



WAGNER'S HEIR?

Can a clear path be sketched from Wagner's music to Auschwitz? Can one artist's work shape history? Wagner's oeuvre was beloved by Hitler and played in the concentration camps, accompanying unspeakable acts of cruelty. But is that the composer's fault? // **Yehuda Moraly**

Holocaust survivor Esther Greenbaum sponsors an international orchestration competition. Her favorite finalist is a young Israeli, Asaf Drori, who has conducted a superb rendition of Mahler. For the contest's final phase, however, Drori wants to orchestrate Wagner. Greenbaum is vehemently opposed. Not only was her father killed in the Holocaust, but she herself, a virtuoso violinist, was forced to play Wagner in the camp orchestras. So her money, she insists, won't be used to fund any performance of this hated composer's work. Drori retorts that Chopin, too, was an ardent anti-Semite, but no one outlaws his compositions. A composer's ideology, says the contestant, has nothing to do with his music.

Such is the plot of Victor Gordon's *You Will Not Play Wagner*, which premiered in

Israel on March 30, 2019, at the Jerusalem Theater. Roy Horovitz directed this stage reading of the play by the Mikro Theatre.

Drori's attitude is now common within the Israeli music world. Though Israel has unofficially boycotted Wagner since its founding, lawyer Jonathan Livni established the Israel Wagner Society in 2010 to promote performances of the composer's works.

Yet those opposing Israel's ban on Wagner are perhaps uninformed. This musical genius was no mere anti-Semite. His writings – including his operas – depict the Jew as the root of all evil, an enemy to be eliminated not just for Germany's sake but to save the entire continent.

To understand Wagner's link to the Holocaust, one must plumb the depths of his connections to Hitler.

The dwarf Alberich commands the Nibelung laborers with the power of the ring stolen from the Rhine maidens. Illustration by Arthur Rackham for the libretto of *The Rhinegold* in English translation, 1910

Stage reading of *You Will Not Play Wagner* at the Jerusalem Theater with Miriam Zohar, Rami Barukh and Niv Petel, March 2019
Photo: Rotem Avrutsky

Playbill for the 2017 world premiere of *You Will Not Play Wagner* in Sydney



Flyleaf of the 1869 reprint of *Das Judenthum in der Musik*, this time boldly displaying Wagner's name. The 1850 edition was published under a pseudonym

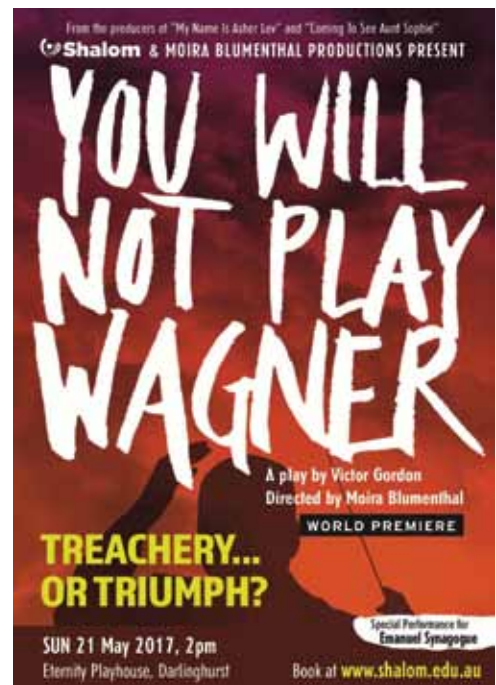
Theory and Composition

Wagner's first anti-Semitic work, *Das Judenthum in der Musik* (Judaism in Music), was published under a pseudonym in 1850, when its author was thirty-seven and exiled from Germany for his socialism. It was republished under Wagner's name in 1869, by which time he had returned home and was enjoying the patronage of Ludwig II of Bavaria. The essay contended that Jews, as cold intellectuals, cannot be creative. As examples, Wagner cited Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) plus oblique references to Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864). Whereas Meyerbeer remained a proud Jew throughout his life, Mendelssohn converted to Protestantism. But for Wagner, as later for Hitler, conversion changed nothing; a Jew was a Jew.

An uneasy sense of gratitude might have prompted Wagner not to denigrate Meyerbeer by name; the popular composer had recommended one of Wagner's early operas to the theater in Dresden that subsequently made it his first success. But the general tone of his article was unmistakable.

"Judaism in Music" set out to explore and explain the abhorrence that Wagner – representing all Germans – felt toward Jews:

We have to explain to ourselves the involuntary repulsion possessed for us by the nature and personality of the Jews [...]. [The Jew] rules, and will rule, so long as Money remains the power



before which all our doings and our dealings lose their force [...]. [His] exterior can never be thinkable as a subject for the art of re-resentation: if plastic art wants to present us with a Jew, it mostly takes its model from sheer fantasy [...]. Our whole European art and civilization, however, have remained to the Jew a foreign tongue [...]. In this Speech, this Art, the Jew can only afterspeak and after-patch – not truly make a poem of his words, an artwork of his doings [...].

If we hear a Jew speak, we are unconsciously offended by the entire want of purely-human expression in his



“We have to explain to ourselves the involuntary repulsion possessed for us by the nature and personality of the Jews,” wrote Wagner

discourse: the cold indifference of its peculiar “blubber” (“Gelabber”) never by any chance rises to the ardour of a higher, heartfelt passion. [...]

His adaptations needs must seem to us outlandish, odd, indifferent, cold, unnatural and awry; so that Judaic works of music often produce on us the impression as though a poem of Goethe’s, for instance, were being rendered in the Jewish jargon [...] and in

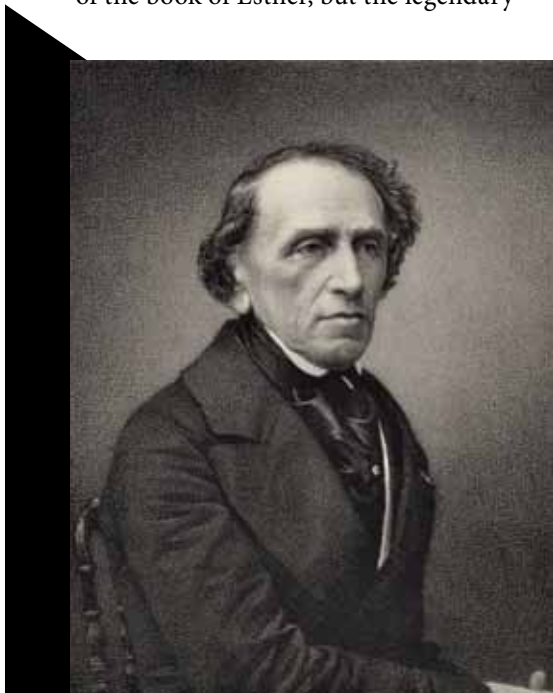
the history of Modern Music we can but class the Judaic period as that of final unproductivity, of stability gone to ruin. (*The Theatre: Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis, vol. 3 [1894], pp. 80–85)

The final paragraph recommends the Jews’ self-annihilation:

Bohemian no more?
Richard Wagner in 1871,
finally married to Cosima
and planning to move to
Bayreuth, Germany

Without once looking back, take ye your part in this regenerative work of deliverance through self-annulment; then are we one and un-dissevered! But bethink ye, that one only thing can redeem you from the burden of your curse: the redemption of Ahasuerus – Going under! (Ellis, p. 100)

This Ahasuerus isn't the Persian king of the book of Esther, but the legendary



Early patron, later derided by Wagner as his enemy. Giacomo Meyerbeer, engraving from a photograph by Pierre Petit published after the composer's death in 1864

Ludwig II of Bavaria, whose ascension to the throne pulled Wagner out of debt, was a classic 18th-century Romantic



Wandering Jew. Having refused to allow Jesus to rest a few moments against the wall of his store as the condemned man bore his heavy, wooden cross to the site of his own crucifixion, a Jewish shoemaker named Ahasuerus was doomed to eternal wandering. Wagner thus proposed three solutions to the existential problem of the Jew: total assimilation (“self-annulment; then we are one”), annihilation by exhaustion from eternal wandering (“the burden of your curse”), or “Going under,” which the composer left for German history to define.

Wagner returned frequently to these themes in his ten volumes of theoretical works. His correspondence (and his dinner conversation, recorded by his second wife, Cosima) reflects his conviction that Jews everywhere conspired to conquer the world. In his *Richard Wagner and the Jews* (2005), however, Milton E. Brener notes that Wagner had several Jewish friends and collaborators. Among them: Hermann Levi, his favorite conductor; Josef Rubinstein, who lodged for long periods in Wagner's home, transposing his operatic scores into piano music; and pianist Karl Tausig. Wagner's prejudice against “that amorphous entity, the Jews,” often conflicted with these relationships:

At one point, with two Jewish friends living as part of his household, he laconically told his wife that their home would soon be a synagogue. (Brener, p. 2)

Vicious Cycle

Of all Wagner's works, his operas are the most densely inhabited by thinly veiled Jewish characters. Take *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg* (1867). Its villain was originally called Veit Hanslich, based on German music critic Eduard Hanslick, who preferred Beethoven and Brahms to Wagner and “gracefully conceal[ed] his Jewish origins” (Wagner, postscript to “Judaism in Music” [1869]). Though later renamed Beckmesser, this fellow reflects Wagner's every Jewish stereotype: pedantry, aggressive argumentation, and



Actor dons a bust modeled on the stereotypical ultra-Orthodox Jew in a performance of *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, directed by Barrie Kosky, Bayreuth Festival, 2018

Photo: Bayreuther Festspiele/Enrico Nawrath

Siegfried is the new German, the fearless hero, and the Nibelungen – the ugly dwarves who pursue gold – are the Jews

total misunderstanding of German art. The opera ends with a hymn to the German race and culture and Beckmesser's utter defeat. Hitler saw *Mastersingers* many times, and Goebbels described it in a radio propaganda speech as "the very incarnation of Germanity" (*Der Angriff*, August 7, 1933).

It is in perhaps his most famous work, *The Ring of the Nibelungen*, that Wagner most explicitly lays all the world's misfortunes at the feet of the Jews and advocates their extermination. Although Celtic mythology inspired this cycle of four operas – *The Rhinegold* (1869), *The Valkyrie* (1870), *Siegfried* (1871), and *Twilight of the Gods* (*Götterdämmerung*, 1876) – they also clearly refer to German society. The gods, Wotan and his royal court, symbolize the German aristocrats and their decline. Siegfried is the new German, the fearless hero. And the Nibelungen – the ugly dwarves who curse love, preferring to pursue gold and world dominion – represent the Jews. Alberich,

the arch-tyrant who subjugates his fellow Nibelung in *The Rhinegold*, embodies the capitalist Jew. His brother Mime signifies the Jewish artist, who is unable to create: Mime cannot repair the sword left by Siegfried's mother, whereas the young son himself does so effortlessly.

Mime claims to be Siegfried's father but repels him. The revelation that his real parents are dead leaves Siegfried relieved, allowing him to kill Mime and finally free himself from the impotent Jew's clutches.

Most dangerous is Hagen, Alberich's son, symbolizing the aristocratic Jew in *Twilight of the Gods*. Secretly a Nibelung, he is also a hybrid, born of Alberich's relationship with a noblewoman. Entrusted by his dead father with the mission of recovering the ring of dominion, Hagen kills Siegfried, traitorously stabbing him in the back. He himself then dies in pursuit of the cursed gold, plunging into the River Rhine to recapture the ring.

Wagner and Hitler



Photo: Wilhelm Hoefler/Ullstein Bild via Getty Images



Germanic hero pitted against vile dwarves. Alberich and his brother Mime, the villains of the first two operas in the *Ring* cycle, in a German production at the turn of the 20th century, and Siegfried, photographed by Felix Nadar at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, circa 1896

Solving the Jewish Problem

Unhappy with the pessimistic ending of *Götterdämmerung*, Wagner wanted to add a fifth opera to the cycle, solving the Jewish problem once and for all. *Parsifal* (1882) reworked the Christian myth of the Holy Grail – the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper and the receptacle in which his disciples collected his blood after his crucifixion. Two of the opera’s characters are connected to Judaism.

The first is Kundry, a female version of the Wandering Jew. In Act 2, she reveals to Parsifal that she has been cursed for laughing at Jesus’ suffering on the cross. Now she can only sneer but never cry.

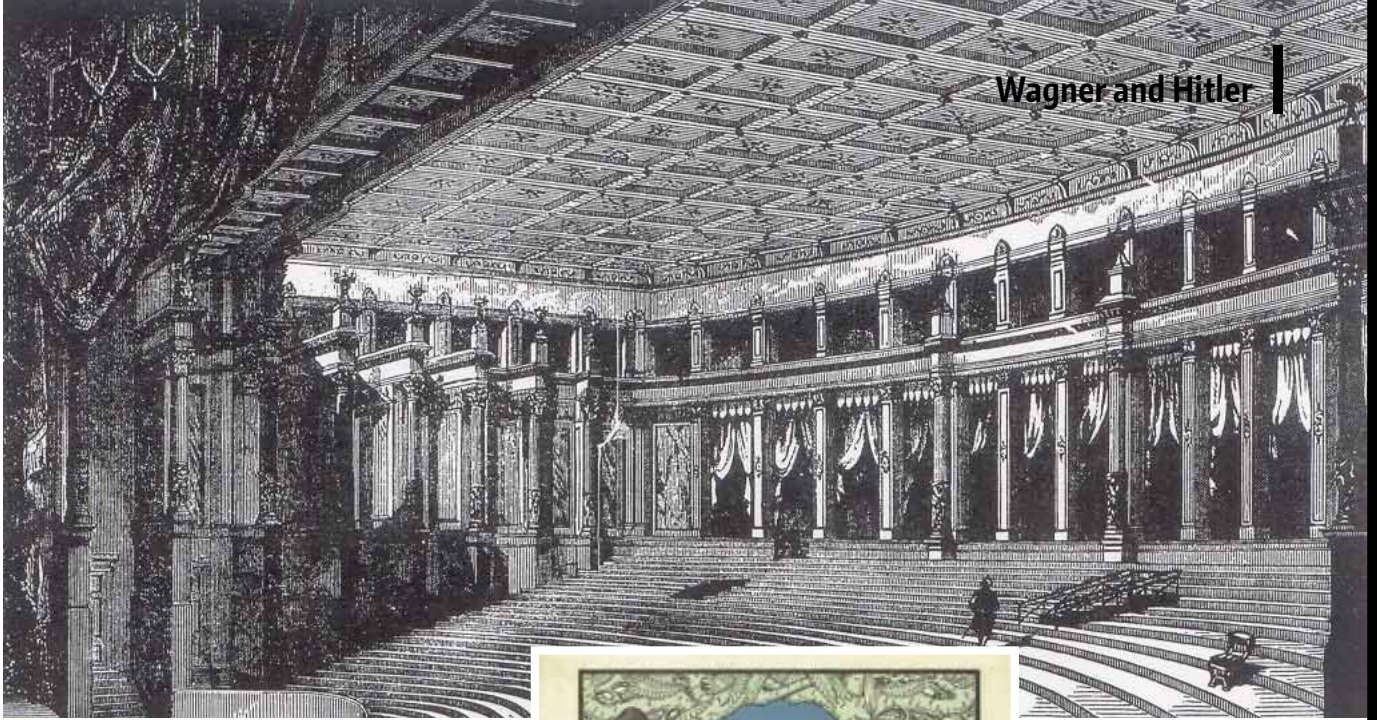
The second is the villainous Klingsor, who, like Alberich, has rejected love. But whereas that dwarf cursed attachment and pursued gold, Klingsor has castrated himself in order to join the Knights of the Holy Grail, who have taken an oath of chastity. Impure thoughts haunt him, however, and he is rejected by the other knights despite his sacrifice. Burning with hate, Klingsor conjures up enchanting Flower Girls to seduce the knights he would destroy.

Wagner explained to his wife that

Klingsor represents the Jew, making the opera a triumph of the pure Aryan over the Semitic sorcerer and femme fatale. Nevertheless, some have preferred to interpret the character as an embodiment of evil rather than a racial slur.

Unlike Klingsor, Kundry is redeemed in the opera’s final scene. Released from her curse by Parsifal, she sinks lifeless to the ground. Is this fate a dramatization of the self-annulment Wagner recommended to the Jewish nation in *Das Judentum in der Musik*?

The conductor proposed for the first performance of *Parsifal* was the leader of the Munich orchestra and the son of a rabbi, Hermann Levi. Wagner objected at first, then resigned himself to the choice. In a letter dated October 1881, Ludwig II of Bavaria rejoiced at Wagner’s decision. The composer responded angrily that he considered “the Jewish race as the sworn enemy of Humanity and of all that is noble in Humanity” (Leon Stein, *The Racial Thinking of Richard Wagner* [New York Philosophical Library, 1950], p. 84). In a triumph of Wagner’s pursuit of artistic perfection over his own anti-Semitism,



Levi became the composer's conductor of choice for decades. Despite Wagner's frequent suggestions that he convert, Levi maintained their friendship.

Hitler and Wagner

Over a decade before Wagner's death in 1883, Wagner societies began to proliferate, fundraising for the opera house the composer was building to host an annual festival of his works in the German town of Bayreuth. These groups soon became a cultural phenomenon. Beyond their devotion to music, they championed both German supremacy and virulent anti-Semitism. As Hitler put it, not altogether accurately, "It was Cosima Wagner's merit to have created the link between Bayreuth and National Socialism" (Norman Cameron and R. H. Stevens, trans., *Hitler's Table Talk 1941-1944* [Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1953], p. 349).

Hitler discovered Wagner very early, considering him a mentor and prophet:

At the age of twelve, I saw an opera for the first time in my life. It was [Wagner's] *Lohengrin*. Right away, I was addicted. My youthful enthusiasm for the Bayreuth Master knew no bounds. (*Mein Kampf*, ch. 1, par. 37)

Wagner was central to Hitler's life as a young man in Vienna. His entire day



Custom-made. The interior of the Bayreuth Festival Theatre, 1885 engraving from a sketch made in 1875, while the building was still under construction. Wagner insisted on a deeply recessed orchestra pit, which hides the musicians from the audience, keeping the focus on the drama

Patronage certificate from the 1922 Bayreuth Festival

Conductor Hermann Levi put up with Wagner's ongoing insults but remained the preferred conductor at the Bayreuth Festival



British-born racialist philosopher Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855–1927) founded the first Wagner society in Paris, immersing himself in the composer's world. Chamberlain even married into it by wedding Cosima's daughter Eva von Bülow

Wagner's love life was infamous. He separated from his first wife, Minna, around 1860 after repeatedly cheating on her and fathered two children with her successor, Cosima, while she was still married to her first husband, Hans von Bülow. Cosima and Richard Wagner, 1872

Wagner's daughter-in-law supplied Hitler with the paper and ink to write *Mein Kampf*

revolved around attending performances of Wagner's operas in the evenings. As a childhood friend later wrote:

Of course, we knew by heart *Lohengrin*, Adolf's favourite opera – I believe he saw it ten times during our time together in Vienna – and the same is true of the *Meistersinger*. (August Kubizek, *The Young Hitler I Knew* [Frontline Books, 2011], ch. 10)

It wasn't just *Lohengrin* that Hitler knew by heart, but all of Wagner's work. The composer's early opera *Rienzi* inspired Hitler's dreams of leadership. Above all, he was obsessed with the *Ring* cycle and its imaginative reworking of Norse sagas.

The second generation of Wagner's family befriended Hitler from the outset, seeing in him a secular Messiah who could bring the patriarch's artistic dreams to fruition. Racialist philosopher Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who married Wagner's daughter Eva at her mother's suggestion, wrote enthusiastically to Hitler in September 1923:

That Germany in its hour of greatest need



has given birth to a Hitler is a proof of vitality. (S. A. Winkle, *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook: An Anthology of Texts* [Routledge, 2002], pp. 84–5)

Many of Hitler's main ideas were drawn from Chamberlain's *Foundations of the 19th Century*, such as the superiority of the Aryan race and the Jews as an unstable mixture of Bedouin and Syrian, money-hungry and destructive.

Furthermore, the circle that formed around Cosima Wagner and her children in Bayreuth was rabidly racist and anti-Semitic. The festival, run by Cosima after Wagner's death, was taken over first by their son Siegfried and then (after the latter's passing) by his British-born widow, Winifred.

The family's connection with Hitler began in the 1920s, when Winifred Wagner invited him to attend the Bayreuth Festival. Imprisoned in Munich after the abortive Beer Hall Putsch of 1922, Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* with paper and ink supplied by Winifred.

When the National Socialist Party came to power in 1933, Hitler held a grandiose celebration marking the fiftieth anniversary of Wagner's death. The ceremony took place in Leipzig, the composer's birthplace, and the guests of honor were Winifred Wagner and her son Wieland. There was even talk of marriage between the Führer and the newly widowed Winifred, who rivaled Magda Goebbels as "first lady of the Third Reich."

Every summer from 1933 to 1939, Hitler attended the Bayreuth Festival





Olive Fremstad as Kundry in *Parsifal* at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York, 1913

Original reproduction of Max Brückner's set design for the finale of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, showing Valhalla on fire

along with his war-wounded, all of whom were privileged to hear Wagner's *Ring* cycle. Following in Wagner's footsteps, the dictator described *Parsifal* as a racial triumph:

It is not the Christian-Schopenhauerian religion of compassion that is here being worshipped but the pure, noble blood which the brotherhood of initiates has vowed to preserve in its purity and to



Jewish artist Arthur Szyk's anti-Nazi *Nibelungen* series reinforced the connection between Wagner and Hitler. Szyk's Valhalla, the heavenly abode where gods and heroes feast together, pen and ink, 1942

Winifred Wagner, widow of the composer's son Siegfried, welcoming Adolf Hitler to her home in Bayreuth, 1939



Hitler and Eva Braun's double suicide was modeled on that of the two lovers in Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*

worship in its sanctity. (Joachim Köhler, *Wagner's Hitler: The Prophet and His Disciple*, p. 239)

Hitler and Eva Braun's double suicide was even modeled on that of the two lovers in *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried and Brunhilde, who were burned together on the same pyre.

Facing the Music

Wagner's line of thought is intimately familiar to me. At every stage of my life I come back to him. ("Hitler and Wagner," *The Daily Telegraph*, July 25, 2011)

Can a philosophical treatise or work of art forge a political system and change history? Some rare examples come to mind. The influence of Descartes and rationalism was instrumental in launching both the Age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution, which replaced belief with reason as the supreme value. The writings of Karl Marx were central to the Russian Revolution. But must Wagner's thought, emerging through his operas, be linked to National Socialism?

Convinced of the essential threat posed by the Jews, and of their ultimate responsibility for all misfortune, Wagner hoped for their annihilation – whether by violence, such as suffered by the defeated dwarf in *Siegfried*, or by a sweet, soothing death, like that of Kundry in *Parsifal*. These unspoken desires were then actualized by Hitler, a passionate Wagnerian.

Can Wagner be blamed for the Führer's delusional attempts to impose theater on reality? Wagner's inner circle delivered his operatic scores to Hitler as the great composer's spiritual heir. Certainly these fans identified with Nazism. Their home was the dictator's refuge.

Wagner's music became the soundtrack to some of the most appalling crimes in history, perpetrated against the Jewish people. Surely that's reason enough to ensure that, sublime though his works may be, they must never resound in the country whose very existence defies their deepest longings. □

Further reading:

Milton E. Brener, *Richard Wagner and the Jews* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 2006); Joachim Köhler, *Wagner's Hitler: The Prophet and His Disciple* (Cornwall: Polity Press, 2000); Hektor K. T. Yan, "The Jewish Question Revisited: Anti-Semitism and 'Race' in Wagner's *Parsifal*," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 43, no. 2 [2012], pp. 343–63.

Hitler wasn't the only modern leader influenced by Wagner's operas. Theodor Herzl attended a performance of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* at the Paris opera house and was captivated by its grand architecture, pictured here. The Zionist visionary wrote afterward, "We too will have such splendid auditoriums – the gentlemen in full dress, the ladies dressed as lavishly as possible." Herzl might look attired for the opera in this photo, but it was taken outdoors during his 1898 visit to Jerusalem



Prof. Yehuda Moraly

An emeritus professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Moraly will soon publish *Revolution in Paradise: Veiled Representations of Jewish Characters in the Cinema of Occupied France*

