English

JEWISHWOOD

THE JEWISH CONTRIBUTION TO THE BIRTH OF HOLLYWOOD



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PATRONAT CALL DE GIRONA

In partnership with:

Museu del Cinema
Col·lecció Tomàs Mallol

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Jewishwood. The Jewish contribution to the birth of Hollywood

An exhibition by the Museum of Jewish History in partnership with the Museum of Cinema-Tomàs Mallol Collection

Jewishwood. The Jewish contribution to the birth of Hollywood

The fathers of Hollywood's industrial production system were the sons of Jewish families from Central and Eastern Europe. At the end of the 19th century, many Jewish emigrants from Central and Eastern Europe arrived in the United States. Some were fleeing pogroms and discrimination, while others were escaping poverty in search of a new way of life.

The pioneers of the world's largest entertainment industry were Ashkenazi Jews who initially struggled to make a living after arriving in New York. Before entering the film industry, they pursued various other professions. Both Carl Laemmle and William Fox worked in the garment industry, while Marcus Loew ran a penny arcade business. Meanwhile, the Warner brothers were bicycle repairmen, and Adolph Zukor was a fur merchant. Years later, they entered the film exhibition business and went on to establish Hollywood's great industry, bringing the spectacular entertainment stories that audiences demanded to the big screen.

Their meteoric rise is a shining example of the American Dream. Indeed, it adds to the mythology of a dream that they themselves helped to popularise through their films.



The Beginnings of the Industry: Edison and the Nickelodeons

Thomas Alva Edison played a key role in enabling the Jewish pioneers of the major studios to create Hollywood. He invented the Kinetoscope, a device for individual viewing, along with a network of parlours equipped with the machines (Kinetoscope Parlours). When the Lumière brothers unveiled their Cinématographe, Edison recognised the commercial potential of projecting films for audiences. He adapted their invention and patented the Vitascope, his own cinematograph. Public screenings soon spread across the country.

At first, public film screenings were fairground attractions, but their success led to the creation of the nickelodeons, the first indoor exhibition spaces devoted to projecting motion pictures. The name came from “nickel” (the five-cent coin, which was the price of admission) and “Odeon” (theatre). The first establishment was opened by entrepreneur John Harris in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Pioneering business people saw a real opportunity in these establishments, partnering with film industry entrepreneurs to roll them out across the country. Housed in grand venues and offering affordable admission prices, the nickelodeons were aimed at a working-class audience.

At first, European films supplied by small New York-based producers were shown at nickelodeons. However, their owners soon realised that if they produced the films themselves, their profit margins would be higher. Their goal was to control film exhibition, distribution and production, but achieving it would not prove easy, since Thomas Alva Edison held a monopoly through his corporate trust.

The trust and the patent war

In 1908, Edison led a new corporate trust, the Motion Picture Patents Company, a group of companies that joined forces to monopolise the film industry, controlling cameras, films, distribution and most of the cinemas. The trust required all producers, distributors and exhibitors to pay for a patent licence. Some refused to comply and challenged the monopoly – these were the so-called Independents, the Jewish producers who would go on to found Hollywood.

The first producer to challenge the trust in court was Carl Laemmle, in 1908. He also spearheaded other business initiatives to counter Edison's aggressive tactics. Laemmle and the other Independents went about expanding the nickelodeon network, growing it to around 20,000 establishments across the country. He also launched a bold move to steal two of Edison's biggest stars: Florence Lawrence and Mary Pickford. Laemmle himself created a marketing department to promote this new







star system. In an unprecedented campaign, he faked Lawrence's death, only to have her later appear at promotional events, thus maximising public impact.

These actions made the trust even more aggressive, resorting to the use of violent tactics against the competition. The Independents realised that the best way to escape the monopoly's stranglehold was to up sticks and re-establish their business 4,000 kilometres away, in the city of Los Angeles, far from the trust's sphere of influence.

Jewishwood

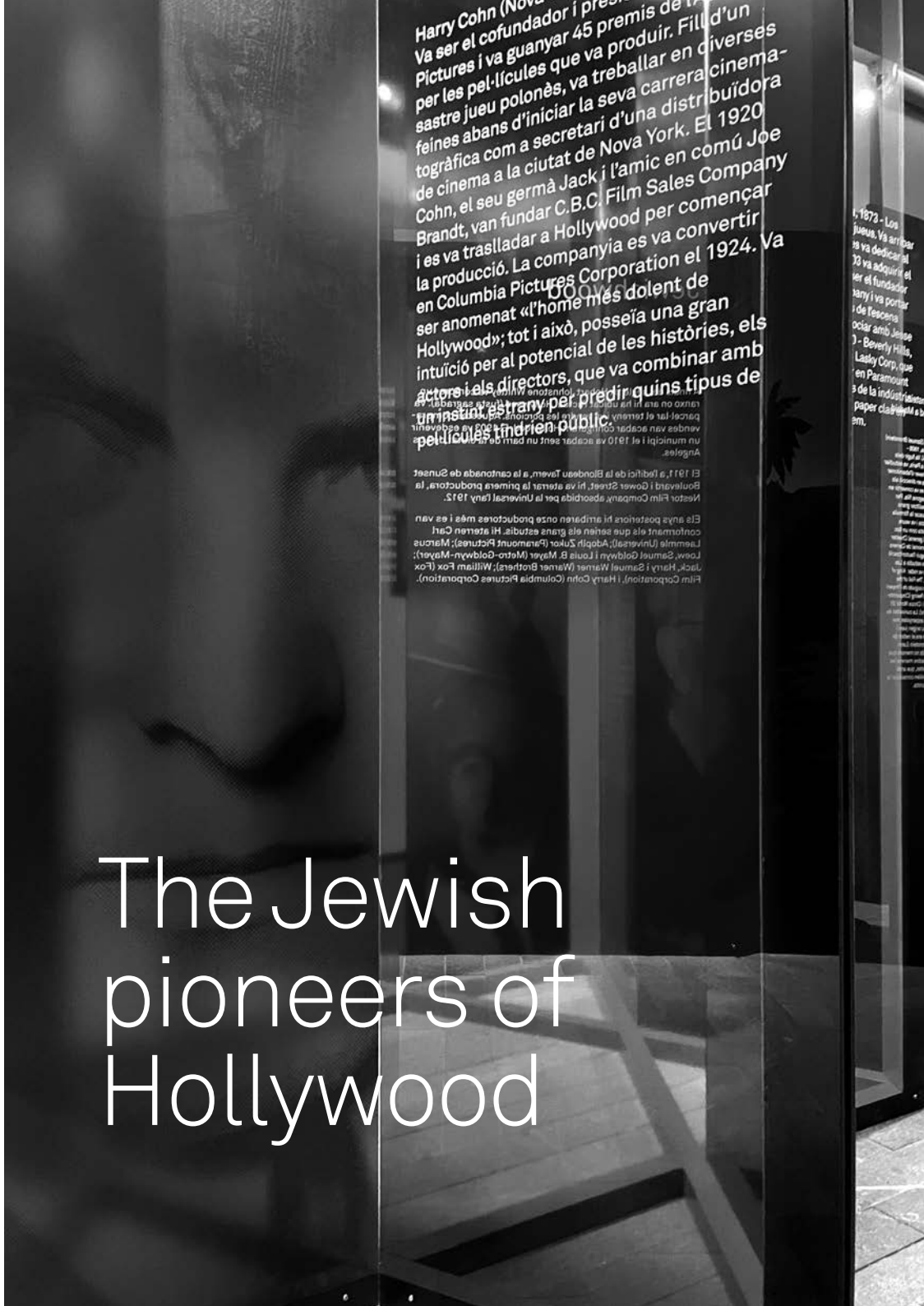
At the end of the 19th century, Hobart Johnstone Whitley bought a ranch where the present-day Hollywood is located. He divided the land into plots and sold them off. These transactions ultimately shaped modern Hollywood. It was incorporated as a municipality in 1903 and in 1910 it merged with Los Angeles to become a district of the city.

In 1911, the first production company, the Nestor Film Company, set up shop in the Blondeau Tavern building at the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Gower Street. It was absorbed by Universal in 1912.

The following years saw the arrival of 11 more production companies, some of which would go on to establish themselves as the big studios. Among them were Carl Laemmle (Universal); Adolph Zukor (Paramount Pictures); Marcus Loew, Samuel Goldwyn and Louis B. Mayer (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer); Harry, Samuel and Jack Warner (Warner Bros.); William Fox (Fox Film Corporation); and Harry Cohn (Columbia Pictures Corporation).

The Jewish founders of Hollywood had several traits in common: a childhood marked by poverty, immense ambition and experience, and a strong understanding of the world of commerce. They all came from working-class backgrounds, which gave them an unparalleled insight into the behaviours and aspirations of this social stratum, the potential primary market of their great business. Moreover, their Jewish heritage – being part of the "People of the Book", a culture deeply rooted in words and storytelling – made them particularly adept at recognising great stories.

They were all Jewish immigrants or the sons of Jewish immigrants, by then already highly Americanised. As such, it is safe to say that Jewish immigrants were instrumental in creating the Hollywood studio system, whereby film production and distribution were controlled by a small number of major studios. These studios produced films in their own facilities, employed creative staff – often on long-term contracts – and controlled both the distributors and the cinemas where their films were shown.



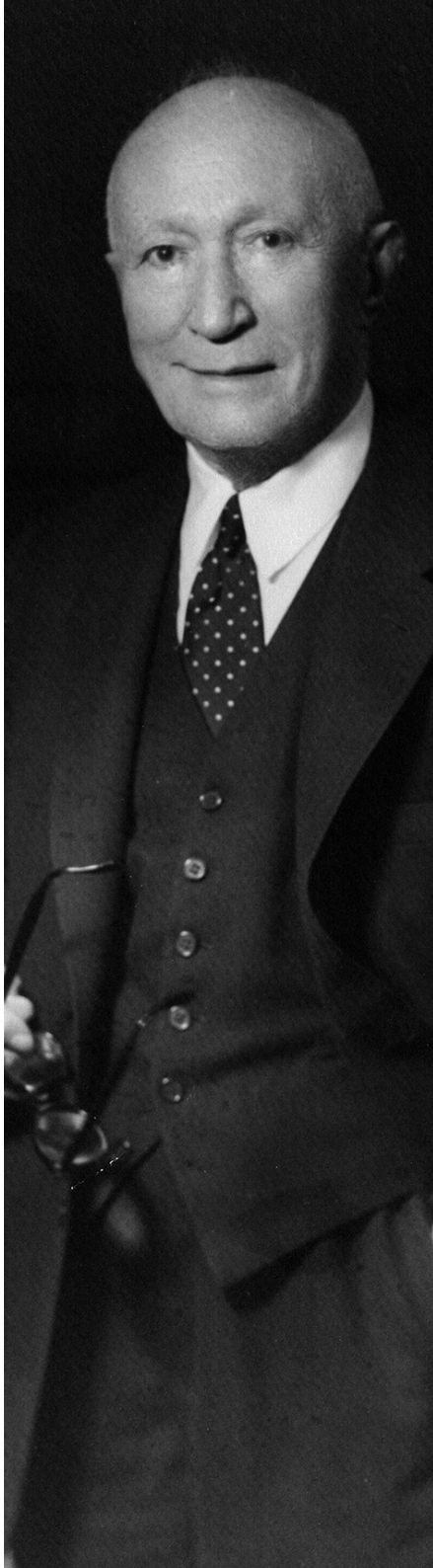


Universal Pictures

Carl Laemmle (Laupheim, Germany, 1867 – Los Angeles, 1939) was born to Jewish parents and emigrated to the United States in 1884. He was a pioneer in the film exhibition industry. His first nickelodeon was opened in Chicago in 1906. In 1909, he also ventured into film production, founding Independent Motion Pictures. In 1912, he formed Universal Pictures, a studio that produced some of the earliest films of John Ford and Erich von Stroheim. After producing *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) – his most notable success – Laemmle retired from the film industry.

Paramount Pictures

Adolph Zukor (Ricse, Hungary, 1873 – Los Angeles, 1976) was born to Jewish parents. He arrived in North America in around 1889 and initially worked in the fur trade. In 1903, he acquired his first nickelodeon. He founded the Famous Players Film Company, bringing several figures from the American stage to the screen. In 1916, he partnered with Jesse L. Lasky (San Francisco, 1880 – Beverly Hills, 1958) to establish the Famous Lasky Corp, which eventually became Paramount Pictures. He was one of the founding figures of the film industry and played a key role in shaping the star system.





20th Century Fox

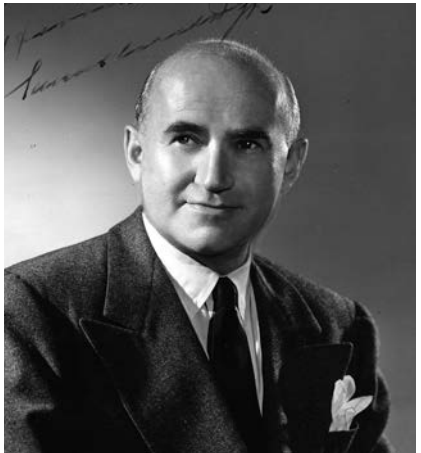
William Fox (*Wilhelm Fuchs*) (Tolcsva, Hungary, 1879 – New York, 1952) emigrated to the United States at a young age and worked in various trades before entering the film industry. He entered the film exhibition business in 1904. He started with a chain of nickelodeons and by 1914 he was already the owner of an important circuit, the Greater New York Film Rental. It was in 1915 when he founded Box Office Attractions Corporation, which would later become Fox Film Corporation. However, the 1929 financial crisis led to the crumbling of his business and he decided to sell Fox to an important trust in Chicago. In 1935, the new owners merged the company with Twentieth Century Pictures, forming 20th Century Fox (now 20th Century Studios).

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Louis B. Mayer (*Ezemiel Mayer*) (Dymer, Russian Empire, now Ukraine, 1884 – Los Angeles, 1957) was of Jewish origin and emigrated to the United States at a young age. He entered the film industry as the manager of a modest cinema in Massachusetts and later acquired more cinemas. In 1917, he moved to California, where he established his own production company, Louis B. Mayer Pictures. He then partnered with Samuel Goldwyn and Marcus Loew, leading to the formation of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). Recognised by its initials and iconic lion logo, MGM gained a reputation in the industry for artistic prestige and quality, which it still holds today.

Samuel Goldwyn (*Samuel Goldfish*) (Warsaw, 1884 – Los Angeles, 1974) emigrated to the United States at a young age and initially worked in the glove trade. Pursuing his interest in cinema, he founded Famous Players Lasky Corp in 1913, and Goldwyn Pictures in 1918. In 1924, Goldwyn Pictures merged with Metro Productions and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was established. From then on, he worked as an independent producer. From 1927 to 1940 he was associated with United Artists. He also played a key role in launching the careers of major actors, including Gary Cooper and David Niven.

Marcus Loew (New York, 1870-1927) was the son of Austrian Jewish immigrants. He began his career in the film business running a penny arcade, a cinema where each ticket cost a cent, before later moving into nickelodeons. He partnered with Adolph Zukor and expanded from 40 cinemas in 1907 to more than 150 by 1919, becoming one of the leading exhibitors in the United States. In 1920, having parted ways with Zukor, he purchased Metro Pictures and renamed it Loew Metro. By 1924, after partnering up with Samuel Goldwyn and Louis B. Mayer, he created Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).







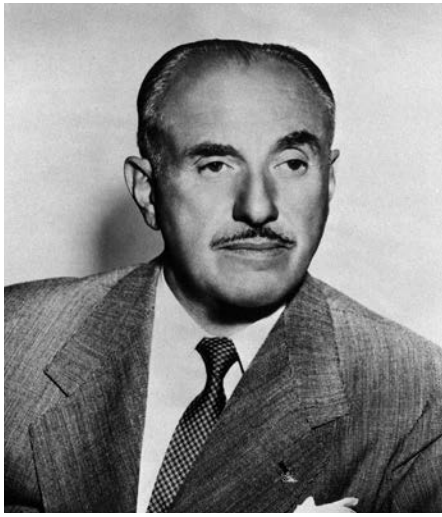
Columbia Pictures Corporation

Harry Cohn (New York, 1891 – Phoenix, 1958) was the co-founder and president of Columbia Pictures, which won 45 Academy Awards under his leadership. The son of a Polish Jewish tailor, he worked in various jobs before beginning his film career as a secretary for a film distributor in New York City. In 1920, Cohn, his brother Jack and their mutual friend Joe Brandt founded the C.B.C. Film Sales Company and they moved to Hollywood to begin production. The company name was changed to Columbia Pictures Corporation in 1924. Cohn was dubbed “the meanest man in Hollywood”, yet he possessed a sharp intuition for the potential of stories, actors and directors, which he combined with an uncanny instinct for predicting which types of films would attract audiences.

Warner Brothers

Jack Warner (Ontario, 1892 – Los Angeles, 1978) was the son of a Polish Jewish immigrant. Together with his brothers Harry Warner (Krasnosielc, Poland, 1881 – Los Angeles, 1958) and Samuel Warner (Krasnosielc, Poland, 1888 – Los Angeles, 1972), he entered the film business through nickelodeons. In 1913, the siblings established Warner Brothers. In 1926, they faced a severe crisis, during which Samuel proposed acquiring a patent that would replace orchestras accompanying film screenings with synchronised records. In 1927, they released *The Jazz Singer*, the first feature-length film with synchronised sound, whose enormous success saved the studio and established it as one of Hollywood’s Big Five. Throughout their long careers, they gave all their films a distinctive style that significantly influenced American cinema.



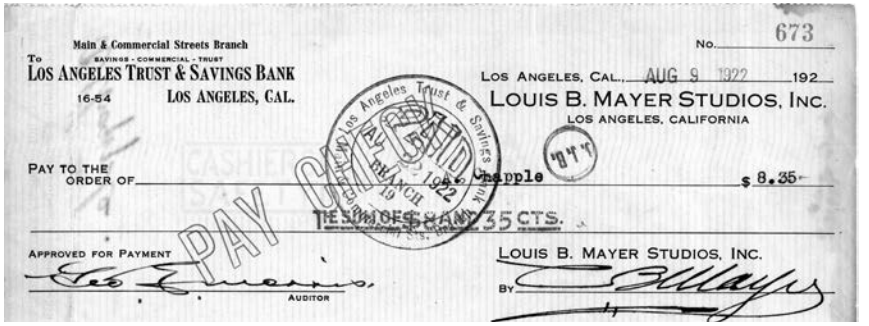




Great Jewish Names from Hollywood's Golden Age







Irving G. Thalberg, Hollywood's Boy Wonder

Irving Thalberg (Brooklyn, New York, 1899 – Santa Monica, California, 1936), the son of German Jewish immigrants, became a producer at Universal Pictures before joining Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). He was known as Hollywood's Boy Wonder. Despite passing away at the young age of 37, he was the uncredited producer of more than 90 films. Thalberg played a key role in elevating the producer's status above that of the director in Hollywood's golden era. He was instrumental in shaping the careers of Greta Garbo, Clark Gable, Joan Crawford, John Gilbert and the Marx Brothers. He was the inspiration for the protagonist of F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon*, which was later adapted as a film by Elia Kazan and as a television series by Billy Ray. One of the awards presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences bears his name.

David O. Selznick, Hitchcock and Hollywood

David O. Selznick (Pittsburgh, United States, 1902 – Los Angeles, 1965) was a highly influential independent producer in Hollywood. He was a creative and independent filmmaker who played a major role in shaping the industry. The son of producer Lewis J. Selznick, a Jewish immigrant from the Russian Empire [now Ukraine], he married Gladys Mayer, daughter of Louis B. Mayer. He was responsible for bringing directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and stars including Ingrid Bergman and Vivien Leigh to Hollywood. Among many other films, he produced *Gone with the Wind*, *King Kong*, *Anna Karenina* (directed by Clarence Brown), *Nothing Sacred*, *A Star Is Born* (directed by William A. Wellman), *Spellbound*, *Rebecca* and *Duel in the Sun*, as well as *The Third Man*.



Sol Wurtzel, the man who discovered John Ford

Born to Polish Jewish parents from the town of Ulanów, Poland, Solomon Max Wurtzel (New York, 1890 – Los Angeles, 1958) worked as an executive assistant to William Fox, the founder of Fox Film Corporation. He began his career in the film industry as an accountant for Fox's film processing laboratory. In 1917, Fox sent him to California to oversee the studio's West Coast productions. Over his 34-year career at Fox and 20th Century Fox, Wurtzel supervised over 700 films and numerous series. He helped launch John Ford's career. He also gave Rita Cansino – later known as Rita Hayworth – her first film opportunity and discovered Norma Jeane Baker (Marilyn Monroe).



Hal B. Wallis, the hitmaker

Hal B. Wallis (*Harold Brent Wallis*) (Chicago, 1898 – Rancho Mirage, 1986) was the head of production at Warner Bros. during Hollywood's Golden Age. Born Aaron Blum Wolowicz, he was the son of Jewish immigrants from Poland. Wallis produced *Casablanca*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*, and *They Died with Their Boots On*. Actors such as Bette Davis, Errol Flynn, Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart owe some of their early successes to his productions. He also played a key role in launching the careers of Jerry Lewis, Dean Martin and Elvis Presley.



John Houseman, producer, screenwriter and actor

John Houseman (Bucharest, 1902 - Malibu, 1988) worked as a wheat exporter in Argentina and as a translator in Canada. In 1932, he began working in theatre, founding The Mercury Theatre with Orson Welles. Before falling out with the legendary director, he collaborated with him on radio with *The War of the Worlds* and in cinema with *Citizen Kane*. He worked as an executive producer at Selznick Productions for 10 years. He also worked in film as a screenwriter and appeared as an actor in several films, winning an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor in 1974 for his performance in *The Paper Chase*. His most notable production credits include *Jane Eyre*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, *Julius Caesar* and *Two Weeks in Another Town*.



Sam Spiegel, the man with three Oscars

Sam Spiegel (Jarosław, Poland, 1901 - Saint Martin, Lesser Antilles, 1985) studied at the University of Vienna before moving to Berlin, where he began his career as a film producer. As the Nazi persecution intensified, he fled Germany, seeking refuge in Mexico. A year later, he moved to Hollywood, determined to establish himself in the American film industry. Three of his most celebrated productions – *On the Waterfront*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Lawrence of Arabia* – won the Academy Award for Best Picture. His last production was *The Last Tycoon*. Beyond filmmaking, he contributed significant funds to the creation of the State of Israel and to the Israeli audiovisual industry, which is why the Jerusalem Film and Television School bears his name.

Robert Evans, the heir to Irving G. Thalberg

Robert Evans (*Robert J. Shapera*) (New York, 1930 - Beverly Hills, 2019) was one of the most talented producers of the 1960s and 1970s. He started his career as an actor but soon questioned his own acting abilities and transitioned into film production. Joining Paramount Pictures as a producer, Evans helped turn it into Hollywood's most successful studio, thanks to his exceptional artistic and commercial vision. He had a remarkable ability to recognise and cultivate top talent. He produced Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* and *Chinatown*, and was also behind Francis Ford Coppola's two first films of the trilogy *The Godfather*. He produced the first Godfather film along with Albert S. Ruddy, who came from a Jewish family in Montreal and later won an Academy Award for *Million Dollar Baby*, directed by Clint Eastwood. His later productions included John Schlesinger's *Marathon Man*, Arthur Hiller's *Love Story*, and Coppola's *The Cotton Club*. A charismatic and striking figure, Evans became almost as famous as the Hollywood stars he worked with, making him a worthy heir to Irving G. Thalberg.

Samuel Bronston, Hollywood comes to Madrid

Samuel Bronston (*Samuel Bronstein*) (Chișinău, Moldova, 1908 - Sacramento, 1994) fled the pogroms and lived in Paris, where he studied at La Sorbonne, before being forced to leave occupied France for the United States, initially working there as a minor film producer. Seeking a way to reduce production costs while succeeding in the creation of major productions, he saw Franco's Spain as an ideal location. Through General Chester Williams, a close associate of Luis Carrero Blanco, he secured permission to establish a sprawling film studio in Las Rozas. In Spain, he produced *King of Kings*, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, *55 Days at Peking* and *Circus World*. Interestingly, the Spanish authorities were unaware of his Jewish heritage, let alone of the fact that he was the nephew of Lev Davidovich Bronstein (Leon Trotsky). Had they been known, these details would probably not have sat well with Franco's regime, which sought to project a more open and modern image of Spain through these productions.





Arthur Krim, the man who revolutionised the business

Arthur B. Krim (New York, 4 April 1910 - New York, 21 September 1994) was the son of Russian Jewish immigrants. He began his career as an entertainment lawyer, representing artists in the film industry. In 1951, he took over United Artists, the production company founded by Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and D.W. Griffith, which was on the verge of bankruptcy. He successfully revived the studio, remaining at the helm until 1978. Krim reinvented the model for film production, distribution and sales, enabling the rise of independent film producers who could create movies outside the major studios and sell them to the big distributors. He facilitated Charlie Chaplin's return with *Limelight* and financed *Spartacus*, written by Dalton Trumbo, who had been blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee. Additionally, Krim was responsible for distributing and financing the James Bond films, the Beatles' movies and the spaghetti westerns of Sergio Leone and Clint Eastwood.

CREDITS

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