Box 1, Folder 3, "Blueprint to Broadcast: The Eternal Light", 1949.
BLUEPRINT TO BROADCAST: THE ETERNAL LIGHT

By Marc H. 'anenbaum

Some six million people across the land — among them, Jews, Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Negroes, university professors, telephone operators, ministers, baby-sitters, taxi-drivers — will celebrate a birthday next October 8.

All over the country, from Maine to California, they will mark the fifth anniversary of the Eternal Light radio program which, since 1944, has been broadcast every Sunday over the National Broadcasting Company network under the auspices of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. When this impressive American family, joined together once every week around the loudspeakers of 92 NBC station-outlets, pauses to commemorate five years of Eternal Light broadcasting, it will, in effect, be paying tribute to an idea and its effective fulfillment.

The "idea", as crystallized by the Eternal Light's Program Editor, Dr. Moshe Davis, is the simple formula he put forward in 1945:

"We do not come to sell soap or toothpowder or automobiles or creed, dogma, or religious denomination. We come to teach humanity to man, morality to society, peace to the world."

The moral and educational force which the broadcast has come to exert increasingly since its early experimental days, is reflected clearly in the components of this "idea" — which have been the spine of every Eternal Light script:

"...to extol those who sanctify God's name; to emphasize the sanctity of the human personality; to demonstrate the fundamental character of the democratic impulse in the good society; to define the
place of Palestine in Jewish religious aspiration; to introduce, elucidate, and interpret Jewish ritual, ceremonial, and folk-lore."

How effective the Eternal Light "idea" has been, can be gauged in many ways. It can be measured in terms of the seven national awards received since the program's birth, all in recognition of its "excellence in religious broadcasting". As a public education and entertainment medium, its effectiveness can be evaluated by its mounting acclaim from people like Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, Rev. Everett C. Parker (chairman, joint radio committee of the Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches in the United States); and from such radio experts as Variety magazine; John Gould, radio editor, THE NEW YORK TIMES; John Crosby, radio editor, THE NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE; and the Radio-Television Critics Circle of New York, among others.

Further, its success in widening the "democratic impulse" and in interpreting Jewish values can be appreciated from its ever-increasing international influence, through Eternal Light broadcasts in Canada, Palestine, Germany, through contacts maintained with Australia, South Africa, Mexico, South America, China, and Japan.

A perhaps more academic, but not less significant barometer of the program's widespread and profound value is the influence wrought upon education and church groups, Zionist and dramatic movements which week after week turn to the Eternal Light scripts for the clearest and most positive statement of what is the Jewish past, and the meaning of contemporary Jewish life.

But valued as are all these indications of the program's success, probably the most cherished measuring rod is the response of the Eternal Light family, the six million listeners.
In effect, the 800 to 1,000 letters which every week swell the Eternal Light's mailboxes tell, almost as dramatically as the scripts themselves, the massive effectiveness of the "idea".

The Jews steeped in their faith, the letters say, the Eternal Light's presentations. Jews wandered from their faith, reestablish contact with Judaism through the Eternal Light's responses. For non-Jewish listeners, the Eternal Light has become the spokesman for the Jewish people, making intelligent the unintelligent, revealing the false and malicious - but, above all, always stressing the positive, the common heritage, the democracy inherent in religious thinking.

Some of the letters are crisp and businesslike, such as those requesting scripts, or asking where Hebrew can be studied, or inquiring how one produce an Eternal Light pageant in South Africa or Asia. Some letters are simple and touching, such as that from a Jewish listener:

"I wonder if you realize how much your programs, the Eternal Light, do for Jewish morale? It brings new meaning to democracy when we hear our Jewish ideals dramatized in a Jewish way as freely as other people's. I am so grateful and thrilled."

From somewhere in Illinois, another listener wrote: "We are an average Jewish family with no religious connections; all we remember is what memories we have of our fathers and mothers. After listening to these programs, we have resolved to be better Jews if we possibly can..."

Non-Jewish listeners have been no less explicit in declaring what the Eternal Light has meant to them. "I am not of your faith," wrote one, "but I am most anxious for harmony and love among all faiths."
and races, and I think your program is a major contribution to that end. The program has always had the quality of reverence and gentleness which is common among all men of good will."

A perceptive example of the program's universal appeal was found in this letter from a non-Jewish listener: "Sometime ago I visited a house of some Italians. The mother, a widow, born in Italy, is a very devout Catholic. Lack of opportunity prevented her from learning how to read and write. She was very intent on the hour and kept asking whether it was twelve thirty as there was a program she wanted to listen to and always listened to. This was my introduction to your hour."

Probably the best testament of the abiding worth of the broadcast's "idea" was its ready acceptance in countries outside America. When Israel Blumenfeld, veteran of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and editor of a magazine published by the liberated Jews of Germany, first considered introducing "Das Ewige Lichte Programme" to a German public, he fretted. Jewish displaced persons had been out of touch with Jewish life for more than six years. The German populace had just emerged from a nightmare of anti-Jewish hatred. To present a program such as the Eternal Light, with its constant emphasis on positive Jewish life and creativity, seemed foolhardy.

Yet, in 1946, when Blumenfeld and a group of survivors from the concentration camps, produced their first "Ewige Lichte" program - the story of the German-Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn - they were stunned by the response: 15,000 letters from German non-Jews as well as Jews. Thereafter, "Das Ewige Lichte" was heard over Radio Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Bremen, and Cologne.

The aim of "Das Ewige Lichte", as Blumenfeld sees it, is to infuse Jewish cultural content into the lives of the liberated Jews
in Germany; and to help in salvaging good-will and tolerance among German religious groups. Whether

How does one account for the demonstrable success of the Eternal Light during these five years? First, the pungent and striking themes covering virtually every stripe of the Jewish spectrum have wielded a magnetic attraction on the imaginations of millions of radio listeners. Secondly, a sparkling new "team-concept", first generated by the President of the Jewish Theological Seminary, opened new vistas for Jewish creative outpouring.

When the Eternal Light took timidly put its foot forward on October 8, 1944, it set then the broad-pattern of future programming. Beginning with great moments in 3,000 years of synagogue history, the first series was built around 13 historic synagogues, from Touro in Newport, Rhode Island, to the crumbling synagogue of Chinese Jews in Kai-Fe-Fung ( ). Then the pattern broadened with a series on the "Builders of Judaism", dramatizations of the lives and lessons of Supreme Court Justice Brandeis, Poetess Emma Lazarus, Folklorist Sholem Aleichim, Humanitarian Henrietta Szold, Martyr Rabbi Akiba, among others. Thereafter, came "Stories of a People", based on writings with Jewish settings and personalities. Classics such as Thomas Mann's "Joseph", Jean Racine's "Athalie", and Leonid Andreyev's "Samson in Chains" were presented.

On the first anniversary of the broadcast, a new series was begun. Called "Ramparts of an Ancient Faith", this series was highlighted by the dramatic account of Solomon Schechter's searching out the treasures of the Genizah in Cairo.

When the tragedy of European Jewry burst upon the world, the Eternal Light rendered immemorial the heroic resistance of the Jewish
people against Nazism. In the script, "The Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto", the writer, Morton Wishengrad, tried, as he said, "to capture the tragedy of the most heroic resistance in Jewish history since the Maccabees and to precipitate from it a concentrate of ethical indignation and exaltation". In two years, NBC presented this script three times. Armed Forces Radio broadcast it to troops overseas. It has been performed all over the world - in Palestine, in DP camps, in hundreds of American schools and universities.

Most popular of the Eternal Light programs has been "The Song of Berditchev", which blended the tender story of Reb Levi Yitchok of Berditchev with stirring Hassidic melodies. During the week following the broadcast, 1153 letters poured in; subsequently, there were 1800 requests for scripts, a large demand for recordings.

Contemporary developments - the independence of Israel, United Nations week, Civil Rights legislation, the passing of an international law outlawing genocide, DP immigration here and abroad - whatever has touched the human predicament, has come within the dramatic purview of the Eternal Light, was seen and reflected upon through the steady eyes of Jewish tradition. This - the spectral drawing from today, yesterday, even tomorrow, from folklore, from Bible, from present-day literature and music - has made for the magnetic attraction to the "idea" of the Eternal Light.

The "team concept", which is the second factor accounting for the Eternal Light's effectiveness, was stated by Dr. Finklestein in a few words: "There may emerge from cooperation and mutual understanding between the discoverer of truths (the scholar) and the creator of works of beauty (the artist) a new phenomenon in
civilization, the team of scholar-artist. In simple fact, that is the story of the Eternal Light.

When an Eternal Light production goes on the air at 12:30 on Sundays, it is the maximal work of the "scholar-artist team." Heading the entire team is Dr. Moshe Davis, Program Editor who is also Dean of the Teachers' Institute and Seminary College for Jewish Studies. The team works in this fashion:

An idea, found in a newspaper clipping, a footnote, a book, or an ancient tale, a song, is suggested by either Dr. Davis, a writer, a faculty member, or a research assistant. The idea is threshed out between the program editor and one of the team of writers, which now includes, Morton Wishengrad, who has been with the program since its inception producing nearly 150 scripts, Peter Lyon, Irve Tunick, Sylvia Berger, Alan Marcus, and Ernest Kinoy.

To lend flesh to the idea, the writer either consults a Seminary faculty member for background; or he and his research assistant refer to the Seminary library where one of the largest collections of Hebrew books are found; or he uses the files of national organizations; or he interviews friends and relatives of a famous personality about whom a script is being done.

When research is over, and when the script is written, Morris Mamorsky composes the original music which lends the broadcasts the fresh, authentic stamp for which they have become known. Mamorsky, who was awarded the 1939 Paderewski Fund Prize for an original piano concerto, arranged the liturgical introduction to the Eternal Light series, the lilting Palestinian folk song, Shomair Hasefer.

Then the music goes to the NBC studio where Milton Katims,
one of America's leading musicians, runs through the score with
25 members of the NBC Symphony Orchestra.

The climax of team-work is then under way. Frank Papp, 
director of the Eternal Light broadcasts, selects his casts from 
a distinguished group of radio actors, runs through three rehearsals 
preliminary to the final rehearsal on Sunday morning, 
before the broadcast. During these rehearsals, liturgical introductions 
by the noted cantors David Putterman or Robert Siegel, the acting, 
the music, the sound effects are all trimmed and trestled into the 
composite and finished work which marks each broadcast.

A similar pattern of "team work" was followed when the 
Eternal Light originated a series of seven broadcasts from Hollywood 
last summer, under the auspices of the West Coast Branch of the Seminary 
With the distinguished scripts prepared by Mr. Wishengrad, the series 
won added distinction through the performances of such movie-world 
 luminaries as Melvyn Douglas, Edward G. Robinson, Joseph Cotten, Lew 
Ayres, John Beal, and Sam Jaffe. Previously, such prominent members 
of the acting profession as Raymond Massey, Margaret Webster, Aline 
McMahon, and Jane Cowl had participated in Eternal Light series in 
New York.

The concept of "scholar-artist" team became all the more 
clear during the summer just past when a new departure was marked 
in Eternal Light programming. In a panel series known as "The Words 
We Live By", significant passages from the Bible were analyzed 
by a distinguished group of thinkers. With Dr. Judah Goldin of the 
University of Iowa, as moderator, the regular participants were 
Marvin Lowenthal and Marie Syrkin. Among the guest participants were 
Ben Grauer, Raymond Massey, Irving Fineman, and others.
In entering its fifth year of broadcasting, the Eternal Light will commemorate its half-decade anniversary by rebroadcasting thirteen of its most popular programs. Beginning in the fall, these will be chosen by a nationwide poll, and will thus be representative of the overwhelming choice of the Eternal Light listening family.

On reaching this crucial turning point in its development, the team of "scholar-artist" behind the Eternal Light show an increased sense of responsibility to its vast and growing audience, an audience which looks to it for expression of Jewish aspiration today, for a throbbing statement of the Jewish cultural past, for an affirmation of the universal principles of brotherhood and justice.

Looking back over the past five years, one feels confident that the "idea" will continue to grow and enrich on whatever soil it strikes. For when the "idea" was first planted, on that Sunday, October 8, in 1944, Morton Wishengrad then confided that it was "probably as nervous an innovation as any in radio. There were many things against it," he said. "It had to overcome the entertainment's industry's prejudice against religious drama. It had to overcome religion's uncertainty about radio -- it had to build an audience not only in New York but in places like Bozeman, Montana, and Jackson, Mississippi. The prospects seemed dubious."

Now, on its fifth anniversary, the ever-growing family of the Eternal Light thinks "dubious" is hardly the word. (The innovation was hardly "dubious".)