



Teater på jiddisch - i Sverige och i världen

BOKRECESSION • BOOK REVIEW

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.144509>

Sylvia Sauter & Willmar Sauter, **Teater på jiddisch - i Sverige och i världen. Teater oyf yidish - in Shvedn un oyf der velt.** Gidlunds förlag, 2023. 301 pp. (in Swedish), 8 pp. (in Yiddish)

The book by Sylvia Sauter and Willmar Sauter is the first description of the history of Yiddish theatre in Sweden and the first work in Swedish that deals with the general, global history of Yiddish-language drama. The Sauters' contribution is highly welcome and necessary as there has been surprisingly little research conducted on the more than 200-year history of the Yiddish language and culture in Sweden. For Yiddish researchers and those who know the language, please note that the book has an eight-page Yiddish summary translated by Mikaela Rohdin.

The book begins with a chapter on the revival of Yiddish theatre in Sweden, when Stockholm Jiddische Teateramator'n (Stockholm Yiddish Theatre Amateurs) started its activity in 2008. Sylvia Sauter herself co-founded the association and has acted in many of its productions. The chapter describes how the association wanted to break out of the familiar clichés of Yiddish culture and find a new, up-to-date repertoire. By introducing this topic from the outset, the Sauters want to emphasize that Yiddish culture is still alive in

Sweden and that Yiddish theatre remains in demand today. Yiddish was declared an official minority language in Sweden in 2000, along with the Sami languages, Finnish, Meänkieli, Romani and Swedish sign language.

The book's chapters deal with the beginning of Yiddish theatre and its stages in Sweden as an integral part of global Yiddish theatre. The Sauters begin the examination of Jewish theatre already in antiquity, coming via *purim-shpils*, traditional folk plays during the feast of Purim, to the rise of modern Yiddish theatre in Eastern Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. After this, the focus shifts to how Yiddish theatre spread as a result of emigration towards the West, to Central Europe and America, also arriving in Sweden at the turn of the twentieth century. All the chapters emphasise how Yiddish theatre in Sweden closely followed the trends of trans-national Yiddish theatre from avant-garde to popular entertainment. The book is based on extensive international research literature on the history of Yiddish theatre, Swedish archival sources and interviews, and Willmar Sauter's solid expertise as an emeritus professor of theatre arts.

Several thousand Yiddish speakers from Russia emigrated to Sweden at the beginning of the twentieth century, mainly from the area of present-day Lithuania and northern Poland. Three individuals from Grodno, Sara Mehr,

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Bernhard Scheiman and Josef Granditsky, founded the first Yiddish-language theatre society in Stockholm in 1906 under the Swedish name *Judiska Dramatiska Amatörsällskapet* (Jewish Amateur Dramatic Society). According to the Sauters, the theatre company had a connection with the local Jewish workers' association *Israelitiska Arbetarföreningen*. After the Second World War, Sara Mehr played a central role in the leadership of the Social Democratic Bund, as Håkan Blomqvist points out in his book *Socialism in Yiddish: The Jewish Labor Bund in Sweden* (2020). In 1910, the Jewish Amateur Dramatic Society for instance performed the operetta *Di kishefmakherin* (The Sorceress) by the 'father of Yiddish theatre', Abraham Goldfaden, and in 1914 a Yiddish interpretation of August Strindberg's drama *Fadren* (The Father).

Between the world wars, the Dramatic Society's repertoire expanded even further to include more Yiddish theatre classics, such as the plays of Jacob Gordin and Sholem Aleichem. The Society also began to rent increasingly larger and finer halls for its performances. The Sauters interestingly point out how the main Swedish-language newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, started regularly sending their critics to Yiddish-language shows. For example, in January 1927, Gunnar Sjöström of *Svenska Dagbladet* wrote a review of H. D. Nomborg's four-act play *Di mishpokhe* (The Family), performed in the small hall of the Stockholm Concert Hall. Sjöström saw Yiddish-language theatre in Stockholm as a welcome manifestation of modern, urban culture. The Sauters also describe how well-known Jewish theatre troupes and actors came to Sweden for guest shows. In 1930, Moscow's legendary Hebrew-language Habima Theatre performed S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk* at the Royal Dramatic Theatre, and in the late 1930s Sweden was also visited by actors Mila Weizlitz and Mosche Potasinsky of the well-known Vilna Troupe.

As a valuable addition to the history of Yiddish theatre in Sweden, the Sauters also provide an overview of the development of Yiddish theatre in the other Nordic countries, in Denmark, Norway and Finland during the period between the world wars. As far as I know, this is the first time that the development of Jewish performance art in these countries is portrayed in parallel.

In the chapter 'Teater som motstånd' (Theatre as Resistance), the Sauters describe Yiddish theatre activities during the Second World War and the Holocaust in occupied Europe and in neutral Sweden. Jura Tamkin (real name Jury Fränkel), a Russian Jew who had emigrated from Germany in the early 1930s, became a central figure in Stockholm's Yiddish theatre scene. Under his leadership, the Jewish Amateur Dramatic Society performed Sholem Aleichem's comedy *Di goldgreber* (Golddiggers) in the spring of 1943. The music for the play was composed by Moses Pergament and the dance choreographed by Manja Benkow, both well-known cultural figures at the time. In the programme leaflet, Tamkin took a stand on the role of humour during war and the persecution of Jews: 'At a time when Judaism is hounded by its persecutors and threatened with annihilation [*förintelsen*], humour is an invaluable outlet for us oppressed Jews.' After Danish Jews had fled to Sweden in the autumn of 1943 Tamkin decided to stage Sholem Aleichem's drama *Tevey der milkhiker*, Tevey the Dairyman, 'the ever-current Jewish national drama'. In the play Tevey and his daughters are forced to leave their beloved home village.

After the Second World War, more than ten thousand Holocaust survivors came to Sweden, and among them thousands of Yiddish speakers, which had a great impact on the revival of Yiddish theatre and Yiddish culture in Sweden generally. The Sauters recount how in the summer of

1945, the Jewish Amateur Dramatic Society in Stockholm performed *The Dybbuk* (in Yiddish for the first time) to many audiences of survivors. The play, in which separated lovers reunite in the afterlife, took on new meanings after the Holocaust. Yiddish theatre was also of great importance to the survivors' spiritual recovery. Many well-known Yiddish theatre professionals, such as Chayele Grober, Joseph Glikson, Cypora Fajnzylber and Lin Jaldati toured the sanatoria where the survivors were recuperating.

The Sauters describe how the nature of the Yiddish theatre repertoire in Sweden changed after the war. Large multi-act plays and operettas were abandoned in the 1950s and replaced by lighter *kleynkunst*, i.e. cabaret, soirées with humorous and satiric song numbers and sketches. The activity of the former Jewish Dramatic Amateur Society was fading away, but new forces and names replaced it. Some of them had been Yiddish theatre enthusiasts even before the Holocaust. For instance, Abe Kirschbaum had appeared in the production of *Di kishefmakherin* of his home *shtetl* Wolbórz with about forty Jewish families. Stockholm Yiddish theatre became part of a new association, which went by the name *Gezelschaft far yidish un yidish kultur in Shvedn*, Society for Yiddish and Yiddish Culture in Sweden. The Sauters base their description of the association's theatre activities on unique privately owned photo albums and interviews. The

Sauters' overview of Yiddish theatre groups in Malmö and Gothenburg is also interesting. Visiting actors continued to come to Sweden after the war, such as the legendary comedians Shimen Dzigán and Yisroel Shumacher, who performed in Sweden around 1957.

At the end of the Sauters' excellent book, the circle closes, when they return to the revival of Yiddish theatre today in different parts of the world as well as in Sweden. Once again, there is a Yiddish amateur theatre association in Stockholm, and the city is regularly visited by Yiddish actors from abroad. In 2021, New York-based New Yiddish Rep theatre presented Samuel Beckett's *Vartn oyf Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) to full audiences at the Royal Dramatic Theatre. As throughout its entire history, Yiddish theatre remains a very trans-national phenomenon. All of this is also important for the revitalization efforts of the Yiddish language in Sweden. According to the Sauters: 'Their importance is difficult to overestimate and probably goes much further than what the members themselves consider. The theatre amateurs offer a platform where Yiddish can be heard, i.e. the spoken dialogue, the conversations in Yiddish. This is an important mainstay for the revitalisation of the language'. ■

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It has come to our attention that sadly Sylvia Sauter passed away in late April 2024. Our deepest condolences to the family.