

Hester Street

By Eric A. Goldman

The 1970s in America was a time when, largely as a result of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s and the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, there was an increased awareness of ethnic identity and a more perceived empowerment for women. It was in this environment that Joan Micklin Silver decided to adapt Abraham Cahan's 1896 novella, "Yekl: A Tale of a New York Ghetto" for the screen. Cahan, who had founded "The Jewish Daily Forward" a decade earlier and made it the pre-eminent Yiddish language newspaper in America, had in this, his first novel, dealt with the challenge for immigrant Jews to assimilate in their new adopted country. With Congress reopening "The Golden Door" to immigrants in 1965, Silver saw "Yekl" as a story that might resonate for all Americans. After all, Cahan's main character Jake, like other new immigrants, was having an identity crisis stemming from the strain between the outright freedom that America offered and the religious tradition that he brought with him to this country—a nineteenth century story that still resonated in the 1970s!

Joan Micklin Silver grew up listening to stories about the immigrant experience. While many newcomers to America were reluctant to share their histories, her father, who had come with his family at the age of twelve from Russia to Omaha, would constantly be sharing his memories with her. "My father loved to tell stories about his experiences, about his becoming a peddler and selling in the streets." Silver's mother was also an immigrant, though she arrived here at the age of eighteen months. It seemed natural that the aspiring filmmaker would choose an immigrant's story for her first movie. In preparing for the film and reviewing sepia photographs from the period, it also seemed right to shoot the film in black and white. As for language, there was little doubt in the writer/director's mind that Yiddish, the language of the Eastern European immigrant Jew, would very much be a part of this film.

Adapting "Yekl" for the screen proved much smoother for Micklin Silver than getting financing for



*Doris Roberts coaches recent immigrant Carol Kane on how to look like an American as she begins her acculturation process.
Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

the film production. Though it had become easier to make an independent motion picture by the mid-1970s, accumulating funding for a first-time director proved most difficult, particularly if that director was a woman. Though she had written and directed several shorts, including "The Immigrant Experience: The Long Long Journey" about the difficult adjustment of a Polish family upon their arrival in America, gathering investors for the proposed feature seemed ominous. Silver relates that when she had a meeting with a Hollywood studio executive, she was told, "Feature films are expensive to make and expensive to market and women directors are one more problem we don't need." Finally, sensing his wife's frustration, Raphael Silver, a real estate developer, agreed to become the producer and raise the money, succeeding in pulling together the budgeted \$370,000 needed to produce the picture. Production moved smoothly, with the director deciding to shoot exteriors for the film on New York's Morton Street and interiors throughout the city, as creating new signage on the actual Hester Street was determined to be too costly. Carol Kane was brought in to be Gitl, a portrayal that garnered her an Academy Award nomination. Steven Keats, himself the son of immigrants, played Jake and Mel Howard, who was originally hired for the crew, would take on the role of Bernstein.

With the film completed, producer Raphael Silver tried to find a distributor for his low-budget independent film. Getting a film released at the time was a complicated and expensive proposition and adding to the difficulty was that most saw the film as too

specialized, “too Jewish.” There simply were no takers! Finally, a few people who helped market John Cassavetes’s work came onboard to help release the film independently at a few film festivals. The film got its big break when the Cannes Film Festival agreed to accept the film. The response to the film by most critics was quite positive and the film opened in New York City six months later, in October, with lines around the block.

“Hester Street” dealt with issues that American cinema was only beginning to tackle - immigrant life and ethnic identity. Could an immigrant woman achieve what America had to offer without sacrificing her distinctiveness and her tradition? Was there something special in the cultural and religious heritage that was pushed aside in the desire to assimilate? Was a story about immigrants relevant for an American audience beginning its search for multi-culturalism? Could Americans relate to the story of one ethnic group? The film has many memorable scenes, like when Jake cuts off the side curls of his son Joey to make him look more American or when Gitl divorces Jake because she wants to hold onto a more tradi-

tional home. Then there is the salt put into the pockets of Joey to keep away the evil spirits, as he is about to go outdoors. This film truly offers “a portrait of Eastern European Jewish life in America that historians have praised for its accuracy of detail and sensitivity to the challenges immigrants faced during their acculturation process.”

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Eric Goldman is adjunct professor of cinema at Yeshiva University and founder of Ergo Media, a distributor of Jewish cinema. Dr. Goldman’s most recent book is “The American Jewish Story through the Cinema.” Prior to that, he wrote “Visions, Images and Dreams: Yiddish Film Past and Present.” In 2014, Eric joined Robert Osborne on the Turner Classic Movies television network to co-host and program the month-long series, “The Projected Image: The Jewish Experience on Film.”