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The blood libel in postwar New York: Erwin Piscator's *The Burning Bush* (1949)

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an unexplored chapter in the long aftermath of the Tiszaeszlár blood libel case (1882–1883), a lesser-known example of East Central and Central European exile theater, and a compelling episode in a postwar campaign to counter antisemitism in the United States. It follows the transnational transfers and intersecting trajectories of intellectuals, Leftist-antifascist culture, and historical memories between Hungary, Germany, and the United States. In doing so, the paper reconsiders the play as an example of antifascist humanism and addresses the following questions: how did émigré intellectuals from Central and East Central Europe transfer an emblematic story of anti-Jewish prejudice to a postwar audience? How did they respond to the recent European past and transform the cultural and political legacy of Leftist antifascism in the process? And finally, how did the latter shape the play's contribution to opposing antisemitism in the United States?

KEYWORDS

Ritual murder; Holocaust; Jewish responses; postwar memory; documentary theater

In 2015, while researching for a book on the aftermath of the Tiszaeszlár case, I came across newspaper clippings from The New York Times that reported on the Tiszaeszlár trial (1882–1883), an emblematic case of modern East Central European antisemitism.[1] A closer look, however, revealed that the copies were in fact part of a theater performance that Erwin Piscator (1893–1966), a German émigré director, staged in New York in 1949. The play was written under the title *The Burning Bush* by two other émigrés, Heinz Herald and Géza Herczeg, a German-Jewish and a Hungarian-Jewish writer. Piscator, once a major figure of Leftist theater in Weimar Germany, staged the play at The Rooftop Theatre on East Houston Street, in an area on Manhattan's Lower East Side that had been known for long as the Yiddish Theatre District. The Rooftop belonged to The New School for Social Research where Piscator started working after his emigration in 1939. The clippings suggested that for staging *The Burning Bush*, he used Living Newspaper Style, a radical technique developed in the nineteen twenties in Soviet Russia and Weimar Germany. Thus, the findings at YIVO made me aware of a little-known episode

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in the aftermath of the Tiszaeszlár case, in East Central and Central European exile theater, and a compelling example of a postwar campaign to counter antisemitism in the United States.

The New York Times clippings may have made their way from The Rooftop Theater to YIVO via a local *zamler*.[2] At any rate, they entered the collections because archivists were aware of the relevance of the Tiszaeszlár case for East Central European Jewish history. The copies were added to the Territorial Collections related to Hungary and indexed under the name Tiszaeszlár. The fact that the clippings were part of a theater play disappeared behind their status as historical documents. In 1949, for the archivists at YIVO, the clippings referred to a piece of Eastern European Jewish history that had just perished.

The trial against the Jews of Tiszaeszlár, a village in Eastern Hungary, rested on the ritual murder accusation, an inheritance from age-old anti-Judaism, but indicated the onset of modern antisemitism in (Austria-)Hungary. The accusation reinforced the claim that Jews, due to their religious practices, could not be integrated into Europe's enlightened societies. Thereby, it called for a repeal of liberal policies that had recently led to their emancipation. After the disappearance of a non-Jewish girl, Eszter Sólymosi, the district's delegate and later co-founder of the Hungarian Anti-Semitic Party (1883–1892), Géza Ónody (1848–?), initiated an investigation. The case against the Jews of Tiszaeszlár was built on the testimony of Móric Scharf (1868–1929), the young son of the synagogue sexton, who claimed to have witnessed the murder through the keyhole of the synagogue. In the center of the proceedings and the public's attention stood the testimony of the Jewish boy and his dramatic confrontations with his father. In the course of the trial, his testimony was disproved, coerced as it probably was, and the proceedings resulted in the acquittal of the defendants. The defense lawyer, Károly Eötvös (1842–1916), emerged from the trial as a celebrated public intellectual. Although the trial ultimately reinforced the liberal order, the case incited violence and anti-Jewish atrocities swept across the country. For later memory, the Tiszaeszlár case offered a multi-layered tale about antisemitism, Jewish self-hatred, and the triumph of liberal principles.[3]

Piscator's staging of *The Burning Bush* rendered the Tiszaeszlár case in ways that referenced the more recent persecution of European Jewry. Recently, Minou Arjomand elaborated a detailed analysis of the play. Applying the lens of a later paradigm of Holocaust representation, she interpreted Piscator's staging as an early expression of post-traumatic non-linearity.[4] In this paper, I do the opposite: instead of looking at the play retrospectively and reading it as a Holocaust drama, I reconstruct the historical context of the play and reconsider it as an example of antifascist humanism.

Drawing on published and unpublished documents, I follow the transnational transfers and intersecting trajectories of émigré intellectuals, Leftist-antifascist theater, and historical memories between Hungary, Germany, and the United States. In doing so, I reconnect the play with the legacy of prewar antifascism and address the following questions: how did émigré intellectuals from Central and East Central Europe transfer an emblematic story of anti-Jewish prejudice to a postwar audience? How did they respond to the recent European past and transform the cultural and political legacy of Leftist antifascism in the process? And, how, in turn, did the latter shape the play's contribution to opposing antisemitism in the United States?

Post-revolutionary trajectories

When Piscator arrived in New York on January 1, 1939, he had been in exile for almost a decade. During the Weimar Republic (1919–1933), Piscator created performances that were radical both in their aesthetics and politics. In Berlin, a radiant cultural center, he experimented with revolutionary forms that addressed the city's working class audience. First at his Proletarian Theater and then at the renowned People's Theater (*Volksbühne*), he extended the traditional theater repertoire toward political revues and presented Marxist interpretations of classics like Friedrich Schiller and contemporaries like Ernst Toller. He used the stage as a forum for exposing political and economic conditions, strengthen class consciousness, and agitate. In order to shift from more traditional theater forms, he pioneered in the use of screenings, image and audio montage, news and propaganda materials, mobile stages, and more. In 1927, he had to resign from his position at the People's Theater because of his radical stance. In the same year, he opened the new Piscator Theater at Nollendorfplatz in Berlin-Schöneberg, a bohemian neighborhood and home of many prominent German intellectuals. There, he collaborated with authors Bertolt Brecht and Walter Mehring, actresses Tilla Durieux and Helene Weigel, composer Hanns Eisler, artists and designers George Grosz and László Moholy-Nagy, among others. In 1931, he left for the Soviet Union to work on a film project and did not return to Germany until 1951.

In 1934, while his former theater at Nollendorfplatz was seized by the Nazis, he became president of the International Revolutionary Theatre Association, or MORT—a rather sinister acronym. As a president, he initiated the opening of a German antifascist theater at Engels, a city at the Volga river. In 1936, while in Paris to work for the Popular Front, he received a warning not to return to the Soviet Union. Many of his collaborators at the Engels project would soon fall victim to the purges. As a double refugee, he stayed in Paris until 1939. He did not resume his theater work before 1940 when, already in New York, he accepted an offer to start a drama program at The New School for Social Research.[5]

Piscator left Berlin as a Leftist radical but reached New York in 1939 as a humanist antifascist. By that time, his radical stance had been tempered by his engagement in the creation of the Popular Front. Antifascism emerged on a truly international scale in the early thirties, initiated, to a large extent, by refugee intellectuals from Germany. These intellectuals—Liberals, Conservatives, and Social Democrats, scattered around countries and continents—generated a political movement, a popular moral stand, and a transnational culture. They rejected the anti-Enlightenment spirit of fascism and promoted the idea of humanism that they derived from classic German culture. Although the Communist International originally dismissed any collaboration with Social Democrats (let alone Liberals or Conservatives), in 1935, they adapted the so-called Popular Front policy that endorsed the participation of Communists and enabled a wider antifascist coalition. It was this new policy that brought Piscator to Paris.

However, for radical artists like him, the Popular Front meant that they had to abandon their former militant stance and class politics. While they previously regarded art as a means of radical social change, now they had to turn it into a medium of humanist enlightenment and appeal to the middle classes as well. At the same time, Leftist interpretations that condemned fascism as a form of capitalism had to be muted and

transformed into a more general humanist stance. Although the Hitler–Stalin Pact soon made an end to the Popular Front, the idea of antifascist humanism continued to inform the work of many intellectuals.[6] It was this humanist stance that Piscator brought into his Dramatic Workshop in New York.

Similar to Piscator's intellectual path, the Living Newspaper Style (LNS), a radical theater technique that he championed, originated in the revolutions in Russia and Central Europe. LNS emerged in Soviet Russia as part of a revolutionary culture that created new theatrical forms, including mass spectacles and reenactments, mobile theater units and stage montage, in a need to address and agitate mass working class audiences. LNS consisted of the staging, reciting, sometimes singing of news and included revolutionary commentary, often comedy, audience response and reflexion. Throughout the nineteen twenties, it became a form of working class culture and spread in the newly established proletarian clubs. By the early nineteen thirties, when Stalinist suppression of revolutionary culture led to its disappearance in the Soviet Union, LNS had been circulating in Central Europe, especially Weimar Germany, and later in the United States.

Piscator himself adopted LNS in the mid-nineteen twenties and the technique then flourished in German antifascist theater. In the United States, it appeared during the Great Depression: publications, research trips to Europe, international workers' organizations, and immigrant newcomers facilitated its transatlantic route. To a large extent, LNS surfaced as part of New York's immigrant culture, with groups such as the German *Proletbühne* on Manhattan's Upper East Side or the Hungarian Workers' Club in The Bronx. Soon, it left the stage and reappeared in the demonstrations and hunger marches that erupted during the Depression. In 1935, when the Federal Theater Project, a New Deal program, started, a branch entitled New York Living Newspaper Unit opened. The Unit came to be the Federal Theater Project's most radical and most disputed undertaking. The debates that surrounded it resulted in charges of communism and hearings at the House Un-American Activities Committee. This, ultimately, led to the suppression of radical art and the closing of the Federal Theater Project in 1939. By Piscator's arrival in New York in the same year, the radical age of Leftist aesthetics was ending in the United States and Living Newspaper Style soon became a residue of a radical past.[7]

Vulnerable pursuits

In Spring 1939, upon his arrival in New York, Piscator recalled his book *The Political Theater* that in 1929 opened with the chapter "From Art to Politics." Now, he "decided to reverse this 'in order to say 'From Politics to Art' … That, finally, is what you want, I said to myself.'"[8] At the time, this shift away from radical politics was a precondition for resuming his career in the United States.

The New School for Social Research, where in January 1940 Piscator opened The Dramatic Workshop, had long become a home for refugee intellectuals. The New School established a University in Exile as soon as 1933, an institution that soon developed into an important center for social and political thought. The invitation to start a drama program opened up for Piscator a unique opportunity to resume his theater plans. In a time before the onset of Off- and Off-Off-Broadway, his engagement at The New

School helped him create a program that could have not met the requirements of commercial theaters. Although this program did not possess the radical edge of his earlier experiments, it assumed that theater had a social mission and, in order to fulfill it, it had to break away from more traditional theater forms. "Art," though separate from "politics," possessed for Piscator a potential for moral transformation—a belief that originated in post-Enlightenment German traditions.[9]

The Dramatic Workshop operated as a "school that is a theater"—a concept that stood at the center of what Piscator now considered as art's social engagement. At The Dramatic Workshop, rehearsals were open to the public: students and audience were to be educated together to become engaged actors and spectators. In his teaching, Piscator promoted a technique that he called "objective acting." This technique required from actors and spectators alike a shift from traditional performing styles. In "objective acting," actors disrupted stage illusion and reflected on the presence of spectators. The latter, on the other hand, ceased to be mere spectators: instead of enjoying from behind the "fourth wall" that separates the stage and the auditorium, they were invited to relate analytically to what enfolded on stage. Ultimately, this technique had to enable the audience to take a stance on social and moral dilemmas presented on stage. "Objective acting" meant, as Judith Malina, Piscator's student and later cofounder of The Living Theatre remembered, "theatre inspired by the spectator, transformed by the spectator, and responsible for the spectator."[10]

The Dramatic Workshop developed a public repertoire based on classic and modern drama and the students performed for a burgeoning audience. Although the Workshop's success remained modest compared to professional commercial standards, The New School's Auditorium on 12th Street soon became too small for the performances. In 1945, the Workshop moved to The President Theater in Midtown Manhattan and, in 1947, extended to a second location, The Rooftop Theater on the Lower East Side. Ultimately, in 1949, a number of factors led to The Dramatic Workshop's separation from The New School. The Workshop struggled under the new conditions and slowly declined subsequent to Piscator's forced return to Germany in 1951.

From the beginning, the anti-communist climate in the United States overshadowed Piscator's American career. Since he landed in the port of New York, he worried about being deported as a former member of the German Communist Party. As the United States entered the war in 1941 and many Germans and German-Americans were interned, he had to fear detention as an "enemy alien" as well. In 1943, the FBI searched his apartment for Communist (or German?) propaganda. Although they did not find anything incriminating, the Immigration and Naturalization Service rejected his application for citizenship in 1944. As the war ended, the FBI changed his file's classification from "Alien Enemy Control—German" to "Security Matter—Communist." In 1947, an FBI attempt to deport him failed in lack of supporting testimonies. In 1951, when summoned to a hearing at the House Un-American Activities Committee, he decided to leave New York and return to West-Germany.[11]

Piscator's political commitment and later his status as a refugee resulted in a precariousness that marked his entire career. He started as a radical Leftist in a post-revolutionary era in Weimar Germany. To the Soviet Union, he arrived in an age when Stalinism suppressed radical art. In prewar Paris, he spent years as a double refugee and a theater-maker *sans* theater. In the United States, he lived as a German refugee and a

former Communist during the Second World War and a second period of Red Scare. Finally, as a forced returnee, he had to face a country that had exiled him but confronted its past reluctantly.

Dramatic correspondents

Around the time when Piscator reached New York, two Central European émigrés teamed up on the West Coast to write *The Burning Bush*. They transferred the Tiszaeszlár story to the United States from Budapest, Vienna, and Berlin and drew on sources they found in art and journalism.

Géza Herczeg (1888–1954), a Hungarian-Jewish journalist and screenwriter, started his career in the early nineteen tens in Budapest as a correspondent and editor of Hungarian and German language liberal newspapers. During Hungary's Aster Revolution in 1918 he served as the chief of the press department at the Foreign Office. In 1919 or 1920 he left Budapest and settled, probably as a political refugee, in Vienna where he became the editor-in-chief of the *Neue Freie Presse* and then the *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*. Despite his progressive views, around 1930 he possibly leaned to Italian Fascism—at least he appears as a translator of the drama *Napoleon: the Hundred Days,* published by Benito Mussolini and Giovacchino Forzano. In 1934, he left Vienna for the United States to work as a screenwriter in Hollywood. Heinz Herald (1890–1964), on the other hand, a German-Jewish director and screenwriter, studied in Berlin and started his career at the prestigious Deutsches Theater. During the nineteen twenties, he made a career as a director of Max Reinhardt's ramified theater empire. After the Nazi rise to power, he emigrated via Paris and London to the United States.[12]

By the time Herald and Herczeg met in the United States, they both had been aware of the Tiszaeszlár case. Herczeg remembered the case from his "days as a political reporter in Hungary," as he related, and Herald probably encountered the material through *Samael's Mission,* a play by the German-Jewish writer Arnold Zweig that Herald staged in Berlin in 1920.[13]

Around 1920, as White Terror was sweeping across Hungary, the memory of the Tiszaeszlár case reemerged as a response to new anti-Jewish atrocities. Back in 1904, the defense attorney in the case, Károly Eötvös, published *The Big Trial*, a powerful memoir that came out in multiple editions during the next quarter century. An eloquently written testimony of a celebrated personality, *The Big Trial* received critical acclaim.[14] Inspired by the attorney's writing, Miksa Szabolcsi (1857–1915), chief editor of the Jewish liberal weekly *Equality* (*Egyenlőség,* 1882–1938) and one of the founders of Hungarian Jewish journalism, published his reminiscences in the same year, 1904. Szabolcsi had reported on the trial as a young man and his investigative writing had helped clear the case. In 1922, in an age of new adversities, his reminiscences were republished in *Equality* under the subtitle "memories from dark times" and reprinted as a book as well. In 1920, journalist Arthur Földes (1878–1938) had published a booklet that contained a compilation from Eötvös's memoir. He used Eötvös's words to answer new allegations that Jews had been confronted with in the wake of war and revolutions.

These and similar publications commemorated what they regarded as a major event of recent Jewish and national history. Their efforts to memorialize the trial originated, in part, in the more recent experiences of post-1919 antisemitism. For the liberal press, Jewish

and non-Jewish, the Tiszaeszlár case reminded of the peril of racial incitement and, at the same time, testified to the liberal principles of a past era. In a time of "dark intentions," suggested Lajos Szabolcsi, remembering the trial restored "faith in the Hungarian judiciary" and, ultimately, the waning liberal order.[15] Knowing the Hungarian context intimately, Herczeg must have been familiar with at least some of these efforts to commemorate the trial.

The Zweig play, on the other hand, published originally under the title *Ritual Murder in Hungary* in 1914 and awarded the reputable Kleist Prize, interpreted the case in the context of Jewish Messianism. In the opening scene, the "voice of Elohim" sends archangel Samael, a Satan-like figure, to bring suffering to the Jews. Hence the story of the Tiszaeszlár Jews is pictured as a process of "purgation" that hastens redemption.[16] When Herczeg and Herald turned the Tiszaeszlár story into a play again, they presented themselves as "dramatic correspondents" reporting on the case and foregrounded a more secular teaching about prejudice.[17]

The Burning Bush was not their first joint work in the United States. In 1937, they wrote the screenplay for *The Life of Émile Zola*, a Warner Bros. production that won three Academy Awards. Despite its title, the movie is less about the life of the French writer then about the Dreyfus Affair, an anti-Jewish trial in turn-of-the-century France that had become a widely understood symbol for racial prejudice. Zola's pro-Dreyfus stance, on the other hand, produced a new icon of an engaged public intellectual and made the title of his open letter, *J'accuse … !,* proverbial. Indeed, *The Life of Émile Zola* was among the very few Hollywood movies that during the nineteen thirties confronted the rise of antisemitism. For both commercial and political reasons, the studios were reluctant to display Jewish contents, openly resist anti-Jewish sentiments in the United States, or oppose Hitler's Germany. Together with conservative Jewish organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League or the American Jewish Committee, Hollywood producers feared that the movies would be viewed as Jewish propaganda, make Jewish-Americans be seen as warmongers and, ultimately, alienate the public from the studios. Although the Production Code Administration, the self-censorship organ of the studios, removed most parts from Herczeg's and Herald's script that displayed Dreyfus' Jewishness, both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences understood the movie's message.[18]

Nonetheless, *The Burning Bush* aroused similar anxieties and the authors' attempts at producing the play turned out to be unsuccessful until the late nineteen forties. First, Joseph Schildkraut, who played the part of Dreyfus in *The Life of Émile Zola*, became interested in producing a movie. Then the Theater Guild and Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater were considering a production in New York. Although leading members of the American Jewish Congress, a progressive Jewish organization that had been influential in protesting against Nazism and antisemitism, apparently supported the play—including Rabbis Stephen S. Wise and Max Nussbaum—, these plans never materialized.[19] Finally, in 1947, the play came out as a book publication and, over the next couple of years, premiered on both stage and screen in London, Los Angeles, and New York. In 1948, a stage performance opened in London and a film adaptation came out in the United States under the title *The Vicious Circle* (to be adapted to television as *Woman in Brown* in the nineteen fifties). In 1949, Piscator's staging premiered in New York and, in 1950, the play appeared on stage in Los Angeles as well.[20] These renditions of *The Burning*

Bush presented interpretations of the Tiszaeszlár case for a postwar audience on both sides of the Atlantic.[21]

In the United States, the staging and screening of *The Burning Bush* in the late forties were part of a wider campaign that signaled a shift in the perception of antisemitism. Alarmed by the fate of European Jews and the rising anti-Jewish attitudes in the United States, Jewish organizations took a more resolute stance and initiated a campaign that aimed at public opinion and legislation as well, especially in relation to education quotas, employment restrictions, and immigration policies. Hollywood, too, made a stand and produced movies such as *Crossfire* (1947), *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), *Open Secret* (1948), and *Prejudice* (1948). While in the nineteen thirties conservative Jewish American leaders preferred to condemn the anti-democratic character of Hitler's Germany without foregrounding its antisemitism, now they made a clear connection. The campaign linked the Nazis' enmity toward democracy to their persecution of Jews and referred to America's role in defeating what had by then become an ultimate embodiment of evil.[22]

This campaign against antisemitism coincided with a larger process that after the Second World War redrew the lines of the American racial system. Gradually, white privileges were extended to groups that had previously not been perceived as white, including Jews and Catholic immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. The extension of whiteness assisted their entry into the newly formed suburban middle class—a transformation that postwar American prosperity enabled and, economically, required. At the same time, it gradually dismantled institutional discrimination against them and made racial prejudices toward them socially less acceptable.[23] In the late nineteen forties, when Piscator staged *The Burning Bush,* these processes were still in the making.

The Burning Bush on the Lower East Side

"In the end, I found what we were looking for," remembered Maria Ley, dancer, choreographer, Piscator's life partner and collaborator, "under the roof of the National Theater, America's most celebrated Jewish theater, at the corner of Houston Street and Second Avenue. […] Our theater was on the fifth floor, at the rooftop, with aged and dusty drapes and decayed dress rooms."[24]

The National Theater where Piscator opened a second stage for his Dramatic Workshop had once been one of the major playhouses at the Yiddish Theater District on New York's Lower East Side. The Second Avenue, synonymous to Yiddish theater, became an important institution in the social life of the mostly secular, working class residents. The National Theater, where Maria Ley entered the deserted dress rooms in 1947, opened in 1912 and belonged to Boris Thomashefsky, an iconic actor and entrepreneur whose long career shaped Yiddish theater profoundly. Yet, "legitimate" theater did not constitute Piscator's sole predecessor at the National Theater building: the rooftop stage that housed almost a thousand seats—half of what The National Theater had on the first floor—opened originally as the National Winter Garden. Here, the Minsky Brothers set up their "vaudpics"—a combination of vaudeville and moving pictures that included comedy, dance, songs, and simple one-act plays. These acts encouraged audience response, reinforced a sense of common immigrant and working-class belonging and addressed pressing social concerns. Although Leftist politics shaped the Lower East Side as much as

secular *Yiddishkeit,* Jewish radical theater did not develop here. The Yiddish theater group that stood closest to Piscator's early art and politics, the Artef (*Arbeter Teater Farband*), operated in Midtown Manhattan, outside of—and in opposition to—the Second Avenue area. The Artef disbanded in 1940, along with the fading away of New York's radical Leftist art scene. For demographic reasons, the Yiddish Theater District declined around the same time.[25]

Despite these "missed encounters," Piscator opened The Rooftop Theater at a site where the stage, both classic and popular, had long been an institution for social life and a forum to represent and discuss concerns of the local community, including antisemitism. It is unclear whether Piscator and his collaborators were aware of the plays about the Tiszaeszlár case that Moishe Isaac Hurwitz (1844–1910), a popular director the early period of Yiddish Theater, had staged on the Lower East Side.[26] Nonetheless, a memorandum entitled "Local Campaign" demonstrates that Piscator and his colleagues were thoroughly aware of the theater's past, the local audience, and the area's changing demography. The memo highlighted that members of The Rooftop Theater came from "the heart of Europe" to play at a "Yiddish theater," and suggested to reach out to an audience that had left the Lower East Side but were still connected to it through family ties and could "combine visits home with visits to The Rooftop."[27]

When *The Burning Bush* premiered at The Rooftop Theater and the audience entered the auditorium, they encountered a space covered with newspaper clippings that reported on the Tiszaeszlár case. The montage extended to all sides of the auditorium and ended at the the stage. Copies were distributed among the audience as well (some of which would find their way to YIVO). The actors, sitting or standing in the auditorium, were reading out the clippings and commenting on them. As the audience were taking their seats, loudspeakers transmitted the sounds of approaching troops, a Hitler speech, and marches, among others.[28] Thus, in a manner of "objective acting," the Prologue to the play transgressed the boundaries that separated the stage and the auditorium and presented a montage of historical documents. While the drama unfolded on stage, the auditorium appeared as an extension of the courtroom: "No curtain is used," as a critic noted, the "open stage is the court room and many of the actors make their entrances and exits via the orchestra, an obvious bid to bring the audience into focus as spectators at an actual trial rather than at a play."[29] For the performance, Piscator revived Living Newspaper Style to connect the Tiszaeszlár trial to the more recent European past and transform a distant case of antisemitism into a teaching for the present.

The Burning Bush centers on the manifold drama that plays out around the Jewish defendants, Moritz (Móric) Scharf, and the court itself. While the defendants appear dignified but desperate, Moritz, the sexton's son, is lost in self-hatred injected into him by the investigation. His cross-examination shows an alienated son who has turned against his community in an attempt to undo his Jewishness and assimilate into non-Jewish society. In the climax of the story, while his father is confronting him, he exclaims: "I HATE the Jews, I said! I hate the Jews and I hate YOU for making ME a Jew! When I'm grown up, I don't want to become […] a synagogue shamus!" Thus, *The Burning Bush* reveals antisemitism in its capacity to cause personal and social disintegration. Unlike the original script, Piscator's staging did not end in a reconciliation between Moritz and his father, Joseph Scharf, and showed the damages of antisemitism on the psyche and the social bonds to be difficult to heal.[30]

In a handwritten note, summing up the "main conflicts" in the play, Piscator referred to the trial's "political purposes" and pointed to the *Reichstag* fire trial—a case that in 1933 contributed to the suspension of civil rights in Germany and the establishment of Hitler's regime.[31] The play connected the story to fascism via the issue of juridical independence: it portrayed prejudice and racial hatred as a danger to the rule of law and, ultimately, democracy.

Although the authors claimed that they did not alter the records of the trial, they made substantial changes to the material in order to foreground issues of judicial independence and the rule of law.[32] In the play, Moritz's attitude is encouraged by the judge who openly displays enmity toward the defendants. At the same time, he accommodates Géza Ónody, a member of the parliament who instigated the case and manipulated the investigation. In the play, he is openly violating the court's independence, pressuring the court and the witnesses.

At the same time, these changes to the historical record conjured up the specter of mass atrocities. In his on-stage testimony, Ónody connects the case openly to his political program and threatens to "wipe every Jew from off the face of Hungary." He tries to use the court, as the defense lawyer comments, "as a fuse to set the world alight with massacres and pogroms." Joseph Scharf, the father, expresses his premonition that "an entire people is being destroyed" and, in the final scene, the defense lawyer wishes the court could "acquit an entire people." Certainly, this looming threat of mass persecution echoed the persecution of Jews in Hitler's Europe.

In countering antisemitism, Herczeg's and Herald's script conformed to the emerging idea of a Judeo-Christian culture. When in the final scene of *The Burning Bush* the defense lawyer reaffirms that "this religion [the Jewish] is the foundation stone of our [Christian] faith," the play refers to this new idea of a Judeo-Christian culture. The latter challenged the long-standing notion of a "Protestant nation" and re-defined American democracy in terms of co-operation among the three "major" religions, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. During the nineteen thirties and the Second World War, the "tri-faith model" helped oppose American tolerance to Nazi dictatorship. In the late forties, it framed the campaign against American antisemitism as well. Inside the Jewish communities, it coincided with a renewed interest in Judaism that replaced, for many, secular Yiddish culture as the foundation of their Jewishness. In an era of social and demographic changes in the United States, Moritz's story could be viewed as a call for renewing ties to Jewishness or, indeed, Judaism.

Eventually, the "tri-faith model" contributed to the acceptance of religious pluralism in the United States and the integration of Catholics and Jewish-Americans. At the same time, it excluded other religions and suppressed secular definitions of liberal democracy. Certainly, it had strong anti-Communist connotations as well: especially during the early Cold War decades, the notion of a religious nation set American democracy against atheist communism.[33]

Piscator, however, removed these parts from the script and stressed secular humanism instead.[34] In Herczeg's and Herald's script, the final scene ends with a reformed judge asking the defense lawyer: "Are you a Jew?", to which Eötvös responds: "No, Your Honor. I simply have a profound respect for God." Piscator, by contrast, changed these lines into "Are you a Radical? No, Your Honor. I simply have a profound respect for Justice."[35] These closing lines mirrored Piscator's position as a "tactful guest"[36] in the

United States. Indeed, the play was in no way radical in the sense that it did not connect the condemnation of fascism to a critique of capitalism, as did the revolutionary Left. Rather, it took a stand on humanism and justice.

American echoes: the Leo Frank case

In *The Burning Bush*, the trial is repeatedly disturbed by chants "Hang the Jews," coming from among the audience and outside the courthouse. During Moritz's testimony, as the story comes to a head, news reach the courtroom about a crowd demolishing Jewish shops and breaking into Jewish homes in the town. When the crowd gathers at the courthouse, they smash the courtroom windows and intrudes the courtroom where the guards eventually stop them. This scene did not come from the Tiszaeszlár case and resulted from the changes that the authors made to the material. While the destruction of Jewish shops and homes recall Eastern European pogroms or the *Kristallnacht*, the chants of the crowd gathered at the courtroom were reminiscent of another anti-Jewish trial—the Leo Frank case.

Indeed, on a handwritten note entitled "Material for *The Burning Bush*," Piscator scribbled the names Mendel Beilis and Leo Frank.[37] The former referred to an infamous ritual murder case in Russia in 1911–13 and the latter to an anti-Jewish trial in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1913–15. While probably many in the audience still remembered Beilis' name, the Leo Frank case connected more closely to the American-Jewish experience. In the mid-nineteen thirties, the Leo Frank case appeared in two movie adaptations, including Oscar Micheaux's *Murder in Harlem* (1935) and Mervyn LeRoy's *They Won't Forget* (1937), the latter a Warner Bros. production that came out in the same year as *The Life of Zola*. Although the main character's Jewishness and the anti-Jewish aspect of the case were omitted in both movies, the topic was certainly in the air when Herczeg and Herald were working on *The Burning Bush*.[38]

The Leo Frank case revolved around a Jewish man, a Brooklynite, and a white Southern girl, Mary Phagan. Frank, co-owner of a factory in Atlanta, Georgia, where Phagan worked, was accused of molesting and murdering the girl. Similar to Eszter Sólymosi, the Hungarian girl who disappeared in Tiszaeszlár, Mary Phagan became a symbol: she represented Southern resentments and claims of innocence. In contrast to her, Frank, a Jewish man from the North, stood for capitalism, rapacity, and "degenerate" culture. In an atmosphere of anti-Jewish hysteria, with "crowds outside the courthouse chanting »Hang the Jew«,"[39] the court sentenced Frank to death. Georgia's Governor, aware of the fact that the charges were unfounded, changed the death sentence to life imprisonment. As a response to the commutation, Frank was abducted and lynched the next day near Mary Phagan's birthplace. As part of the ritual of lynching, the site became a spectacle, photos were taken showing people posing beside his hanging body and distributed on postcards. Leo Frank's fate came as a shock to Jewish Americans and showed how vulnerable their status in the American racial system was. The fact that a Jewish American was subjected to lynching—a social practice that, up until the nineteen sixties, caused the death of thousands of African Americans—might explain why the memory of the Leo Frank case was particularly difficult to deal with. Alfred Uhry, author of the Leo-Frank-play *Parade* (1998), relates how in the nineteen forties, when he was growing up in Atlanta, "nobody talked about the Leo Frank case much. All I remember is sitting in a room

with a lot of relatives and somebody said something about Leo Frank and the older people got up and walked out of the room. And I said: »Who is Leo Frank?« And my mother said: »Well, you know Miss Lucille? […] That was her husband.« And I said: »Well, what about him?« And she said: »Nevermind«."[40]

In *The Burning Bush,* the chants "Hang the Jews" coming from the audience did not just transgress the boundaries between stage and auditorium, staged and real life, but at the same time the boundaries between European Jewish and American Jewish experience and, to some extent, diverging experiences of racism within the US. The echo of the Leo Frank case probably helped an American audience relate to a story from a distant European past and to the more recent persecution of European Jews. At the same time, the Tiszaeszlár case possibly helped recall an experience that, for Jewish Americans, was too close and too difficult to articulate. Thus, *The Burning Bush* retold a story from late nineteenth century Austria-Hungary, but responded to the more recent, though different, past of Jewish communities in both Europe and the United States.

As part of the Prologue to the play, a long list of historical events projected on the stage framed the story—running from the antiquity through the (French) Reign of Terror to the *Reichstag* fire. This list consisted of events that were not exclusively Jewish or European—but were, indeed, exclusively white. This exclusion separated Jewish suffering from non-white histories and thus repressed precisely what was so difficult about the Leo Frank case—the experience of being expelled from whiteness. In that way, the historical references were not only not comprehensive,[41] but reinforced the exclusion of non-white, especially African American, histories.

Conclusion

Piscator's staging of the Tiszaeszlár trial transformed traditions of Leftist theater to warn a postwar audience of the dangers of fascism and respond to anti-Jewish sentiments in the United States. By showing an emblematic case in East Central European history, the staging of *The Burning Bush* created a transcultural space for mediating European and American Jewish experiences of exclusion. For staging the play, Piscator used a very specific site within the city's cultural landscape. Although the play addressed the city's theater-going audience, he was, at the same time, very much aware of the significance of the place and local communities, including their relation to Central and Eastern Europe and memories of exclusion in the United States. The performance contributed to an anti-antisemitic campaign by representing a political stance that centered on secular humanism and distanced itself from religious-conservative redefinitions of democracy, tolerance, and the nation. On the other hand, it diverged from Piscator's radical past as well. His new stance originated in antifascist humanism that abandoned radical Marxist critique: instead of connecting fascism to capitalism, he foregrounded the principles of justice, civil rights, and democracy. In case of *The Burning Bush*, however, these principles were enacted in a way that reinforced the separation between white-European and non-white histories. Ultimately, the play presented "a dramatic report," as the authors called in, on a distant case of European antisemitism, but framed the case as a precursor of fascism and responded to the fear that fascism could emerge anywhere, including the United States.

Although *The Dramatic Workshop Digest* announced that *The Burning Bush* would "demand decisions" from the audience "instead of feelings,"[42] the Prologue and the opening scene made the prejudiced character of the case transparent and the audience perceived the story from an enlightened perspective from the beginning. Consequently, the use of audience participation and radical techniques such as the Living Newspaper Style remained limited. "I am afraid," told Piscator in a different context, "that the audience lacks imagination. I am afraid that they are too »ingenuous.« Isn't it how Hitler came to power? […] The audience has to be explained everything."[43] This statement reveals just how deeply his experiences in pre-1933 Germany and the exile influenced his theater practice. Piscator, wrote Judith Malina, "whose whole epicenter was the audience, also feared the audience."[44] Returning to West-Germany in 1951 and confronting his old-new public was anything but easy.

For years following his return, Piscator and Herald were planning to stage *The Burning Bush* in West Germany. At that time, Herald himself worked for the Kammerspiele in Munich and they were considering producing *The Burning Bush* there or in the more liberal Berlin. A letter from Herald suggested that "clerical influence" in Munich prevented the Kammerspiele from staging the play.[45] "Berlin—has remained Berlin," wrote Piscator to Herald, "and I would be glad if I could start [staging the play] there."[46] Their first letter regarding staging *The Burning Bush* in West Germany dates to 1951 and the last to 1956, but it never came to a premiere. Thus, a transfer of an American production of the Tiszaeszlár case "back" to Central Europe did not materialize.

In the nineteen fifties and sixties, Piscator developed in West-Germany what he called a "theater of confession" that culminated in his staging of Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* (1965). The play, a celebrated example of documentary theater, turned the proceedings of the Auschwitz trials into a performance. During the trials, twenty years after the war, German officials who had served in Auschwitz-Birkenau were charged for their role in the genocide. The play's documentary technique—an invention of the nineteen sixties that drew on the inheritance of the Living Newspaper Style—helped present the Nazi past "as a challenge for the present."[47] For his staging of the play in Berlin, Piscator presented the auditorium as an extension of the courtroom, using the same stage concept that he had designed for *The Burning Bush* back in New York. In Berlin, however, Piscator took the concept one step further: the actors playing the witnesses in the Auschwitz trial were sitting in front of the first row seats, facing the stage, similar to the audience, and stepping on the stage only for the time of testifying.[48] This setting put the audience in the ambiguous position of being, by extension, witnesses themselves, a situation that suggested their involvement in the past on trial and indeed "demanded decisions" from them.

Notes

1. YIVO Archives, Record Group 116, Territorial Collection Hungary, Box 176.
2. On the *zamler* program, see see Kuznitz, "YIVO."
3. For the most recent study, see Kieval, *Blood Inscriptions*.
4. Arjomand, *Staged*.
5. For Piscator's career, see: Kirfel-Lenk, *Erwin Piscator im Exil in den USA*, Haarmann, *Erwin Piscator und die Schicksale der Berliner Dramaturgie*, as well as Palmier, *Weimar in Exile*.
6. For antifascism, see: Traverso, *Fire and Blood*; García et al., "Introduction."; Agocs, *Antifascist Humanism and the Politics of Cultural Renewal in Germany*.

7. For the history of the Living Newspaper Style, see: Cosgrove, *The Living Newspaper*.
8. Willett, "Erwin Piscator," 3.
9. For a critical analysis of his de-radicalization, see: Saal, "Broadway and the Depoliticization of Epic Theater".
10. Malina, *The Piscator Notebook*.
11. See Stephan, *Communazis. FBI Surveillance of German Emigré Writers*.
12. See Herczeg, *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon 1000–1990*; Herczeg, *Magyar zsidó lexikon*; Herczeg, *Deutsches Literatur-Lexikon. Das 20. Jahrhundert. Bd. XVII*., 62; Herald, *Handbuch des deutschsprachigen Exil Theaters 1933-1945. Band 2. Teil 1*., 405.
13. See Herczeg, "The Story of "The Burning Bush"". For Herald's staging of the play, see Zweig, Die Sendung Samaels.
14. See Kövér, "Tiszaeszlár (biografikus) emlékezete."
15. Szabolcsi, "Megszólal a nagy tanú," 6.; Szabolcsi, "Tiszaeszlár," 2.
16. See Zweig, *Ritualmord in Ungarn*; Wogenstein, "Jewish Tragedy and Caliban".
17. For the expression "dramatic correspondents" (*dramatische Berichterstatter*), see the play's German manuscript: Herald and Herczeg, "Der Prozess ohne Ende. Der Fall von Tisza Eszlar. Ein Gerichtstück in drei Akten". The sources that in the United States were most probably available to the authors included the collection *Der Blutprozess Tisza Eszlar* (New York: Schnitzer Bros., 1883) as well as Paul Nathan's reportage: *Der Prozeß von Tiszaeszlár: ein antisemitisches Culturbild* (Berlin: F. Fontane & Co., 1892).
18. See Herman, "Hollywood, Nazism, and the Jews, 1933–41".
19. See Herczeg, "The Story of "The Burning Bush""; as well as "Correspondence about "The Burning Bush"," *Voice of the New Americans*, 9 (1950), AdK, Walter Wicclair Collection 47.
20. For the book publication, see Herald and Herczeg, *The Burning Bush. A Play in three Acts*, for *The Vicious Circle* (director: W. Lee Wilder), see Asper, "Der Holocaust im Fernen Spiegel". The television adaptation *Woman in Brown* is available on YouTube. Documents related to the Los Angeles stage adaptation can be found at the AdK, see Walter Wicclair Collection 47, 48, 554, 337.
21. At the same time, a film entitled *The Trial* (director: G. W. Pabst) showcased the Tiszaeszlár case in Austria, see Asper: "Der Holocaust im fernen Spiegel" as well as Michael Miller's article in this Special Issue.
22. For postwar antisemitism in the United States and for the anti-antisemitic campaign, see: Dinnerstein, *Uneasy at Home. Antisemitism and the American Jewish Experience*; Shapiro, *A Time for Healing. American Jewry since World War II*. For the postwar understanding of Nazi atrocities, see Alexander, "On the Social Construction of Moral Universals. The 'Holocaust' from War Crime to Trauma Drama".
23. See Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What that Says about Race in America*.
24. Ley Piscator: *Der Tanz im Spiegel*.
25. For the Yiddish theater district, see Nahshon, ed., *New York's Yiddish Theater*. For "vaud-pics" on the Lower East Side, see Thissen, "Beyond the Nickelodeon", see especially 63–64, on the National Winter Garden, see 62. For Artef, see Nahshon, *Yiddish Proletarian Theater. The Art and Politics of the Artef, 1925–1940*.
26. See Kanfer, *Stardust Lost. The Triumph, Tragedy, and* Mishugas *of the Yiddish Theater in America*.
27. See "Local Campaign," memorandum, AdK, Piscator Collection 3633.
28. See "Prologue," handwritten note, AdK, Piscator Collection 170.
29. Francis, "The Burning Bush".
30. See "The Burning Bush. Regiebuch," AdK, Piscator Collection 171.
31. See "The Burning Bush," handwritten note, AdK, Piscator Collection 170.
32. For the legal aspects of the Tiszaeszlár trial, see Stipta, "A tiszaeszlári per és a korabeli büntető eljárásjog".
33. For the tri-faith model, see Schultz, *Tri-Faith America*, as well as Gaston, "Interpreting Judeo-Christianity in America".

34. Nevertheless, his staging of *The Burning Bush* was awarded by the National Conference of Christians and Jews, an organization that had been instrumental in fashioning the Judeo-Christian idea. See "Anerkennung für den Dramatic Workshop," newspaper clipping, Southern Illinois University, Special Collections Research Center, Piscator Papers, Box 189, Folder 7.
35. "The Burning Bush. Regiebuch," AdK, Piscator Collection 171.
36. Willett, "Erwin Piscator."
37. "Material for *The Burning Bush*," AdK, Piscator Collection, Piscator 170.
38. For the movie adaptations, see Bernstein, *Screening a Lynching*.
39. See Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case*.
40. See his appearance in the documentary *Jewish Americans,* directed by David Grubin, PBS, 2008.
41. Arjomand, *Staged*, 110.
42. Apstein, "The Burning Bush. A Cause Célèbre".
43. Cited by Kiefer-Lenk: *Erwin Piscator im Exil in den USA*, 107.
44. Malina, *The Piscator Notebook*, 151.
45. Heinz Herald to Erwin Piscator on November 30, 1954, AdK, Piscator Collection, Piscator 1200.
46. Erwin Piscator to Heinz Herald on May 2, 1955, AdK, Piscator Collection, Piscator 1200.
47. Kraus, *Theater-Proteste. Zur Politisierung von Straße und Bühne in den 1960er Jahren*.
48. Ibid.

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