

JEWISH PIONEERS OF THE MOVIES

BY

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WHILE it is wrong to assume that Jews monopolise the film industry, it is interesting to find that the world of cinema entertainment owes much to those hardy pioneers who have brought a one-time luxury within reach of the purses of the masses. They have played a prominent part in the development of the industry, and civilisation has been the beneficiary of their contributions. The story of the movies is a romantic one of men who rose from obscurity by their own genius and native ability, and if they are magnates to-day it is because of the courageous ideas which they put into practice in the face of overwhelming odds. The world is richer for their labours.

Adolf Zukor was to have been a Rabbi when the films were considered a futile experiment. Born in Ricse, Hungary, in 1873, he came to the United States in 1888 and, through the vagaries of circumstance, took to the fur business in the gloomy slums of New York. It was at that time that William Selig, an owner of a traveling minstrel show, became interested in the "flickers," and started to study the making of cameras and projectors. He experimented and made little headway, and when he told the world of his ideas, he was dubbed a fool. But, fortunately, from the east side of New York came several ambitious young Jews. The foremost of these was Marcus Loew, who was as gifted as he was clever. He soon set about work with Selig, and in 1904 Zukor became associated with them. Before long they were producing motion pictures, and sowing the seeds of the Hollywood film industry. Zukor went ahead with his valuable work, and in 1912 founded a company of his own, the famous Players Company. He weathered many a storm of depression, and is to-day the chairman of the Paramount Pictures Inc.

Samuel Goldwyn started life as Samuel Goldfish in Warsaw in 1882, and came to the United States in 1902. He was educated solely at night school and spent his early youth in poverty. But he had a good business brain and was in his element in the film industry. Meeting Jesse Lasky, a newspaperman who had taken to the theatre, Goldwyn worked together with William Fox as a producer. In 1913 Goldwyn and Lasky organised the Jesse Lasky Feature Photoplay Company, which established a higher standard of films.

It was Goldwyn who revolutionised the movies by inducing eminent authors to work actively in the promotion of better films. Through his genius he gave the industry a new impetus, and in 1916 established the Goldwyn Pictures Corporation. By now the film industry was no longer a mere experiment, and Jewish money and brains came forward to back it up. In 1919 Goldwyn established

three more companies, the Eminent Authors Pictures, the Samuel Goldwyn Inc., and the famous Players-Lasky Corporation. Better and bigger pictures was his motto, and he spared no effort to refine and raise the standard of the film. He was responsible, in some way, for the introduction of the "star" system, and among the many artists he introduced and made famous were Vilma Banky, Mary Garden, Geraldine Farrar, Anna Sten, Pauline Frederick and Eddie Cantor. To please his public, he searched the world for talent and subject matter. He translated some of the world's greatest classics to the screen.

It was about this time that Lewis J. Selznick, a son of Russo-Jewish parents, fell into the movie business, with Moritz Rosenthal and Arthur Spiegel. With these gentlemen he formed the World's Film Corporation. The new film company saw several years of indifferent luck and was eventually dissolved.

Selznick formed a new company and gave it his name. To his banner came Nathan Asher, Sol Lesser and Joseph Schenck. It was this new company that glorified and brought fame to three Jewish girls, Constance, Norma and Natalie Talmadge. Norma was coached to stardom, and when Dumas' "Camille" was brought to the screen, she played the ambitious role of Marguerite Gautier. Like the great Sarah Bernhardt, who, by the way, was also a pioneer of the films, Norma Talmadge charmed the world by her brilliant acting and deep understanding of the intricacies of the human heart. True, Mary Pickford was for long the idol of the screen, but it was the acting genius of Norma Talmadge that made photoplay acting an art. Pickford, it must be remembered, owed much of her success to the foresight of those Jewish men who plunged into a precarious industry which many thought would die a natural death.

In pre-War years Adolf Zukor and others did their best to encourage the European film industry, and it is said that much Jewish money went into the famous German U.F.A. Company. At the same time Ernst Lubitsch and Josef von Sternberg were becoming known for their productions in Germany. Eventually these two men left Berlin and came to Hollywood, where they became associated with Paramount Films, and are to-day amongst the outstanding producers. It is said that it was Lubitsch and Sternberg who groomed Marlene Dietrich for stardom.

Among the many other pioneers of the industry were Joseph Brandt and his two cousins, Jack and Harry Cohn, David Belasco, who financed Loew, Max Aronson (G. M. Anderson), who was the first cowboy on the screen and maker of the famous



SAMUEL GOLDWYN

— One of the important men in the movie world to-day.

"Broncho Billy" films, Louis B. Mayer, Sam Harris, Adam Kessel, Al Lichtman, Benjamin P. Schulberg, and Carl Laemmle. The last-named was one of the founders of the Universal Company. Other names, now almost forgotten, are Isaac M. Wolper, Sydney Cohen and Katz.

The story of the birth of the talkies is the story of Jewish ambition and enterprise. The microphone and the gramophone had been invented by Emil Berliner several years before the improved inventions by Graham Bell, and Edison. From these inventions sprang the theories of the talkie film, but there had been little or no progress before William Fox broke new ground and did all he could to encourage his engineers to experiment with sound track on film. At the same time the Warner Brothers, Harry, Sam, Albert and Jack, came into the field and patented their "vitaphone." Friendly competition resulted between Fox and his co-religionists, and the Fox Company brought out their "movie tone." These were at first dismal failures, but they laid the foundation of the talkie film. Then the Warners decided to sacrifice all and put everything into their newly-formed company, Warner Brothers-Vitaphone. After being reduced to almost complete poverty, they took the famous play "The Jazz Singer," and with the permission of the Jewish author, Samuel Rapaelson, proceeded to make a talkie film of it. The whole of Wall Street frowned on the gamble, and even Hollywood cried that talkies would never be successful. Undaunted, the Warner Brothers went ahead.

They engaged the Jewish actor, Al Jolson, to play the lead. Then, braving a sceptical press, they released the film. It was a smashing success.

Al Jolson, formerly a Hebrew choir master, achieved fame by bringing into popularity one of the greatest inventions of the age. The sound film revolutionised the entire cinematographic world. The talkies brought to the world the kings of Jazz, Irving Berlin and George Gershwin, two young Jews from "Tin-Pan-Alley," who achieved worldwide fame.

This, then, is the story of the Jewish pioneers in the films. We can name many actors who have added prestige to the art. We can point to Pola Negri (Pauline Schwartz), the first vamp of the movies; Carmel Myers (daughter of the late Rabbi Isidore Myers), a one-time heroine; Eddie Cantor, the pop-eyed clown; Paul Muni (the finest Pasteur the screen has known); Luise Rainer, twice winner of the Academy Award; Edward (Goldberg) Robinson, the ideal "gangster"; Joseph Schildkraut, one of the best character actors, and many others.

Of present-day producers, there are David O. Selznick, Fritz Lang, Sid. Franklin, Joe Pasternack, Henry Koster, George Cukor, and many others, including the late Irving Thalberg.

Jewish pictures that have become famous are "Der Dybbuk," "The Golem," "Green Fields," and that moving folk-story of a Jewish-Polish village, "Der Purimspieler."

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