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**SOFT HANDS FOR THE *SEDER*: THE PORTRAYAL OF GENDER IN THE ADVERTISING OF THE *KENEDER ADLER*, 1920–1935** [PCB1]

In the pre- television era, newspaper advertising was arguably the dominant form of public graphic representation.<sup>1</sup> The pictures that spoke a thousand words were accessible and articulate. They were the “stories” read by everyone, providing a common narrative and a body of iconography for people of all ethnic and social origins.<sup>2</sup> For immigrant Jewish women, ads provided a doorway into the mental landscape of contemporary urban Canadian society.

The inter-war period was one of almost giddy-paced change during which an urbanized society of mass consumption and production took shape. The negotiation of modernity was a particularly complex task for immigrants Jews, who often found themselves abruptly removed from their familiar, traditional, cultural context. Faced with a bewildering array of choices of products, services, and self-images, immigrant Jewish women and their daughters were able to use the information offered to them in advertisements in the Yiddish press not only for guidance in practical affairs, but also as a kind of a identity-construction kit. This kit allowed them to blend into or to differentiate themselves from womanhood in the new society in which they found themselves. In advertisements they found not only a mirror of North American society, but also a series of images of Jewish femininity from which to choose to create the colours of their own identities.<sup>3</sup>

This essay offers a look at the images of women and gender that appeared in the Montreal Yiddish daily, *Der Keneder Adler*, in the 1920s and 1930s. It will examine standards of female attractiveness and the notions of femininity, motherhood, and family reflected in advertisements with a view to determining how these ideas intersected with female Jewishness as experienced by the immigrant generation. The pictures will speak for themselves with the help of some commentary.

The *Adler* was well placed to serve as a link between Old World and the New. Until the mid-thirties, when the circulation of the paper peaked, it is safe to assume that the majority of Montreal's "downtown Jews" read the paper. Most of them were immigrants or the children of immigrants, and the paper spoke to them in their language. Montreal Jews were still a very young population, most of them in their "productive" years and considerably younger than the general population of the city. In the pages of the paper, one could read international news of particular interest to people of eastern-European origin, notices of mass meetings to be addressed by radicals, business news, a labour column, serialized Yiddish novels, as well as commentaries and sermons by Orthodox rabbis. From 1927, the newspaper included an English page which appeared at the end of each issue, fulfilling the mandate of gently easing downtowners into Anglo-Canadian culture and language.

Graphic advertisements scattered throughout the middle pages of the *Adler*, offered a variety of goods: clothing, furniture, home remedies, appliances, kosher foods, cleansers, financial services, travel, and accommodations. Most of the advertisements were bilingual: the explanatory or discursive text printed in Yiddish, the mother tongue of the newspaper's readership, while slogans and brand names, in other words, the "load charge" of the message, appeared in English. Many of the ads for nationally distributed products arrived at the *Adler* offices with an English text. These were probably translated by staff members, giving the finished product immediacy and authenticity that were enhanced by the largely colloquial tone of the Yiddish.

Before we examine the specific content of the ads, we need to look at the interactive nature of the dialogue between reader and advertiser. The process of deciphering ads was as significant as the nature of the images presented. Theorists of popular culture speak of the tacit understanding between advertiser and reader that the pictures or social tableaux being presented in an ad, are *ideals*.<sup>4</sup> They were meant to be representations of whom the reader would like to resemble, the “people like you” who use the product advertised.<sup>5</sup> According to advertisers of the period under study, in order to be effective, these images needed to represent a standard of living and attractiveness that was somewhat above the reality of the reader, but not unattainable. They had to foster readers’ identification with the people and scenes depicted.<sup>6</sup> Even the most alienated reader, however, who rejected an image of the wealthy or powerful representing a reality far removed from her own, entered into the world of the advertisement by actively decoding the ad. She put picture and text together to extract what was for her an unacceptable message. She had measured herself against the image in the ad and found no likeness to herself. But she had entered into the categories of the advertiser, even as she rejected them. The implications for the immigrant reader were inescapable. She had managed to create for herself a sense of belonging to this New World, even as she laughed at it.

Ads in which women were frequently pictured included those for food, cleanser, patent medicines, household appliances, and telephone services. Certain motifs recurred regularly. One was hyperbolized representations of gender providing standards for masculinity and femininity invaluable in the process of transition in which the *Adler*’s female readers found themselves. In changing continents, Jewish immigrants experienced a shift from a culture which upheld the bread-winning matron as an ideal to a youth culture in which **daughters** were likely to be wage earners.<sup>7</sup> Except in the early years of their marriage, wives were not expected to work outside the home. Images of women in advertising reinforced this accent on youth and the notion of



FIGURE 1. Five Roses Flour, 1927



FIGURE 2. Bon Ami cleanser, 1927

women’s domesticity. In the 1920s, the dominant art-deco aesthetic allowed for the combination of both [see figures 1 and 2]. Even when engaged in domestic pursuits, the housewife was suave and elegant. In the Bon Ami cleanser ad [figure 2], one can see a woman pictured as a decorative object, her long, lean lines perfectly blending in with the kitchen architecture, dishes, sink, windows, towels and tiles.<sup>8</sup> The youth of the woman in the Bon Ami ad was suggested by eyebrows, hair-style, lips, and lines of the arms, while the seductive tilt of the head and shoulders of the woman in the Five Roses Flour ad [figure 1] suggests a certain coquettishness in the pie baker. The Bon Ami user did not need to worry that her labours would lay waste her youth; the advertisers were reassuring her that their product would “make her dishes shine like new” without making her hands red or swollen.<sup>9</sup>

According to advertisers, housekeeping was fraught with a series of potential disasters, such as heavy pastry dough. “Five Roses Flour will

give you flaky pastry, every time,” the Five Roses ad promised.<sup>10</sup> [See figure 1] In fact, however, domestic labour was ultimately to be avoided, in keeping with the North American ethic that emphasized the cultivation of leisure as the supreme goal of the modern woman. The automatic Beach Range ad [figure 4] went so far as to suggest that the kitchen itself could become a trap. It focused instead on the open door and the woman dressed for pleasure. “Enjoy more leisure,” proclaimed the ad in English, while the Yiddish text exhorted the harried housewife to “go out for the afternoon with a peaceful conscience [thanks to the new automatic temperature regulator that prepared the meal for you].”<sup>11</sup>

What did the modern woman do with her leisure time? She got together with her upmarket friends to chat in bucolic garden settings, if we are to believe the Royal Baking Powder ad [figure 3]. This new setting for female sociability represented a departure from the familiar

FIGURE 3. Royal Baking Powder, 1927

FIGURE 4. Beach gas ranges, 1927

European locales: bakeries, butcher shops, bath houses, and marketplaces, places where the work of providing and socializing overlapped. The Yiddish text of the ad, however, makes the requisite link with the home and with “appropriate” female role with a Jewish flavour to the message. “Royal Baking Powder is used by all sure and economical *balebustes* [housewives], who have in view their reputation as *beryes* [good, skillful, efficient housewives]”<sup>12</sup>



FIGURE 5. Dow Old Stock Ale, 1933



FIGURE 6. Dow Old Stock Ale, 1933

A very different role for women was suggested by the “Dow Girl,” who appeared in beer advertisements in the *Adler* in 1933. Young, spunky, dynamic, and invariably pictured far removed from the domestic setting, this tomboyish waif modeled gender flexibility. She was as much at ease with fishing tackle<sup>13i</sup> [see figure 5] as in an evening gown [see figure 6].<sup>14</sup> The text that appeared next to her image had her answering sports questions posed by correspondents; readers were invited to “fregt der Dow maidel” (ask the Dow Girl) by telephoning the number in the ad. Given the Dow Girl’s somewhat unusual

interests, and the male clientele to which beer ads traditionally were pitched, it is reasonable to speculate that she was an ad agency's "male fantasy." And yet, she may well have had a subversive effect on female readers. Immigrant Jewish women would have had a hard time envisioning the footloose, fancy-free, and somewhat juvenile Dow Girl fulfilling the Jewish ideal of family matron with a scholar husband.

So far, we have been looking at images of femininity which had an up-to-date, North-American flavour. The Postum ad campaign of 1933, however, demonstrated cross-cultural continuities regarding male/female differences. The campaign targeted men and women separately, and used very different images, tones, and messages for each.

The male figures in the ads appeared assured and self-confident [see figure 7]. The reader was warned about the dangers of over-stimulating the heart through the consumption of caffeine in tea and coffee. The ad adopted a scientific approach, exploiting both the current concern about health and the masculine susceptibility to heart disease. By citing statistics: "Your heart beats 100,000 times every 24 hours, 50 billion times in 50 years." The doctor and the machine in the left-hand corner of the ad reinforced the rational, scientific tone. The reader is assumed to be a calm, reasonable man, who makes decisions on the basis of demonstrable facts.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, the images of women in the Postum ads appear hyper-emotional and obsessed with self-image [see figure 8]. The Postum ad targeting them appeals not to



FIGURE 7. Postum, 1933



**צוויי מאל אזוי אלט**  
 און בלויז א העלפט  
 אזוי אנציענענדיג

עס איז געווען אזוי די פריער אין די טעגערליכע יארן  
 אזא געזונטע פון טעגערליכע געזונט. עפע אזוי נאר  
 א העלפט אזוי טעגערליכע און געזונטע ווי אזוי  
 האט געזענען ווי? ליינען אהרן פון טעגערליכע  
 קיים און אפגעהאנגען וואס טאקען איינע האלט  
 פארגעסן. טאקע און אפגעהאנגען וואס טאקען איינע  
 הערען נעמען זיי און אפגעהאנגען וואס טאקען איינע  
 ערשאלטען פאנען און אפגעהאנגען וואס טאקען איינע  
 מיליאנען געזונטע. עס זיינען נאטורליך דא פילע  
 טעגערליכע וואס קאנען מיינען זיי און קאנען פאן  
 שטיקליכע פאנען — פאן צו ליינען פון טעגערליכע  
 קיים זענען אנדערע באשולדיגטע אפגען. זיינע  
 יעדער איינע און אפגען אזוי גלייך.  
 מיינען פאנען. קיינע א זיינען נאטורליך ווי  
 וויך דעם רייכען. מיינען פאנען. אזוינעמאל  
 לערען נעמען וואס אזוי און פאן פאן דאס  
 לאנגען. זענען טעגערליכע פאן דעם טעגערליכע וואס דעם  
 לאנגען. זענען טעגערליכע פאן דעם טעגערליכע וואס דעם  
 א האלבען טעגערליכע 50 געזונטע און דעם 50 טעגערליכע  
 געזונטע. מיינען פאנען טעגערליכע פאן דעם טעגערליכע  
 וואס דעם טעגערליכע פאן דעם טעגערליכע וואס דעם  
 דעגערליכע. דעגערליכע פאן דעם טעגערליכע וואס דעם  
 קאנען טעגערליכע.

1	נינג נאכער	אנציענענדיג געזונט זענען פאן די פאן
2	מורקוס	איבען פאן די געזונט אנציענענדיג פאן
3	עפענען	זענען פאן די געזונט אנציענענדיג פאן
4	עפענען עפענען	זענען פאן די געזונט אנציענענדיג פאן
5	פאן שיעור	זענען פאן די געזונט אנציענענדיג פאן



**Postum**

מאכט א רעכענונג איבער זיך  
 און אירע זענען קאפע  
 זענען פאן די געזונט  
 אנציענענדיג פאן

FIGURE 8. Postum, 1933

strained nerves, fatigue, and chronic headaches, making a woman perpetually dissatisfied, bad-tempered, and angry (*shtendiker kaas*). And these moods lead to melancholy (*moyreshkhoyre*), the fate of one who has lost her natural beauty and charm. Such hysterical bitter women were the counter-image of the youthful female ideal we have seen in other ads.<sup>16</sup> Most of the ads feature frames of single individuals. Such a focus gives the reader room to project herself into the image and reinforces the individualistic ethic of the modern consumer society.<sup>17</sup> Examining some ads with group settings will allow us to see how Jewish immigrant women were encouraged to construct their identity in relation to others, particularly their families and ethnic group.

In the next section of this paper, I will look at images of women as mothers and wives and as the bearers of Jewish identity.

The ads for Bell Telephone long-distance calling, which appeared in the *Adler* in 1933, demonstrated the power of the mother figure in Jewish imagination [see figure 9]. “I miss her terribly,” reads one text, “but the telephone helps.”<sup>18</sup> The scenario

reason but to vanity by exploiting female anxiety about aging. The central image is that of a frowning, matronly woman looking into a mirror. Her dress and coiffure contrast sharply with her frowning face. “Twice as old,” the ad reads, “and half as exciting.” In an attempt to introduce a scientific note into this emotional appeal, the ad includes a cause-and-effect chart associating caffeine with insomnia,



here is the separation of a mother from her newly married daughter, who has moved to a distant town. Another Bell ad in a maternal trope has a middle-aged mother on the phone speaking to a son away at school as a solicitous father leans over her shoulder.<sup>19</sup> Ads featuring a doting mother were selected specifically for a Jewish immigrant readership. Whether the choice was suggested by the ad agency or by an *Adler* staffer, the message is the same: motherhood carries a strong emotional charge for the Jewish cultural community.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, other ads appearing in the newspaper exploited the generalized anxiety about mothering skills. In the United States, pop psychology texts were proliferating warning of the dangers both of overindulging children or of exerting an alienating degree of authority over them.<sup>21</sup> The Custaria ads [see figure 10] are a variant of what Roland

**מיד,**  
**פעקען נאר אירד... אבער**  
**דער טעלעפאן העלפט**

העלפן איראם האט געטראגן לעקטן זיי  
 אז האט געמאכט אירא היים אין א היינט  
 שטאדן.

איר זיין געזען שוועלדן אינגאס און איר  
 די קריסטל געליבטע ווארט, איר מוט אירא  
 געזען די אירא זיין איינציגע. אבער דאן  
 האט איר איינגעזען זיי לויבט עס איז איר  
 צווישן אירא טעלעפאן אין אירא אירא  
 איר א לויבט דימאכט געשטרעקט יעדע זיי  
 מא אירא.

אבער דאס דארף זיין געזען היינט.  
 גיין, האט מירא אירא קעלערט איר  
 דאס 30 טעג, איר לויבט דימאכט איר איר  
 לויבט צו געזען, מירא אירא זיין  
 איר וואלט זיך געזען אין זעלבן צייט.

א. דאס וועלט.  
 טעלעפאן

**\*פאר 30 טעג**  
 זעט איר טעלעפאן צייט  
**100 מיל**

דאס אירא מירא איר אירא  
 (אירא אירא אירא) זעט 8.00 איר  
 זעט איר לויבט איר מירא איר איר  
 דירעקטאר

FIGURE 9. Bell Telephone, 1933



„איד ווייס אז איד סאך ניס וויגען דאס קינד ביז עס שלאמס איין — אבער זי איז אזוי אויסערמאנליך — אז איד קען זי ניס מאכען צו עפען.“



„ביזנעס ויבער אז זי דארף ניס האפען אז אפער מיטעל, עס זי א סאנצו סא-טעמפונג מאכט דאס קינד געזיך טרענענדיג, ביזן דאקטאר האט רעקעמענדירט קאסטאריא.“



„נישט ניינס! דאס קינד האט באקומען א נונט נאכער ווי א שפעטע איד האב דיר גער וועט עפען אים סלעשעניצען אז איד האב איהר נענצען קאסטאריא נעכטן בינאכט. ס'איז פינטק וועסן זי האט געארבעט.“

„איז עס ניס ביין, עס זי, וועס עס איז אראז אויפער מיטל פאר קינדער אזוי זיכער אז אנטענעס זיי קאסטאריא. עס איז איינציג זיי-ענס וואונדערליך פאר א ארבעטספרייע מאנען. און דו ווייסט דאך ווי אומבאקוועם דאס איז. קאסטאריא ענטמאלט ניס קיינע פון די שערליכע דראגס וועס מען נעמט אין אפער מיטלען פאר ערוואקענע. און קינדער האבן עז עס ליב — „ס'איז נונט!“

**קאסטאריא**  
דער אפער מיטל  
פאר קינדער ביז 11 יאהר

FIGURE 10. Custaria, 1934

reinforce an immigrant woman’s sense of the need for vigilance regarding her child’s bodily functions. The ad suggests that the neurotic overbearing mother of *Portnoy’s Complaint* may have learned smothering mothering from an authentically all-American source. These graphic narratives and models were plucked from an English-language context and given a Jewish trope. As such, they provided material from which Jewish women’s collective and individual identities were constructed.

A small proportion of ads featured women in overtly Jewish settings, signaled by ritual objects and a holiday context.

Marchand calls, “the parable of the captivated child.”<sup>22</sup> In an accessible and entertaining format, the ads tell a story in a series of frames much like a comic strip.

A woman and her friend discuss the disturbing case of a sick child. “I know I shouldn’t rock the baby to sleep,” says one of them, “but she is so lethargic, and I can’t get her to eat.” The friend suggests that a laxative (doctor recommended, of course) may be the answer. In the last frame, order is restored: all three are smiling, dressed for an outing made possible by the restoration of the child’s health.<sup>23</sup> We can see how this kind of story might

These ads usually represent New-World Jewish women as family members in contrast to the contemporary ads, which emphasize the individual woman thematically and visually. When women were represented in explicitly Jewish settings, they rarely appeared as individuals, but rather, as family members. Male figures in traditional settings were depicted as the conveyors of Jewish identity, as we shall see.

In the ad for Manishewitz matzo [figure 11], women are centre stage with the men seated at oblique angles to the viewer.<sup>24</sup> Women are seen as enablers, serving the *seder*, the Passover meal, while the prayers are led by the man seated to the left. Women are dressed in clothing that is old-fashioned, identifiably European, emphasizing modesty regarding the body. Seated at the *seder* table are three generations: parents, children, and grandparents. The text accompanying the ad states: “For a thousand years, everywhere, in every country we celebrate our liberation from Egypt.” In



FIGURE 11. Manishewitz ad, 1933



FIGURE 12. American Express, 1933

ד' אשתאון עטפדעס קאספאני  
 חודר קייבעל  
 חודר פאסט  
 חודר ראיה  
 חודר דורעמסען קייבעל אדער ראיה  
 AMERICAN EXPRESS COMPANY  
 521 PHILLIPS SQ., MONTREAL

FIGURE 13. American Express, 1924

the American Express Passover ad [see figure 12] we see many of the same components with the text explicitly mentioning the unity of the Jewish people.<sup>25</sup> “Joy and Happiness this Pesach in the Jewish homes on each side of the sea,” proclaims the ad. Tradition and continuity are the values associated with the product on sale.<sup>26</sup>

In the Rosh Hoshanah (Jewish New Year) ads for American Express [figures 13-14], the patriarchal status of traditional Jewish males is represented by their appearing alone, by their use of ritual objects like the *menorah* (candelabrum), *tallis* (prayer shawl), and *shofar* (ram’s horn sounded on the high holy days), and by their depiction in heavenly settings surrounded by rays of light. The message that female readers could reasonably draw was that the proper role of Jewish women was performing everyday tasks as a participant or as the servant at family holiday meals.

גוים יודעטוּפֿי  
 חודר קייבעל  
 חודר פאסט  
 חודר ראיה  
 חודר דורעמסען קייבעל אדער ראיה  
 AMERICAN EXPRESS CO.  
 521 PHILLIPS SQ., MONTREAL

FIGURE 14. American Express, 1924

Depictions of women in ads related to tradition gave them no link to modernity and no religious aura, as with the *shofar*-blowing man.

The advertisements of the *Adler* did not portray Jewish settings exclusively. Black Horse Ale produced a series of ads entitled “D’J’ Ever,” which depicted elaborate social tableaux in the form of cartoons. “D’J’ Ever” offered glimpses of married life through the eyes of a bourgeois, male, stock character, a middle-aged man whose ineptitude and philandering were forever earning him the contempt of his wife. The last frame of the strip often represented the husband in some male bonding scene, where alcohol facilitated the bond. The “gag” of the ad was that Black Horse Ale enabled the henpecked husband to remain happy *in spite of* being married. His liaisons with women considerably younger than his wife (in some instances, his secretary) suggested that adultery was a normal aspect of matrimony, itself portrayed as being essentially a prison.<sup>27</sup> [See figure 15.]

The premise of the series ran counter to the traditional Jewish ideal for both men and women: domestic life as the fulfillment of one’s identity. While it is true that there were many variations on the nagging wife in Yiddish literature, generally she lived in a framework of monogamous matrimonial life that was rarely called into question.



FIGURE 15. Black Horse Ale, 1933

It is difficult to speculate on the impact of “D’J’ Ever,” which ran for several decades, because it was one of the rare ads that was printed untranslated in English.<sup>28</sup> This very fact, however, was a powerful statement that what was being represented was, in fact, *the other*, barely within the purview and experience of *Adler* readers. In this way, the series might have helped to define for Jews what gender relations were **not**, while simultaneously inspiring fear in women of what might become of them in “America.” The other woman could be the *shikse*, the attractive, young, gentile woman from “the real America.”

The ubiquitous images and narratives in the *Adler* advertisements were often quite powerful. Mostly they drew Jewish immigrant women into a common North-American discourse of freedom, individualism, and modernity, although they seemed to reinforce traditional gender roles. The specific feminine trope of this discourse consisted of the equation of modernity with freedom from domesticity. There was a certain tension between this message and the need to sell domestic products like cleansers and food to women, and this tension was resolved by the integration of the cult of youthful femininity into advertising aimed at women. The values portrayed were not those of traditional Jewish life, nor were they specifically Jewish in a modern setting. We can see how they might well have contributed to the compartmentalization of Jewish ritual life and to the alienation of women from it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jib Fowles makes an even greater claim for the role of advertising. In his *Advertising and Popular Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996) he says: “Mediated advertising and popular [culture] are undeniably the *chief symbol* systems of the capitalist economy.” (p. 68)

<sup>2</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. xx.

<sup>3</sup> Fowles stresses the essential role of idealized images of self with hyperbolized gender as speaking to an increased need for self-definition in modern culture. See *Advertising*, pp. 156-57.

<sup>4</sup>Marchand, p. 167.

<sup>5</sup>Judith Williams, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), pp. 12-13, 60.

<sup>6</sup>Marchand, p. xix.

<sup>7</sup>This cultural shift is the main thesis of Susan Glenn's book, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labour in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

<sup>8</sup>For woman as decorative object in the advertising of the 1920s, see Marchand, p. 185.

<sup>9</sup>*Keneder Adler*, 20 April 1927.

<sup>10</sup>*Adler*, 16 April 1927.

<sup>11</sup>*Adler*, 22 April 1927.

<sup>12</sup>*Adler*, 3 May 1927.

<sup>13</sup>*Adler*, 29 September 1933.

<sup>14</sup>*Adler*, 13 April 1933.

<sup>15</sup>*Adler*, 19 September 1933.

<sup>16</sup>*Adler*, 8 April 1933.

<sup>17</sup>For the concept of psychological space in advertisement graphics, see Williams, pp. 75, 165-66, and *passim*. For an eloquent treatment of the theme of the new individualistic ethos, see Marchand, p. 234.

<sup>18</sup>*Adler*, 20 September 1933.

<sup>19</sup>*Adler*, 14 September, 1934.

<sup>20</sup>In the course of the same campaign, Bell ads in the *Montreal Herald* focused on maintaining links with friends "in the Old Country"; other advertisements featured a young man telephoning his girlfriend and a man calling home to his wife from a business trip. It is difficult to say whether the difference in focus can be attributed to real or perceived life-style differences between Anglo-Canadian and Jewish readers. See *Montreal Herald*, 12 September 1934, and 12, 26 December 1934.

<sup>21</sup>Marchand, 228-32.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>*Adler*, 17 September 1934.

<sup>24</sup>*Adler*, 17 April 1933. The centrality of women in this representation is perhaps due to the fact they were being targeted as the family members most likely to shop for the family dinner ingredients including the advertiser's products.

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<sup>25</sup> *Adler*, 18 April 1924. This emphasis is no surprise, since American Express engaged in trans-Atlantic remittances.

<sup>26</sup> In the context of a generation that included many secular people as well as traditionalists, this approach would have appealed only to some readers.

<sup>27</sup> The ad pictured ran on 16 August 1933.

<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to note that a more hard-edged version of D'J' Ever appeared in Yiddish in the paper in the forties.