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P R E S S R E L E A S E

AJHS Holds 1st-Ever Exhibition of Molly Picon Scrapbooks Fragile Materials of Yiddish Star Digitized for Future Generations

NEW YORK – A highly personal account of Yiddish theater in the 20th century will be on view during the first-ever exhibition of the scrapbooks of legendary performer Molly Picon and her spouse and collaborator Yonkel (Jacob) Kalich.

The American Jewish Historical Society will present “Pages from a Performing Life: The Scrapbooks of Molly Picon,” starting January 26 in the Paul S. and Sylvia Steinberg Great Hall at the Center for Jewish History, 15 W. 16th St.

From 1919 to 1967, Molly and Yonkel kept scrapbooks primarily in Yiddish and English that brim with clippings, reviews and interviews, fan letters, programs, telegrams and other ephemera. The original 22 scrapbooks, the bulk of them digitized, chronicle Molly’s prolific career in real time and as she and Yonkel wanted to remember it.

These personal documents serve as the centerpiece for the exhibition, which also includes posters, photographs, scripts and correspondence from the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS) collection and material from the YIVO Institute archive, a fellow partner at the Center for Jewish History. The scrapbooks are part of the Molly Picon Papers, which Molly donated to AJHS in the early 1970s.

Recently, AJHS digitized the scrapbooks because they are in fragile condition. This is the first – and likely only – time the original material will be publicly displayed.

“Using 21st-century technology, we have preserved these documents and made them available online so that future generations will have access to this extraordinary chapter of American Jewish cultural history,” said Evan Kingsley, AJHS executive director. Funding for the digitization of the Molly Picon scrapbooks came from the Mellon Foundation project at the CJH, with scanning done by the

Gross Lipper Digital Lab at CJH. The lab also provided cataloging and other services so that the materials can be searched online through DigiTool® (www.digital.cjh.org).

Born Margaret Pyekoon on Feb. 28, 1898, on the Lower East Side, Molly was unusual among Yiddish theater performers in that she learned to speak the language properly only after Yonkel took her to Eastern Europe. Starting in the Yiddish theaters of New York's Second Avenue and later moving to Broadway and Hollywood, Molly delighted Jewish and non-Jewish audiences around the globe. Known as "the darling of Second Avenue," she appeared on stages from South America to pre-state Palestine in such shows such as *Yonkele*, *Shmendrik* and *Mamele*. She later appeared in mainstream plays and films and on radio and television. She may perhaps be best known for her 1971 role as "Yente the Matchmaker" in Norman Jewison's film version of *Fiddler on the Roof*.

"AJHS is able to preserve these historically important – and delicate – materials while making them accessible to the public," said Daniel Kaplan, president of the American Jewish Historical Society. "The Picon exhibition demonstrates the critical role of archives in connecting the past to the future."

The exhibition was curated by Ari Y. Kelman, Assistant Professor of American Studies at University of California, Davis and author of *Station Identification: A Cultural History of Yiddish Radio in the United States*, for which he studied the Picon scrapbooks. He also serves on the managing board of editors for the AJHS quarterly academic journal *American Jewish History*.

"The scrapbooks chronicle first-hand Molly and Yonkel's performances in Eastern Europe for Holocaust survivors and displaced persons, their entertainment of troops during the Korean War and their ongoing support for the State of Israel through such activities as selling bonds and playing before the Knesset (Israeli Parliament)," Kelman said. "What emerges is a fuller understanding of the social and cultural history of Yiddish theater on a global level during the 20th century."

About the American Jewish Historical Society

The American Jewish Historical Society provides access online, in-house and through publications, exhibitions and scholarship, to more than 20 million documents and 50,000 books, photographs, art and artifacts that reflect the Jewish presence in the United States from 1654 to the present. Founded in 1892, AJHS is the oldest national ethnic historical organization in the nation. It is one of five partner organizations at the Center for Jewish History in Manhattan and has a branch at Hebrew College in Boston. For more information, see www.ajhs.org.