

## 38 Judaizing Communism

Unity and democracy led to a changed attitude in the party to Jewish work. Belittling and sneering was replaced by an awareness of the vital part that Jewish Communism had in the party's ambitious schemes.

Gaining control in several important new unions and a foothold in others, significant as it was for the ultimate aims of Communism, did not meet the urgent need for an immediate rise in the political stature of the CP. This required masses of articulate followers concentrated in large cities, to fill the Madison Square Gardens and the Coliseums and march in political demonstrations that would reverberate around the country and the world. The Jewish group fitted that requirement; 65 percent of the Jewish population were living in metropolitan New York and Chicago. And fascism abroad and anti-Jewish sentiment here made sections of this group vulnerable to Communism's tender and reassuring voice.

Moscow, too, anxious for closer contact with Washington and under the exaggerated notion—that the Nazis helped to foster—of Jewish influence in America, was interested in courting Jewish good will. Birobidjan, language conferences, theaters and international gatherings against anti-Semitism were demonstrative steps in that direction. Jewish Communists were now given a new task, to win over important segments of the community on Jewish issues. And because the Kremlin was led to believe that the top of the garment trade unions were a major obstacle to amicable relations with the AFL, the Jewish Communists had the added job of wooing the Dubinsky's and the Hillman's.

The new interest in Jewish affairs took various guises: the sudden awareness of many Communists, Jews by birth only, of their Jewishness; the entrance of Jewish Communists in the field of American-born Jews; the attention shown by the party to signs of anti-Semitism here; and the Jewish Communists parading as the "best friends of the Jewish people."

*Azoi vi es Cristelt zich azoi Yidelt zich* (as the Christians do so do the Jews). The party Americanized its election campaigns, and the Jews Judaized them, shifting the emphasis to the struggle against anti-Semitism and the defense of Jewish rights.

The angle to trap Jewish votes was first employed on a large scale in the Presidential campaign of 1936. The Jewish Bureau published a Yiddish booklet by Olgin—35,000 copies—*Jews Must Resist Anti-Semitism*. The subtitle read, "Communist Party Demands that Anti-Semitism in the United States Should be Considered a Crime." The entire booklet was devoted to the growing menace of fascism and the dire necessity "for a United Front of the Jewish people's masses." The subject was treated as if the Jews were already denied their civil rights.\*<sup>309</sup>

Jewish voters were treated to a rare experience. Communist candidates, entirely alien to Jewish life, running in Jewish districts, were taking pride in their Jewish origin. And though all their Jewishness was contained in the capsule of fighting anti-Semitism, their appeal was not without response. Israel Amter, running in 1937 and 1938 for president of the City Council and congressman-at-large respectively, emerged as a proud Jew whose primary concern was the defense of Jewish rights and Jewish unity. This theme he kept repeating in the campaign. The *Freiheit* introduced him as a "dignified representative of the Jewish masses." And a report of an Amter election meeting was headlined "Vote for Amter and Beat Anti-Semitism."\*<sup>310</sup>

### PENETRATING THE AMERICAN-BORN

The Jewish Bureau was given the green light to approach the American-born on Jewish issues. Hitherto, the language groups in the party were confined to immigrants speaking their mother tongue. The monthly *Jewish Life*, published by the Jewish Bureau of New York State, August 1937, was the immediate consequence.

(A Jewish state bureau in itself was something new.) Its editorial board was made up of John Arnold, Hyman L. Castrell, Paul Novick and Henry Sand. Castrell and Novick were old hands. Arnold and Sand (both assumed names) were native-born. The chief topic of the new monthly was Jewish unity; the anti-Semitic menace was the favorite argument.

As the party now directed the language groups to "go to the people," Jewish Communism was voicing a gentle solicitude for its people. Castrell, in the first issue, harping on the growth of anti-Jewish sentiment, expressed the gloomy thought that "These . . . tend to make the Jews an oppressed minority in the United States. . . ."

*Jewish Life* carried warm greetings from Browder and Amter. Browder, touching upon the failure that summer of the British plan for the partition of Palestine, generously offered "our hand of fellowship to all disillusioned Zionist workers for a common approach to all problems." He also admitted "overzealousness on the part of the Communists" in their attitude and reaction toward the *yishuv* in Palestine (meaning 1929-1930). The Communists "are ready for a reexamination," he added.\*<sup>311</sup>

*Jewish Life* devoted much space to Palestine. Though the old antagonism was still alive, a new slant in orientation among the American-born was becoming noticeable, the latter being free of the anti-Zionist heritage of the early radicals. To fortify the idea that the Jewish Communist must not ignore his people, John Arnold, editor, quoted from Molotov's speech at the eighth Soviet congress, highly praising the Jewish people and dwelling on their greatness.

A naive question by a reader as to why the party was suddenly so interested in Jewish affairs elicited from Arnold a most revealing answer, "The Democratic Front in New York is not possible without the Jewish people."\*<sup>312</sup>

Philip Schatz, educational director of the New York State YCL, in his piece in the same issue, did not quibble either. To him unity was necessitated solely by the struggle against discrimination—a not a word about positive Jewish values. The YCL secretary blamed the Trotskyites for blocking unity of Jewish youth groups. This was the heyday of the Trotsky sentiment in the United States, as a

reverberation of the trials in Moscow, and Schatz thought it clever to hit the enemy on a "Jewish issue."

#### TROTSKY ON STALIN'S ANTI-SEMITISM

Trotsky also came in for severe condemnation for stating in an interview with the JTA that "Since 1925, and particularly since 1926, there has been (in Soviet Russia) in progress a well-camouflaged anti-Semitic demagogy, hand in hand with symbolic trials against open pogromists. . . ."

"The recent trial in Moscow (the Radek-Sokolnikov trial), for instance, was prepared with the almost open object of making the internationalists appear as Jews without ideals and law, capable of selling themselves to the German Gestapo."\*<sup>313</sup>

In an article, "Trotsky and the Jews," Samuel Golden ascribed Trotsky's "sudden interest in the Jewish question . . . (to) a conscious political maneuver by his general policy of counterrevolution. . . ."\*<sup>314</sup>

Parenthetically, the belief that the Soviet Union was perhaps the most formidable bastion against anti-Semitism was shared by many distinguished non-Communists. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, refusing to join the Committee for the Defense of Trotsky, in 1937, wrote to Dr. Sidney Hook: ". . . Moreover, to invite me to join your committee on that ground savors of Trotsky's own disingenuousness in introducing the Jewish issue in the present situation. If his other charges against the Soviet government are as unsubstantiated as his complaints on the score of anti-Semitism he has no case at all."\*<sup>315</sup>

It may be interesting at this point to quote the opinion of an old rabbi who lived several years under the Bolshevik regime in a large Jewish city. A writer on *The Day*, S. Erdberg, went to see this rabbi about the Trotsky interview. The rabbi was bitter against both Stalin and Trotsky. When asked about Trotsky's charge that Stalin was anti-Semitic, he answered unhesitatingly, "It is true."

"Still, there are no pogroms in Russia," Erdberg insisted.

"Of course, there are no pogroms there," countered the rabbi. "Private initiative . . . (has) been abolished in Russia. No one can do anything without the state. Stalin says, 'If it will be necessary to make pogroms, the state will do it.'"

"Anti-Semitism is banned," continued the old man, "because

the professional anti-Semites, the Black Hundred, are also anti-Soviets." \*316

He had four children in Russia. All occupied good positions. But he had to send them a few dollars from time to time.

The rise in anti-Jewish sentiment, an aftermath of the merciless struggle for power raging in the Russian Communist Party in the 20's—the three most important opposition leaders were Jews—prompted the JTA to request Stalin, at the end of 1930, to repudiate "the stories in the foreign press that he is an anti-Semite and that the Soviet press is conducting for the first time an agitation for pogroms." Stalin's written reply was a sharp denunciation of anti-Semitism: ". . . Anti-Semitism is a dangerous survival of cannibalism . . . it is a false road (for the toilers) and leads them into the jungle. Hence, Communists, as consistent internationalists, cannot but be irreconcilable and bitter enemies of anti-Semitism. . . . According to the laws of the USSR, active anti-Semites are punished by death." \*317

(Stalin's statement was obviously meant only for foreign consumption. It did not appear in the Soviet press until the end of 1936, when the *Pravda* quoted it from a speech by Molotov on the new Soviet constitution.) \*318

Less than two decades later, Stalin was to order the Slansky trial in Czechoslovakia, the "doctors' plot" in Moscow, and the cultural and national genocide of the Jews in Soviet Russia.

The first steps among the native-born were shy and halting. *Jewish Life* reflected this hesitancy. Lacking experienced men, Jewish Communism was also unsure of its footing. A big handicap was the absence of an apparatus, a prerequisite for penetration. The *Freiheit* did its share in this new field by starting a daily column in English devoted to Jewish affairs, written by Olgin. The new target was the social workers and professionals.

(Rabbi Moses Miller, a young ordained rabbi without a congregation, who entered the Communist movement in the 30's, was a notable asset to *Jewish Life* and the work among the native-born. In September 1938, he became editor of the magazine. Ambitious and able, he grew more influential in the years that followed.)

The publication of *Jewish Life* was interrupted by the Stalin-Hitler pact. After the World War, the party's recognition of its

Jewish movement was still further extended. *Jewish Life* was renewed on a larger scale. The Jewish angle as a means of widening the Communist foothold among the second and third generations of Jews was applied in earnest.

A major beneficiary of Communism's new Jewishness was the parochial schools. Relenting in their negative treatment of Jewish education, the schools recognized three Jewish holidays, Passover, Chanukah and Purim, for their national-liberation symbols. They now taught Jewish history, but were greatly handicapped by the lack of qualified teachers, the majority of whom were themselves not too familiar with that subject.

During their peak, in the late 30's, the *shules* claimed an enrollment of over 6,000 children in approximately 100 schools and three secondary schools. The teaching staff numbered between 65 and 70.

#### THE PASSION FOR JEWISH CULTURE

Once Jewish Communism became "anxious for Jewish life and rights," a surging concern for Jewish culture was inevitable. The reasons were duofold: one, the deep sentiment for the language and its cultural manifestations rooted in the secular strata; two, building a cultural position does not necessarily require being accepted by rival groups; initiative and hard work are sufficient.

The cultural field was little cultivated. But the people of the Bureau were not exactly the ones to make a bold move—nor a sincere one either.

The National Conference of Jewish Communists, September 25–27, 1936, heard professions of loyalty to the Jewish people and love for their culture. Papers were read on projects for deepening and enriching that culture. But this new concern was negated by the old devotion to proletarian culture—or, as it was beginning to be called, the culture of the toilers—"that is developing alongside the bourgeois degeneration." \*319

This program, contradictory and unreal, evoked little response, even in Communist ranks. It was too confusing.

However, Jewish Communists did not have to wait long for a full-scale drive on the cultural front. A committee for a Jewish World Cultural Congress appeared in Paris in September 1936. It was the same old device, a long letterhead with a few non-Comm-

nist men of letters covering a number of known and camouflaged party workers. The chairman was Nahum Aaronson, the sculptor; the vice presidents were non-Communists, but the secretary, Dr. H. Sloves, was a party man. In its call the committee repeated the traditional appeal for building cultural positions at a time when the enemy—fascism this time—was attacking the Jewish civil and economic positions.

#### THE PLAN FOR A WORLD CULTURAL CONGRESS

The directives were received here early in 1937, and the Communists immediately went to work. The very boldness of the idea of a world gathering, the first of its kind, was bound to focus attention on it. And, despite the vigorous opposition of the entire Yiddish-speaking non-Communist sector, a group of distinguished writers and intellectuals were won over, and cooperated with the Communists in preparing the congress. A convincing argument for participation was the promise that the congress would pierce the thick wall that separated Soviet Jewry from the rest of the Jewish world. The desire for a face-to-face meeting in Paris with Jewish Soviet writers proved too great for a number of writers who had been steadily maligned in Russia. Some of them nursed the hope that once the movement was under way, they would be able to take over and pour it into a genuine cultural mold.\*<sup>320</sup> A few of them also retained a lingering sentiment for the Soviet Union. Moreover, they were assured that the Communists would be kept in the background.+<sup>86</sup>

The congress was immediately labeled another Communist scheme to trap the innocent. The *Forward* took the lead in the attack. A statement denouncing the American conference in preparation for the Paris congress was signed by 26 writers.\*<sup>321</sup> The burden of the statement was contained in the following lines: "We view with horror local Jewish Communists justifying all the charges—unproven and unfounded—against Jewish writers and leading cultural workers in Soviet Russia. . . ." Observing that "Culture is decency, culture is truth," the statement went on to say that the Communists were shamelessly trampling on both. They were also reminded of their anti-Jewish stand during the Palestinian events and their total negation of Jewish values just a few years earlier.+<sup>87</sup>

Jacob Gladstein wrote a vitriolic column on the eve of the conference. Referring to the Jewish Communist writers, he said, "Nowhere in Jewish history has such an organized group of scoundrels made so many attempts to throw themselves on Jewish life in order to corrode and blacken it."\*<sup>322</sup> Dr. S. Margoshes, on the same subject, ended his English column in *The Day* of August 22nd with, "No truck with the enemy!"

The warnings against the congress were effective. Not a single non-Left group came to the conference for the election of delegates, August 28, 1937. Still, the opening in Town Hall was an enthusiastic affair. Strengthening and expanding Jewish culture went straight to the heart of the Left rank and file. It was not the kind of activity one carried out in the name of party discipline. In the midst of the cruel news from Russia—the purges—it was comforting to be engaged in something peaceful and constructive in company with well-known creative writers. Branches of the IWO throughout the country and similar bodies made strenuous efforts to be represented.

The conference adopted a resolution for the building of a cultural center in this country. The idea of a center was merely Communist big talk to hold on to the new friends and to scare the enemies.

A delegation of 11 was elected to the congress in Paris, only three Communists among them, and a committee was formed for the work here. The entire expense for the trip to Paris and back was paid by the Communists—to be exact, by the IWO and the *Freiheit*.

#### THE CONGRESS IN PARIS; NO ONE FROM MOSCOW

The congress in Paris opened September 7, 1937, in the presence of about 100 delegates from 18 countries. More than 4,000 people crowded the opening session. Dr. Schatz-Anin, a fellow traveler from Latvia, was chairman. On the face of it, such a gathering of writers was highly impressive.

Paris was then already a center of Eastern European Jews, particularly from Poland. Some estimated their number at not much under a quarter of a million. The immigrant youth had to struggle hard for a livelihood, and a considerable section were in the orbit of the Left. The French Communist Party stubbornly refused to

give the Jewish Communists any organizational form, insisting on total integration. Only after ceaseless pleas were they permitted a weekly paper, *Naie Presse*, which later appeared three times a week. But they were denied a daily paper.<sup>\*323</sup> The Communists rivaled the other two groups, Labor Zionists and Bundists.

After listening to a number of reports and papers, the congress issued a manifesto on September 17th calling upon all the *yishuvim* to redouble their efforts to expand and fortify Jewish cultural institutions. The gathering was described as a "shining page and a great day in Jewish history."<sup>\*324</sup>

The congress launched the World Alliance of Jewish Culture (IKUF), composed of territorial sections, and elected an international committee. Dr. Sloves was made general secretary. The Alliance was to publish a central magazine and, generally, to help in and coordinate the activities in the various countries. All the ambitious plans were built on the financial promises of the American delegation—its Communist part.

A great disappointment was the absence of the Soviet delegation. No one came. Again, as in the case of the delegation to Birobidjan, the Communists were at a loss to offer an explanation. The reason was the same too. Quite a number of Jewish writers were in the purge or slated for purging, and the Kremlin reneged on its promise to let a Jewish delegation go to Paris.

#### IKUF, A VALUABLE ASSET

The report of the American delegation, November 6th, in Mecca Temple, was a festive affair. The enthusiasm was as yet undampened. All the Communist cultural groups and Maurice Schwartz and Ben Ami participated in the program. Dr. A. Mukdoni, a noted writer and a non-Communist, became the chairman of the American IKUF; Zeinwell Weinper, a poet and a new secret member of the CP, was made secretary. The IKUF began publishing a monthly, *Yiddische Kulture*. Between the sizable contributions of the IWO and Weinper's skill in raising money through tearful appeals for Jewish culture, the IKUF was well supplied with funds.

The IKUF gained an active worker with the arrival, in 1938, of Nachman Meisel, who had published a literary magazine in Warsaw. Meisel had had no previous contact with Communism, but

being unable to find a place in the existing literary groupings in America, he accepted the proffered hand of the Communists, who needed him for the IKUF precisely because of his non-political past. Meisel served them well, and never wavered in his loyalty.

The IKUF published the works of Jewish Soviet writers and of Americans who were affiliated with it. It formed a number of reading circles in several cities. Alongside the ICOR, it became one of the most valuable transmission belts for Communism. During the Stalin-Hitler pact, the IKUF lost almost all its non-Left writers. But the resurgence of Soviet popularity here during World War II caused some people to overlook the IKUF's toeing the party line. In the years 1948-1955, the IKUF magazine brazenly denied the destruction of Jewish culture and the decimation of Jewish writers. At the same time, the names and the works of those who had perished disappeared from its pages. The *Freiheit* underwent the same mysterious process. The paper spared no abuse for those who "invented" the liquidation of Jewish men of culture, while taking pains not to mention any of them or to reprint their works in the special issues devoted to the Soviet Union.

The IKUF was still functioning, its magazine appearing, in the late 50's, when Ambidjan-ICOR, ARTEF and the IWO were a thing of the past. The devastating shrinkage of the Jewish Communist movement severely curtailed the activities of the IKUF, but it did not shut it down.

Incidentally, the Right answered the challenge of the IKUF in the 30's with its own cultural body, the CYCO (Central Yiddish Cultural Organization). The CYCO worked along the same lines, publishing books, offering annual prizes for outstanding literary works. The CYCO, too, called a world congress in 1948.

As to the world body of the IKUF, it fared rather badly in the very beginning. Moscow was no longer interested in its existence. Nor were the American Communists willing to support a world cultural group after deriving all possible advantage from the Paris congress. The glowing promises of financial aid made by them were never carried out. And the desperate reminder by Dr. Sloves was not even answered.<sup>+88</sup> In a year or so the World Alliance quietly died, and nobody cared enough to bury it.

## THE FIGHT IN THE PARTY OVER PALESTINE

The recommendation of the British Royal Commission on partitioning Palestine into two autonomous states, Jewish and Arab, announced on July 7, 1937, and motivated by the "inability to reconcile the interests of the Jews and the Arabs," was condemned by world Zionist opinion. The Chaim Weitzman followers showed a willingness to negotiate with the British, but the Labor Zionist and the Dr. Wise group here were decidedly against it. Still, Britain's readiness to recognize a Jewish State added enormously to the *yishuv's* prestige.

Melech Epstein, mindful of the tangible achievements of the *yishuv*, that he had seen in 1936, thought that this was the opportune moment for a shift in the party's policy. He argued that it was childish, even harmful, to ignore the needs of a lively and active Jewish group of well over half a million souls. He reminded his comrades of the many headaches the movement had suffered because of its pro-Arabism.

The only active opposition to this view came from Paul Novick. The struggle against the *yishuv* was his province. Olgin, unsure of any change in the Comintern line on Palestine, straddled the fence. The Bureau, fearful even of discussing this question, referred it to the political committee of the party.

One afternoon in late July 1937, the political committee took up the Palestinian problem, Stachel presiding. Epstein reviewed the party's attitude toward Palestine, stressing its sectarian and unreal approach. And by way of making the new orientation palatable, he suggested that a more sympathetic regard for the *yishuv* would remove many obstacles to the Democratic Front in the Jewish community.

Before Epstein had a chance to sit down, Bittelman was on his feet. Quoting earlier decisions of the Comintern on Palestine, he categorically rejected any change in policy. "The Communist Party does not bargain away its basic principles for any immediate advantage," he rebuffed Epstein with righteous finality. It was odd to hear Bittelman speak of basic principles. But his pious waving of Comintern quotations blocked the way for Browder and the others to adopt a more sympathetic attitude, even had they been inclined to do so. And this was precisely Bittelman's intention. Browder,

who followed him, did try to soften down Bittelman's unbending stand. In a conciliatory speech, he cited Dr. Wise's opposition to the British plan, and pleaded with the Jewish Communists to approach Dr. Wise and his friends on the common ground of defending the *yishuv* against the British colonial policy. But the bare fact remained—Novick could continue the calumny against the *yishuv*. Epstein, who was working on the advance proofs of his book on Palestine, to be published by the *Freiheit*, withheld the manuscript rather than change it.

Still, the struggle for a new approach to Palestinian Jewry was not entirely lost. Witness Olgin's speech in 1938, at the tenth convention of the New York State party, quoted in Chapter 36.

In the fall of the same year, the CP of Palestine, in a memorandum to the Royal Commission, demanded autonomous rights for the Jewish group, but "to maintain the existing numerical relationship between the Jewish and the Arab populations," thus openly supporting a total ban on Jewish immigration.\*<sup>325</sup>

In summing up the attempts of Jewish Communists to acquire respectability, it is well to point out that the two largest segments of the community, the middle class and labor—the American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Labor Committee—persistently refused any kind of cooperation with any of the Communist-dominated bodies. Neither the perils hanging over European Jewry nor the uneasiness on the domestic scene could bridge the gap that separated the Communists from the bulk of their fellow Jews.