Episode 24 - A Romanian Jew in Hollywood

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast and this is episode 24, where we'll be reviewing the life of Eduard G. Robinson, the first Romanian-born Jew to make it in Hollywood. The G. in his name signifies his original last name, Goldenberg.

By-the-way, you just listened to a scene from the 1931 movie "Little Ceasar**"** in which Eduard G. Robinson plays Rico, aka Little Ceasar. A link to the full video is provided in the Notes.

Edward G. Robinson's family, whose history went back about two hundred years, was a typical Romanian Jewish family living in Bucharest near the turn of the 20th century; they belonged to the small bourgeoisie and were somewhat assimilated into the Romanian culture, although they still retained some of their Jewish traditions, including the Yiddish language. Edward G. Robinson's parents, Morris and Sarah Goldenberg, had already had four sons when another boy, baptized Emmanuel, was born on December 12, 1893; he would eventually be the second youngest son.
The Goldenbergs, who were "urbanized but far from emancipated", lived in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood "where Jews were assigned to live, "1 in a "traditional Jewish home". The family placed great value on the children's upbringing, arranging for them to receive a religious education, as well as language lessons in Hebrew, Yiddish, Romanian and German. The family were also frequent spectators of the theatre performances staged by the Bucharest Jewish Theatre, a place where many talented actors started their career.

Morris Goldenberg made the decision to leave Romania and emigrate to America, where he hoped that his family would find a better life. The Goldenbergs did not travel all together: first, the father and the oldest three sons left, followed by Sarah and the three younger children, who made their way to Vienna via a kind of "underground railroad" aiding Jews to reach the western European embarkation port of Le Havre. Thus, Emmanuel Goldenberg finally arrived in New York in 1903, at the age of 10. As he confessed in his autobiography, "My mother may have given birth in Romania, but I was born the day I set foot on American soil". The Goldenbergs settled in on Broome Street , in the overcrowded, predominantly Jewish Lower East Side, where the younger boys – including Emmanuel – started school. The young boy knew no English at the time, but he found it quite easy to learn the new language, as he had an obvious talent for it. Interestingly enough, Emmanuel (or Manny, as his family called him), went to the same high school later attended by George Gershwin and Manny's own cousin – another iconic gangster figure, who first portrayed Scarface on film – Paul Muni.
He has his Bar Mitzvah at the First Roumanian- American congregation synagogue in New York and attended Townsend Harris High School and then the City College of New York.

Initially, Emmanuel wanted to become a rabbi and started training in this sense, but soon enough, discovering the calling of the stage by acting in high school plays, abandoned the religious path and focused on becoming an actor, hoping to be starring on Broadway one day. The interest in acting led to him winning an Academy of Dramatic Arts scholarship after which he changed his name from Emmanuel Goldenberg to Edward G. Robinson.

Edward Robinson got his start in Yiddish theater. Robinson appeared in one time in a Yiddish play, "Number 37" by Moshe Schorr, which opened at the West End Theatre, then was located at 368 W. 125th St., in West Harlem, in NYC. The play opened on March 10, 1913, when he was nineteen years old and starred Rudolph Schildkraut, Mae Simon and Gustav and Emma Schacht. Robinson acted in the play, but he did so under the name "Edward Golden."

His dream would come true in 1915, when Emmanuel, who had by now changed his name to Edward G. Robinson, in an attempt to make it sound more American and minimize his immigrant heritage – a trait characteristic for many new immigrants who were trying to “blend” into American society, made his Broadway debut. His very successful gangster role in the crime drama “The Racket” brought him to the attention of Hollywood producers, who saw his potential and hoped that his stage persona would translate well to the silver screen. The industry was in the midst of making the transition from the silent films to the talkies and Robinson apparently had all the qualities to successfully negotiate this change, unlike other actors, whose careers were killed by the advent of sound.

Capitalizing on the success of “The Racket”, in 1931 Robinson was cast in the role of the ruthless Caesar Enrico Bandello in Warner Brothers’ Little Caesar, one of the very first and most iconic portrayals of the gangster in the American cinema. It can be argued that this part helped create many stereotypes associated with the gangster hero stereotypes exploited by the studios that kept casting Robinson in similar roles throughout the 1930s, relying on the public’s familiarity with his mobster persona: Five Star Final (1931), Smart Money (1931; his only movie with James Cagney), Tiger Shark (1932), Kid Galahad (1937) with Bette Davis and Humphrey Bogart, and A Slight Case of Murder and The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse (1938). In the 1940s, after a good performance in Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet (1940), he expanded into edgy psychological dramas including Double Indemnity (1944), The Woman in the Window (1945) and Scarlet Street (1945). Probably the best-known spin-off role based on the character played by Robinson in Little Caesar is John Houston’s 1948 Key Largo, where he was cast opposite Humphrey Bogart. In this film, Robinson played an aging Little Caesar figure, the gangster Rocco (seemingly based on the real-life mobster Lucky Luciano), who wanted to return to America from deportation to start his old ways again; his nemesis was war veteran McCloud (Bogart), who thwarted his efforts. However, the message of the film was that the gangster’s own hubris brought about his downfall.

During the late 1930s, Robinson – partly because of his Jewish origins – became an outspoken critic of fascism and Nazism, donating more than a quarter of a million dollars to various anti-Nazi political groups between 1939 and 1949 and hosting the 1938 meeting of the Committee of 56 (made up of various figures from the film industry) who signed a “Declaration of Democratic Independence” calling for a boycott of all German-made products. He even starred in Warner Brothers’ 1939 Confessions of a Nazi Spy, the first American film that presented the threat posed by Nazism to the United States. The release of this film that outspokenly denounces Nazi ideology is all the more remarkable considering that the Production Code made it almost impossible to release films criticizing foreign powers. Here, Robinson played an FBI agent who investigates a spy network in the US that was stealing

military secrets and selling them to Germany; the film employs a semi-documentary style that blends together voice-over narration and authentic footage of Nazi rallies in Germany. Robinson also played a Jewish scientist in the 1940 production of Dr. Erlich's Magic Bullet – the first role in which he was required to portray an explicitly Jewish character. The second Jewish character he played was Paul Julius Reuter in A Dispatch from Reuters (1941).

He married his first wife, the stage actress Gladys Lloyd, in 1927; born Gladys Lloyd Cassell, she was the former wife of Ralph L. Vestervelt and the daughter of Clement C. Cassell, an architect, sculptor, and artist. The couple had one son, Edward Goldenberg Robinson, Jr. (aka Manny Robinson, 1933-1974), as well as a daughter from Gladys Robinson's first marriage. Robinson lived his young adult life in the Bronx.

As Robinson spoke seven languages besides English, including Yiddish, Romanian and German, he used at least six of them to deliver anti-Nazi speeches from London during the Second World War. Robinson was the first movie star to entertain the troops in Normandy, crossing the channel less than a month after the invasion.

Starting with the mid-1940s, Robinson began to move away from playing the kinds of roles that had made him famous and approached some very different characters in a series of films that would later come to be known as film noirs. His supporting role as claims insurance agent Barton Keyes in Billy Wilder's 1944 Double Indemnity revived his career and proved that he was capable of creating diverse and challenging roles; in contrast to his earlier, tough-guy parts, the characters Robinson played in film noirs were sensitive, vulnerable, and thoughtful. In his autobiography, Robinson confessed that he did not readily accept the part Wilder offered him in Double Indemnity, primarily because it was a supporting role; however, after thinking about this offer for a while, he understood that "at my age it was time to begin thinking of character roles, to slide into middle and old age… I was never the handsome leading man; I could proceed with my career growing older in roles that would grow older, too". In a very fortunate way, this role paved the way for some of his best-known parts: Professor Richard Wanley in The Woman in the Window and Christopher Cross in Scarlet Street, both of whom are middle-aged men faced with their own mortality. The list of Robinson's film noirs includes, besides these three undisputed classics, Night Has a Thousand Eyes (1948), House of Strangers (1949), The Stranger (1946), Vice Squad (1953), Illegal (1955), Nightmare (1956) and the sci-fi neo-noir Soylent Green, his very last film made in 1973.

In the early 1950s, just as his career was taking off again, Robinson came under scrutiny by the House Un-American Activities Committee; he was called to testify before this body three times in 1950 and 1952, after the notoriously racist congressman John Rankin accused him, alongside other Jewish actors, of being a communist sympathizer. Robinson was threatened with blacklisting. He refused to give the names of other communist supporters and took steps to clear his name by allowing an accountant to verify his checkbooks and prove that no funds had been sent to subversive organizations. His reputation was eventually rehabilitated, but his career suffered in the aftermath of this infamous affair, as he started being offered minor and less frequent roles.

His career was revived in 1954, when legendary director Cecil B. DeMille cast him as the villainous Dathan in his grandiose biblical epic The Ten Commandments. In the late 1950s, Robinson started accepting roles in television films and virtually stopped appearing on the big screen.
After DeMille brought Robinson back into movies, his most notable roles were in A Hole in the Head (1959) opposite Frank Sinatra and The Cincinnati Kid (1965), which showcased Robinson alongside Steve McQueen. Director Peter Bogdanovich was considered as a possible director for The Godfather in 1972, but turned it down, later remarking that he would have cast Robinson in the role ultimately played by Marlon Brando. Robinson indeed tried to talk his way into the part (which was how he had won the role of Little Caesar 40 years earlier), but Francis Coppola decided on Brando instead, over the initial objections of the studio.

Robinson was never nominated for an Academy Award, but in 1973 he was awarded an honorary Oscar in recognition that he had "achieved greatness as a player, a patron of the arts, and a dedicated citizen, in sum, “a Renaissance man". He died from cancer at the age of 79, two months before the award ceremony. Edward G. Robinson is buried in a crypt in the family mausoleum at Beth-El Cemetery in Ridgewood, New York.

Despite unfounded accusations of communism, Robinson remained a liberal democrat and a political activist all his life, even attending the Democrat Party Convention in Los Angeles in 1962.

Robinson was always proud of his Jewish identity and maintained strong connections with the Jewish community in Los Angeles and in his beloved State of Israel.

In his half a century-long career, Edward G. Robinson completed 101 films belonging to a wide variety of genres; his very diverse roles bear witness to his tremendous artistic potential and to his remarkable acting skills, as well as to the dedication with which this Romanian Jew served the American public and the noble art of cinema.

On the screen Edward G. Robinson was the cocky, ebullient tough guy. He was Little Caesar, the quintessential gangster success and failure story. Robinson had defined for the huge Great Depression moviegoing audience the idea of the snarling, immigrant anti-hero – a vicious and repentant underdog going down in a hail of bullets.
In contrast to his many tough-guy roles, the real Robinson was a sensitive, soft-spoken and cultured man, who spoke seven languages and possessed a vast and valuable art collection – a passion he had inherited from his father. Edward G. Robinson was famously a very shrewd and passionate art collector. By the time of his death, Robinson had amassed what was widely considered one of the greatest collections of French Impressionist paintings. He started purchasing art in the 1930s. In the 1940s, he built his own art gallery to house a growing collection. By 1953, his collection included works by Renoir, Cezanne, Degas, Picasso, Gauguin, Matisse and Van Gogh. Robinson reportedly went into debt to finance his art collection. He also sold half the collection to Greek shipping tycoon Stavros Niarchos in order to raise cash for his

divorce settlement with Gladys Robinson in a 1956 divorce, though he was eventually able to buy many of his paintings back. “I have never owned a work of art,” he said. “They owned me.”

Among Robinson’s fellow Warner Brothers stars, Humphrey Bogart has long held the title of coolest— tough as Spade and Marlowe, romantic opposite Bergman and Bacall. James Cagney has been celebrated for being a gangster and a hoofer, the Public Enemy and Yankee Doodle Dandy been the darling of the left. Author J. Hoberman once dubbed John Garfield as the Jewish Brando. Robert Sklar honored all three of these men when he surveyed their careers in his book *City Boys* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). In his own time, Robinson watched as Paul Muni was celebrated as the most versatile actor in town, not just on the Warners lot. Muni was remarkably successful at transforming himself, through makeup and accent, into an array of historical figures—Louis Pasteur, Emile Zola, and Benito Juarez, to name the most obvious.

This concludes this short episode on Edward G. Robinson; I hope you enjoyed it.
Until next podcast episode, be well.