Who was Jevel Katz?

With the influx of the Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe to the Southern Atlantic starting in the late nineteenth century, Buenos Aires became a world center of Yiddish language and culture, spawning significant literature, theatre, and journalism. A main figure in that milieu was Jevel Katz. Born in Vilna in 1902 and arriving in Argentina in 1930, Katz soon became the best-known performer on the Yiddish stage. Katz’s success extended beyond Buenos Aires to other cities and the Jewish agricultural colonies in Argentina and bordering countries. His comic persona is reflected in his reputation as “der freylekhster yid in Argentine” [the happiest Jew in Argentina]. Word of his fame reached impresarios of the North American Yiddish stage. Alas, just as he was to embark upon a U.S. tour, he died in 1940 of complications following a routine tonsillectomy. Katz’s funeral was attended by tens of thousands, a monumental percentage of the 250,000-strong Jewish population of Argentina. His legendary status was such that he was dubbed “el Gardel judío” [the Jewish Gardel], after the tango idol Carlos Gardel, who also died at the pinnacle of his career, in 1935.

Katz’s posthumous reputation declined as Argentine Jews integrated, abandoned Yiddish, and increased their use of Spanish. Interest in this artist—mainly among scholars—re-emerged right before the turn of the millennium.

Jevel Katz’s Repertoire

Jevel Katz’s prolific work surpassed hundreds of pieces. He himself published only one volume, in 1933, with lyrics to just ten songs: Argentiner glikn: parodyes un kuplein [Argentine
fortunes: Parodies and couplets]. In 1939 and 1940, words to other pieces were featured in the Argentine Yiddish newspaper *Di yidishe tsaytung*, in a section exclusively dedicated to the performer and titled “Azoy zingt Khevvl Katz” [Thus sings Jevel Katz]. Katz recorded his renditions of only a handful of songs, some of which can be heard on the album *Homenaje a Jevel Katz*, issued by the Fundación IWO, the Buenos Aires equivalent of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research based in New York.

Katz drew on “European music-hall and cabaret traditions” (Baker, “Gvald” 153), incorporating Jewish liturgical and folk music motifs as well as Latin American rhythms. His Yiddish lyrics, with their heavy borrowings from Spanish and the Argentine slang known as *lunfardo*, mirrored the everyday language of Jewish immigrants. Katz’s songs portrayed in sharp comic mode the challenges they faced: economic hardship, acquisition of a new language, the slow process of acculturation. He sang of streets and cafés in Buenos Aires Jewish neighborhoods, the tenements where immigrants lived, and other places where they gathered. In some pieces, Katz joked about his own artistic tours, as he depicted life in the Jewish agricultural settlements in provincial Argentina.

“An IOU Tragedy”

Following is the text of a typical parody by Jevel Katz, “A tragedye fun a pagarey” [An IOU tragedy], one of the songs published in *Di yidishe tsaytung* between 1939 and 1940 (see illustration). Katz’s title Yiddishizes the Spanish term *pagaré*, which designates an I Owe You (IOU) or promissory note. We include Spanish and English translations of the song, as well as its original Yiddish and a transcription into the Latin alphabet. Terms derived from Spanish are italicized and glossed in the English.
An IOU Tragedy

Let us sing a pretty song,
Hey didl didl dry.

On Corrientes Street flies a Jew,
Carrying a pagaére [IOU],
He carries a pagaeyrele [little IOU].
A venarim [expired] pagaeyrele,
Expired two weeks ago.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

What is written on the pagaére?
Hey didl didl dry.
“Peso moneda nacional [national currency],”
A one followed with three zeros.

Firmé [signed] with horse-sized letters [letters].
And with a flourish.
And with a flourish ago.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

To whom is the pagaére made payable?
Hey didl didl dry.
To the kherente [manager] of a Jewish bank,
A kanyeyle [fixer] at that.
It has already expired twenty times,
Turikmanist [bounced] and prolongiert [been extended].

It knows no rest.
It knows no rest.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

Who wrote the pagaére?
Hey didl didl dry.
It was written and sealed
By a Jew named Simón.
He did not have the least bit of money.
He had a pier [fur] made for his wife
In the latest fashion.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

What will happen to the pagaére?
Hey didl didl dry.
It will expire and be given another extension,
Probably ten more times.

After going back and forth indefinitely,
It will be used as paper
To the very last gram.
To the very last gram.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

Tragedia de un pagareí

Cantemos una Linda canción,
Hey didl didl dry.
Por Corrientes va volando un judío
y lleva un pagareí.

Lleva un pagareíle,
vencido hace dos semanas ya,
vencido hace dos semanas ya.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

¿Qué dice el pagareí?
Hey didl didl dry.
“Peso moneda nacional”,
un uno seguido de tres ceros.

Con garantías que tienen validez,
firmado con letras enormes como un caballo
y encima rubricado.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

¿Para quién es el pagareí?
Hey didl didl dry.
Para el gerente de un banco judío,
un cabile además.
Ha vencido ya veinte veces,
ha sido devuelto y prorrogado.
Circula sin parar,
circula sin parar.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

¿Quién escribió el pagareí?
Hey didl didl dry.
Lo escribió y selló
un judío llamado Simón.
No tenía ni un peso.

Encargó una prenda de pie
para su mujer,
la última moda,
la última moda.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

¿Qué le ocurrirá al pagareí?
Hey didl didl dry.
Vencerá y será prorrogado
probablemente diez veces más.

Después de ir y volver indefinidamente,
será usado como papel,
hasta el último gramo,
hasta el último gramo.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

A tragedye fun a pagarey

Lomir zingen a sheyne lid,
hey didl didl dry.
Iber Koriënte flit a yid,
an trogt a pagarey.

Er trogt a pagareyele,
a venisrit pagareyeyele,
venisrit shoyn vokhtn tovey.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

¿Qué le ocurrirá al pagarey?
Hey didl didl dry.

Vos shreyt geshnibn in pagarey?
Hey didl didl dry.

“Peso moneda nacional”,
an ein mit neln dray.

Mit garanties vos hobn vert,
firmat mit letters gus vi ferd,
farreydelt nokh derbay,
farreydelt nokh derbay.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

¿Quién escribió el pagarey?
Hey didl didl dry.

Lo escribió y selló
un judío llamado Simón.

Geshribn un gekhasmet hot
enormes letras
como un caballo
y encima rubricado.

Mit garanties vos hobn vert,
firmat mit letters gus vi ferd,
farreydelt nokh derbay,
farreydelt nokh derbay.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

Qué le ocurrirá a la última moda.

A tragedye fun a pagarey

La moneda se usará como papel,
la última moda,
robablemente diez veces más.

E veysirtn pagareyele,
venisrit shoyn vokhtn tovey.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

¿Qué le ocurrirá a la última moda?

A tragedye fun a pagarey

En la última moda.

Y encima rubricado.

Mit garanties vos hobn vert,
firmat mit letters gus vi ferd,
farreydelt nokh derbay,
farreydelt nokh derbay.

Oy dam, dam dam dam didl dam...

¿Qué le ocurrirá a la última moda?
The song portrays the path followed by an expired promissory note. In the opening scene, a Jew holding a valueless IOU runs down Corrientes Street, one of the main arteries of the Jewish area of Buenos Aires. The IOU bears the signature of a Jew named Simón who, lacking the money to buy a fashionable fur for his wife, borrowed 1,000 pesos from the manager of a Jewish bank and failed to repay the lender within the designated period. The IOU, often extended, passed around, bounces repeatedly. The “tragic” end of the promissory note resides in the scatological implication of its ultimate use as “paper.”

“A tragedye” is set to the tune of a contemporary Yiddish song titled “Rabeynu Tam,” whose lyrics were written by poet Itzik Manger (1901-1969), with music by Hertz Rubin (1911-1958). Manger’s humorous text, or rather metatext, tells of a song composed by a tailor’s apprentice to honor the medieval French Talmudic scholar Rabbeinu Jacob Ben Meir Tam. Somehow the song turns parodic, incorporating an improbable love letter sent by the queen of Turkey to Rabbeinu Tam and the jealous reaction of the rabbi’s wife. Maintaining the original’s question-and-answer and choral structure, Katz recontextualizes the love-letter narrative by moving its new protagonists to Buenos Aires and adding another comic stratum to Manger’s faux traditional narrative. In Katz’s lyrics, the swindled Jew running down the street as he holds the IOU has replaced the golden peacock flying over the Black Sea to carry the queen’s letter to the rabbi; the promissory note is the parodic parallel to the love letter; the scammer Simón corresponds to the loving queen of Turkey; and the swindled bank manager’s counterpart is the honored Rabbeinu Tam. The gerente (Spanish for “manager,” in this case, of a bank) is Simón’s “connection” or kunyele—from the Spanish cuña, which literally means a “wedge” but in lunfardo slang designates a fixer. The word is adapted to Yiddish by changing the final vowel to “e” and adding the diminutive suffix “-le,” which further undermines the figure of the bank
manager, who is not only untrustworthy but now deceived by Simón. A similar pattern is used with pagareyele, by borrowing the word pagaré from Spanish—meaning promissory note—and extending the final vowel into the Yiddish diphthong “-ey” followed by the diminutive suffix “-ele,” which thereby stresses the IOU’s worthlessness. The last two lines, repeating “akurat tsum gram,” are kept as in Manger’s text. In addition to their literal meaning, “in perfect rhyme” (Mlotec 170), the use of the word gram as a metric unit allows a second reading: after having lost its monetary value, the promissory note’s material worth has been reduced “to its very last gram.”

“A tragedye” exemplifies the rhetorical strategies deployed by Katz to comic effect. Drawing upon parodic contrasts and the hyperbolic use of language in the immigrants’ vernacular, Jevel Katz portrays their financial tribulations (and occasionally questionable responses to them) by the means of a quick-money scam, set against the backdrop of Buenos Aires during the worldwide economic crisis of the 1930s.
(Newspaper clipping of the song “A tragedye fun a pagarey” from Di yidishe tsaytung, Jevel Katz, ca. 1939-40, Fundación IWO, “Jevel Katz” Collection. Image reproduced with the authorization of the Fundación IWO.)
Sources


Homenaje a Jevel Katz. Fundación IWO, undated.


—. “Azoy zingt Khevl Kats: A tragedye fun a pagarey.” Di yidishe tzaytung, ca. 1939-1940.


Acknowledgements

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Notes

i Note variant spellings of the performer’s first name: Jevel, Jevl and Khevl.

ii See DellaPergola (88-97) for detailed data on the Jewish population in Argentina during 1930-1940.

iii For more information on Jeeval Katz’s work and life, see Baker (“Gvald”; “More Argentine”), Palomino (36-41), Svarch (“Der freylekher”; “Mucho lujo”), and Toker (“Andá”; “Jeeval Katz”).

iv The Argentine documentary *Jevel Katz y sus paisanos* [Jevel Katz and his countrymen] (dir. Alejandro Vagnenkos, 2005) makes an invaluable attempt to portray the historical importance of Jevel Katz by interviewing some very aged fans of the performer, veritable last of the Mohicans. The film is available in *Vimeo*.

v *Argentiner glikn* includes the lyrics to these pieces: “A ranchera” [A ranchera], “A piknik in Vicente López” [A picnic in Vicente López (a Buenos Aires suburb)], “Qué decís: Tango” [What are you saying?: A tango], “Tango,” “Ranchera de mi corazón” [Ranchera of my heart], “Dados: Rumba” [Dice: A rumba], “A kolonist” [A settler], “Colchón: Rumba” [Mattress: A rumba], “A yidisher marinero” [A Jewish sailor], and “Mucho lujo” [Great luxury].

vi After Katz’s death, *Di yidishe tsaytung* renamed the section “Azoy zingt Khevl Kats” to “Azoy hot gezungen Khevl Kats” [Thus sang Jevel Katz].

vii The pieces compiled in *Homenaje a Jevel Katz* are the following: “Mucho ojo” [Beware], “Kinder-maysele” [A children’s story], “Glokn in altn shtetl” [Bells in the old shtetl], “Tukuman” [Tucumán]; “Mozesvil” [Moisés Ville] and “Basavilbaso” (two locations of Jewish agricultural colonies), “Ikh zukh a tsimer” [I’m looking for a room], “Freylekhe garmoshke” [Happy harmonica], “A pokerl” [A little game of poker], “Zlate” [Zlate (a woman’s name)], “Ovinu malkeynu” (a parody of “Avinu malkeinu,” an august Jewish liturgical piece), “Vilne” [Vilna], and the monologue “El gringo en la plaza” [An immigrant in the park]. The first four pieces are recordings by Jevel Katz himself, while the other songs were performed by Max Perelman, Simón Tenovsky, David Hitzkop, Max Zalkind,
and César Pierry (in Spanish). Some of them were recorded during a concert held in tribute to Katz, “Te acordás de Jevel Katz…?” [Do you remember Jevel Katz…?]. In addition, the album Jevel Katz y sus canciones features several of the tracks mentioned above.

viii For transcription and English translation of several of Katz’s lyrics, see Baker (“Gvald”) and Svarch (“Der freylekhster”). Further excerpts in English are available in Grosser Nagarajan (74-76) and Rein (26). For the Spanish, see Toker (“Andá”; “Jevel Katz”), Malena Chinski’s translation of “Mucho ojo”—one of Katz’s best-known songs—in Kon (26-31), and Svarch (“Mucho lujo” 76).

ix Manger and Rubin’s transcription and translation of the song, along with musical score, are available in Eleanor Gordon Mlotek’s compilation of Yiddish songs (170-71). Transcription and English and French translations can be found at the Yidlid website (see “Rabeynu Tam”). Israeli singer Chava Alberstein’s album includes a recording of the piece, which is available on YouTube.

x Manger turned to the Yiddish folkloric tradition while adding a modern viewpoint by which Rabbeinu Tam is the addressee of a woman’s love letter (“Rabbeinu Tam”).