1. THE HIDDEN TRADITION

In 1944, Hannah Arendt publishes her essay, "The Jew as Pariah: The Hidden Tradition." By this time the German political philosopher has settled down in her last place of exile, New York City, Europe is at war; European Jews are sent to the camps, and Arendt, who was never to shy away from any criticism directed at Jews themselves, reflects upon their fate; she considers any missed opportunities in their social and political engagement.

Arendt has just completed her first book since writing her dissertation on St. Augustine, a study entitled, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*. She had begun the book in 1927, and most of it had been written in Berlin. Yet, Arendt fled to Paris with the incomplete manuscript in 1933. The book is first to appear in English translation in 1956. Arendt is also writing essays on the contemporary situation of Jews and Zionism for various American and German-American papers, and she begins work on what will become her major oeuvre, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The first section of *The Origins* is entitled, "Antisemitism," and will concern the history of the Jews as well. How could one understand what had happened to this people, and how could Jews themselves have prevented these events? These are questions that have haunted Arendt since the 1930s.

Already, in *Rahel Varnhagen*, Arendt deplores the lack of political commitment on the side of Jews, along with their long-standing rejection of—or oblivion to—political action. Moreover, Arendt adopts two terms in this
book that were defined by Max Weber. She uses them to describe two possible social positions for Jews. She writes about how Jews within European society have had the status of ‘pariahs’; they are outsiders in legal and cultural terms. She also writes about how some individual Jews, however, have tried early on (and for Arendt, this means in the eighteenth century) to cross over to mainstream society and to become members of an established class. The Jews that try to approach Gentility are ‘parvenus’.

While Jews can do little to fight their pariah position, Arendt tries to show that becoming a parvenu is the wrong path for a Jew. The status of a parvenu equals only self-deception and will do little to alter one’s outsider position. Moreover, in becoming a parvenu a Jew will reject the advantages of being in a pariah position. For Arendt, outsiders have privileges as well. An outsider can reflect on society more clearly than an insider. Arendt thus calls for ‘conscious pariahs’, Jews that embrace their outsider status and become lucid critics of the society. In short, Arendt wants Jews to become politically responsible and even possess a moral conscience of sorts.

In her essay on “The Jew as Pariah,” Arendt describes an alternative history of Jewish literature and culture, only to insist once more on the significance of conscious pariahs. Arendt writes:

That the status of the Jews in Europe has been not only that of an oppressed people but also of what Max Weber has called a “pariah people” is a fact most clearly appreciated by those who have had practical experience of just how ambiguous is the freedom which emancipation has ensured, and how treacherous the promise of equality which assimilation has held out. In their own position as social outcasts such men reflect the political status of their entire people.

In her earlier book, Rahel Varnhagen had already served as an example of a conscious pariah. Rahel converted, married a Gentile, and attempted to become a parvenu. Yet, according to Arendt (not necessarily in accordance with historical records), she reconsidered, and insisted proudly on her Jewish roots.

In Arendt’s essay, “The Jew as Pariah,” Rahel is in good company. For a further example Arendt mentions Heinrich Heine. He too was already briefly mentioned in the earlier book. Heine converts to Protestantism, but continues to write and comment about Germany as a Jew from neighboring Paris. Arendt describes his poetry as that of a dreamer, filled with stories of a “schlemihl.”


6 Arendt begins her book on Rahel Varnhagen with a statement recorded by Rahel’s husband, Karl August Varnhagen. The statement reports that Rahel was happy to have been born a Jewess. It represses the further statement relating the satisfaction about her conversion to Christianity. In regard to Arendt’s reading of Rahel, see my introduction to the critical edition of Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess, ed. Liliane Weissberg (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 3-69.

Heine may be a pariah, but he does not identify with any ruling class; he continues to ‘imagine’ a better society and life, both for the Jews and for Germany. For Arendt, Heine’s poetry achieves a German-Jewishness that simply escapes other writers and poets.

For Arendt, the political activist and writer, Bernard Lazare, is yet another example of a conscious parvenu. Lazare is able to use his outsider position to develop a theory of Zionism and to imagine a Jewish state that will be founded, not on race, but on common conviction. Franz Kafka joins Arendt’s group as well. In her discussion of Kafka’s work, Arendt concentrates on his novel Das Schloß (The Castle). In this novel, the main protagonist, K., awaits a message from the castle that will enable him to commence his work. K. is torn between joining the people of the village and identifying with its absent but powerful master. But by refusing to make a choice, by neither belonging to the village nor to the castle, K. becomes a revolutionary of sorts. It is not he, but the world around him, that appears to be out of joint.8

Still, there is another figure Arendt insists upon: Charlie Chaplin. For Arendt, Chaplin is less of a “schlemihl” and more of a typical “suspect.”9 He is a figure always ready to be blamed, but also ready to escape conviction; Chaplin is an outsider, but able to point at the general humanity of all human beings. As a “Little Man,” he remains victorious.

As her examples show, Arendt does not distinguish between a living person (Lazare) and a fictional one (K.), between a writer (Heine) and his creation (Chaplin’s tramp). In her pantheon of conscious pariahs, Arendt includes figures who can serve as examples for her theory, whether they are imagined or alive. Only the stories they tell—be they life stories or fiction—are important. And while Arendt praises Lazare as a Zionist who would be able to define a Jewish state without reverting to a discourse on Jewish essence, with Chaplin, Arendt’s account also includes a non-Jew. Indeed, only in a later English version of her essay does Arendt refer to Chaplin’s non-Jewish background in a footnote. Yet she adds the footnote only to make him a member of another social outsider group—the gipsy (as well as Irish). But in the proper text, Arendt’s theses remain unchanged.10

Indeed, how are we to understand the inclusion of Charlie Chaplin into this group of Jewish conscious pariahs? Is it simply an instance of Arendt’s misperception?


10 This footnote appears in the English book editions of the essay only; see Arendt, Jewish Writing, 297, n.1. Here, Arendt writes: "Chaplin has recently declared that he is of Irish and Gypsy descent, but he has been selected for discussion because, even if not himself a Jew, he has epitomized in an artistic form a character born of the Jewish pariah mentality."
I. CLOSE-UP

The bowler hat. The tight jacket. The wide trousers. The all-too-large shoes. The walking stick. The moustache. [Ill. 1] Due to his out-turned feet and peculiar walk, the whirl of his walking stick and his sad glance, sometimes it seems as if costume and mask already define the figure of Charlie Chaplin. His identity seems to be comprised of his image and his gestures.

In 1913, Chaplin moves from England to America, and one year later he has already completed his second film for the Keystone Company. Keystone's Mack Sennett produces a series of slapstick comedies and hires Chaplin to play a clown in this new film, *Kid Auto Races at Venice*. Chaplin will play a person who will constantly and awkwardly interfere with the filming of a car race. [Ill. 2] Sennett asks Chaplin to put together a costume for his role, and Chaplin appears in the clothes of a vagabond or tramp. "The moment I wore these clothes," Chaplin writes, "costume and make-up transformed me into the person whom I was to represent. When I entered the stage, 'the tramp' was born." 11 Thus, Chaplin appears as a tramp in a film about making films, and he sticks to this figure, without much further development, until 1936 when he writes and acts in *Modern Times*. The tramp was invented in 1914, at the beginning of WWI, and Chaplin will abandon it only a few years before WWII. With the figure of the tramp Chaplin devised a role that could be carried over from film to film, and from short film to movie. The figure of the "tramp" unites his films and turns them into a single, coherent oeuvre. Chaplin describes the protagonist of these movies to Sennett in the following way:


You know, this guy has many faces; he is a tramp, a gentleman, a poet, a梦mer, a lonely man who is longing for love and for adventure. He could play a scientist, a musician, a duke, and a polo player. Just the same, it would not be beneath him to pick up a cigarette but from the street or steal some sweets from a baby.12

Chaplin does not only play the tramp. He is a protagonist who invents this figure, who writes the script for it, directs its movies, and composes the music for its films. He is both author and actor in a movie business in which authorship, in the traditional sense, could already no longer be maintained. For his public, Charlie Chaplin is the tramp and thus a symbol of the new medium of film. The tramp stands for the victory of film as modern entertainment.

By the beginning of the twenties, Chaplin's image has become a general cultural signifier. It is recognizable with a few strokes of the pen. But Chaplin's tramp is more than an image. Chaplin moves in a rhythm of his own. He is neither too slow nor too fast. His gestures are at times exceedingly correct and almost mechanical. At the same time, Chaplin struggles with the objects of his surrounding, especially mechanical objects and machines. This is particularly apparent in Modern Times, Chaplin's satire of Frederick Taylor's attempts to modernize industrial production, which culminates in the invention of assembly lines. [III. 3] Chaplin is a master of situational comedy that rests on

12 Chaplin, My Autobiography, 144.
movement and he manipulates his gestures for the screen—with the help of the speed of the projection machines, which are reproducing his gestures on screen.

Chaplin's films were shown, not only in his native England, but in the deepest provinces, in America and in Europe, as well. The incongruity of Chaplin's gestures also appeal to a new European art movement, DADA, on whose manifestoes—here, for example, a Serbian one—Chaplin appears.13

Writings on Chaplin and visual renderings of him proliferate in the twenties in Central Europe and in France, where he is simply known as “Charlut.”14 While his gestures can be viewed as awkward, the grown man appears closer to the stage of childhood. The tramp is always innocent, he is just learning to walk and to move; he tries to understand his surroundings and takes every suggestion quite literally. In his naivété, Chaplin is not only a tramp, but he is known as “The Little Tramp.”15


Chaplin's figure and his movements elicit laughter; in his presence, objects are out of control and end in chaos. In the *Human Condition*, Arendt would later distinguish between labor and work. Chaplin labors with his body, but he does not work to produce objects of any use. Indeed, in his rejection of work, he sometimes resembles the upper classes. He can switch roles with ease, even if this will end in chaos. But because Chaplin can *play* a duke, but cannot *be* a duke, any switch of roles has to be temporary, and has to be reversed at the end of each film. His film, *City Lights* (1931), makes this obvious. Chaplin achieves an "elevated" social position here (both literally and metaphorically), but only temporarily. *[III. 5]* Thus, when the tramp becomes a master, he embodies the true inaccessibility of this position as well. Chaplin's films present a social structure that cannot change, and the audience's laughter confirms the recognition of this fact.

It may not be without significance that Chaplin’s tramp appears on the screen between 1914 and 1936. On the one hand, Chaplin’s tramp stands in the tradition of slapstick elements and pantomimes that encompass British and American vaudeville and the Italian *commedia dell’arte*. But in America at that time, the tramp is part of a social reality as well, and the object of political concern as well as scholarly study. In 1923 Nels Anderson published a study for the Chicago Council of Social Agencies under the direction of the Committee of Homeless Men. Anderson had conducted field research and defined the social problem as “hobohemia.” In Chicago there were between 30,000 and 75,000 homeless people at that time. To comment on this problem, Anderson cites an unpublished article written in 1917 by the journalist Harry M. Beardsley. In the article, Beardsley describes the social situation by turning to geography, and comparing it to the theater world: “All that Broadway is to the actors of America, West Madison is to its habitués—and more. Every institution of the Rialto is paralleled by one in West Madison. West Madison Street is the Rialto of the hobo.” The theater already serves as a model for social perception.

In 1934, Thomas Minehan published an illustrated study on *Boy and Girl Tramps of America.* Minehan observed people who had lost their jobs in 1929 and had to live on the streets. However, despite the title of his study, women hardly appear in his or other studies on the subject. Ben Reitman’s “Sister of the Road,” the autobiography of “Boxcar Bertha,” as told to the editor, is a rare exception. *Sister of the Road: The Autobiography of Boxcar Bertha* by Ben Reitman (New York: Gold Label, 1937).

Minehan writes, “ln company with millions of other Americans who have heard the panhandlers’ pleas for a couple of nickels for a cup of coffee, I often wondered what the man who is down and out thinks of us and of our civilization.” He continues in less scholarly prose and more in the style of a film noir movie script:

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22 Minehan, *Boys and Girl Tramps of America*, xi.
And how could it be ascertained? Were the men, I asked myself, any more truthful with each other? Would a man living on relief line learn more than an investigator talking to men on the streets or to social cases across an interviewer’s desk? One evening in November, 1932, I disguised myself in old clothes and stood in a bread line in the cold and rain.

The experience was memorable. I can still see the ragged cold line of men shivering in the rain ... They seemed like some strange night creatures who stirred abroad from caves and water holes.23

Unknown photographers took some of the images of hobos, beggars, and tramps, published in these studies, whereas other photographers, like Dorothea Lange, are well known today. [III. 7] Lange worked for the Farm Security Administration and took photographs of the homeless in California.24 These pictures do not show any men in cities of night and fog, but rather men on the open road—versions of Chaplin’s tramp. [III. 8] Lange concentrates on the male figures that are moving away from the viewer.25

Chaplin’s image, we must assume, has influenced the scholarly studies on unemployment of the time. How can his figure be contained?

II. THE TRAMP

Although many of the American homeless people of the twenties and thirties are described as unwilling to move—as standing in cues—Chaplin has to be in constant movement. The tramp and Chaplin have no permanent residence. He has to change locations and find his roots in movement itself. For example, he does not walk towards the viewers, he moves towards the unknown distance, the open field. [III. 9] The last few images of his early film, The Tramp (1915), show Chaplin on the road and only in City Lights does he receive a young girl as a companion. [III. 10] But the figure of the tramp is very masculine, mostly alone, self-reliant, and always moving. Would this be a desirable form of freedom?

At the time, there would be different answers to this question in the United States, in Germany, and in Eastern Europe. In America, this tramp would resemble a cowboy who faces open roads and spaces. The open road is a familiar view in a country that is comfortable with a landscape of vast and uninhabited expanses. Being on the road could signify an exciting adventure. But unlike the cowboy, the tramp does not return home. He does not own

23 Minchan, Boys and Girl Tramps of America, xi-xii.
Dorothea Lange. "Migrant Worker on California Highway" (June 1935). Farm Security Administration Collection (FSA). Library of Congress

Dorothea Lange. "Next Time, Try the Train" (California. 1932). FSA. Library of Congress
land or cattle. He is also not invited to visit; he is trespassing, and there is always a question as to the ownership of the land. Freedom is that of the individual who wants to do as he pleases, and here poverty and freedom may not contradict each other.

Germany does not have open, seemingly public spaces, or the same sense of individual freedom. To be without residence would simply mean to be without a proper place. This is not only to be censured, but it is dangerous for the well being of the state itself.

In 1938, in Munich, the Bayrischer Landesverband für Wanderdienst (the Bavarian county federation of hikers) published a collection of studies on men “without residence,” “a contribution to the new development of space and human order in the larger German Reich.” 26 Wilhelm Polligkeit’s essay, “Die Haltung der Volksgemeinschaft gegenüber dem nichtseßhaften Menschen” [The Stand of the [German] Folk vis-à-vis Men without Proper Residence], is included there and describes a situation against which the whole German population was to protest:

“Malus homo qui in pago faciat et non habeat, ubi consistat, nec res unde componat et per silvas vadet/ Bad is the human being who lives in the land, but has nothing to live on, and work with, and just wanders through the woods.”

This sentence, which can be found in the Franconian ordinance of the sixth century, contains the Measure for the Evaluation of Men without Residence.²⁷

We learn that hiking, or simply wandering about in the woods, is a form of physical exercise that presupposes a return to a residence or house. Yet, the tramp only temporarily stays at a house and then returns to the road. His direction, his goal, is a very different one. He does not beg for bread to carry home; moreover, he is like Chaplin, without a home and in constant movement. Thus, the tramp becomes a double of the Wandering Jew.

Paradoxically, Hollywood has become not only the capital of the moving pictures, but also the residence of the people without a home.²⁸ Neal Gabler describes how Jewish immigrants to California invent their own empire there. California becomes a place that will not only invent a new identity for them


and document their desire for assimilation, but it will also be a new road in the shape of a movie strip. After WWI, Adolph Zukor offered Chaplin a million-dollar contract to work at his studios and then returned to his Eastern European place of birth to donate money and give presents to relatives and friends left behind. He brought movies as well, and some other Jewish film professionals did the same. These movies were greeted with great enthusiasm. For the Jews in the Eastern European shtetls, film was an entertainment for the poor, and one that could offer something familiar as well. Chaplin’s figure of the “Little Tramp” resonated with an already known figure in Yiddish literature: *dos kleine menschle*, the little man. In turn, the “Little Tramp” grew to become a frequent reference in Yiddish literature of the time. Already in 1916—just a couple of years after Chaplin’s invention of the figure of the tramp—a novella by Scholem Aleichem mentions Chaplin, as the characters wonder whether he was a Jew. For the audience in the shtetls Chaplin is no homeless tramp without work. Rather, he is the Little Man of Jewish wit. We also have to remember that what is now considered to be a brand of Jewish wit emerged only in the nineteenth century and in this Eastern European context. In Chaplin, the film audience of the shtel recognized itself.

The tramp became Chaplin and Chaplin became *dos kleine menschle*. In 1927, Ludwig Davishon published an article in the *Jüdisches Lexikon* confirming that Chaplin was a Jew. According to Davishon, Chaplin was born in 1889 as the son of an Eastern European family called Thonstein, who had immigrated to England in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1935, Leo Glassman referred to this information in his *Biographical Encyclopedia of American Jews* and added further details. According to Glassman, Charlie was the son of Charles and Hannah Thonstein. This information was in turn entered in the Hebrew *Entsiklopedia Kelalet*, published in Tel Aviv between 1935 and 1937; in this entry Chaplin’s mother’s name was hebraized as “Haya (Khaya).” In 1948, *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* suggested that “Chaplin” might have been a form of the Jewish name “Kaplan.”

30 Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, 41.
32 Halachmi, “È Della Stripe Dei Guidei/ And He is of the Seed of the Jews,” 164.
33 Ibid.
35 Halachmi, “È Della Stripe Dei Guidei/ And He is of the Seed of the Jews,” 164.
37 Ibid.
The rumor about Chaplin's Jewish origins persisted in non-Jewish circles as well. Chaplin himself confirmed, but also denied, his Jewishness at various times in various statements and interviews. The question seemed to be an open one. For the German National Socialists, however, Chaplin's figure and his peculiar walk were clear marks of his Jewish body image. In 1937, a still photograph from *The Kid* (1921) was included in the collection *Der Ewige Jude* [The Eternal Jew or Wandering Jew] with the headline: "Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Coogan." [III. 11] Different information about Chaplin was brought forward in the text attached to the photograph:

Charlie Chaplin, a Galician who emigrated to America (his mother was a born Thonstein) and the movie child Jackie Coogan (Jakob Cohen) who hails from the East, too, and belongs to Chaplin's following, have pressed hard on the tear glands of those harmless souls who were inspired by gross comical acting to feel sorry for their poverty, and laugh about it at the same time.

In 1940, Chaplin appeared in the film version of Der Ewige Jude. After the film was made, a comment was added describing how the Jew, Chaplin, was greeted enthusiastically during his visit in Berlin. 39

One of Chaplin's acquaintances forwarded him the antisemitic brochure Der Ewige Jude shortly after its publication, and it was this brochure that inspired Chaplin to consider a film comedy that would deal with the dictatorship of the Third Reich and its policies regarding Jews. For Chaplin, Hitler was a dark comedic figure who had copied his moustache; indeed, Chaplin spoke of Hitler's theft of his own image. 40

Chaplin transforms the figure of the tramp in his new movie. The tramp turns into a Jewish barber who returns to the ghetto after the war (presumably WWI). This barber loses his memory of the past and does not really understand the changed world. A dictator, Adenoid Hynkel, is in power, but soon the barber is mistaken for him. He then emboldens the inhabitants of the ghetto to fight against discrimination.

In 1941, Chaplin's film The Great Dictator had its premiere, and it was the first American film that openly dealt with the persecution of the Jews. 41 At the time, Chaplin lived with the actress Paulette Goddard, who also played his love interest in The Great Dictator; she had already been his partner in City Lights. Goddard's father was of Jewish descent. 42 At the time of the production and release of The Great Dictator, Chaplin decided not to deny his own Jewish background, even though it did not exist. Every denial, Chaplin explained, would "play into the hands of the anti-Semites." 43

The American FBI suspected Chaplin of communist leanings and kept a close eye on him until 1952, the year in which Chaplin left the United States for England. 44 The FBI had a secret file on Chaplin, which has meanwhile become public and available on the Internet. The code word for his FBI file was Israel Thonstein. 45 Thus, not only the curious last name remained, but the National Socialists' 1939 law concerning Jewish first names also lived on. 46

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39 Halachmi, "È Della Stripe Dei Guidi/ And He is of the Seed of the Jews," 167. The film Der Ewige Jude was directed by Fritz Hippler, book by Eberhard Taubert (1940). In regard to Chaplin's travel to Berlin, see also Wolfgang Gersch, Chaplin in Berlin: Illustrierte Miniatur nach Berliner Zeitungen von 1931 (Berlin: Argon, 1989).

40 See, for example, Chaplin, My Autobiography, 391, and compare Stratenwerth and Simon, Pioniere in Celluloid, 124.


43 Stratenwerth und Simon, Pioniere in Celluloid, S. 124.


45 See http://www.fadetoblack.com/foi/charliechaplin/.

46 According to a decree of August 17, 1938, women of Jewish descent had to assume the first name Sarah, and men the first name Israel, beginning January 1, 1939.
III. IMAGE AND VOICE

The propaganda film Der Ewige Jude refers to Chaplin's European tour in 1931. Sigmund Freud, one of Chaplin's admirers, reported in a letter: "In the last few days, Charlie Chaplin was in Vienna. I have almost had a chance to see him, but it was too cold for him, and he left the city in a hurry." At the Vienna railroad station, however, people were able to witness a historical moment. One of the reporters offered Chaplin a microphone—and Chaplin spoke. Chaplin's voice became audible for the first time and a presumed Thonstein could intone.

This was, indeed, a momentous event that changed people's perception of Chaplin as a solely silent figure, although he still insisted on remaining silent in his film career. In 1927, The Jazz Singer had its first screening. The film was very successful and assured the victory of sound in film. Only Chaplin continued to reject the new invention. For him, language and film contradicted each other. For Chaplin, film was related to the pantomime and not to theater in general. "I find the voice superfluous," Chaplin explained, the "voice destroys film just as painting destroys sculpture. And I would rather put rouge on marble cheeks. Cinema is the art of the pantomime. Otherwise, we could do with the stage. Nothing would be left to the imagination." Even in 1929, while sound has already begun to replace silent movies, Chaplin still insists: "Talkies? You can write that I hate them! They ruin one of the oldest arts in the world, the pantomime! They destroy the incomparable beauty of silence."

Chaplin only began to experiment with sound later in his career. City Lights has a musical score; the tramp sings, but he does not sing with any words that would make sense. In Modern Times, as a factory worker Chaplin receives his instructions from a loud voice audible via a microphone; however, the language is incomprehensible. In The Great Dictator, Hynkel gives a

48 Sigmund Freud, letter to Max Schiller, March 26, 1931; see Freud, Briefe 1873-1939, second edition, Ernst and Lucie Freud, eds. (Frankfurt/M: S. Fischer Verlag, 1968), 423.
50 The Jazz Singer was directed by Alan Crosland, 1927. See Donald Crafton, The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound 1926-1931 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) in regard to this film's success. The Jazz Singer earned about $3,000,000 for Warner Studios, see Patricia Erens, The Jew in American Cinema, 104.
51 Chaplin's remark in 1921 is cited in Cotes and Niklaus, The Little Fellow, 69.
52 Chaplin's 1929 interview with a motion picture reporter is cited in Cotes and Niklaus, The Little Fellow, 60.
53 Al Hirshfeld created the poster in 1940; interestingly, one of Hirshfeld's earliest sketches was a caricature of Jackie Coogan that was used in 1921 to advertise the film The Kid. "Garbo Talks!" was the advertisement for Greta Garbo's first speaking role in Eugene O'Neill's Anna Christie (1930), directed by Clarence Brown. The poster for that film described it as an "All Talking Picture."
nonsensical speech that is translated by the written language cards once used in silent movies. Only at the end of this film does Chaplin himself speak and ask his audience to resist dictatorship. Al Hirshfeld comments on this fact in his movie poster, which states, "He talks." This announcement follows a few years after the famous "Garbo Talks."53

But in talking, Chaplin has already left his figure of the tramp behind. The tramp himself cannot talk; at most, one screams at him. The tramp's speechlessness forms his secret non-articulate center of his persona, which Arendt would take up again in her essay in 1944. Arendt explains how, in articulating this tradition, in giving it his own voice, Chaplin turns into a Jewish figure par excellence. Arendt's argument about Chaplin's hidden Jewish tradition begins with a reference to language:

When it comes to claiming its own in the field of European arts and letters, the attitude of the Jewish people may best be described as one of reckless magnanimity. With a grand gesture and without a murmur of protest it has calmly allowed the credit for its great writers and artists to go to other peoples, itself receiving in return (in punctiliously regular payments) the doubtful privilege of being acclaimed father of every notorious swindler and mountebank. True enough, there has been a tendency in recent years to compile long lists of European worthies who might
conceivably claim Jewish descent, but such lists are more in the nature of mass-graves for the forgotten than of enduring monuments to the remembered and cherished. Useful as they may be for the purposes of propaganda (offensive as well as defensive), they have not succeeded in reclaiming for the Jews any single writer of note unless he happen to have written specifically in Hebrew or Yiddish. 54

Ironically, Arendt herself first pens these lines in German and then in English translation. She is astutely aware of her own linguistic shift. Switching from German to English—and unable to write in either Hebrew or Yiddish—Arendt becomes part of the group of authors she writes about. She is sensitive to the question of an author’s choice of tongue. Alongside Rahel Varnhagen—who achieved a great reputation because of her intelligent and spirited conversation, as well as the dialogues documented via letters—the silent Chaplin assumes the role of an outsider. His silence avoids language altogether. In his silence, he establishes himself as a conscious pariah who simultaneously remains close to the people:

In Chaplin the most unpopular people in the world inspired what was long the most popular of contemporary figures—not because he was a modern Merry Andrew, but because he presented the revival of a quality long thought to have been killed by a century of class conflict, namely, the entrancing charm of the little people. 55

As the tramp, Chaplin becomes the Jew—the little man who has to confront the real world, filled with ruses. These ruses are clever, but nevertheless innocent; they save him from troubles, but also turn him into a suspect. Arendt describes how Chaplin’s relationship to his surroundings makes him a suspect par excellence. But for Arendt, Chaplin’s tramp character does not remain a timeless one. He is transformed into one of the stateless refugees of the nineteen forties, a group in which Arendt would place herself in essays like “We Refugees.” 56 In his movies, as this little man Chaplin is always threatened by punishment and tries to evade the persecution of the law. While he is able to escape at times, he is mistaken for somebody else at other times and then punished for deeds that he did not do. His life, free and uncontrolled by society, seems paradoxically marked by fear at the same time. In his behavior, Arendt recognizes an exemplary boldness that no longer exists:

The divine effrontery of the poet who consorts with heavenly things and can therefore afford to thumb noses at earthly society. On the contrary, it is a worried, careworn impudence—the kind so familiar to generations of Jews, the effrontery of the poor “little Yid” who does not recognize the class order of the world because he sees in it neither order nor justice for himself. 57

55 Ibid, 286.
56 Ibid; see also Arendt, “We Refugees,” in: Arendt, The Jewish Writings, 264-274. This essay was published in 1943.
But Chaplin’s tramp does not prevail. His figure of the little man becomes real as a result of the seriousness of the economic depression. Arendt contends that the unemployment of the real little man in the forties and this reality, just as that of growing antisemitism, made Chaplin less popular than in previous decades.58

Moreover, Chaplin’s tramp may not be just any little man. In the German edition, Arendt speaks of the “innumerable Jewish folk stories” to which Chaplin’s figure relates.59 One can assume that Arendt does not view Chaplin simply as a Jew, but as an Eastern Jew. The popularity of the Jewish tales that she mentions allude to those by the Baal Shem Tov that were discovered by Martin Buber and then translated and recast for a pre-WWII German public.60 Indeed, For a German Jewish woman, these Eastern Jews are without language. But the inferior little man who can only fight back via a pantomime becomes, for Arendt, the universal “Little Man” of any country. Popular, close to the people, and international all at once, Chaplin becomes a pariah whose Jewishness she now suggests is self-evident. But this is not Chaplin’s full significance. Once the eternal Jew has turned into a political refugee and a “stateless” comedian, he can still transcend Jewishness.

In defining Chaplin’s tramp as a suspect Jew, Arendt enters this character into Jewish tradition. For Arendt, this tradition generally failed precisely because of the neglect or denial of political rebels. Chaplin appears to be Jewish, he becomes the symbol of a conscious pariah, and he can create a space in which Jews and other non-privileged people can meet. Arendt writes, “It was in this ‘little Yid’…poor in worldly goods but rich in human experience, that the little man of all peoples most clearly discerned his own Image.”61 Arendt deplores the fact that the Jewish people did not include poets of non-Jewish languages in their historical writing and turned them into a “present” for other peoples instead. As such, she now offers the figure of Chaplin as her own gift to Jewish tradition: Not a Jew who is a human being, but the human being who, as a pariah, becomes a Jew.

58 Ibid.
60 See also the dissertation by Violet Lutz, "Romancing the Ball Shem Tov: Martin Buber’s Appropriation of Hasidism in the two early Hasidic books, Die Geschichte des Rabbi Nachman (1906) and Die Legende des Baalschem (1908), University of Pennsylvania, 2006.