

MEMORIES OF LONDON YIDDISH THEATRE

by

BERNARD MENDELOVITCH

*Director of the Harry Ariel Memorial Yiddish
Theatre Group in London*

The Seventh Annual
Avrom-Nokhem Stencl Lecture in Yiddish Studies
delivered before
The Eighth Annual
Oxford Summer Programme
in Yiddish Language and Literature
on 14 August 1989

Oxford Programme in Yiddish
Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies
Oxford 1990

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S. S. Praver's impression of Bernard Mendelovitch

I feel privileged to be invited to deliver the seventh annual Stencl Lecture. Both the late London Yiddish actor Harry Ariel and I were well acquainted with A.N. Stencl, a true friend of the Yiddish theatre. I recall that when there was a thriving Association of Yiddish Journalists, Stencl was the only one to make regular visits to the theatre, always offering a word of praise and warm encouragement for the hard-working actors.

Yiddish theatre in London is over a hundred years old and came into its own at a time when the city's East End was teeming with immigrants newly arrived from Central and Eastern Europe. This was very much a case of God sending the cure before the illness, *di refue far der make* as the saying goes. The theatre had many functions apart from being a house of entertainment and culture. It was a meeting place for kinsmen, for *landslayt* to meet and discuss their problems, to seek help and advice, to provide a sense of belonging. At the same time it was an education. Most of the newly arrived immigrants, my own late father included, could not read English and for them the Yiddish theatre was not only entertainment but also their first introduction to world literature. The works of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Dumas, Sardou and Strindberg were performed in Yiddish translation, and the works of the classic Yiddish writers, Sholem Aleichem, Sholem Ash, Y.L. Peretz, Yankev Gordin and others, were imbued with new meaning when they were brought to life on stage by truly great actors.

One should also remember that the London Yiddish theatre could not afford to specialize in one particular

genre. Classical plays, dramas, comedies, musicals, farces and even opera had to be performed under the same roof by the same company. New writers emerged on the scene to provide new plays for the numerous Yiddish actors but because they wrote on contemporary themes and produced melodramas and comedies, with interpolated musical items, they were labelled, somewhat unkindly, as *shund* writers, a highly uncomplimentary epithet that translates roughly as 'trash writers'. The Yiddish theatre had to cope with great opposition from the established Jewish community who urged the immigrants to assimilate more quickly into the English way of life. Indeed, when the great Yiddish actor Jacob P. Adler sought assistance from his distant cousin, the Chief Rabbi, Dr Nathan Marcus Adler, the latter was only too pleased to offer a sum of money provided that it was used to pay for the company's passage to America. Jacob P. Adler, who later had a legendary career in the United States and was the founder of a famous Yiddish theatrical dynasty, was considered to be an undesirable relative. When seventeen people lost their lives in the unhappy incident at the Princes Street Yiddish Theatre Club in January 1887, the *Jewish Chronicle* suggested that if local Jewry did not patronize the Yiddish theatre and tried to be more anglicized and visit other places of entertainment, such tragedies could be avoided. The incident referred to was a false fire alarm which caused unnecessary panic resulting in loss of life.

Following the halcyon days of Yiddish theatre in London (1880–1905), the Pavilion Theatre on 191–193 Whitechapel Road became the principal venue and served the public well for almost thirty years (1906–1934). An attempt to establish another Yiddish theatre was made in 1912 at the specially built Temple of Art (or the Feinman

Yiddish People's Theatre) on Commercial Road but the management had set their sights too high and aimed at presenting only classical plays and operas. The opening production was an opera in Yiddish entitled *Meylekh Okhoz* ('King Ahaz') composed by Professor Samuel Alman who had also written a great deal of liturgical music as well as arrangements of Yiddish folk songs. The project was very short-lived and the building was later sold and became the Palaseum Cinema. Still, Yiddish actors do not give in easily. They continued to play at the Pavilion and at other venues and when the Pavilion closed its doors in 1934, Yiddish theatre flourished at the Grand Palais on 133–139 Commercial Road, playing nine performances a week, with a very frequent change of programme. In 1935 it became the home of the permanent Yiddish theatre in London until 1961, and Yiddish theatre was still played in the Grand Palais until as late as 1970. Another company, the Jewish National Theatre, established itself only a few hundred yards away, off Commercial Road, at the Adler Hall in 1936. It closed in 1939, but between 1943 and 1947 Adler Hall was leased to the New Yiddish Theatre Company.

Now, how do I, born in London in 1925, come to be associated with the Yiddish theatre? Quite simply because Yiddish theatre and the Yiddish language are part of my life, a great love which I inherited from my late father, Avrom Chayim Mendelovitch. He came from a town near Lodz, a tailor by trade. He was in apprenticeship from the age of eight and his only education was the *kheyder*. He could neither read nor write any non-Jewish language. He was a very good tailor but a very bad businessman which is why we were in a constant struggle to make ends meet. But he was a happy man and his great love of the Yiddish

theatre, Yiddish newspapers and the traditional *shul*, the synagogue where Yiddish was regularly spoken, sustained him. I always remember him sitting at the machine all hours, singing the musical parts from Goldfaden's operettas *Shulamis* and *Bar Kochba*. The family moved to Manchester when I was only a few months old. Our house, humble as it was, seemed to be a meeting place for all visiting Yiddish actors and choristers from the local *shul*. The only language I heard at home was Yiddish although we, the children, of whom there were six, would speak to our parents in English. Our entertainment each Friday evening would be listening to my father reading serialized novels from the American Yiddish newspaper *Forverts* (the *Forward*) or the plays of Yankev Gordin and Sholem Aleichem which he would borrow from the local library or from friends. By the age of eight I had joined the local *shul* choir. The choirmaster was Azriel Fairman, a nephew of the afore-mentioned composer, Professor Samuel Alman.

At that time, the Manchester Jewish community was large and well established and could support visiting Yiddish theatre companies for quite lengthy seasons. It was customary for the actors to co-opt choristers from the local *shul* if they needed extras as they were certain that a chorister would not 'dry up' in the presence of an audience. The visiting company at that time (in 1934) was directed by Joseph Sherman and the guest stars were actors of great repute, Herman Fenigstein and Malvina Rappel. They were presenting an operetta entitled *Bar Mitsve* and needed four boys to sing a chorus in the prologue. I was one of the chosen four and I must have acquitted myself fairly well because I was later given all the child parts in the repertoire with dialogue to speak and musical items to perform. My very first solo was in the operetta entitled *Khinke-Pinke!* When the company changed personnel, I

continued to play child parts and had the pleasure of working with such stars as David Zeiderman and Hannah Lerner, Max Perlman and Gita Galina, Meier Tzelniker and Fanny Waxman. By this time I was irredeemably stagestruck and was particularly pleased to be invited to appear in other provincial cities, especially in Leeds where I was cast in the operetta *Bar Mitsve*, not as a choirboy in the prologue but playing the leading role at the age of eleven. Another great thrill was being invited to appear in Liverpool with the great American stars Joseph Shejngold and Frances Adler, daughter of the legendary Jacob P. Adler. I had to rehearse my part and learn a duet with Shejngold on the day of the performance and being a quick study with a good ear for music I was able to see it through and the memory remains with me to this day.

Before very long, the war years came and the tours of Yiddish theatre companies were few and far between. In any event, I was at an in-between age when I would have been difficult to cast. Still, my interest in the Yiddish theatre continued unabated. My father still received the Yiddish paper daily and I would glean every bit of information I could on who was playing, what and where. My father would very often do his own casting of the play that was announced and on reading the write-up in the following issue he was proved to be right! In 1944 I was called up for military service and for a while I was stationed near London which I visited as often as I could and my port of call was, of course, the Yiddish theatre. I even risked travelling into London without a pass and on one occasion I was arrested and sentenced to detention, but to me it was worth it to see *Der Kenig fun Lampedusa* ('The King of Lampedusa') and *Di Sheyne Miryem* ('The Beautiful Miriam')!

Upon my return to Manchester, after my war service, I

found that the lure of London and the Yiddish theatre was too strong to resist. By late 1948 I was living in London where I had the good fortune to stay with a charming old lady who was known as Mrs Simon. It was the custom for many years for the wife to take the husband's first name and add the prefix 'Mrs'; by the same rule, my own mother was known as Mrs Abraham. Mrs Simon, who was the epitome of the theatrical landlady, knew well the problems of a Yiddish actor's life, the late rehearsals, the erratic mealtimes, the vicissitudes of one's artistic career. A warm and generous lady she opened not only her home but also her heart to Yiddish actors, who were never made to feel that they were sitting at someone else's table. After the war when the travel restrictions were lifted, the Grand Palais, which had been run alternately by Mark Markov and Meier Tzelniker, with their respective permanent companies, embarked on a return to the pre-war years. The performance schedule consisted of visiting guest stars who would play seasons of thirteen to fourteen weeks. The whole season ran from October, after the *Yontoyvim*, the High Holidays, and continued until the following July. The director of the company in October 1948 was Meier Tzelniker who remembered me from my days as a child actor. At that time the company needed a 'second juvenile', and so I was soon given a chance to fulfil my ambition by becoming a member of the Yiddish theatre company. The visiting guest artists at that season were Benzion Witler and Shifra Lerer. This was a magical time for me. Later I was to have the honour of appearing with Zygmunt Turkov, Berta Gersten, Leo Fuchs, Peysakhke Burshtein, Henri Gerro, Max Perlman and many more great stars. Let me try to illustrate what life has been like for the London Yiddish actor from 1948 until the present day.

It should be remembered that the theatre operated without any form of grant or subsidy and was entirely self-supporting. The visiting guest stars worked on a gross percentage basis; a further percentage, after deducting that for the guest stars, was paid to Mr Greenby, the proprietor of the theatre. The company would then have to cover weekly expenses, including orchestra, posters, press publicity, stage manager, props, costume and wig hire and the residue would be shared by the company on a points (*markn*) basis, the number of points being allocated according to one's professional stature and one's contribution to the work of the company. Naturally, the company member's pay packet at the end of the week would reflect the drawing power of the visiting guest star.

Life at the theatre was not an easy one. In the main we would have a change of play each week and as we gave seven performances weekly (the Sunday matinée was later abandoned) and had to simultaneously appear in one play and rehearse the new play for the following week, it meant that the only leisure periods left were Friday evening and Sunday morning. Every Saturday evening was a time of excitement for our regular patrons as they came to see the premiere of the new show. The eager anticipation of the audience coupled with the feeling backstage, which was described by the American Yiddish actor and manager, Boaz Young, as *der heyliker tsiter* (an inadequate translation would be 'the divine tremble'), created a very special, in fact indefinable, atmosphere. The first performance of the new play took place on Saturday night and the final performance on the following Thursday. There was, therefore, no opportunity for us to rely on a good write-up (or suffer the consequences of adverse criticism) from the Yiddish newspaper or the *Jewish Chronicle*. By the time

they had gone to press the play would have been taken off in favour of the following week's production. The company had to rely on word of mouth recommendation via the grapevine which at that time was Hessel Street market (just opposite the Grand Palais) with its open-fronted shops and 100% Jewish occupancy and patronage. Whenever we had found favour with our 'first nighters' we could be sure that Sunday would be a sell-out and we would have good houses mid-week. The reverse would be the case if they gave us the thumbs-down sign. On mid-week nights benefit performances were very often booked by various charitable organizations for fund-raising purposes. This was a regular and vital source of income. The organized booking of the theatre – for a modest sum – with the week's current show, would guarantee us a fixed amount of takings for the night. This system was to play an important part in later years.

Monday morning presented a different story for the Yiddish actor. This was always a time of anxiety. We would have the first rehearsal of the play which was to be performed the following Saturday and the guest star would distribute the parts to other members of the cast. We never received a full script of the play. All we were given was the actual text we had to speak with cue lines of two or three words. Each actor would hope for a part of reasonable size and importance. When the parts were distributed we would feverishly count the number of pages allotted; accordingly our faces would soon register pleasure or indignation. We would also be told of the musical items that we would have to learn for the forthcoming show. It was impossible to always please every member of the company; some poor individual would feel at times the victim of a grave injustice. But the rehearsal would go

ahead. Our routine was to commence rehearsal at 10 am with dialogue only until about 12.15 at which time our pianist would arrive to teach the musical items by ear. We would learn our new parts during the afternoons and by Thursday morning we would be word-perfect and know the musical items too. The final rehearsal would be on Saturday morning with the four musicians. Quite often this would be the only occasion on which the orchestra had seen the music; we would have heard it only in piano form at the earlier rehearsals. Still, all the members of the company were thoroughly professional and the curtain would go up on Saturday night to our eager audience. The financial rewards? Well, we made a living. . .

The theatre carried on with its peaks and troughs but with the passing of time, circumstances changed. The local Jewish population moved away from the East End, many of our patrons died or became too ill to visit the theatre and, as we received no subsidy, financial pressures forced us to close the doors in early 1961 and the Grand Palais no longer functioned on a permanent basis. However, the charitable societies approached Mr Greenby and persuaded him to continue to present benefit performances. We rallied the forces that were available and continued to give performances two or three times weekly for some years. A further change in circumstances forced the company to leave its semi permanent home and operate as a freelance mobile company under my own administration, a duty which I had been entrusted with some years earlier.

We then joined forces with Anna Tzelniker and gave performances of Yiddish theatre throughout the London area and the provinces. Old age and sickness took their toll on the company's numbers but we carried on working,

first as a trio, Anna Tzelniker, Harry Ariel and I (1970–1987), and later Harry and I as a duo (1987–1989) with great success.

In my opening words, I mentioned that the Yiddish theatre at its inception was a cultural ‘home’, a meeting place and a place of learning for the immigrant. But what does it offer now to a more learned, sophisticated and assimilated audience? It is a homecoming. A return to our beginnings. The opportunity of hearing a long-forgotten phrase that our grandparents would use, a melody remembered from the cradle. At one time it was the accepted thing to say that one did not understand Yiddish and sometimes, quite inaccurately, people maintained that they were third and fourth generation English Jews. This is no longer the case and Jews are proud of their antecedents, and particularly of their cultural heritage.

Our recent work had taken us as far north as Glasgow, as far south as Bournemouth. The venues are varied in the facilities they offer and the work is extremely arduous. So why do I do it? The answer again lies in one of my opening phrases. The Yiddish theatre and the Yiddish language are vital parts of my life. In fact they are my life and I will try to carry on presenting the Yiddish word and the Yiddish song as long as the Almighty will give me the strength to do so.

HARRY ARIEL (1915–1989)

My great friend, colleague and collaborator, Harry Ariel, died just over a month ago, on 6 July 1989, aged 74. One could say that Ariel was born on the stage as both his parents, Chayim Duvid and Rukhl Ariel, were Yiddish

actors as were four of his aunts. He played child parts from a very early age, making his debut as a page boy in a translation of Kalman's *Gypsy Princess*. He was later billed as a 'wonder child', singing, mimicking, tap-dancing until he reached his teens as a popular juvenile character actor. In order to join the Yiddish Actors' Union and be allowed to appear in Warsaw, he had to tour the provinces for two years. Ariel always asserted that those two years were the formative ones of his career as he played alongside all the great names in the Yiddish theatre, including Anna Yakubowitz, Moyshe Lipman, Dina Halpern, Benny Adler, Jack Reichtzeit, Benzion Witler, Leo Fuchs, Peysakhke Burshtein, Joseph Shejngold, Frances Adler. He often maintained that he drew much of his artistic cast and dramatic inspiration from his earlier work with such great stars of the Yiddish stage.

Ariel always hoped that he would receive an engagement to travel abroad, to extend his experience and have the opportunity to display his talent. The big chance arrived. He was engaged to appear in London at the Grand Palais along with Benzion Witler. He rushed to the English consul to obtain a visa and was packed and ready to start his journey but the date was a fateful one: 1 September 1939 when the Germans occupied Warsaw after heavy bombardment. By this time, Ariel's father was bedridden and his mother insisted he should flee to the Russian occupied part of Poland in the hope that he could send for his parents. Ariel fled to Bialystok where he joined the Soviet sponsored State Yiddish Theatre under the direction of Avrom Morevsky (who played the *tsadik* in the film *The Dybbuk*). Although Ariel had appeared predominantly in the lighter Yiddish repertoire, he scored a great success as Ferdinand in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in Gershenzon's

Hershele Ostropolyer, in *Di Gebrider Lurye*, and in Sholem Aleichem's *Shver tsu zayn a yid* ('Hard to be a Jew'). He made such an impact, although aged only 24, that a visiting commission from Moscow promoted him to the rank of 'principal artist'. However, his great sorrow was that he could not bring his beloved parents eastwards and the happy period in his professional career was shortlived. With the outbreak of war between Russia and Germany, Ariel once more fled eastward, but with no Yiddish theatre and no visible means of support he was drafted into a labour camp where he spent his days digging peat. He had always been sickly as a child and the conditions in which he had to work affected his health and he soon contracted malaria (or so he thought) coupled with a blindness which struck him only at dusk each day. Fortunately, he had a friend who worked in the cookhouse and was able to smuggle out a couple of small pieces of liver which helped to cure the blindness by supplying one of the essential vitamins that he lacked. But even in these depressing circumstances, his artistic spirit came to the fore and he would give readings of Sholem Aleichem and Peretz for his fellow inmates in the primitive hut which served as a barrack room.

But he was ever the optimist and help came fairly soon in the person of the eminent actress, Ida Kaminska. She had been given permission by the Soviet government to re-establish a Yiddish theatre and asked for any Yiddish actors who had been drafted to civilian labour camps to be released and attached to her company. This was the case with Ariel and very soon he found himself in Frunze, still further east, playing *Mirele Efros*, *Khasye di Yesoyme*, *The Kreutzer Sonata* and all the Gordin repertoire. Life was very hard, the pay was abysmal, food was in very short

supply and, apart from his stage costumes (which did not belong to him), he had only one shirt to his back. But he was alive and working in the theatre with Ida Kaminska!

He was repatriated to Poland at the end of the war, making the journey by cattle truck in which he travelled for three weeks. On returning to Lodz he learned that his parents had been put to death in 1942. He was determined to leave Poland and found his way into a displaced persons' camp in Linz, Austria. There were other Yiddish actors in the camp and Ariel lost no time in organizing entertainment for the thousands of Jews who were in the same plight, without hope and without knowledge of what the future would hold for them. He had no scripts and rewrote the plays from memory, producing Sholem Aleichem's *Shver tsu zayn a yid* and *Hershele Ostropolyer* as well as two revue programmes. In their desperation and their search for a little relief from their situation, the audience flocked to the theatre and filled the house at every performance. Ariel designed and painted all the scenery (his raw material was sack cloth) and he managed to provide costumes from the contents of the parcels which had been sent by American Jewry. Naturally, many of the items were quite useless for the inmates of the camp (who needed an evening dress in such circumstances?) but Ariel made use of every scrap of material for stage wear. Some kindhearted person sent two commissionaires' uniforms (he must have been the owner of a hotel!), but Ariel soon transformed one into the village policeman's outfit in *Hershele Ostropolyer* and the other became the Chief of Police's uniform for the *seyder* night arrest in *Shver tsu zayn a yid*.

After what seemed an eternity help came with an engagement to appear at the Grand Palais in London with

Mark Markov and Etta Topel who headed the cast at that time. Ariel soon found favour with the audiences and later transferred, with Markov and Topel, to the Alexandra Theatre in Stoke Newington. He returned to the Grand Palais and early in 1950 travelled to South Africa to fulfil an engagement which he hoped would be the highlight of his career. Indeed, he had great press and public acclaim but sickness dealt a severe blow and he had to enter the hospital where he was to remain for a period of nine months. The sickness which struck him earlier in the Russian labour camp was not malaria but incipient tuberculosis which affected his lungs and his larynx. Fortunately for him, the drug known as streptomycin had just been invented and this speeded his cure. He returned to London but was not allowed to work for a year until he received a complete discharge from the hospital. He rejoined the company and soon became its artistic director in early 1952. This was a difficult time when the supply of guest artists had dwindled because there were few playwrights able to supply them with the necessary repertoire. Ariel had always been a clever lyricist, working at great speed, and thought he would try his hand at writing a full-length play. His first play was very successful and he continued to write and direct, providing a repertoire for many visiting guests including Henri Gerro and Rosita Londner, Anna Rappel, Bebe Spitzer and Chaye Shiffer. Established stars such as Benzion Witle, Max Perlman and Peysakhke Burshtein were keen to acquire plays by Ariel.

He was then tempted to play a season in Argentina and welcomed the idea to present his plays on a grand scale and in large theatres. He also was happy to be able to see his aunt, the splendid actress Bella Ariel. His appearance

was very successful but . . . the revolution (of 1955) put paid to the season as all theatres were closed. Ariel returned to London vowing never to set foot out of the country again. He soon took up the reins at the Grand Palais and one of his greatest achievements was producing his own dramatic adaptation of Sholem Aleichem's novel *Blondzhende Shtern* ("The Wandering Stars"). Ariel's adaptation of *Blondzhende Shtern* was later presented also by the eminent ex-Soviet producer Joseph Shejn in Australia and in New York.

The later years of the Grand Palais have been covered earlier, but I must add a few words about Ariel himself. His acting was nothing short of brilliant, his stagecraft and stage presence tremendous. His great failing was that he was too modest and self-effacing. He would always give the better parts to other actors in an effort to please them. A fine characteristic was his willingness to help young actors with personal coaching and extra rehearsals in private. I had the privilege of working with him from 1948 to the end of his days. Very often I would stand in the wings and marvel at his ability to hold the house in his hand, to have the audience hysterical with laughter and, at his will, to have eyes filled with tears. His only excursion into English stage was crowned with success when he appeared at the South Bank Festival Hall with Harold Pinter and Ruth Rosen in June 1988. He electrified the audience with every item he performed and his Yiddish reading of Katzenelson's poems was a *tour de force*. Unfortunately his illness and untimely death robbed us of the opportunity of appearing as a duo in Oxford in 1989. Our first appearance in Oxford in 1988 was a highlight of our joint career which will always be remembered.

In February 1989, we were approached by the Spiro

Institute in London to lead and direct some of their members as a Yiddish Theatre Group. The undertaking was a huge success but Ariel rehearsed and performed under a terrible strain, unaware that he was suffering from a brain tumour that was to claim his life with frightening speed. I noticed many symptoms of his illness but for me the most alarming was that his memory seemed to be failing. And yet, when I asked him to write a new verse for my introduction to *Di Tsvey Kunilemlekh* ('The Two Kuni-Lemels'), he dashed it off in a matter of three minutes. The verse was perfect and full of his old humour. He even made costumes for the show although his right hand was unsteady.

A final word about his last performance on June the 18th. Our portable footlights were his own special province, nobody was allowed to go near! Before the last show he saw that one of the bulbs did not function nor did its replacement. He immediately unscrewed and replaced the holder in spite of his disability but when the show commenced, that lamp did not burn . . . His final words to me when he was in the hospital before he lost the power of speech were that I was to carry on, to keep the *ner tómid* (eternal light) alive and this I will try to do.

And now, back to Stencl. Where is the affinity? As I said earlier, Stencl was a friend of the Yiddish theatre. Going back to the war years, when the bombing was heavy in London, many people fled to the comparative calm of Manchester, among them a group of *Fraynd fun Yidish Loshn*, the 'Friends of Yiddish', the literary group founded by A.N. Stencl in 1938. At whose house were the meetings held? The Mendelovitch house. Who was elected to greet Stencl at a birthday celebration? Bernard Mendelovitch. Whenever Stencl wrote a new poem he would bring it to

Harry Ariel to see how it sounded when delivered by one who could really recite poetry. When the Sholem Aleichem Centenary was being celebrated in 1959, who prevailed on Ariel to present *Shver tsu zayn a yid?* Stencl. Stencl's love and respect for the Yiddish actor can be illustrated easily. If ever he learned that an actor or actress was in hospital, Stencl would arm himself with a few flowers or a few apples as appropriate and visit the sick artist no matter how far or difficult the journey.

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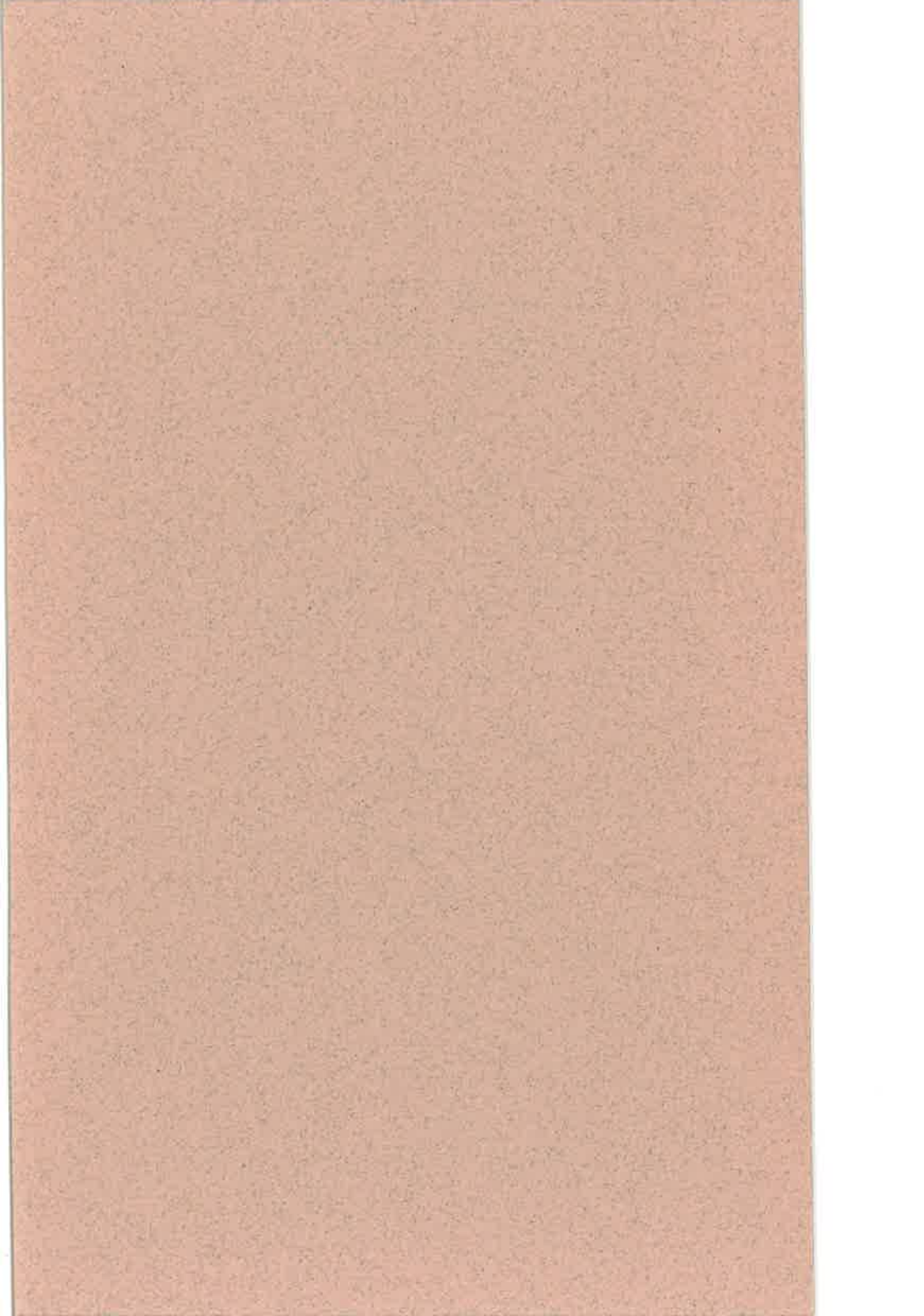
A.N. Stencl (1897–1983)

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