

41 *Excitement and Fury*

Jewish anger at the Stalin-Hitler pact was understandably more profound and more widespread. *The Day*, not too hard on the Soviet Union in the recent past, spoke out sharply: "A horrible treason. The worst has come . . . an infamous document for a country which in the last few years has pressed the democratic countries to its bosom, . . . which moved heaven and earth for collective security . . . a country which claims to be Socialist . . . is bringing on a world catastrophe with open eyes. . . . Millions of Jews in the center of world fire . . . are now in the hands of Hitler." *375

And the *Morning Journal*, in an indignant editorial on the justification of the pact by the *Freiheit*, called for the annihilation of Jewish Communism: "The Jewish enemy of the Jewish people raises his head, and it is our duty to hit him with an iron bar on the head, as one would a snake." *376

A reporter, sent by *The Day* to the garment center on Seventh Avenue during the lunch hour to hear the comments of the people, found the workers standing around in circles talking excitedly; the Communists prudently avoided mingling with the crowd.

"Who could have believed it?" one exclaimed. "If someone had told me that a month ago, I would have scratched his eyes out," a younger man said in agitation. A third said wistfully, "If I could force my way into the *Morning Freiheit*, I would make a little pogrom there for the few dollars I gave them a couple of weeks ago. . . ." "The *Freiheit* tells me now that condemning Moscow means siding with Chamberlain. But Chamberlain is not going to

help Hitler . . .," remarked another bitterly. "I bought all the five papers today, one can go crazy reading them . . .," someone else broke in.*³⁷⁷

The small group of outstanding men of letters, lured by a cause dear to them—Yiddish culture—to collaborate with the Communists in the IKUF, immediately severed relations with that body. For some this was not the first, but the second break with the Communist movement. They had left the *Freiheit* in 1929 in protest against its anti-Jewish position. The most prominent of them were: Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky, H. Leivick, Joseph Opatoshu, Peretz Hirshbein, David Ignatoff, Menachem Boraisha, Dr. A. Mukdoni and Ben Zion Goldberg. Zhitlowsky was not anxious to resign from the IKUF. He tried to influence the others to wait and see what would happen to Poland. But the group's insistence on leaving immediately impelled him to join them.*³⁷⁸

The Communists on the IKUF executive pleaded with them to withdraw their resignation, arguing that the work for Jewish culture should not be disrupted by political factors. And they had weighty reasons for their efforts to avoid a break. The continued collaboration of outstanding writers in an important auxiliary at that trying moment would have been a sort of protecting shield for Jewish Communism. Besides, none of the leading Communists had any clear idea of where Stalin was heading, and they were stalling for time. But the signers of the letter of resignation refused to be dissuaded, pointing to the Declaration of Principles adopted at the IKUF congress in Paris, which included the struggle against fascism as part of its cultural program.

There were a few, the veteran Jacob Milch and Reuben Brainin among them, who remained with the Communists throughout the crisis, finding extenuating circumstances for the pact with Hitler.*³⁷⁹

Menachem Boraisha, a sensitive poet-essayist, wrote a piece, really a confession, which seemed to express the distress of the entire group:

"Thanks be to Stalin. He has cut open the abscess and the 'pus' will run off and the blood will stop, and the patient will open his eyes and be cured. . . . How much pain and strain were required in the last ten years to maintain at least a shred of faith that everything going on in Moscow meant redemption! Iron dictatorship, concentration camps, the slaughter of comrades and builders of the

Revolution, espionage, informers, servility, dehumanization. . . . All the shedding of innocent blood was forgotten. . . . Workers, liberals, intellectuals, Socialists labored to find a vindication for all this, stifling their own conscience, explaining away through rationalization and casuistry, and with tooth and nail clinging to the consolation. . . . Still, Socialism is being built there. . . ."*³⁷⁹

H. Leivick, one of the foremost poets and playwrights, writing on his resignation from the IKUF, acknowledged that he had been disillusioned for a long time. He had realized that the Communist concern for Jewish culture was insincere, but it had been hard for him to leave a work which he loved.*³⁸⁰

POLISH JEWS FLEE EASTWARD

Hitler began his war on Poland with an air bombardment of Warsaw on September 1st. England and France answered with a war declaration on September 3rd. The Nazi invasion caused a panicky flight of Polish Jews. Hundreds of thousands, men, women and children, taking what belongings they could, were fleeing before the Nazis toward the East, heading for Soviet Byelorussia, Lithuania and Rumania. (The gates of the latter were totally closed to them.) It was a flight unprecedented in modern Jewish history. In the chaos, many families were separated never to see each other again. The fleeing masses of people met Red Army units marching toward the West; they stopped the refugees from going further.

The Stalin-Hitler partnership pointed up the gravity of the situation of nine million Jews in Eastern Europe. A spontaneous social and individual boycott of Communists and their institutions, reminiscent of the boycott exactly a decade earlier, spread quickly. The label *Communazis* taunted Communists in the shop, the street and at meetings. The *Freiheit* was torn to shreds at newstands. Its loss of readers was rather small, but the loss of advertisements was considerable.

Like a beleaguered fort, the *Freiheit* fought back desperately, one day shrilly denouncing a published fact as a "conscious lie" of the enemy press, the next day having to defend it. One day the paper displayed a cabled statement by the French Communist Party saying that Moscow would aid Poland if Paris did likewise.*³⁸¹ A couple of days later, the Communist paper was hard put to approve Molotov's

dictum that Poland was ruled by a fascist-military *schliakhta*, and had no right to exist. Issue after issue, in front-page pieces, editorials, articles, and in the English columns, Olgin, Novick, Katz and the rest were straining to turn black into white.

INNER PARTY DEMORALIZATION CHECKED

The mood among Jewish Communists on Wednesday, August 23rd, and the days immediately afterward was a mixture of embarrassment, bewilderment and pain. They seemed to be hanging in suspense. Hardest hit was the small minority who, like the author, had been for a long time Marxists heretics and Communists with misgivings. No longer harboring any illusions on the nature of the Soviet regime, they still believed implicitly in its anti-fascism. This belief and the movement's democratic orientation were the only threads holding them to the party. Now these threads were about to be torn.

As one who led the small secession from the party in the Jewish area, the author may again be permitted to describe his experience in the momentous days that followed. It will reflect the ebb and flow of emotional reactions that swayed active Communists.

The news of Epstein's refusal to write anything in defense of the pact and the accompanying rumor that he was breaking with the party spread rapidly around Union Square. People close to him and many rank-and-filers came running to ascertain that they were groundless. No one hid his revulsion with the pact. All they did was to plead for patience, in the faint hope that nothing basic had changed in the Soviet foreign policy. All agreed that the behavior of the Red Army in Poland would provide the key to the grim enigma.

Epstein had to decide quickly. He agreed to put off his resignation from the party on the promise of a number of people to leave with him once the Red Army would join the Nazi army in Poland.

The hostile air outside and the demoralization within prevented the party hierarchy from challenging those few who were loud in their denunciation of the pact. On the contrary, they were treated with patience and simulated understanding, the party anxious not to aggravate a threatening crisis.

The first break in the suspense came at the Madison Square Gar-

den meeting on September 11th, called to raise the spirit in the party and to solidify its ranks. It was a demonstration of the party's amazing resilience. At that huge gathering the party succeeded in turning the tide of disorganization and rallying the membership behind the old standard. No adequate reasons have been advanced to explain the victory of the party at that meeting. The speeches by Browder and Foster were certainly not distinguished by their eloquence or genuine pathos. But they did rouse the crowd against the "Chamberlain-Munichmen" and the American monopolists, reactionaries, and Socialists, and hatred is often more powerful than love.

Listening to the familiar voices of their leaders renewed the crowd's sense of allegiance. This sentiment, coupled with the antagonism and ridicule they met individually wherever they went, created a feeling of solidarity and righteousness powerful enough to overcome all wavering. The hesitancy was over. And when the treacherous character of the pact was revealed in deeds, about a week later, the spiritual crisis within the party was largely past, at least on the surface. Of course, the special measures applied after that meeting were factors in holding the ranks intact; but of them later.

The party and Communism generally lost heavily in public confidence, but the internal loss was insignificant; only crumbs fell off. Men of consequence who left the party could almost be counted on the fingers. Granville Hicks and George Powers, the latter a vice president of the IWO, were among them. There was a larger defection of ordinary members, but they could not be counted since practically all of them refused to be identified, sitting in their corners, silently nursing their wounds.

THE BREAK WITH THE PARTY

Epstein's decision to wait was not justified. All calculations went wrong. All his moves to take a sizable group with him out of the party were blocked. The friends who had cried on his shoulder, promising to leave with him if the worst came to pass, nervously shied away from him.

Ready for a break were only Ephraim Schwartzman, secretary of the important Jewish Committee Against Anti-Semitism and Fas-

cism, and George Wishnak, formerly manager of the *Freiheit* and *Daily Worker* and then an officer of the ILGWU, Moishe Nadir and Louis Hyman, of the *Freiheit*. The last two were fellow travelers.⁺⁹⁴

In the beginning the party held out both a big carrot and a big stick. The business manager of the *Freiheit*, George Hochberg, offered Epstein six months vacation in the mountains to cool off. "Have trust in Stalin," he counseled. In the same breath, he threatened to crush him.

The five letters of resignation, from the party and the *Freiheit*, were sent to the press spaced in time so as to achieve the maximum effect. The *Freiheit* replied with a shower of epithets: degenerates, decadents, agents-provocateur, yellow leaves that fall off a healthy tree. . . . And to deny the signers of the letters any motive of honest differences, Moishe Katz charged, "They were tempted by the fleshpots of the bourgeois press."³⁸² In another piece, on October 1st, he called them "rats who smelled a fat roast." This at a time when four of them were without any work at all.

Olgin applied a more civilized method. He introduced to the readers of his English column the type of man who broke with the party. Picking on the weaknesses of each of them, he drew a composite picture of a "renegade" so unflattering that his readers must have felt relieved that they were outside the movement.

INTIMIDATION AND SOCIAL OSTRACISM

The campaign of intimidation took on a two-pronged character after the handful of "renegades" formed the League Against Fascism and Dictatorship, at the end of September, and began calling anti-Stalin meetings in the neighborhoods. These meetings were packed with ordinary men and women, outside of any movement, indicating how deeply disturbed the people were. (Hyman and Epstein also toured the Midwest and Eastern Canada.)

One morning, Epstein found Communist goon squads waiting for him in the lobby of the house where he lived. They were still there when he returned late in the evening. As he wasn't certain whether the intention was to terrorize him or to cripple him, he telephoned the business manager of the *Freiheit*, whom he suspected of having something to do with these strong-arm boys, and warned him that if the "watch" was not called off, he would see the district attorney.

As the Communist Party was losing out in Washington, the threat was effective. (The "watch" appeared again later on, a couple of GPU agents among them.)

Another sort of intimidation was applied to the party membership. In public and in private, they were sternly warned against the slightest association with the "traitors." Good Communists were instructed to report anyone seen with any of them. The favorite method for imposing a social ostracism was via manufactured questions of readers. One such question read: "Is it permissible for a progressive worker to maintain relations with a renegade?" The verdict of the *Freiheit*, replete with invectives, was: "You have to fight him like an enemy."³⁸³ Party committees stood at the doors of the mass meetings of the new League to watch that no Communist or Left-Winger entered. At the same time, trusted people were sent in to try to disrupt the meetings from inside. But they were shouted down by the angry crowd.

At the height of the activity of the League, when the *Freiheit* was beginning to feel the impact of the protest meetings, P. Novick, dubbed the "little Red Goebbles," in a vitriolic column, indirectly called for physical attacks on the founders of the League. However, the printed epithets were the lesser part of the campaign of incitement. Most vicious were the speakers mobilized to visit all the units and branches of the party and its mass auxiliaries, especially the Jewish. There, without the restraint of appearing ridiculous or the fear of libel, the slander could be pumped out without restraint. Communists and their sympathizers were assured that the party had evidence that Epstein and Schwartzman, particularly the former, were secret agents of the Dies Committee, that they had sold party secrets to the committee, and that the two would soon appear in public with many more lies against the party. For greater effect, former friends were harnessed for that job. These secret-Dies-agent stories were conveyed to Epstein's children to turn them against their father.

The calumnies followed Epstein on his lecture tours in Mexico and in Havana, in 1940. *El Popular*, Lombardo Toledano's paper—and Toledano was close to the government—demanded his immediate deportation as an undesirable, a demand meant largely to frighten the Jewish community into canceling his lectures. In Havana, *Hoy*, the Communist daily—the party there was still co-

operating with the government—ran an article repeating the secret-agent tale and adding new ones. “Epstein,” said *Hoy*, “is a Trotskyite counterrevolutionary whose mission is to drag Cuba into the imperialist war.” But in neither country were the meetings called off. The Jewish communities there were deeply stirred by Stalin’s alliance with Hitler. All Jewish groups in Havana adopted a resolution condemning the lies and the anti-Jewish insinuations spread by *Hoy*.⁺⁹⁵

LEAGUE NO MENACE TO THE PARTY

On the whole, the incitement was effective. Passions were inflamed against the group fighting the party, and even those who disapproved of the calumny did not dare to meet any of them. The party succeeded in erecting a thick wall to quarantine the membership against being infected by the League.

Some unfriendly voices were raised against the men of the League in the anti-Communist press too. Shmuel Rosenfeld, of *The Day*, reproved them for “spitting in the well from which they had recently drunk.”^{*384} They should have remained silent in view of their past sins, exactly what the party wanted them to do. Only Jacob Fishman and Abraham Goldberg, in the *Morning Journal*, asked for understanding and tolerance for the little group. The *Forward* was friendly throughout.

The League made little headway. It gathered only a couple of dozen people. Jewish radicalism had been reduced to Communism and anti-Communism. The League, too small for independent existence, could not offer the wavering Communists any alternative. Long-built-in hostility to the Right Wing made affiliation with that camp unthinkable. Even the little help the League received from national Right-Wing bodies, halls for the meetings and their protection, and some financial aid for its magazine, *Hoffnung* (Hope)—issued in Yiddish and English—was seized upon by the party as proof that they had sold out to the *Forward*, Dubinsky and Chanin.

As should have been anticipated, people long active in such a closely knit movement were afraid to remain alone. And having to give up their positions—becoming nobodies politically—was a factor not to be discarded either. As for the rank and file, aside from the hatred of the enemies, effectively invoked by the party, a weighty

deterrent must have been the dread of admitting to their shopmates and neighbors, with whom they had argued for many years, that they had been wrong all along. The party top, aware of the uneasiness below, discreetly circulated the hoped-for hint, “Have faith. Things will turn out alright yet,” meaning that the Moscow-Berlin ties were only temporary. It was a comforting thought.

In this crisis, a tacit acceptance or even complete silence was sufficient for the party, as long as the individual did not come out publicly against the pact. And, in the nature of things, those who stayed with the party despite their dissent eventually swallowed their objections and made peace with their conscience.

The women proved to be more emotionally attached to the party, though quite a few were shaken by the pact. Philip Weiner’s wife was sick in bed for two weeks. Still, the author does not know of a single defection of a woman Communist at that time. Indeed, there were instances where they prevented their men from leaving.

Another loyal group were the leading Communist trade unionists. Engrossed in extending their positions and careers—and successfully too—and absorbed in the daily chores of the union, these Communists had no time nor inclination to care about happenings thousands of miles away. They remained as undisturbed by the pact as they had by the purges. They were the only happy lot in the party. This was true of the older people, former immigrants, and of the younger, native-born. Joseph Boruchowitz sent word to Epstein in the very first days. “What is he excited about? He should be satisfied; the business is growing.” John Brophy, a CIO leader, expressed to the author his dismay at the young Jewish union organizers—many of them former students who had joined the YCL during the depression—for their lack of regard for their fellow Jews in Eastern Europe.

It would be inaccurate to assume that the Communist movement avoided any repercussions. There were spontaneous stirrings in the IWO, the ICOR and the IKUF in the beginning. A group of the IWO Branch 98 issued a call to a protest mass meeting. Letters of protest from individual members of these auxiliaries appeared in the papers, asking others of similar views to contact them. The League had not yet been formed, and there was no one to follow up this agitation organizationally. The hail of abuse in the party press

and at meetings and fear of ostracism squashed these incipient oppositions.

COMMUNIST OFFICERS OF LOCAL 22 LEAVE PARTY

In the trade union area, a costly blow to the Communists was the breakup of the United Front in the Dressmakers' Union Local 22. As mentioned in Chapter 36, Local 22, similar to 117 and 9, concluded a United Front with the Communist-Left in the elections of 1937, and for similar reasons: a difficult and complex situation in the trade and solemn Communist promises of constructive cooperation. The Lovestonite leadership of the union, with Charles S. Zimmerman at its head, had previously been a "concentration point" for Communist attacks. The Communist group in the union was not too numerous, but highly vocal and numbering several able men. The real intention of the CP was not genuine cooperation, but to undermine the existing leadership. But its followers in the union, by and large, regarded the new undertaking seriously.

Jews were a majority of the 23 to 24 thousand members of the union, and the link between the Communists and the non-Communists snapped under the weight of their resentment against the Stalin-Hitler pact.⁺⁹⁶ Some of the more sensitive Communist union officers were repelled by the pact and openly voiced their disagreement. The party, veering again to a neo-revolutionary course, began to exert pressure on its people in the union to engage again in oppositional activity detrimental to the union. The duofold reaction, revulsion against the pact and resistance to the new party pressure, reached a climax on December 13th. On that day, the New York State committee of the CP announced in the *Daily Worker* the expulsion of seven active Communists of Local 22, calling them weaklings, cowards and opportunists.⁺⁹⁷ The dress and other garment markets were flooded with Communist leaflets praising the peace policy of Moscow and condemning the "Red-baiters who split the ranks of labor."

The defection of these well-known Communists spelled the end of Communist hopes to gain control of the union. Their ticket was defeated in the next election, and since then not a single Communist has been elected to any office in the union.