

OLD JEWS AT THE MOSCOW  
SYNAGOGUE

I.

FROM YALTA I WENT BY BOAT ALONG THE BLACK SEA to Sebastopol and from there by train to Moscow. Leaving the Crimean colonies, as the train sped along the flat Ukrainian plains where, next to White Russia, the Jewish population is thickest, it seemed to me that I was leaving the "Jewish problems" in Russia behind me.

For while the solution of this eternal "problem" is one of the most interesting aspects of present-day Soviet reality, it nevertheless is only one tiny screw in the vast Soviet machine and, as I have already emphasized, cannot be considered apart from the rest of Soviet life.\* In Moscow, I sought to acquaint myself more intimately with Soviet life in general. Moreover, I did not think that there was in Moscow a Jewish community to speak of. In the old days only Jewish merchants of the first guild had the right to live in Moscow. Jews in general were not permitted. For Moscow was a "holy" city of sixteen hundred Greek orthodox churches. Only after the Revolution was Moscow opened to all the Jews of Russia.

\*The Jewish population in the Soviet Union comprises only 1.77% of the entire population.

And yet, it was in the Red capital that I first discovered the real Jewish art, literature and the theatre. Curiously enough, it was also in Moscow that I visited the first Jewish synagogue.

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Lonely, like a ruin in a desert, the Jewish synagogue stands hidden in a corner of revolutionary Moscow. It is a new synagogue. Its worshippers, however,—a tiny fraction of the city's hundred thousand Jewish inhabitants—belong definitely to Russia's past.

The existence of this synagogue in Moscow, popularly referred to as the *Beth Midrash* by its worshippers, is unknown to the vast majority of the city's Jewish workers. Unlike, for instance, the "Merchants' Synagogue" in Kiev which I visited on my way back, or the age-old crumbling *Beth Midrashim* in the former ghettos, this synagogue does not occupy a conspicuous place in the cultural and national life of the Jews. It stands in obscurity on Malaya Bronnaya street—at one time one of the very few Jewish streets in Moscow—and is known only to a few older people.

It was with difficulty, or rather by sheer chance, that I succeeded in finding the *Beth Midrash*.

I arrived at Moscow on November 7 when the country's proletariat was celebrating the anniversary of the October Revolution and the successful carrying out of the Five-Year Plan. Wandering through

the streets of the city, I came across little groups of Muscovites playing harmonicas, singing and dancing.

"You see these little groups of dancers," a Russian friend, accompanying me, remarked. "Fifteen years ago they also had holidays in Russia. It may have been the birth of the Tsar or the death of a Grand Duke. But then the workers would go to the nearest saloon, and as they say in Russian 'drown their sorrows,' and then march drunkenly over the cobblestones of Moscow's back streets. Look at them now dancing and singing, celebrating their victory."

At the Strastnoi Boulevard, we had to stop. A militia-man, one of those typical Soviet cops—a short, broad-shouldered and red-cheeked peasant boy, dressed in a gray uniform—wouldn't let us pass.

"I can't let you pass, comrades," he argued. "The October district marchers are going to pass here. Orders are orders."

But the crowd of Russians that surrounded him insisted on passing. And having caught a moment when the militia-man looked away, they broke through the line. The militia-man ran after them and caught one, but many got away. The crowd laughed while the militia-man, like a typical peasant, scratched his head and smiled good-naturedly.

I succeeded in joining a group of Americans who worked on the *Moscow Daily News*, and who were part of a long column that was waiting for a chance to enter the Red Square and parade before Stalin and other Soviet leaders.

While waiting I fell into conversation with three

workers. They happened to be Jews who were sent by their trade union all the way from Odessa to witness the Moscow celebration of the Bolshevik victory. I asked one of them how the demonstration impressed him.

"Well . . ." he replied. "What is there to say? Fifteen years ago today the priest Tikhomirov organized in Leningrad and Moscow 'a holy crusade' against Jews. Then the Black Hundreds, headed by long-haired Russian priests, marched the streets of Moscow, carrying crosses, singing 'holy' chants and cursing the Jews— The Jews are to blame! Two thousand Jews were killed in that crusade. But Tikhomirov didn't know that in Leningrad and Moscow the revolutionary proletariat was already paving the way for a new life, a new world. You come from America, so you may not know, but . . ."

Our conversation was cut off because at that moment our column was entering the Red Square. From five directions, like a sea of red, Soviet workers carrying red banners were triumphantly streaming towards the tomb of Lenin . . .

The march lasted from early morning until evening. It was getting dark when, returning from the Red Square, I stopped on Malaya Bronnaya to watch a parade of returning Young Pioneers. The shrill songs of Russia's growing generation filled the narrow, crooked street. As I stood there watching them, I remembered Bluma's words:

"The majority of our youth are atheists. Instead of the melancholy synagogue and chassidic prayers



there rings out now on the 'Jewish Street' the revolutionary songs of the Young Pioneers and Kom-somols. Our new generation, Jewish or Gentile, does not know what religion means. Instead of praying and wailing they sing . . ."

Suddenly, I saw a group of Jews, with patriarchal beards, prayer books under their arms, strolling leisurely along the noisy street. How curiously the old persists within the new! It was a familiar Sabbath Day sight, and yet, in the capital of the Revolution, it was a strange and unusual sight. I followed them to the synagogue which was located nearby.

Moscow's *Beth Midrash*, to be sure, was in no way different from the synagogues I have seen in the ghettos of Poland or on the East Side of New York. It was a small room, dimly lit by a tiny electric lamp. Here and there, bearded Jews were bent over huge gemorrhas. They swayed to and fro in meditation, chanting the universal accompaniment to the Talmud:

*Oi, Omar Rabba, Tonu Rabbonon . . .*

*Oi, Thus Rabba said, thus have our teachers taught . . .*

*Mm . . . mm . . . mmm . . . mm . . .*

I entered. All eyes turned upon me. It seemed as though they were asking: "And how did this young fellow get here?" Soon, however, they lost interest in me and turned again to their gemorrhas.

I remained standing alone, looking for someone with whom to start a conversation. The meditative faces of the swaying Jews looked forbidding. In a

corner, near the oven, a man surrounded by a group of eager listeners was talking heatedly. He was a short man, with a yellow, pointed beard and an ironic twinkle in his eyes. I approached him:

"Tell me *reb* . . ."

Loud laughter greeted my words.

"Froyka is my name," he informed me. "There are no longer any *rabonim* in Russia. They have banished together with the *panis* and *gospodins*. My name is Froyka, the tailor, a genuine blue-blooded proletarian, if that is what you are looking for. And what, permit a Jew to ask, are you seeking here?"

"I came to pray," I replied.

Froyka looked mockingly at me.

"Tell it to Stalin, *landsman*. You don't look to me like the praying kind. You don't even look like one of us, although you speak a Volhynia Yiddish. Are you a foreigner, eh? Maybe an American with dollars?"

"Yes," I said, "an American without dollars."

"I know," said Froyka, "you came to find out if the synagogues are still open in Soviet Russia, whether Jews are allowed to pray. Simple, naïve people you Americans are. And who doesn't permit us to pray? Stalin? The Government? Why should they care? We can even pray our bellies full."

Froyka caressed his little beard. His eyes twinkled ironically. How curiously, it seemed to me, he resembled at that moment Babel's hero, Ghedalli, the Zhitomir antiquarian who wanted to create a "Fourth International of Good Men." But no: Ghedalli was

naïve and metaphysical; Froyka was rebellious and realistic. If anything, he resembled more one of those peculiar types of Uriel da Costa *apicorism*—heretics—that are to be found in almost every Jewish community.

It is men like Froyka, I discovered, who sow the seeds of secular culture among the orthodox Jews. They are what one might call “the secular leaders,” and are to be found in every synagogue of Europe and America.

A tailor by profession, Froyka was a philosopher, poet, and politician by choice. He even dared to penetrate into the mystery of the “tiny letters” of the Talmud, a subject hitherto reserved for specialists and rich men. And how generously he quoted, in his own perverted way, of course, from Lenin, Maimonides, Tolstoy and Rashe. But what puzzled me most was Froyka’s relation to the synagogue. What is more, he was beloved by his orthodox brothers and considered one of them.

Historically, Froyka is probably the juncture of two epochs. His tragedy—it is indeed a tragedy—insignificant as it may be, is the tragedy of a great number of the old generation of Jews in Russia. Too old, too much bound by old traditions to accept enthusiastically the new life that is being forged in Russia, he is at the same time too young and alive to become an organic part of a dying caste of old Jews who spend the rest of their days in a dying synagogue.

And there is no doubt that the old, traditional

Jewish synagogue is rapidly dying out in Russia. It is dying not because of Communist persecution, as many would like to believe, or any other outside influence, but simply because of a natural law of life: the synagogue lacks fresh blood. The youth has deserted it. Or, as Froyka put it: “The old Jews die and the young Jews have left us. . . .” Indeed, there was not a young face in the room.

“Tell me, Froyka,” I said, “I see only old men here. Where are the young Jews? Where is your youth?”

He smiled. It was a sad smile.

“Young people,” he said in his sing-song voice, “you want young people? There hasn’t been the foot of a young man here for the last fifteen years. And why should they come here? Haven’t they better places to go to? You can find our youth in the theatres, at the clubs, meetings or maybe with the girls. Go over to the Jewish Communist Club on Tverskaya Street and you will find plenty of them there.”

At that moment our conversation was interrupted. An old Jew mounted the altar and knocked twice with his fist on a fat prayer book:

“Sh . . . sh . . . sh . . . Let there be silence!”  
And the evening prayer commenced.