popular productions from the time. This lack of connection between the Tercentenary and earlier pageants highlights their profound ideological and aspirational differences.

While *The Romance of a People, We Will Never Die*, and the Tercentenary pageants all fall into the pageantry category, utilizing particular features of narration, spectacle, anti-realism, and episodic structures, their similarities end with that. As Nathan’s pamphlet outlined, the Tercentenary pageants strove to integrate Jewish historical presence in the United States in the grander American narrative, therefore establishing loyal Jewish “Americanness” in the post-war period. Just as earlier American historical pageants, such as the 1914 *Pageant and Masque of St. Louis*,<sup>[64]</sup> aimed to create an optimistic future by crafting an idealized past, the Tercentenary pageants strove for the same goal. Conversely, *The Romance of a People* and *We Will Never Die* performed Jewish difference to assert their message, while the Tercentenary performed proudly assimilationist narratives.

With communities permitted either to purchase ready-made scripts (offering titles such as *Faith and Freedom*, *The Lamp of Liberty*, and *We Came to an Island*)<sup>[65]</sup> or to pen their own community-oriented pageants, towns and cities across America performed their own local renditions of American Jewish history. These pageants simultaneously asserted contemporary (and historical) Jewish presence alongside Jewish integrity and ingenuity throughout American history. The basic narrative entailed several narrators framing a number of short episodes that featured notable figures through introduction or initial verbal reenactment of the scene by the narrators.

For example, the 1955 pageant, *The Quilt*, written by Mae Clement Perley for the Louisville, Kentucky Tercentenary celebration, includes episodes describing Jewish ties to Abraham Lincoln, community ties to Louis Brandeis, and dramatized peacemaking amongst Jews and the previous Native American dwellers of Kentucky, all being reenacted in order to educate two Louisville youth about their community’s illustrious history.<sup>[66]</sup> Highly didactic, the narrative of Jewish impact on American life and society is clear. Though specific to Kentucky history, Perley’s script bears strong resemblance to more generic pageant scripts available for purchase, written to be performed across the country, and available

in formats either broad enough to suit any local setting, or able to be shaped to include local events and memories.

*The Golden Door*, penned by Norman Corwin for the American Jewish Tercentenary Committee, is an example of the former, that could be tailored to any community and offered an American narrative, depicting a broad Jewish-American history. Featuring numerous short monologues from notable public figures attesting to positive Jewish-American presence, the script is comprised of short, didactic vignettes. Monologues are delivered from figures as diverse as George Washington, Theodore Roosevelt, Levi Strauss, and the voice of God, among many others.

Another alternative was a that enabled portions of the play script to be personalized for local performances. This was the case of *Faith and Freedom*, written by Marc Siegal for the Tercentenary committee. The script is comprised of the same narrated episodic format, and attends to both local and nationwide Jewish-American history, even including a pre-written but optional scene, available for use if the community possessed an esteemed member who had been “an eyewitness to the growth of [the] Jewish community since 1880.”<sup>[67]</sup> If so, such a person could have been featured in a scene in conversation with the narrator, Dr. Goldman, as an integral part of the plot and pageant’s mission. This potential character, “Mr. Blank,” could deliver a monologue on the hardships of early Jewish settlement in the local area, including needing to move frequently as the Jewish neighborhoods changed. Additionally, the character emphasizes the increased community engagement and local involvement in the present time: “Around (blank year) we elected our first (name of public office), (name of person). There was real excitement when he won.”<sup>[68]</sup>

Much like *The Golden Door*, *This is Our Home*, written by I. Goldberg and Yuri Suhl for the Committee for the 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Jewish Settlement in the U.S., similarly enabled personalization, though also incorporated Yiddish into the core script, with nearly 50% of dialogue in Yiddish. Unlike other Tercentenary pageant scripts, this suggests a different Jewish community, one in which assimilation had not entirely erased Yiddish-language usage, potentially indicating a more recently immigrated community audience and/or one more interested in maintaining a more visible Jewish presence in a secularizing nation. In spite of its Yiddish components, however, *This is Our Home* almost verbatim follows the formulaic model of incorporating a Jewish thread into known nationalistic, American narratives. With four episodes and voice-overs by Albert Einstein, Chaim Zhitlowsky, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the play begins with a rendition of “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” followed by English and Yiddish preambles that echo each other’s statement of the shared heritage of American and Jewish-American beginnings.

This performative tactic, which extends beyond the presentation of Jewish presence in early America, led to grander statements of Jewish exemplification of true American democratic ideals. This juncture was ripe for classic American pageantry techniques, “at the intersection of progressivism and antimodernism [that] placed nostalgic imagery in a dynamic, future-oriented reform context.”<sup>[69]</sup> As was the case with the two previous pageant moments, the Tercentenary responded to contemporary political conditions.

Ultimately, while the American Jewish Tercentenary celebration seems to have aided the strengthening of Jewish public image in America, the festivities, tributes, and commemorations of 1954-55 were less frequently or substantially reported in newspapers and made a less significant mark on public memory. Unlike the earlier massive-scale pageants, the Jewish Tercentenary was about blending in to the standing American narrative, erasing radical associations, naturalizing patriotism and nationalist contributions, and

asserting neighborliness.

## Politics of Pageants

Each of the pageants we examine in this essay assert Jewish significance in their individual performances; either pushing toward redefining the group's investment in broader Jewish issues, or by insisting upon Jewish importance in early and foundational American narratives. These pageants came about during such "times of crisis" in which the necessity of American interest and involvement in Jewishness needed to be emphasized, galvanized, and supported.<sup>[70]</sup> As previously discussed, each of these mid-century pageants did so in its own manner specific to the cultural and political contexts in which they emerged, but collectively they performed Jewishness in a broader American context and in that way similarly reinvented Jewish-Americaness in their respective decades. Furthermore, each performance discussed pageants as the appropriate mode of performance by building upon America's long history of pageantry as a means for ethnic communities' performed articulation and redefinition of their own hybrid identities.

Pageants are both theatrically significant and historically situated. That is their purpose and their charm: they uncover the themes of a community and the challenges that are being faced. As performances, they attempt to persuade their audiences about those issues that are currently engaged. These three decades of pageants, produced at distinct historical moments, demonstrate that the idea of a "Jewish pageant"—or for that matter any pageant—must be contextualized. Even more than most forms of theatricality, the pageant attempts to inspire or to rouse a public that sees itself as belonging together and sharing common assumptions and desires. The pageant form is, in some sense, the most communal of all dramatic genres: this is true not only because of its massive production values, the fact that the performers are often members of the same community as the audience, and that the authors have deep local roots, but also because the themes and the morals build a sense of unity. The pageant provides a nexus of the study of theatre, history, and sociology.

While these three mid-century Jewish-American pageants each present didactic accounts of ethnic history, they do so with markedly different agendas, each a presentation of and response to Jewish-American needs and interests at the time. Beginning with the start of the worldwide Jewish crisis in 1933 as Hitler took power in Germany and spanning through the post-war period of critical ethnic assimilation, each of these pageants served to both attract broad-scale interest through the mass-appeal of spectacle and sought to channel nationwide Jewish-American interest into a singular political performance (or set of performances), thereby powerfully enacting a desired outcome, from recognition to rescue to the reconstitution of Americaness. While each pageant utilized Jewish history and linked it to the present, each depended on a different set of values and historical events, shaping collective memory for specific purposes. For this reason, too, each pageant may itself offer fruitful insight into the moment in which it emerged.

Because of their questionable literary authority and their focus on events of the moment, it is understandable that, unlike canonical drama, pageants will not be reprised over time, and, as a result, few scholars have focused on examples of the form as signals of current civic concerns and ethnic worries. These three Jewish-American pageants, however, demonstrate that such historically contingent productions have value as indicators of the state of society. The community provides a stage that these dramas fill. For all their local interest, pageants reveal the world.

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[1] The authors thank Megan Geigner and Grace Overbeke for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

[2] Earl Mullin, "Holiday Throng at Fair Nears Monday Record," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (5 July 1933): 1. The current capacity is only 61,500. For the 1933 pageant, seating spilled from the stadium seating onto the stadium green, with makeshift seating filling the playing area all the way up to the stage. (Lauren Love, "Performing Jewish Nationhood: The Romance of a People at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair," *TDR: The Drama Review* 55, no. 3 (2011): 61.)

[3] Arthur A. Goren, *The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 196.

[4] S. E. Wilmer, *Theatre, Society, and the Nation: Staging American Identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 108.

[5] Esther Willard Bates, *The Art of Producing Pageants* (Walter H. Baker Company: Boston, 1925), 240.

[6] Wilmer, *Theatre, Society, and the Nation*, 11.

[7] David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 4.

[8] *Ibid.*, 4.

[9] Richard M. Fried, *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians are Coming!: Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold-War America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 122.

[10] For reference, see Stephen J. Whitfield, "The Politics of Pageantry, 1936-1946," *American Jewish History* 84, no. 3 (September, 1996): 221-250.; Robert Skloot, "We Will Never Die": The Success and Failure of a Holocaust Pageant," *Theatre Journal* 37, no. 2 (May, 1995): 167-180.; and Love, "Performing Jewish Nationhood," 57-67.

[11] Megan Geigner, "Performing the Polish-American patriot: civic performance and hyphenated identity in World War I Chicago," *Theatre History Studies* 34 (2015): 59-78.

[12] Martha S. LoMonaco, "Mormon Pageants as American Historical Performance," *Theatre Symposium* 17 (2009): 69-83.

[13] *Ibid.*, 288.

[14] Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no.1, (1967): 1-21.

[15] "The Romance of a People." *Official World's Fair Weekly: A Century of Progress International Exposition* Week Ending July 8<sup>th</sup> (Chicago: The Cuneo Press Inc., 1933), 6.

[16] Love, "Performing Jewish Nationhood," 63.

[17] Virginia Gardener, "Unseen Actors Supply Sound at Jewish Pageant: Sing, Play and Speak in Hidden Room," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (4 July, 1933): 4.

[18] *Ibid.*, 6.

[19] Garfield discusses the use of amplified sound in *The Romance of the People* in his article about the pageant, arguing that Van Grove's use of amplification in this context was totally unique for theatrical performances in the US. "The 'binaural, electro-acoustical system,' as it was called, was a highly innovative sound set-up – probably the first public use in the United States of what has since come to be known as stereophonic sound." David Garfield, "The Romance of a People," *Educational Theatre Journal* 24, no. 4 (1972): 440.

[20] James O'Donnell Bennett, "125,000 Witness Jewish Spectacle: Mighty Drama Traces History Back 4,000 Years; Climax of Jewry's Day at Fair," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (4 July, 1933): 2.

[21] "The Romance of a People," *Official World's Fair Weekly: A Century of Progress International Exposition*, 6.

[22] *Ibid.*, 6.

[23] Garfield, "The Romance of a People," 436.

[24] *Ibid.*, 436.

[25] S. J. Duncan-Clark, "Jewish 'Romance of a People' Kindles Thrill of Faith in 150,000 Spectators," *The Chicago Daily News* (5 July, 1933).

[26] Rev. John Evans, "Jewish pageant to depict 40 centuries of religion," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (9 June, 1933): 10.

[27] *Ibid.*, 10.

[28] Chicago Jewish Historical Society, "The Romance of a People" pageant program reprint from 1933 (Chicago: Chicago Jewish Historical Society, 2000), 1.

[29] Ibid., 17.

[30] Ibid., 18.

[31] Liam T. A. Ford, *Soldier Field: A Stadium and its City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 157.

[32] Love, "Performing Jewish Nationhood," 60.

[33] Edward Moore, "Stage Effects at Jewish Fete to Make History: Lighting Arrangements to be Feature," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (17 June, 1933): 6.

[34] Chicago Jewish Historical Society, "The Romance of a People," 18.

[35] Moore, "Stage Effects at Jewish Fete to Make History," 6.

[36] Chicago Jewish Historical Society, "The Romance of a People," 19.

[37] While the Pageant program includes Exposition-wide advertisements, it also contains numerous "Jewish Day" specific advertisements and messages from sponsors.

[38] Chicago Jewish Historical Society, "The Romance of a People," 56.

[39] Ford, *Soldier Field: A Stadium and its City*, 155.

[40] While audience statistics are not known to be available, the sheer numbers of spectators that attended both events render ethnic and religious homogeneity highly unlikely. In the first performance, *The Romance of a People* performed in front of anywhere between 125,000 and 150,000 people, depending on the source. *We Will Never Die* performed before an estimated 15,000-20,000 (for the opening Chicago performance). Furthermore, *We Will Never Die* had a significant tour around the US, including a stop in Washington, DC, where President Roosevelt sent First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in his stead, as well as numerous cabinet, Supreme Court, and Congress members (See Medoff 2002).

[41] *We Will Never Die Official Program* from Madison Square Garden 9 March, 1943 (New York: Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews, 1943), cover.

[42] certainlyl ESexecuted this through loosa, 2002."ers in attendance that night included First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, all the way Rafael Medoff, *Militant Zionism* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 85.

[43] Edward Barry, "Pageant Stirs 15,000 to Vow Jew Must Live," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (20 May, 1943): 1.

[44] Ibid., 1.

[45] Ibid., 1.

[46] Ben Hecht, *We Will Never Die: A Memorial Dedicated to the 2,000,000 Jewish Dead of Europe* Pageant Script (New York: Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews, 1943), 11.

[47] The Jewish Day of Atonement.

[48] Hecht, *We Will Never Die*, 11.

[49] The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is generally considered to have begun on April 19, 1943. The original production of *We Will Never Die* occurred in New York on March 9<sup>th</sup> prior to the start of the Uprising, as did the Washington DC performance on April 12<sup>th</sup>, but Hecht later incorporated an additional scene entitled “The Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto,” which was performed in Los Angeles on July 21, 1943. The date written in the script for the start of the uprising was March 17, 1943 (Hecht, *We Will Never Die*, 29).

[50] Ibid., 39.

[51] Ibid., 39.

[52] Whitfield, “The Politics of Pageantry, 1936-1946,” 239. The Committee for a Jewish Army had been proposed by the Zionist Vladimir Jabotinsky, and was designed to create a fighting force against Hitler, but which would also support the aspiration for a Jewish-led Palestine.

[53] Ibid., 239.

[54] Ibid., 251.

[55] Aaron Beim and Gary Alan Fine, “The Cultural Frameworks of Prejudice: Reputational Images of the Postwar Disjuncture of Jews and Communism,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2007): 376.

[56] On the larger-end of cast size, Chicago’s main Tercentenary pageant featured 1,000 performers, compared to *The Romance of a People*’s 3,500.

[57] David De Sola Pool, *Planning for the Tercentenary of the Settlement of the Jews in the United States in 1954-55* (New York: American Jewish Historical Society, 1950).

[58] Beim and Fine, “The Cultural Frameworks of Prejudice,” 375.

[59] De Sola Pool, *Planning for the Tercentenary of the Settlement of the Jews in the United States in 1954-55*, 414.

[60] Judith Friedman Rosen, “In Search of... Earlier American Jewish Anniversary Celebrations: 1905 and 1954,” *American Jewish History* 92, no. 4 (2004): 481.

[61] American Jewish Tercentenary Committee, *Exercises in the celebration of the Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Settlement of the Jews in the United States, 1655-1905* original pamphlet reprint (New York: American Jewish Tercentenary Committee, 1954).

[62] Adele Gutman Nathan, *Producing Tercentenary Pageants* (New York: American Jewish Tercentenary Committee, 1954), 7.

[63] Nathan mentions a single Jewish themed pageant/play from wartime, *The Eternal Road* (1937), though only to use it as an example of what not to do: don't use "canned music" (Ibid., 9).

[64] "St. Louis officials desperately sought to present a different civic image to the nation. They felt that a successful historical pageant would not only cleanse the city's tarnished reputation nationwide, but also advance a single civic identity around which the various people and classes could rally to enact reforms at home." Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, 159-60.

[65] Listed in American Jewish Tercentenary Committee, *Program Materials for the American Jewish Tercentenary* (New York: American Jewish Tercentenary Committee, 1954).

[66] Mae [Maie] Clement Perley, *The Quilt* (Louisville: Jewish Tercentenary Committee of the Conference of Jewish Organizations, December 1954). Written for presentation in Louisville on March 8, 1955.

[67] Marc Siegel, *Faith and Freedom: A Dramatic Presentation* (New York: American Jewish Tercentenary, 1954), 20.

[68] Ibid., 21.

[69] Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, 5.

[70] Wilmer, *Theatre, Society, and the Nation*, 11.



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