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Silent Films – What Is There to Translate? – *Ost und West* (1923) in English, German, and Yiddish

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The article explores the translation of silent films, specifically focusing on the film, *Ost und West* (*East and West*) (1923). It addresses the broader question of whether silent films can be translated and delves into the methods and practices used to render these films in German, English, and Yiddish. In the case of *Ost und West*, an engaged comic drama that was seen in Austria as a thoughtful and heartening work in support of beleaguered Viennese Jews, was transformed in the United States into a slapstick comedy befitting a Vaudeville presentation and, for some, into a film that is actually offensive to Jewish viewers and should be censored for its alleged sacrilegious tendencies. The argument in the article addresses the broad nature of such research, which extends beyond textual translation to a wide selection of primary materials and the consideration of social, economic, cultural, and historical contexts. Accordingly, it is argued that film translation requires a multidisciplinary approach that combines insights from Film Studies, Translation Studies, and cultural and historical contexts. The findings describe the manner in which the film, *Ost und West*, was translated, adapted, and received in different contexts and review the scholarly reception of the film, which is at times anachronistic and limited by a narrow disciplinary approach.
Keywords: audiovisual translation; film translation; silent films; German; English; Yiddish

1. Introduction

In this article, I explore the extensive and multifaceted nature of translating silent films into different linguistic and national contexts by concentrating on the translation, adaptation, and reception of a single silent film: *Ost und West* (*East and West*) (1923). I look at two versions of the film: One with intertitles in German, and one with bilingual intertitles in English and in Yiddish. The discussion underscores that translation extends beyond mere language conversion, encompassing various dialects, sociolects, humor, and cultural registers.

The article also emphasizes the necessity of a multidisciplinary approach in studying film translation, integrating insights from Film Studies, Translation Studies, and cultural and historical contexts. This broader perspective is crucial for understanding the complex dynamics

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at play in the reception of translated films. The example of *Ost und West* demonstrates that historical and economic contexts influence translation choices and, consequently, the film's perception in different regions. The conclusion suggests that contemporary approaches to film translation research may be limited by anachronistic perspectives, advocating for a more nuanced and contextually aware methodology. This call for a multidisciplinary study reinforces the need for comprehensive analysis in preserving the integrity and cultural significance of silent films in translation.

I begin this article by reviewing the existing research on the translation of silent films in general, and the translation of silent films in Yiddish in particular. I follow with a summary of the plot of the film, *Ost und West*, and with two separate sections about the adaptation and the reception of the film, first in German, and then in English and in Yiddish (as the film was distributed in the United States in a bilingual version). I follow this discussion with a section that reviews contemporary scholarship about the film. In my conclusion, I underscore the extent to which the film was presented and received differently in Austria and in the United States—as well as the extent to which existing scholarship about *Ost und West* is limited both by anachronistic and disciplinary approaches.

2. Existing Research

There is little material about the translation of silent films, and virtually no material on the translation of silent films into Yiddish. Among the best-known sources on this issue are the works of Markus Nornes (*Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema*; Nornes 2007) and Michael Cronin (*Translation Goes to the Movies*; Cronin 2009). As Cronin writes: "A common misnomer about silent films is that they were silent" (2009, 3). He enumerates, as do other scholars, the abundance of methods that were used to translate and produce dialogue in the Silent Cinema. These methods, in addition to intertitles (and later, subtitles), include a narrator, a magic lantern that screened titles on a separate screen, actors speaking behind the screen, sound effects, and of course, live music. Nornes is best known for his work on early Japanese Cinema, but he also provides an entire chapter on the translation of silent film in general, with examples from primary research that demonstrate the liberties that were taken by translators of intertitles for various linguistic, cultural, and political reasons (2007, 99–101). Nornes also discusses the Yiddish Cinema in the United States (120–122) and the changes in the methods

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of screening and translating silent films as a result of immigration and demographic changes. Other important sources are Siegbert Salomon Prawer's *Between Two Worlds: The Jewish Presence in German and Austrian Film, 1910-1933* (Prawer 2007), Ioana Crăciun's *Die Dekonstruktion des Bürgerlichen im Stummfilm der Weimarer Republik* (The deconstruction of the bourgeois in silent film of the Weimar Republic) (Crăciun 2015), Daniela Sannwald's "Approaches: A Working Report on the Intertitle Reconstruction" (Sannwald 1995), Thomas Elsaesser's "Social Mobility and the Fantastic: German Silent Cinema" (Elsaesser 1990), Holger Jörg's *Die sagen- und märchenhafte Leinwand* (The legendary and fairytale canvas) (Jörg 1994), Alexandra Monchick's "German Silent Film and the 'Zeitoper': The Case of Max Brand's Maschinist Hopkins" (Monchick 2017), Paul Matthew St. Pierre's *Cinematography in the Weimar Republic* (St. Pierre 2018), and others.

Perhaps the most recent and most significant source on the translation of silent films is *The Translation of Films: 1900-1950*, an edited collection by Carol O'Sullivan and Jean-François Cornu (O'Sullivan and Cornu 2019). The collection does not address silent films exclusively, but features a good number of scholars, archivists, restorers, and film-historians that address the issue of silent film translation in general, and translating intertitles in particular (Barr 2019; Dixon 2019; La Tour 2019; Moustacchi 2019; O'Sullivan 2019; Weissbrod 2019). Charles Barr discusses the creativity of intertitle design and translation, referring to Alfred Hitchcock's own contribution as title designer at the beginning of his career (2019, 84–85). Rachel Weissbrod, while not discussing silent films exclusively, mentions the silent film *Jiskor*, which was produced in Austria in 1924 on a Jewish theme. Weissbrod describes the manner in which, during a screening in Palestine, the film was accompanied by Jewish liturgy to produce an emotional effect (2019, 250).

While there is virtually no written material about intertitle translation into Yiddish, and few sources that discuss Yiddish silent films, there are a few sources that offer general information about the Yiddish Cinema, providing partial, anecdotal, and 'circumstantial' evidence about the translation and use of Yiddish intertitles. The most important source is Natan Gross's *Toldot HaKolnoa Hayehudi BePolin: 1910-1950* (The Jewish Film in Poland: 1910-1950), which includes a chapter about silent Yiddish films in the Second Polish Republic (Gross 1990, 27–41). An older source is Eric Goldman's *Visions, Images, and Dreams: Yiddish Films Past and Present* (1979). It is an older source that refers to certain 'Yiddish' films that are actually Austrian German-Language films—but provides an invaluable historical background.

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Another valuable source is Jeffrey Shandler's long article, "*Ost und West*, Old World and New: Nostalgia and Anti-Nostalgia on the Silver Screen" (Shandler 1992). Shandler discusses *Ost und West* (1923), which is also discussed in this article. A recent source is Dafna Dolinko's article, "Trauma VeYitsuga BaKolnoa Haidi BePolin 1924-1949" (The representation of drama in the Polish Yiddish cinema 1924-1949) (Dolinko 2008). And, more recently, Ela Bauer's (2017) article, "The Jews and the Silver Screen: Poland at the End of the 1920s," and a number of sources by Karina Pryt, provide important information about the role of the cinema in Polish Jewish life (particularly in Warsaw) and materials in Yiddish about the cinema, ranging from movie ads and posters to film reviews, news-items, and entire magazines in Yiddish that were devoted to the cinema (Pryt 2022a, 2022b, 2023 pers. comm. "The Translation of Silent Films – A Book Project").

3. Plot Summary of *Ost und West*

Despite the differences between the two versions of the film, one in German and the other in English and in Yiddish, the plot remains largely similar in both versions: Molly and her father travel from the United States to Poland to attend a family wedding. Molly also wants to be a bride and arranges a mock wedding in which she pretends to marry Ruben (renamed Jacob in the bilingual version). However, since they go through the ritual of placing a ring on her finger and saying the blessings of marriage, Molly and Ruben are legally married. Since, in Orthodox Jewish tradition, divorce can only be granted by the husband, it is up to Ruben to annul the marriage. However, he refuses to divorce Molly. Instead, he asks her to wait for five years, after which he would be willing to grant her a divorce. Ruben leaves his town in Poland, moves in with his rich uncle in Vienna, changes his appearance, becomes an academic scholar, and meets Molly under a different name after five years. She then falls in love with him and no longer wants a divorce.

4. The German (Austrian) Version – *Ost und West*

Ost und West, marketed in English and in Yiddish as *Mazel Tov* or *Good Luck* (a mistranslation)[1] as well as *East and West* or *Mizrekh un Mayrev* (east and west in Yiddish), starring the immortal actress, Molly Picon, is probably familiar to many readers that might have

[1] *Mazel Tov* is literally 'good fortune' but the expression means 'congratulations.'

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actually seen it or heard about it. In popular sources, *Ost und West* is erroneously referred to as the "earliest surviving Yiddish language film" (Kramer 2015). A similar reference to *East and West* as a "Yiddish picture" is found in Eric Goldman's *Visions, Images, and Dreams: Yiddish Films Past and Present* (Goldman 1979, 13). Today, the film is more familiar to scholars and viewers as a 'Yiddish film' than a German one. However, at the time of its release, the German version of the film was by far more popular in Austria and in Germany than its bilingual English and Yiddish version was in other countries. This is not to say that the film did not receive either attention or commercial success (and some criticism) in Poland, the United Kingdom, and the United States when it first came out. But the reception of the film in English and in Yiddish was by far less positive than its reception in German. As Goldman writes: "Despite the fact that the film was aimed at the Jewish audience, it did extremely well financially. During its 1923 run in Vienna, it even outlasted Chaplin's *The Kid* in theaters" (1979, 12).

Some of the technical differences, and the differences in adaptation, explain in part the different reception of the film in different languages and locations: The German version of *Ost und West* includes 184 intertitles that flash quickly across the screen. With 34 more titles than the English-Yiddish version, and with an extra scene that is removed in the bilingual version, the German version is still three minutes and eleven seconds shorter.[2] Within one hour, 24 minutes, and 16 seconds, intertitles appear at an average rate of a little less than half a minute per intertitle. Since this is an average rate, some titles only have a few seconds between them, some titles appear for only a few seconds, and others, which are given more time, sometimes include a good deal of text (such as Ruben's handwritten (!)[3] letter to his uncle (Goldin, *Ost und West* [Hebrew University Spielberg Film Archives], 1923; intertitle 110, time mark 0:48:46). The large number and fast rate of the intertitle express confidence in the ability and endurance of the viewers of a plentiful, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan text.

[2] These technical details are significant for two reasons: First, the fact that the bilingual version takes (slightly) longer time to display fewer intertitles suggests that this version leaves more time for the viewers to read the intertitles, possibly assuming that the target audience does not read as fast. This is also the result, however, of the fact that that some of the filmed documents (letters exchanged between the characters) tend to appear twice, each time in a different language. Second, as in the case of the English version of *Das alte Gesetz* (*The Ancient Law*) (1923), while the number of intertitles might not reflect on their quality, a story that is told in fewer words is likely to be less complex—particularly as the text of the intertitles in the bilingual version tends to be more humorous, and less socially and politically engaged.

[3] It is not rare that handwritten notes are displayed in silent films. I highlight the handwritten letter here for two reasons: (1) Reading a handwritten text would challenge viewers even further as they read a relatively long text in a short time. (2) The handwritten letter underscores the technical investment that was put into the German version, while the bilingual version, in English and in Yiddish, includes no illustrated titles.

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Reflecting the personal multilingual experience of the director, Sidney Goldin, the text is rich with expressions, and sometimes short texts in English, Yiddish, and Hebrew. In addition, the intertitles also include various speech patterns, dialects, ethnolects, and sociolects. The text moves from the imagined broken speech of Machle, a Jewish cook in a traditional household in Poland (intertitles 47, 48, 49, 50, 61; time marks 0:17:31, 0:17:59, 0:19:01, 0:19:10, 0:26:18) to the Viennese sociolect of the antisemitic gardener of Ruben's uncle (intertitles 123, 124, 125, 126, 130, 132; time marks 0:54:41, 0:54:48, 0:55:16, 0:55:53, 0:57:25, 0:58:35).[4] And, at one point, when Molly is enraged with Machle, who exposes the fact that Molly ate all of the food in the house during the Day of Atonements, she declares, in transcribed English: "OH, J´LL FIX HER!" (intertitle 51; time mark 0:20:01). Two intertitles are in Yiddish, followed by a text in German: One of them is a partial text (intertitle 109; time mark 0:48:42), and the other is the entire text of the letter that Ruben leaves to Molly and her father, which is signed in Yiddish by Jacob rather than Ruben (intertitle 115; time mark 0:50:39), perhaps betraying the intention to replace the name Ruben with Jacob in the English-Yiddish version (Jacob being the actual name of the actor, Jacob Kalich).[5]

Also impressive, are the beautiful hand-drawn intertitles with Hebrew letters, recording religious and traditional terms such as *Kol Nidrey* (all vows [a part of the payer of the Day of Atonements]) (intertitle 32; time mark 0:09:37); *Koriim UMishtakhavim* (And we kneel and bow) (intertitle 37; time mark 0:11:54); *Kohanim* (priests) (intertitle 39; time mark 0:13:32); and *Bore Meorey HaEsh* ("the creator of fire and flame") (intertitle 44; time mark 0:15:38)—with the addition of brief explanations.[6] Other titles are replaced with images of signs, letters, an invitation to a literary reading (intertitle 156; time mark 1:07:20), and a mock-divorce-document that is in fact a secret note to Molly, revealing Ruben's true identity (intertitle 178; time mark 1:21:19). Three of these documents are handwritten (intertitles 109, 110, 116; time marks 0:48:42, 0:48: 46, 0:50:43).

[4] For example: "Uj jegerl a Lercherl. [Oh my. A lark]" (intertitle 123; time mark 0:54:41); and "Bist scho wieder do Shiegerl - wart Zuagraster jetzt fliagst! [Are you back again, Shiegerl [?] – wait foreigner, now you're out of here for good!]" (intertitle 126; time mark 0:55:53).
[5] As the viewers are not expected to read this intertitle, it is replaced by the same letter, handwritten in German and signed by Ruben (rather than Jacob), after four seconds.
[6] Other illustrated slides announce the different acts of the film (a division that is missing in the bilingual English and Yiddish version) and, at the very end, credit the institution that reconstructed the film in 1994—the Austrian Film Archive (Österreichisches Filmarchiv) (intertitle 184; time mark 1:24:16).

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Beyond the intertitles, the film offers a cosmopolitan story that takes place in the United States, Poland, and Austria, culminating with beautiful urban views of Vienna. The production quality is excellent, and the acting, particularly the performance of the immortal Molly Picon, is phenomenal.

In addition to the technical features of the German version, the reception of *Ost und West* in Germany and in Austria was also affected by a social and political context during the rise of anti-Semitism and the advent of the Second World War. The German version, in addition to being a well-invested production that was received in Vienna as a well-made comedy, was also perceived as a "serious comedy" that addresses important Jewish issues:

> Wenn ich irgendwo jüdische Filmsujets angekündigt sah . . . zu der Zeit, da ich noch auf das jüdische Sujet in Film hereinfel, geboten wurde, war zumeist schlecht kostümierte, lächerlich sentimentale Judenleidpoesie, mit Progromszenen, Sabbatsagen und allerlei schlecht gestllten Milieumäßchent durchjeßt . . . Der Film "Ost und West", zu dem Sidney Goldin und Eugen Preiß das Sujet geschrieben haben, atmet in der Darstellung echtes jüdische Wesen, wirkliche jüdische Stimmung . . . Mali Picon . . . und Jakob Kalischs gelassen-innige Partnerschaft erfreuen noch über die Freude hinuas, die es mir machte, einmal einen Film echter jüdische Stimmung zu sehen. (Fried 1923)
>
> (Whenever I saw Jewish film subjects announced somewhere . . . at the time when I still fell for films with a Jewish theme, what I found was mostly badly costumed, ridiculously sentimental poetry of Jewish suffering, with pogrom scenes, sabbath expressions, and all sorts of poorly placed milieu elements . . . The film "East and West", for which Sidney Goldin and Eugen Preiß wrote the theme, breathes of real Jewish character, real Jewish mood . . . Mali Picon . . . and Jakob Kalisch's relaxed and intimate partnership gave me a great deal of pleasure in seeing a film with authentic Jewish atmosphere.)

German advertisements also express appreciation of the film's artistic achievements and its social message. It is referred to as a "Jüdische Komödie" (Jewish comedy),[7] and is described as follows in an invitation in *Das Kino-Journal* for theater owners to preview the film:

> Nicht nur durch das Interesse an dieser Tendenz und dem hier aufgerollten Problems der Judenfrage, sondern auch durch die erstklassigen künstlerischen Leistungen auf jedem Gebiete.[8]
>
> (Not only because of the interest in this issue and the problem of the Jewish question raised here, but also because of the first-class artistic achievements in every aspect.)

[7] *Der Abend*. 1923. "Ost und West." Advertisement. May 5. 16 (105): 7.
[8] *Das Kino-Journal*. 1923. "Ost und West." Advertisement. August 11. 16 (680): 14.

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A review from September 14, 1923 in the *Wiener Morgenzeitung*, a Jewish owned[9] newspaper that targeted Jewish readers, adds:

> [Trotz des] Standpunkt, daß dieser Film nichts anderes eine Komödie in großen Stil sei so war doch die Auswirkung dieses Lustspiels auf das Publickum die eines Tendentzfilm. Zum erstenmal wurde hier im Film das typische ostjüdische Milieu wahrheitsgetrev festgehalten und mit einer seltenen Genauigkeit bis in das kleinste Detail hinein erstreckt. (*Wiener Morgenzeitung* 1923)
>
> ([Despite] the point of view that this film is nothing but a comedy on a grand scale, the effect of this comedy on the audience was that of a socially-engaged film. For the first time in local films, the typical Eastern Jewish milieu was recorded truthfully and extended with rare accuracy down to the smallest detail.)

These and other German references suggest that the film is an exposé on Jewish life and social issues.

It is important to note, however, that despite some attention in *Der Abend*, *Der Tag*, *Das Kino-Journal*, *Die Filmwelt*, and few other sources,[10] most of the attention to *Ost und West* was concentrated in the *Wiener Morgenzeitung*, and directed towards Jewish readers. In this context, it was received as a strong, authentic, and heartening pro-Jewish film.

5. The English-Yiddish Version: *Mazel-Tov*

The reception of *Ost und West* in English and in Yiddish in the United States was not as enthusiastic as it was in Germany and in Austria, and it was certainly not received as a 'serious comedy.' Yiddish advertisements for the English-Yiddish version (as the bilingual intertitles in English and in Yiddish render the two languages a part of a single version of the film) literally promote the film as a Vaudeville act, advertised in the Yiddish *Forward* on both May 21 and 23, 1924, as part of a *Groyser vodvil program* (great Vaudeville program).[11] Perhaps the most flattering reference to the film is a news-item in the Yiddish *Forward* from September 17, 1924, under the title: *A khosene af katoves vos endigt zikh ernst* (A mock wedding ends up seriously). According to this news-item, a fifteen-year-old student in Lviv (referred to in Yiddish by the German name, Lemberg, at that time a part of Poland and currently

[9] At the time, the *Wiener Morgenzeitung* was owned by *Jüdische Zeitungs- und Verlagsges.m.b.H* (Jewish newspaper and publishing company ltd).
[10] *Der Abend.* Op. Cit; *Der Tag*. 1923. "Ost und West." Advertisement. November 2. 2 (335): 10.; *Das Kino-Journal*, Op, Cit; *Die Filmwelt*. 1923. "Ost und West." Announcement. No. 14: 15.
[11] *Forward.* 1924. "Mazel Tov." (Congratulation.) Advertisement. 9.

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in Ukraine) was influenced by the film, in which a mock wedding receives a formal status. As a result, the student performed a mock wedding with a girl that he was courting, finding himself legally married and requiring the intervention of a Rabbi from the nearby city of Turka to untangle the mess (*A khosene af katoves vos endigt zikh ernst* [A mock wedding ends up seriously], 1924). The news-item itself seems to be a part of a column of sensational stories and might be completely fictional. However, even if the events did not take place, the news-item indicates that the film has been known and held some public awareness. The film was also the object of both popular (Prawer 2007, 70) and official criticism in the United States, and was condemned by the Motion Picture Commission of the State of New York for being "sacrilegious, much of it indecent in character," before it was finally released, with substantial changes, after an appeal (State of New York Education Department Motion Picture Division 1924).

But despite its initially disappointing reception, and likely as a result of the spiking popularity of Molly Picon, who plays the main role in the film (most noticeably after the production of her well-known movies, *Idl mitn fidl* [*Yiddle with his Fiddle*] [1936] and *Mamele* [1938]), and perhaps also due to the sound remake of *Ost und West* in 1932, *Mazel Tov* has come to be remembered as a 'Yiddish film,' and rather a popular one.

Despite several differences, many of the good qualities of the original German version of the film are kept in the bilingual, English and Yiddish version: Naturally, the great acting and good quality of the film are kept. The intertitles, fewer and less elaborate, with no illustrated intertitles, eliminating some of the credits for individual actors, still keep some of the different speech patterns of the various characters, such as the broken speech of Machle, the cook in the Polish-Jewish home, which is replicated only in the English text, while her Yiddish is transcribed as standard. In one intertitle, Machle codeswitches and declares: "*Oi gewald! A ganif!* A thief!" (Goldin, *Ost und West* [National Center for Jewish Film], 1923; intertitle 38; time mark 0:23). Machle's idiosyncratic speech (in English only) contributes to the comic tone of the film, and continues in intertitles 39-41, time marks 0:24 and 0:25, uttering expressions such as "Dat American *shikse* (a derogatory name for a non-Jewish woman)!" and "An appetite she's got like a Helephnt." Arriving from the United-States and meeting his mother after a long time, Molly's father calls her "Mawma!", trying to approximate the Yiddish endearment *mamenyu!!!* (mommy), with three exclamation marks in Yiddish but only one in English (intertitle 14; time mark 0:05). The Yiddish text of the intertitles also increases the number of

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Americanisms, attributing them both to Molly and her father, contributing to the comic effect, and marking the American relatives as being out of touch with their Polish-Jewish family. These Americanisms are transcribed in the Yiddish part of the intertitles (while having no effect on the English text): Molly greets her cousin by saying, in English, "*Hello Kid*" (intertitle 16; time mark 0:05), and later asks to stay with the members of the choir, to which she refers as the "*gang*" (intertitle 48; time mark 0:31). Her father says "*all right*," but warns her that they are nice "*boys*" and that she should not be "*wild*" (intertitle 49; time mark 0:31). In return, when left alone with the members of the choir, Molly instructs them not to dance like a "*rocking chair*" (intertitle 50; time mark 0:32). And in intertitles 72 and 75 (time marks 0:47 and 0:49), Molly naturally refers to her father as "*Daddy*."

Surprisingly, many of the cultural and religious explanations that appear in the original German version are kept intact, even though the New York viewers, and Yiddish speakers in particular, could be assumed to know more about Judaism than the viewers in Vienna. Some intertitles actually expand on religious explanations that are supplied in the original German version:

> ***Intertitle 27, time mark 0:13***
>
> The Day of Atonement - The one day of all the year when the children of Israel scattered the world over unite in prayer to the God of Israel
>
> *Yom Kiper bay tog – der tog in yor vos farbindet dos folk isroel in zeyere tfiles afile ven zey zaynen tsushpreyt iber der gantser velt*

In the German version, the intertitle simply reads: "*Jom-Kipur* (Versöhnungstag) (Yom-Kippur [Day of Atonement])" (Goldin, *Ost und West* [Hebrew University Spielberg Film Archives], 1923, intertitle 110; time mark 0:48:46). Similar intertitles in the bilingual edition are: 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 32, 34, 36, 56 – time marks: 0:09, 0:12, 0:13, 0:15, 0:17, 0:38. Possibly, these religious explanations are kept and elaborated, not as essential guidance to Judaism, but rather as a statement of social sentiment and endorsement of Jewish values.

There are also a few name changes, the most noticeable of which is the change of Ruben, the forced groom that Molly wishes to divorce but finally falls in love with, into Jacob—which is the original first name of the actor (and Picon's husband), Jacob Kalich. In the Yiddish intertitles, this also enables the change of the spelling of his name from *Yankev* to *Yakov*, moving from a Yiddish to a German pronunciation of the name, as Ruben/Jacob strengthens his ties in Vienna and becomes an academic scholar (intertitles 100 and 103; time marks 1:00

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and 1:01). Molly is referred to in the English text as Mollie (in the credits as well), and her father's name changes from Robert to Morris. Morris's brother's name changes from Mottl Brauner to Mottel Brownstein. And, in addition to the production credits in the beginning and the end of the film, two English intertitles (intertitles 12 and 127; time marks 0:04 and 1:12) and one intertitle in Yiddish (intertitle 21; time mark 0:08) are not translated into the corresponding language.

One scene in the original German version is removed in the bilingual adaptation. During the *Polterabend*, a German traditional celebration resembling a wedding-shower,[12] Molly dresses up as a boy, and when she is discovered, she is spanked by her father and sent to her room. Molly is upset and retaliates, declaring: "Im Männerkleidern darf ich nicht - all right - dann gehe ich so hinunter (I'm not allowed in men's clothes - *all right* - then I'll go down like that) (Goldin, *Ost und West* [Hebrew University Spielberg Film Archives], 1923; intertitle 69; time mark 0:33:34). She then returns to the party dressed in her undergarments (though, of course, in a full-body under-suit) and is spanked again—this time with three bearded men hiding under the table and watching with lecherous pleasure. The scene is somewhat reminiscent of paintings that describe the apocryphal story of Susana and the Elders,[13] and can be interpreted as anti-Semitic. It is therefore removed, along with the entire part of Molly's returning to the party in her undergarments. Another scene in which Ruben/Jacob goes to a hairdresser salon to remove his sidelocks and acquire a secular appearance is kept, although it is considerably shortened. Unlike a more dramatic scene in the film, *Das alte Gesetz* (*The Ancient Law*) (1923), in which the main character reflects deeply on his actions while cutting his sidelocks by himself in front of the mirror, the viewers only see Ruben/Jacob go in and out of the salon.

Most importantly, the bilingual English and Yiddish version adds a good number of funny quips that are not found in the original, strengthening the comic facet of the film at the expense of a more engaged presentation of Jewish issues. The added anecdotes are endearing, sometimes with slight criticisms of the various characters, most noticeably of Molly and her father, who find themselves out of place in the Polish-Jewish community, as well as in a

[12] During the *Polterabend*, however, it is customary to break porcelain dishes.
[13] A biblical narrative featured in chapter 13 of the Book of Daniel according to the text that is maintained by the Catholic and Orthodox churches, of two lecherous men that spy on a married woman and then accuse her of adultery when she refuses to grant them sexual favors. The two men, however, provide conflicting testimonies and are punished for their crimes.

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traditional Jewish environment. Even before arriving in Poland, Molly's father is criticized for being a money-centered businessman with little literary talent beyond writing business letters. In reply to his brother's wedding invitation, he writes:

> ***Intertitle 10, time mark 0:03***[14]
>
> *Ikh dank dir zeyer far dayn ~~order~~, ikh meyn, far dayn aynladung* (I thank you very much for your ~~order~~, I mean, for your invitation)

And, when Morris arrives in Poland, his relatives chastise him for his lack of Jewish knowledge:

> ***Intertitle 28, time mark 0:14***
>
> Don't bluff Morris. You can't read it. That's a prayer book and not a check book
>
> *Blof nisht, Moris – dos iz a sider in nisht keyn tsek buk*

In other places, the added humor is meant to elevate the mood during some of the less happy moments of the film, such as during Molly's five-year period of waiting to be free of her forced marriage. Her father tries to console her by saying:

> ***Intertitle 188, time mark 1:09***
>
> Don't cry, my little sweetheart. You're better off than most wives. You don't have to live with your husband
>
> *Veyn nisht mayn tayer hertsele – du bist beser op fun asakh ferhayerter froyen – du darfst nisht leben mit sayn man*

Such comic quips contributed to the manner in which the English-Yiddish version of the film was received. The translated movie does not highlight to the same extent the bitter-sweet message of the original, which calls for tolerance, not only between Jews and non-Jews, but also between Jews of different factions and locations, uniting American, Polish, and Austrian Jews, and turning them literally into a single family. Outside of the German and Austrian context of anti-Semitism, anti-immigration, and rising Nazism, the adaptation titled *Mazel Tov* loses some of its more serious facets and delivers a positive comic performance that, despite some initial resistance, won over audiences that could not resist the charm and kind-hearted humor of Molly Picon. And even if the film might not have been immensely popular during the time of its release, it had gained a great deal of attention in retrospect.

[14] This intertitle appears only in Yiddish, but the same anecdote, within a slightly different text, appears in English one minute later in intertitle 12.

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6. A Nostalgic Reception of *Ost und West*

As mentioned above, *Ost und West* did receive a fair deal of retroactive attention, to a great extent as a response to Molly Picon's meteoric rise in the Yiddish theater and cinema (as well as her many roles in English speaking movies and television programs). Much of the retroactive reception of the film is nostalgic, often applying anachronistic agenda and concerns that attempt to enforce a particular historical point of view—not always taking into account the social and historical context in which the film was first distributed. Some popular references to the film either moan national and ethnic representation (Kramer 2015)[15] or praise what one sees as a feminist agenda of the film (Harvey 1994; Peratis 2007; Sicular 1995).[16] Using terms such as "Queer Yiddishkeit" (Peratis 2007) or "Gender Rebellion" (Sicular 1995), such writers use anachronistic terms to apply a deliberate gender-related agenda to a film in which the main plot, as Molly's character is manipulated into accepting a forced groom, indicates that if Picon (or Goldin) had a feminist agenda, it would have been very different than one might have perceived a century later. And while it is true that Picon explores gender roles in *Ost und West*, as well as in her other films, this might be the result of the fact that gender roles have always been a fundamental basis for comedy, or that—if one takes into account the roles of Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet on the stage or Asta Nielsen as Hamlet on the screen—this was a common practice in contemporary theater and film productions.

Eve Sicular also refers to *Ost und West* as "clearly the product of a permissive, defiant, anti-nostalgic mood" (1995, 4). The term, anti-nostalgic, is used extensively in Shandler's long article, "*Ost und West*, Old World and New: Nostalgia and Anti-Nostalgia on the Silver Screen" (Shandler 1992), which is the most extensive scholarly resource to discuss the film, *Ost und West*. Shandler's article, which was published three years earlier than Sicular's, is pointing at the obvious clash between different cultural worlds that is suggested by the film's title. Shandler, however, does not discuss either gender or national and ethnic origins, but rather different Jewish religious identities. The alleged preference of Austrian (or German) culture that is suggested by Fritzi Kramer is reinterpreted by Shandler as a prejudice in favor of Austrian Jewry, or rather of modern and possibly secular Judaism at the expense of traditional

[15] Fritzi Kramer complains that the film presents Americans in a negative fashion.
[16] The arguments of Harvey, Peratis, and Sicular deserve a longer discusssion—which I provide in a longer version of my work for a book project on silent film translation.

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and Ultra-Orthodox Jews. But the clash between the 'old' and 'new' worlds of Europe and the United States, as well as between modern and traditional Judaism, is very different at the beginning of the twenty-first century than at the beginning of the twentieth century. Shandler's discussion takes the film out of the context of Jewish and non-Jewish exchange, in which the film was originally produced, and reintroduces it within the more contemporary context of secular and religious politics. The latter terms are anachronistic in themselves, as the ideological division into religious and secular Judaism did not exist in the beginning of the twentieth century in the way that it exists today. And the claim that the film takes a decisive side against traditional Jewry is indicative of the shift in the interest in *Ost und West* from World Cinema to Jewish Cinema. The term, 'anti-Nostalgia,' is therefore used as a cognitive dissonance, which highlights the extent to which the contemporary discussion of the film is anachronistic.

Three scholars that build on each other's arguments in the discussion of *Ost und West* are Jim Hoberman (Hoberman 1991), Jeffrey Shandler (Shandler 1992), and Siegbert Salomon Prawer (Prawer 2007). While Hoberman acknowledges that the film speaks to the circumstances of "beleaguered" Viennese Jewry, he sees in *Ost und West* a clear preference of "Germanized" Jews at the expense of other European and American Jews: "[*Ost und* West] provided a satisfying fantasy for Vienna's beleaguered Jewish community by presenting the successfully Germanized Jew as a golden mean between the primitive *Ostjude* and the crass American" (Hoberman 1991, 66).

Shandler refers extensively to Hoberman in his article, and, in turn, Prawer uses a long quote from Shandler's article to agree that the film portrays a "terrified vision" of traditional Jewry:

> In a tableau that appears about halfway through *Ost und West* (East and West), a 1923 silent film made in Vienna by Sidney M. Goldin, a pious East European Jewish family is depicted celebrating the beginning of the Sabbath . . . Viewed by American Jewish audiences today, this tableau is likely to evoke a wealth of nostalgic, sentimental associations . . . **In fact, the scene's function within the film *Ost und West* is quite the opposite. Far from being a beatific vision of the virtues of piety, it is nothing less than a nightmare. Rather than presenting an idealized image of devotion to Jewish traditions, it is a young American Jewish woman's terrified vision of her future, trapped, by comic mishap, in marriage to a Polish Hasid.** (Shandler 1992, 153–154; my bold and underline)

Shandler does admit, however, that "the film's Viennese episode, rather than constituting the kind of validation of self that Hoberman suggests it was for its audience of

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Westjuden, becomes for New World audiences the setting for the fairy tale's happy ending" (Shandler 1992, 179). And Prawer adds that:

> With its often witty intertitles and its comedy spirit this film, produced for an Austrian company by an American director and American stars, and featuring a supporting cast made up of Gentile Austrians alongside Jewish actors originating in Eastern Europe, [*Ost und* West] is not for people who lack a sense of humour. (Prawer 2007, 72)

Indeed, one needs a certain lack of humor to imagine that the film is critical of "the primitive *Ostjude* and the crass American" when so many *Ostjuden* and "crass" Americans have been involved in this production, including the stars of the film and its director. In fact, the word *Ostjuden* does not appear in the film, and there is nothing even slightly disrespectful in the portrayal of traditional Jewry in *Ost und West*. Unlike similar silent films that were produced in Germany and in Austria at the same time, such as *Das alte Gesetz* (The old law) (1923), *Jiskor* (Remembrance) (1924), and *Die Stadt ohne Juden* (The city without Jews) (1924), in which Eastern European Jews seem to live in wretched hovels, the Brauners are affluent and civilized, and their religious ceremonies are described in very positive terms:

> Sieh nur, Bruder, wie man bei uns den Versöhnungstag, an dem die Juden der Welt an ihren Gott denken, einweiht.
>
> Just look, brother, how we inaugurate the Day of Atonement, on which the Jews of the world think of their God. (Goldin, *Ost und West* [Hebrew University Spielberg Film Archives], 1923; intertitle 31, time mark 0:08:58)

In comparison with contemporary German productions that display some errors in the representation of Jewish tradition,[17] *Ost und West* displays a detailed and knowledgeable description of Jewish Eastern-European Orthodox traditions. In fact, the Polish Brauners are portrayed as erudite, polite, and self-assured in comparison with their American relatives, who are being mocked both for Molly's behavior and Robert's lack of Jewish knowledge: "Amerikanische Frömmigkeit - business und Dollar. - mehr könnt ihr nicht (American piety - business and dollars. – that's all you can do)" (intertitle 33; time mark 0:10:37). Shandler confirms this: "Mr. Brown's fixation on business as well as his Jewish cultural illiteracy is mocked by Brownstein [Brauner], who comments during the *Kol Nidre* service that his immigrant brother is more familiar with a checkbook than a prayerbook" (1992, 160). But

[17] For example, in the film, *Das alte Gesetz*, in addition to other small errors in representation, the followers of the Rabbi are saying *Kaddish* when the Rabbi is gravely ill. *Kaddish* can only be recited for someone that is deceased.

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insists that: "The Polish Jews in *Ost und West* make up a contrasting set of mocked Jewish archetypes. They are portrayed as backward exotics, pietistic, provincial, and, in the case of Jacob, sexually repressed" (162).

And when Shandler writes about "the mud-filled streets; the lack of electricity, indoor plumbing, or central heat; the limited diet; the reliance on horse and wagon; and so forth" (ibid.), he is referring to images that simply do not appear in the film. A look at the footnotes reveals that Shandler is indebted to Hoberman, who instructed him in the production history of *Ost und West* (185, footnote 1). In addition, Shandler's term, "antinostalgia," is indebted to Dan Miron's term, "antifolklore" (167), and to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (187, footnote 17). The result is an anachronistic scholarly tradition that applies a contemporary acrimonious relationship between traditional and secular Jews to a time and a place in which Jews of different affiliations were united by a mounting hostility on the part of non-Jews.

Particularly in the case of *Ost und West*, Goldin works hard to demystify the division of East-European, German, and American Jews, presenting all of them favorably and showing that they are not only able to interact with each other—but that they literally belong to a single family (through the marriage of the two main characters). More importantly, taken together, all Jews, and not only the 'modern Jews' that the non-Jewish viewers might be familiar with, are humanized in the film and presented to the German speaking audience in a manner that was controversial and highly relevant in 1923. This is the reason that the film received a great deal of attention in Vienna and was referred to as a thought-provoking and socially engaged comedy. It is an important part of the film's history that is ignored by later critics, and that goes beyond the current scholarly discussion of the film to shed light on the agenda of Jewish-European artists and intellectuals in the early 1920s.

7. Conclusion

To come back to the titular questions of this article, it seems that there is a great deal to translate when 'carrying-over' a silent film into a different national and linguistic environment. As seen in the discussion of *Ost und West*, this translation is not limited to the content of the film, but also to various dialects, ethnolects, and sociolects, code-switching, humor, and register. The translation of intertitles, particularly because there is no soundtrack to consider, can also easily change the plot of the film, the names of the characters, the speech patterns of

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various characters, what they choose to say, and how they choose to say it. In the case of *Ost und West*, an engaged comic drama that was perceived as a thoughtful and heartening work in support of beleaguered Viennese Jews was transformed into a slapstick comedy befitting a Vaudeville presentation and, for some, into a film that is actually offensive to a Jewish audience and should be censored for its alleged sacrilegious tendencies.

Of course, the translation of the intertitles is only part of a wider context in which the film is received. As I write elsewhere (Abend-David 2019, 215), in order to study film translation, one has to simultaneously have a background in Film Studies, Translation Studies, and the cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds of the languages that are represented in the film, and to which the film is translated. The reception of *Ost und West* is a product of the different historical and economic realities in Austria, Germany, and the United States in the early 1920s—and they are likely the reason that the intertitles have been translated in the manner that they have been. And, as *Ost und West* has been transformed into a lighthearted comedy, the important German history of the film has been forgotten, and, for many, the film has been reincarnated as the "earliest surviving Yiddish language film." As a result, a nostalgic and anachronistic approach that is inspired both by religious and academic politics created an orthodox method of research that fails to study *Ost und West* in the context in which it was created and insists on considering it in the contemporary context of the scholars that write about it. A multidisciplinary study that considers the complex linguistic, historical, and cultural representation in the film reveals that *Ost und West* has a great deal more to offer. Moreover, it reveals that, in the international distribution of silent films, there was, in fact, a great deal to translate, both in terms of linguistic content, and in terms of national, social, political, and cultural adaptation.

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