An Image For An Image: The Making of “Breaking Home Ties”

By Joseph P. Eckhardt

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"It is written that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons….
But sometimes it is the other way around….”

With an intertitle that turns an ancient adage on its head, the 1922 silent film, Breaking Home Ties, begins a haunting tale of a Jewish family shattered and separated by murder, escape, and poverty, then reunited and reconciled by love and miraculous coincidence. Set in pre-revolution Russia, and America in the 1920s, it tells the story of the Bergman family, and their ties of love and loyalty that survive under the most difficult circumstances. Melodramatic and emotional, loaded with positive stereotypes and recreations of Jewish rituals, and originally accompanied by a score woven around the traditional Jewish lament, Eili, Eili!, the film was intended as much for education as for entertainment. Specifically, the imagery of this film, produced at the Betzwood Motion Picture Studio in the Philadelphia suburbs, was designed to counteract the anti-Semitic propaganda of Henry Ford and the Dearborn Independent.

One of the worst eras of anti-Semitism in the United States occurred in the decade following the First World War. After growing for decades, the phenomenon was intensified by the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, the xenophobia that followed the First World War, the rising tide of immigration from Eastern Europe, and the Communist revolution in Russia. It finally reached a fever pitch in 1920 with the publication by Henry Ford of the infamous Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The book purported to be a transcript of Protocols secretly read at the First Zionist Congress at Basel in 1897, and supposedly revealed a “Jewish conspiracy” to gain world power. Even though the Protocols had long since been recognized by scholars as the forgery it was,i Henry Ford published the Protocols in his Dearborn Independent between 22 May and 2 October 1920, giving the virulent racist diatribe more attention and publicity that it ever had before. Beyond that, Ford published a weekly column in his paper which denounced the “International Jew.”ii It was this poison for which Breaking Home Ties was intended as an antidote.

A young Philadelphian, Frank N. Seltzer, who was only twenty-one at the time of the film’s production, appears to have been the prime mover behind the project. Frank Seltzer began writing professionally while still at Philadelphia's Central High School. At seventeen, he was the city editor for the Wilmington Morning News, the youngest man in the U.S. to hold such a position. At age twenty, he joined the production staff of the Betzwood Film Company and worked on the Toonerville Trolley films as a writer and assistant director.iii “Frank made a specialty of being the youngest man to do things,” his brother, Walter, recalled.iv In 1921, as the Betzwood Film Company ceased production and the last of its Toonerville Trolley comedies went into release, the ambitious and energetic Seltzer looked for a way to keep the Betzwood studio in operation, and—not coincidentally—keep himself employed. As a Jew he was keenly aware of Ford’s anti-Semitic weekly columns in the Independent. As a newspaper man himself, he was all the more sensitive to the damage such publications could do. As a fledgling film director, it is not surprising that he came up with the concept of producing a feature film to counteract the negative press Ford was giving the Jews. Fighting Ford with film was a logical and powerful response and one for which it would not be difficult to raise financial and professional support in the Jewish entertainment community. Beyond that, Seltzer hoped that the film’s success would make it possible to follow up with a series of feature productions at Betzwood.v

Seltzer was no doubt also inspired by the surprising success the year before of the film, Humoresque, one of the earliest of the feature-length Jewish genre films, which had been produced by William Randolph Hearst and directed by the twenty-seven-year-old Frank Borzage. That Humoresque influenced the production of Breaking Home Ties...
seems clear in the early press releases for the project which announced that “Eili, Eili!,” (the original working title for Seltzer's film) "will go far beyond “Humoresque” in realism, faithful characterization, story quality and production merit."vi It is likely not a coincidence that—like Humoresque--the story line of Eili, Eili! involved a violin and a repeated musical motif which theater musicians could weave in and out of their accompaniments for the film. Through his theater-owner father, and his own connections with the Betzwood Studio, Frank Seltzer knew all the movers and shakers in the Philadelphia entertainment community. He seems to have had little trouble in getting them to listen to his idea and quickly rounded up financial support. The actual names of those who backed the project were “closely guarded,” however. Perhaps sensitive to Ford’s charges that Jews had taken over the theater and movie businesses as part of their “international plot,”vii the film's backers chose to identify themselves only as a “syndicate composed of Philadelphians.” Only the names of the producer/directors and their press agent, Mark Wilson, were released to the press. It would seem from surviving letters and press clippings that Stanley and Jules Mastbaum—owners of the Stanley Theater chain—were backers, as were various theater managers in Philadelphia, and various members of Wolf Brothers Inc., who owned the Betzwood studio. The syndicate’s decision to produce a film based on Jewish themes, with the working title of Eili, Eili!, was announced on 30 October 1921.

Though talented and sophisticated beyond his years, Seltzer had no other experience in the larger world of motion picture production and distribution. Small and very slender, his obvious youth must have given the film’s financial backers misgivings despite his obvious talent. Thus, they insisted that he team up with an established director with a proven track record for producing Jewish films—George K. Rowlands.

Rowlands, though born in Odessa to Russian-Jewish parents, had also grown up in Philadelphia and was well-known to the “syndicate” backing the Eili, Eili! project. Also educated at Philadelphia’s Central High School, Rowlands had attended Jefferson Medical College with intent to become a surgeon before moving on to classes at the Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York. Before entering the movies, his credits included vaudeville and legitimate theater, with his first directorial efforts coming in traveling stock companies. By 1921 he had already spent a decade in the film industry, having collaborated on the production of Bleeding Hearts, and Sorrow of Israel, in 1913. In 1915 he had produced a five-reel reenactment of the notorious Leo Frank case.

He was obviously well qualified to help produce a movie intended to defend the Jewish people against the fantasy of the “Jewish World Conspiracy.” In addition, his years in theatrical and motion picture circles had provided him a wide circle of acquaintances and contacts which proved useful in recruiting the talent the project would require for success. He was considered a superb judge of talent and had already developed several actresses as stars.viii It was largely through his efforts that talents such as Lee Kohlmair and Rebecca Weintraub were hired for the film.

Because of the joint crediting of Seltzer and Rowlands as writers and directors, and variant stories about their involvement, it is not possible to say with assurance which, if either of them, dominated the production. Perhaps somewhat reluctant to play second fiddle to an inexperienced “kid,” Rowlands in interviews and press releases frequently suggested that the whole project was his idea. But in the end it was young Frank Seltzer’s name that came first in the credits.

The image of “The Jew” that permeates all of Henry Ford's publications is one of a cold, vicious, greedy alien lusting after world domination, while making relentless malicious attempts to destroy capitalism, the Christian religion, and the value system of western society. Echoing The Protocols, Ford's text utilizes the purpest of prose intended to raise strong negative images in the minds of readers. It is obvious that, from the beginning of the Eili, Eili! project, the main purpose would be to present an image of Jews which would strikingly contrast with the images left in the minds of those who had encountered Ford’s publications. Image would be fought with image.

The original draft of Mark Wilson’s press release announcing the project survives in the Theater Collection of the Free Library in Philadelphia. It gives interesting insights into the intentions of the “syndicate of Philadelphians” as they launched their ambitious project. One portion of Wilson’s draft, later crossed out and not included in the final copy sent to the newspapers, reads like a concept statement for the film:

“. . . Ely Ely [sic] . . . will deal intimately . . . with the religious and social customs and characteristics of the Jewish people, their loves and hates, their pride and humiliations . . . their sacrifices, their homes and synagogues, their feasts and fasts, their courage and their superstitions, their ambitions and their handicaps, their successes and their failures . . . [It will be] a genuine effort to present truthfully the everyday life of the Jew with emphasis on that human and sympathetic element in his nature too often overlooked or completely ignored.”ix
Somewhat defensively, the draft also stated: "'Ely Ely' [sic] is not intended as Jewish propaganda, but a wholesome, worthwhile story with the "punch" of human interest....There are tears, thrills, and laughs...." The producers hoped to show the most positive aspect of Jewish culture and religious life. All of this was in fact carried out in the scenario.

In preparation for this production, and in anticipation of other possible feature films to follow, the old Betzwood studios were renovated, a new studio space was built, and a new lighting system “as good for motion picture photography as the golden sunshine of California” was installed. When production began in November 1921, all interior scenes were shot at Betzwood, as were many of the exteriors. Cosmetically altered with Russian signs, the old western village used in countless Betzwood westerns since 1914, was transformed into a Shtetl street. Various buildings, both grand and rustic, scattered through the studio grounds and on nearby farms, stood in for the homes, stables, and theaters required by the scenario. Downtown Norristown, Pennsylvania, the local county seat only four miles away, became—albeit somewhat tenuously—New York City, with the corner of Main and Walnut standing in for New York’s Lower East Side. Despite some changes in the cast during production, the shooting of all raw footage was completed by January 1922.

Looking at Breaking Home Ties against the backdrop of the weekly outpourings of The Dearborn Independent, it is possible to see that many of the film’s most important moments are calculated to counter specific charges. Like many of the Jewish genre films that would follow, BHT makes the point that, far from arriving in America for the purposes of plotting the society’s overthrow, many Jewish immigrants came only in desperation and often fell upon very hard times in the United States. The circumstances of two main characters, Mama and Papa Bergman, in New York, working to exhaustion and still unable to pay their rent, watching their daughter die from a lack of medical attention, are scenes unlikely to evoke images of fiends plotting world domination.

Against the image of "The Jew" who possesses "secret" knowledge and maintains a world intelligence network that sees everything and misses nothing, is posed the image of the scattered Bergman family who cannot find each other in years of searching through the streets of New York City. Instead of a gross misinterpretation of the Kol Nidre—the charge was that Jews dismissed themselves from their vows and obligations—the ancient rituals of Yom Kippur are presented in their proper context in one of the most moving scenes in the film. In opposition to the notion of the singular "Jew," all alike in their ethnic characteristics, we see the characters as individual human beings. The allegedly exotic and secret nefarious world of the "Jew" is dispelled by scenes which reveal the actual human and spiritual nature of Jewish religious rituals. The first reel sets the tone for the whole picture. The themes of Jewish religious faith, family values, emphasis on learning, loyalty, sacrifice, and generosity, manifest themselves in the actions and attitudes of the Bergman family from the beginning of the story. These themes are the leitmotifs that run through the entire film.

The Sabbath is about to begin as the film opens and the various members of the Bergman family, who live “in a village near St. Petersburg,” are introduced as they make their preparations. Papa Bergman sits reading his “Book of Books.” Mama Bergman sets the table and prepares the candles. Their little daughter Rebecca helps. The Bergman’s adult son, David, is introduced as he sits in a nearby tavern, studying his law books—he is specializing in American Law. As David leaves to get home before sunset, he encounters an old acquaintance. Paul Zeidman, who once had a promising career as a violinist, is now a derelict reduced to stealing fruit in the market. David has to rescue him from angry merchants. David insists on taking Paul home for the Sabbath. There he asks his mother if Paul can stay until he gets back on his feet. She cheerfully agrees. As it turns out, it is not the first time she and Papa Bergman have taken a homeless individual into their home. Esther arrives home. Described as a foster child of the Bergmans and David’s presumed fiancée, she puts on her best dress for the Sabbath and plays the piano while waiting. Esther is at first appalled by Paul’s dirty appearance, but he is obviously touched by her playing. Later, when Paul has shaved and dressed in borrowed clothes, Esther seems touched by him as well.

The Sabbath begins as Mama Bergman blesses the candles. The solemnity of the moment is emphasized by Rebecca advising Esther that she must stop playing because “Mama is praying.” As Mama prays, she remembers her son lost in the war—this Sabbath is the anniversary of his death. Coincidentally, David’s dead brother, who resembled Paul Zeidman, owned a Stradivarius violin and David shows it to Paul after dinner. In a gesture typical of David’s youthful enthusiasm, he prevails upon his mother to give Paul their violin—in hopes of helping Paul regain his old career. Thus, within the film's first reel, a whole series of positive values and cultural practices have been presented before the audience. Intelligence, faith, loyalty, generosity, and sacrifice, are the characteristics of this Jewish family.
As the story develops, however, several disastrous problems befall the family. Paul Zeidman and Esther—David's supposed fiancée—fall in love. After a concert, where Esther has accompanied Paul on the piano, they reveal their love for each other and embrace, just as David walks in. In the fight that ensues, David strikes Paul so violently that Paul falls to the floor, apparently dead. Horrified, David rushes home where his father orders him to flee—"to America." David rushes out the door into the teeth of a howling storm: The wind blows out the candles his mother has just lit. His father begins to pray—Eili, Eili! An intertitle then tells us that ten years have passed. David, now using the name Berg, has become a successful lawyer in New York City, specializing in the problems of Russian immigrants. David has changed. In place of the exuberant, somewhat naïve enthusiasm we saw at first, he is now glum, quiet, and detached. It is obvious that his disastrous quarrel with Paul and his hasty flight from his parents’ home presses down on him. At his office, his secretary, Rose Neuman, brings David his mail. As he reads one letter, an insert shows us the text. We learn that David has been searching for his parents, unsuccessfully, for quite some time. All he is able to find out is that they sold their house and left the country. Their whereabouts are unknown. The scene suddenly shifts to a cramped tenement in New York’s Lower East Side. Unknown to David, his parents and sister, Rebecca—now grown up—are living in the same city in miserable conditions. Pulling out all the stops, the film employs every device to illustrate their absolute poverty and misery. The Bergmans are shabby, gray, ill, and barely making ends meet. They are also looking for David, but unaware of his change of name, have been unable to locate him. From this point on, the film cuts back and forth between the two separate stories of David and his family, until a remarkable set of circumstances bring the two narratives together at the conclusion of the film. It would be unfair to the film makers and anyone who has not seen the film to tell any more of the story here. The lengthy, but remarkable, process by which the family is reunited is skillfully handled and well acted. The story line provides a context for showing—for the first time ever in a feature film—accurate portrayals of both a Yom Kippur service and a Jewish wedding. And despite the deep poignancy of some scenes, the plot is not without some elements of humor as well. When the shooting was completed, a rough cut of Eili, Eili! was previewed in February 1922 for a select audience of Philadelphians, who were asked for their critical comments. One of those who responded was Judge Eugene C. Bonniwell of the Municipal Court of Philadelphia. "I predict a wonderful success for the new film," he wrote to Frank Buhler of the Stanley Company, who had apparently staged the preview, "and I believe that its exemplification of orthodox Jewish family life will be a most powerful, if a silent, answer to the venom of a Ford or a Dearborn Independent." Those at the preview were also asked to suggest a release title. By now the producers had determined that, since their goal had been to stress the universal human qualities of Jews, they needed a title less esoteric and ethnic than Eili, Eili! Commenting that the film had had a profound effect on him, Judge Bonniwell suggested the title should be “Out of the Depths” as it paralleled Eili, Eili! in sentiment, and was also a Jewish Psalm which had become part of Catholic liturgy. Who actually chose the final English release title of Breaking Home Ties is unknown, though it may have been inspired by the famous painting of the same name, by Montgomery County artist, Thomas Hovenden. In foreign distribution, the film usually bore a title that translated as Sorrow and Joy.

Final editing, shooting of foreign language intertitles, printing of release copies, physical and financial arrangements for distribution of the film, took until fall of the year. Breaking Home Ties was premiered at the Hotel Astor in New York City late in November 1922. Despite annoying projector problems at the premiere, the film received a good reception, and the producers must have been heartened by the signs that they had succeeded in their goal of making a very specifically Jewish film that had a universal appeal. One of the film industry’s most important trade journals, the Exhibitor’s Herald, reported that during certain scenes there was “not a dry eye in the house.” Another, Moving Picture World, while pointing out that the production standards were nothing special, recommended the film to exhibitors on the basis of “heart appeal and the glorification of family love” Despite “the fact that it deals entirely with one race of people,” the World felt the film would have “a strong appeal.”

That viewers were being given rare glimpses of a usually hidden world was also commented upon by several film reviewers. Moving Picture World noted with interest the “Jewish ceremonial scenes” which appeared to be “in strict accordance with Hebrew ritual even to the men keeping on their hats.” The Exhibitor’s Herald suggested that the film had offered “a deeper insight into the customs of orthodox Jewish religion than has ever before been shown on the screen.” The film was in fact noteworthy for its depiction of Jewish religious ceremonies and was...
apparently the first American feature film to do so explicitly. While these rituals are more familiar to people today—thanks to the movies and television—in the early twenties, few people outside of the Jewish community even knew of, let alone had seen these ceremonies.

But in spite of its good initial reception, *Breaking Home Ties* failed to garner much more attention. There were no further national reviews.

The timing of a film release is crucial and the Philadelphia syndicate soon discovered that their timing could not have been worse. To market their film, the producers hoped to take advantage of the popularity of the recent film, *Humoresque*. Ironically, the film that hoped to ride the coat tails of one successful film, was in the end overshadowed by another. The legendary Jewish genre film, *Hungry Hearts*, released only a week after *Breaking Home Ties*, was a far superior film and the wide-spread attention it received soon eclipsed BHT. Unable to justify another costly investment, the producers backed off their original plans for a series of new feature productions at Betzwood. BHT would prove to be the last major film ever made there.xix

*Breaking Home Ties* was long thought to be lost until a single print of the film turned up in Germany some years ago. That the film had originally seen international distribution was clear not only from the German intertitles but from one insert which is in Dutch. Stored at the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek in Berlin under the title *Leid und Freud* (Sorrow and Joy), the film was rescued from oblivion by the National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University. In 1993-94, in a cooperative effort of the Betzwood Film Archive at Montgomery County Community College in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, and the National Center for Jewish Film, *Breaking Home Ties* was restored and made available to the public once again. Its second world premiere was the featured event at the 1994 Betzwood Silent Film Festival. At age 78, Walter Seltzer, the younger brother of the film's director, flew from Hollywood to attend the event and see a film he had not seen in 72 years. Presented with a new organ score by Don Kinnier, the film played to a packed house. Since then, *Breaking Home Ties* has played before numerous modern audiences.

In some ways, the story of *Breaking Home Ties*’ oblivion, rediscovery, and return to its roots, parallels the story told within the film. With eighty percent of the films made before 1950 lost forever, and others surviving only as fragments, the survival of BHT—completely intact—is something of a miracle, and tempts one to echo the film’s final intertitle: “Blessed is He who restores the dead to life.”

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iv Walter Seltzer, interviewed by Joseph P. Eckhardt, 7 May 1994. Walter Seltzer was the younger brother—by fifteen years—of Frank Seltzer. They went to Hollywood together in 1935 where both had successful careers as film producers.

v Though Seltzer was probably too young to remember them, the first narrative motion pictures designed to combat anti-Semitism had been made in Philadelphia. In fact, the very idea of doing so had been pioneered by Philadelphia film mogul, and founder of the Betzwood Studio, Siegmund Lubin, back in 1907-1909.

vi *Humoresque* was released by Cosmopolitan Productions. Filmed in an ersatz studio in an old beer hall in Harlem, under somewhat challenging conditions, the film included footage of the gritty facts of ghetto life on the Lower East Side of New York City. Hearst was not happy with the film when it was finished and it was nearly scrapped. Yet, when released—during Fords on-going publication of the Protocols—*Humoresque* proved an unexpected success. For a detailed description of the film and its production, see Brownlow, *Behind The Mask Of Innocence*, pp. 385-392;
Moving Picture World, one of the leading movie industry trade journals distributed to thousands of theater owners and exhibitors every week, felt obliged to sternly renounce Ford’s charges. “If the screen were Jew invented, Jew owned and Jew controlled, it would stand today as the greatest monument to Jewish achievement in all the history of that race,” MPW wrote. “Down to this very day and hour there never has been a control of any group of religionist or racialists and there is no movement evident toward such an end.” MPW, 5 March 1921, pp. 20-21.


Mark Wilson Press File.


Thomas Hovenden’s famous work, “Breaking Home Ties,” painted in 1890 at Plymouth Meeting in Montgomery County, was the most popular painting displayed at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. It was also shown with great success in 1915 at the Panama-Pacific Exposition at San Francisco. It is displayed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Hovenden died tragically, in Norristown, in 1895.


After BHT, a series of short "Song Films" were made at Betzwood until December 1924

BREAKING HOME TIES
Produced, written and directed by Frank N. Seltzer and George K. Rowlands.
Presented by E. S. Manheimer, Associated Distributors, 12 November 1922. 6 reels, 5622 ft.

Cast:
Lee Kohlmar…………………………. Papa Bergman
Rebecca Weintraub…………………...Mama Bergman
Richard Farrell……………………...David Bergman
Betty Howe…………………………..Esther, foster child
Arthur Ashley………………………Paul Zeidman
Bob Maximillian………………..Moskowitz
Jane Thomas…………………………Rose Neuman
Henry B. Shaffer……………………J. B. Martin
Maude Hill………………………….Mrs. Martin