

## **"Eddie Cantor Fights the Nazis"**

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During the 1930s, Eddie Cantor was one of the most successful performers in the country and one of America's best-known Jewish figures. He co-authored best-selling books, starred in popular movies, sold out theatrical houses nationwide, and helmed a weekly radio variety show that, at its height in the early 1930s, attracted more listeners than any other program.

Jewish celebrities usually did not draw attention to their religious background. In addition, while the 1930s saw workers in the film and radio industries becoming more politically active, most celebrities of Cantor's stature did not take controversial political stands. However, Cantor was strikingly proud of his Jewish identity and he expressed this pride through his politically courageous work fighting antisemitism. Cantor risked his career by leading fund-raising drives for Jewish causes and serving as one of the nation's most prominent critics of fascism. My paper will examine Eddie Cantor's response to the growing fascist movements in the United States and Germany.

One of the issues that my paper will explore is the way radio performers tailored their political content to fit different broadcast and non-broadcast venues. Cantor starred in a popular, weekly, comedy-variety show. Networks, sponsors, critical listeners, and government regulators carefully monitored prime-time comedy programs for political content. On his weekly shows, Cantor made only the occasional, carefully worded comment or statement about the dangers of bellicose "dictators in foreign lands." Cantor did not name specific individuals or even countries that might pose a threat to American freedom, democracy, and peace.

Cantor reserved his strongest fire for press interviews and fund-raising appeals delivered to Jewish organizations away from his primetime program. Several of these talks were covered by the country's daily newspapers and broadcast nationally as a public service on CBS or NBC. This work began with a March 1936 fund-raising speech for Youth Aliyah, an organization that facilitated emigration of people under age eighteen from Europe to Palestine, Cantor presciently described the dire situation in Germany and urged listeners to support the international movement to stop Nazism and antisemitism.

Cantor continued to sound these themes throughout the 1930s, making passionate and specific statements about fascistic and antisemitic threats in the United States and Germany. After Henry Ford accepted a medal from Germany in 1938, Cantor questioned Ford's patriotism and called Ford a "damned fool." In 1939, speaking at the World's Fair's Temple of Religion pavilion, Cantor implied that leading industrialists were bankrolling prominent antisemites such as Father Charles Coughlin and Senator Robert Rice Reynolds of North Carolina. Cantor paid a price for his outspokenness. Shortly after he delivered this speech, Cantor was effectively blacklisted. He lost his radio sponsorship and was taken off the air because of his off air political activity, missing the entire 1939-1940 radio season. It was only with the help of his friend Jack Benny and growing public

acceptance of Cantor's anti-Nazi politics that Cantor returned to the air with a new sponsor, after nearly fifteen months, in October 1940.

My paper will analyze the challenges and limitations that even the most successful celebrities faced in assuming the conflicting political, ethical, and professional responsibilities of American Jewish identity during the 1930s. Cantor was a Jewish, anti-fascist celebrity. However, these labels of "Jewish," "anti-fascist," and "celebrity" defied easy classification and did not offer clear roadmaps for action. For example, the American Jewish community was divided on the question of how openly and directly Jews should speak against anti-Semitism in the United States and Europe. The anti-fascist left had many splits: isolationist versus interventionist; communist versus non-communist; Jewish versus non-Jewish. Radio celebrities had to follow network and sponsor rules, explicit and implicit, regarding politics, comedy, Jewish performance, and the ways in which stars should conduct themselves on and off the air. Cantor's attempts to navigate these structures and tensions, and to choose the affiliations and actions that best advanced his values, illustrate broader historical themes about the possibilities and limitations of activism for radio celebrities reacting to the horrible crisis facing Jews internationally during the 1930s.

My presentation will incorporate audio clips from broadcasts by Cantor and President Franklin Roosevelt.

As I have prepared this paper, I have been in contact with Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (Georgia State University), a colleague who is submitting a conference paper proposal on Jack Benny and Rochester. Kathryn and I are both looking at the construction of American radio star personas and the radio industry during the 1930s in the context of broader political and social issues. You may wish to consider putting us on a panel together. Thank you.

Please note: I also submitted a proposal to present a workshop about NEH grants at the WCFTR "On, Archives!" conference. The proposed Cantor paper is part of a larger biography on Cantor that I am writing independent of NEH.

**David Weinstein** is senior program officer in the Division of Public Programs at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in Washington, DC. He joined the NEH in June 2000 after teaching at George Mason University and the University of Maryland College Park. He is the author of *The Forgotten Network: DuMont and the Birth of American Television* (Temple University Press, 2004) and several scholarly articles on cultural history.