

The unbending dogmatism of the Third Period, hindering the growth of the party as it did, placed Jewish Communism in a strait-jacket.

Throughout the 20's, Jewish Communism had more links with its environment than the party had. It exploited to the utmost the rising prestige of the Soviet Union and its own concern for the Jewish group. Jewish Communists were forging positions of strength on several fronts, confidently looking ahead to further expansion. However, their stand on the Palestinian outbreaks alienated them from the community. And the Third Period completed their isolation.

When the *Daily Worker* and *The Communist*, in conformity with the Leftist line, were maligning the American democratic heritage, the effect did not go beyond their small circle of readers. Party members bought the paper largely as a duty, depending on the "capitalist" papers for their information. But when the *Freiheit* and the monthly *Hammer* began to sneer at Jewish cultural values, the repercussions were almost disastrous. For all its limitations, the Yiddish Left periphery was relatively larger and more varied. The contents of the *Freiheit* and the *Hammer* were also more diversified than mere party mouthpieces. The sudden narrowing down of their scope and their intolerant, shrill tone repelled many of their readers.

Several factors entered into the rapid process of isolation. The first was of a purely inner-party nature.

In the early 30's, the language groups were still further cut down.

For the Jewish Section, with its wider ramifications, this spelled steady shrinkage. The National Bureau of Jewish Fractions—as it was now called—was a party agency solely of Communists active in Yiddish work. "Jewish" trade unions and Jews working in other areas were excluded. The Bureau had no way of approaching them though they may have been interested in Jewish affairs.

Reducing the function of the language bodies was followed by a lowering of their status within the party. Once the entire program was switched to mass production industries and to Negroes, little attention could be paid to foreign-born and still less to Jews. Jews were not in the former and on the wrong side of the color line. The outcry for Americanization meant only that one could not speak his native tongue in the party; otherwise, America was vilified from every street corner.

#### THE ANTAGONISM TO JEWISH "ENCROACHMENT"

The Jewish Communists suffered most from the new "Americanization" policy. The local party leaders treated them almost as rivals, claiming that many Jews could be employed to better advantage in general party work. The consumers' goods industries, white-collar workers and small businessmen were relegated to the background. However, they were remembered—and quite well—during fund-raising campaigns.

*Freiheit* leaflets were banned at big anniversary affairs in New York because they were Yiddish, although the audiences were largely Jewish.

Local party functionaries, sensing the change in attitude, resisted the "encroachment" of the *Freiheit*, the ICOR and other fund-raising in their areas. They argued that the Jews from New York drained the financial resources to which only they were entitled. And they were right inasmuch as it was easier to approach the Jewish middle class for contributions than the non-Jewish. Among the former, the ground had been cultivated by a decade of activity of the Jewish Communist-Left and by the money-giving tradition of the Jews.

However, the national office, taking a longer view, had to impose a compromise to save the *Freiheit* and the other Jewish auxiliary bodies. It stipulated that before the Jews enter an area for a

money campaign, they were to have the specific permission of the national office and that 15 per cent of the gross income was to go to the local party. This arrangement did not hinder the latter from going after the Jewish members and sympathizers and persuading them that the *Freiheit* and Jewish causes were less important than the *Daily Worker* and the general party. Many could not resist this pressure, and either curtailed their donations to the Jewish work or stopped giving altogether.

Moishe Katz, returning from a speaking tour in 1933, after several years in Russia, complained in the *Freiheit* that non-Jewish Communists spoke disparagingly of the paper and of Jewish work, and that one functionary in Detroit had called the Jewish movement a liability to the party.

The reduced status of the Jewish fraction paralleled a sizable increase in the number of Jewish white-collar people, students and professionals, American-born, who either joined the party or moved in its periphery during the depression. Some of them were Jewish-conscious, and the Jewish Bureau could have contacted them fruitfully were it not for the ban imposed by the party. Moreover, there were instances where the party took active people out of the Jewish field for general work.

#### THE ANTI-RELIGIOUS CAMPAIGN

The leading Jewish Communists were too timid to stand up to this new course. Their own activity contributed in no small measure to the shrinkage of Jewish Communism. As mentioned in Chapter 28, fighting Zionism was given high priority. Soon the range was widened, taking in anti-Jewishness and anti-religion.

Jewish Communism reverted to the anti-religious drives of the early radicals at the turn of the century. The latter indulged in it in stiff competition with an aggressive orthodoxy over the minds of the immigrants. No such orthodoxy existed in the 30's, but there were Comintern instructions to fight "the church and reaction." In the absence of institutional political reaction among the Jews, the Communists' best target was the institutional religion. (The Catholic Church was at that time waging an energetic campaign against suppression of religion in the Soviet Union, which prompted Moscow to answer with atheist campaigns by the world parties.)

Widespread Communist anti-religious propaganda was conducted on the eve of the Jewish holidays, with Mock *Seders* on Passover and anti-religious affairs and lectures on the Day of Atonement, the Bureau preparing the "theses" and supplying the cities with speakers. The *Freiheit* appeared on the Holy Days with special anti-religious material—the Jewish press was not published on *Rosh Hashonah* and *Yom Kippur*. The only feature of the campaign of the early radicals omitted by the Jewish Communists were the *Yom Kippur* balls. Dancing was taboo for Communists during that "revolutionary" period.

Fighting religion was but one ingredient in the anti-Jewish brew stirred up by Communism. The cultural heritage previously claimed as its own was now contemptuously refuted. The Yiddish classics, Sholom Aleichem excepted, disappeared from Communist publications here and abroad. And the great humorist was seen only as an artist who took up the cudgels for the poor against the rich.

#### THE STIFLING PROLET CULT ERA

The stage was set for the proletarian culture—Proletcult—handed down by the Kremlin. Stalin's "building Socialism in one country" had to be accompanied by sweeping away the remnants of "bourgeois culture and art," and replacing them by the new cultural values of the victorious proletariat—whatever this term may have meant.

The American delegation at the Congress of Revolutionary Writers, that met in Kharkov at the end of 1930, returned home with the thesis, *Art Is a Weapon in the Class Struggle*. Consequently, the creative artist with a high social conscience had no choice but to commit his art to the cause of the revolutionary proletariat. And, of course, the Communist Party was the sole expression of that cause.

A brigade of self-appointed literary commissars turned up here, armed with party cards and the latest quotations from Soviet Proletcult. They kept a strict vigil over the literary output of fellow traveling writers, rebuking them for "insufficient clarity on the role of the proletariat" and similar offenses. Among the group of prole-

tarian writers were a few talented people. Max Eastman dubbed them "Artists in Uniform." Among the promising younger men was V. J. Jerome, Polish-born, a well-read man, with a pedantic concern for language, but also scrupulously conformist. Jerome later made his career as a cultural commissar. But the chief cultural commissar in the 30's was Alexander Trachtenberg, head of the International Publishers, an efficient bureaucrat. Trachtenberg was agile enough to make the jump from a Centrist of the Workers Council to a loyal and valuable man of the majority camp, and to maintain his position after the minority won out, without being hurt in any way.

The *New Masses* was the house organ of American Proletcult; the John Reed clubs, its organizational outlet. Michael Gold, Harry Freeman, A. B. Magil, Joseph North and Bill Gropper were among the leading people in New York. The clubs were constantly torn by internal squabbles. On the Left theater front was the League of Workers Theaters, founded in April 1932. In 1934, the League branched out, taking in the Workers Dance League and the National Film and Photo League. Its magazine, *Workers' Theater*, was renamed *New Theater*. An array of Broadway and Hollywood luminaries were contributors.

#### THE "PROLETARIANS"

It would be tedious to go into the details of the havoc wrought by Proletcult. Only one yardstick was applied to a literary piece, whether it would help to bolster a hunger march or a strike. The cultural area of Jewish Communism was turned into a wasteland.

A little army of worker-poets and novelists sprang up, anxious to take the place of the distinguished writers who had left the *Freiheit* in 1929. There were but a few gifted people among them.<sup>+71</sup> And their growth was largely stunted by the demands made upon them for immediate response to current political happenings. Even the older and non-political Isaac Raboi had to write party and class-struggle stories. Creative writing was reduced to the level of the Arbcorn-workers' correspondence. No one was supposed to smile, to be gay or humorous. Only one cheerful note was permitted, that of the Soviet poems eulogizing the Great Stalin and the achievements of the industrialization; these became a regular feature of the *Freiheit*. All the other printed material was rigidly uniform, as if

written by one man. Original expressions were snuffed out. The dried-out *Freiheit* lost readers.

The Proletpen, formed by the *Freiheit* staff after their expulsion from the Yiddish Writers' Union, in 1929, published a few anthologies of the new proletarian literature. The first one, symbolically called *Union Square*, appeared December 1930. In 1933, a monthly, *Signal*, made its appearance. But the magazine, a rigid Proletcult affair, had few readers even among the Left. After struggling for a time, it disappeared without leaving a mark on current Jewish literature.

The Proletcult dogma extended to secular Judaism. Outstanding workers in the field of Jewish science here and abroad, all of them Socialists of various shadings—Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky, Dr. J. N. Steinberg, Dr. A. Menes, Dr. Joseph Shipper, Dr. Max Weinreich and others—were sneered at, their work tagged a "fascist-Yiddishist science."<sup>\*223</sup> In a booklet by P. Shprach, published by the *Emes* in Moscow and distributed by the *Freiheit* here in 1933, men like Zhitlowsky, Zivyon, S. Niger, Chief Rabbi Kuk of Palestine, Sholom Asch, Ab. Cahán, Chief Rabbi Hertz of England were lumped together under the scare title of "The Fascist Counterrevolution and the Jewish Bourgeoisie."

The *Freiheit* itself was more discriminating. It applied the Comintern distinction. Bourgeois reformers and writers were simply fascists, while labor and Socialist leaders were placed in a more subtle and complicated category, social fascists. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise got off easier. For signing a call with two other public men in support of the La Guardia-Fusion ticket in 1933, he was called "one of the three grenadiers of bourgeois reaction." Four years later La Guardia was hailed as the standard bearer of the progressive forces of New York, and Wise was flattered as the leader of progressive Jewry.

Albert Einstein did not escape insulting epithets either. For saying "The joy of life is here (in America) harmonized with joy of work," N. Buchwald called him a "great *khnyuk*."<sup>\*224</sup>

#### THE ARTEF; THE HEAVY COST OF THE PROLET CULT

The "revolutionizing" and the "proletarianizing" pauperized the Communist-led cultural groups. The major victims were the Frei-

heit Singing Societies, the ARTEF—Jewish Workers Theater—and the *shules*.

The ARTEF, originally a group of amateurs, all of them shop-workers struggling for theatrical expression, was begun in 1924 on a small scale as the Freiheit Dramatic Section, and later became known as the Freiheit Dramatic Studio. In 1927, it became a permanent theater, and was given the name of ARTEF at a Left-Wing conference in 1928.

Hard work and the competent direction of Benno Schneider, formerly of the *Habima*, raised the artistic level of the ARTEF and made it a conspicuous cultural factor of the Left, imparting to the movement dramatic color and a sense of pride as the only theater of its kind in the country. Schneider was particularly adept at presenting stylized versions of Sholom Aleichem and other classical plays. These ARTEF performances were memorable. The ARTEF also produced a play by H. Leivick, *Chains*, treating the conflict between the exigencies of the revolution and the moral values of the individual, a dramatization of Samuel Ornitz' *Haunch, Paunch and Jowls*, and a play by Gorky. The plays drew favorable comment in the general press, but not in the Jewish, where the ARTEF was boycotted.

The hostility to anything remotely savoring of Communism, that grew out of the struggle in the unions and ripened during the Palestinian events, surrounded the ARTEF like a Chinese wall. Still, the moral success—the theater could not boast of a financial one—gave a large measure of satisfaction to the members of the cast, to compensate for their hardships and material sacrifices. (Jacob Mestel, Joseph Buloff and Benjamin Zemach were the other directors of the ARTEF; M. Zolotaroff did the decorations.)

But the meddling of the Jewish Bureau, through its unofficial commissar, Nathaniel Buchwald, a capricious and vain intellectual, and the maneuvering of the party fraction there kept the cast in a steady turmoil. The heaviest blow was the party's insistence on a revolutionary repertory to dramatize the workers' struggles and "serve the revolutionary labor movement." The ARTEF was compelled to stage a couple of *agitkas*—cheap propaganda plays—one by Philip Cherner, *By the Noise of the Machines*, dealing with a garment strike, another a translation from a piece called *Drought*,

about the tenant farmers in the Southwest. Both were miserable failures.

Only with the passing of the Proletcult could the ARTEF revert to its original repertory, dramatizing Jewish and general classical works of a social orientation.\*<sup>225</sup>

#### JEWISH SHULES WITHOUT JEWISH EDUCATION

The textbooks of the parochial schools of the IWO, which in the beginning boasted of their progressive Jewish education, were cleansed of anything resembling the Jewish past or present. Jewish history disappeared from their pages. The schools were Sovietized, celebrating only the 1st of May and November 7th. All they taught was Communism in Yiddish.

They were originally formed as the Non-Partisan Yiddish Workers Shules, the Left and those of the Right who believed in secular education cooperating. They retained their name and much of their character in 1926, after the Left seized the majority of the *shules* and Camp Kinderland. However, in 1929, the approaching Leftist course caused a split. Jacob Levine, director of the *shules*, and a group of his followers, opposing the new curriculum, broke with the *shules* to join those of the WC.

A year later, the new IWO took over the *shules* and the camp. The word "Non-Partisan" was dropped from their name. The convention of the *shules*, May 1930, in Philadelphia, approved an entirely new curriculum, called the project system, strictly adapted to the mood of the Leftist course.

The very first program article by Kalmen Marmor, educational director of the IWO, stressed that the aim of the Jewish proletarian *shule* was to "raise the children in the spirit of the class struggle, in Yiddish. . . ." And the resolution in Philadelphia explained that through the projects the "children will investigate the class struggle . . . what is industrial unionism, the TUUL, strikes, picket lines, mass demonstrations, ILD, WIR, ICOR, Friends of Soviet Russia, etc. . . . They will acquaint themselves with the October Revolution, the Paris Commune, the Luxemburg-Liebkecht murder, Sacco-Vanzetti, the Communist press, the Communist mass action." \*<sup>226</sup>

The project *America*, of the fourth school year, concentrated on

all the shady spots of the American scene: Negro lynching, anti-labor laws, Mooney and Billings, Sacco-Vanzetti, the graft scandals, frameups of radicals, speedup in factories, child and woman labor, crises, unemployment—and the treacherous role of the Socialist Party. On the other hand, the project *Russian Revolution* was full of fascinating heroism and the climactic glorious victory of Soviet power.

One of the projects for the children in the summer camp Kinderland was to organize the 36 bungalows into "36 little Soviet republics." All the games and discussions were to revolve around revolutionary heroes, Russian revolutionary struggles, oppressed Negroes and the TUUL.<sup>\*227</sup> Jewish revolutionary heroes and the Jewish labor movement were non-existent.

A book of children's stories by Olgin for the IWO *shules*, published in 1932, was filled with tales of the Bolshevik Revolution and the negative side of America. There was not a single Jewish story in the book.

The total elimination of Jewish subjects from the curriculum was completed at the convention of the IWO *shules*, in December 1933. Heavy Communist fire was brought to bear on those *tuers* and teachers who refused to part with the original aim of the *shules*. Olgin led the assault.<sup>\*228</sup>

It is not surprising that Jewish Communism in the early 30's made enemies and lost friends. The unwritten motto, *Those Who Differ With Us in Anything are Our Enemies*, and the reckless demolition of every creative aspect of Jewish life, however forward-looking, could only drive people away.

The closing of the Bank of the United States in New York City, in the summer of 1931, hit several thousand Jewish families at a time when earnings were dropping to a new low or entirely disappearing. A few active Left-Wingers among the indignant victims turned the newly organized Depositors' Association over to the *Freiheit*. Max Levine, a friendly and tactful man, not widely known as a fellow traveler, became their counsel. He managed to keep the Tammany politicians out of this movement.

The *Freiheit* became the organ of the depositors, and would have gained a boost in its circulation were it not for the long and boring statements by Comintern and party plenums and the paper's gen-

eral approach and tone, which the new readers found indigestible. They quickly returned to the *Forward*, the *Morning Journal* and *The Day*.

The isolation which the Jewish Communists so successfully achieved would in all probability have crushed them were it not for the advent of Hitler in Germany and the flexible, all-inclusive Democratic Front that followed.