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A voice of the Jewish left

ARTHUR J. SABIN

THE current Broadway hit *I'm Not Rappaport* has Judd Hirsch portraying an elderly man expounding to his park-bench companion about his radical Jewish background. At one point he recites a list of names of leftist Jews, "greats" who influenced his life. One of those he recites had very special meaning for me: *Olgin*.

Even for a largely Jewish audience, few would recognize the name in any context. Maissay Olgin was a founder, and for most of the years from 1922 to his death in 1939, editor of the *Freiheit*, the leftist Yiddish newspaper. Just two days before, I had interviewed Olgin's successor, Paul Novick. Novick, now in his nineties, continues to edit the paper whose influence in the history of the Jewish left in America was a significant force and still retains thousands of loyal followers.

Now in its sixty-fifth year, the *Freiheit*, whose name was changed after a bankruptcy during the Depression to the *Morning Freiheit*, continues to publish in Yiddish, with a four-page English section, on a weekly basis. Most American Jews have heard of the leading Yiddish paper, the *Forward*, the voice of the Workman's Circle (Arbeiter Ring), the paper of Abraham Cahan, the "Bintel Brief," I. B. Singer, and so many others. Far fewer have ever heard of its journalistic antagonist of so many decades, the *Freiheit*.

The *Freiheit* never had the circulation or the following of the *Forward*, essentially because it moved from a left-wing labor paper

of the early 1920s into the fold, and control, of the American Communist Party. Despite its small circulation, as Melech Epstein, once an editor of the *Freiheit*, pointed out in his book *The Jew and Communism, 1919-1941*:

The printed word had always been a weighty factor in all the moves and struggles of Jewish labor. The labor press was a trumpeter calling for action, a teacher and an organizer. These, essentially, were the roles of the two rival camps in the 20's, the *Forward* and the *Freiheit*. Their job was not merely to indulge in polemics, carrying the fight into the other camp, but to supply ammunition—argument—and bring encouragement to their own followers. . . .

The *Freiheit* was the voice of this small [Communist] but highly articulate and disciplined minority and their close followers. It conveyed the daily slogans of the struggle of its few readers in every shop. It took up and answered the challenges in the *Forward*, and, in the heat of the struggle, delighted its readers—and through them the larger mass of the opposition—with indiscriminate invectives against the leading Right-Wingers. Not that the *Forward* was more restrained in its treatment of the Left, but no one could outdo the *Freiheit* in the resourcefulness of its abuse.

The era this refers to is that of the intense labor struggles of the 1920s and 1930s, and was the high water mark of Jewish involvement in the labor movement—the *Forward* representing the Socialist and, for the most part, mainstream of the Jewish labor movement, and the *Freiheit* waging war on behalf of the Jewish Communist Left. Numbers of readers was not the sole determining factor, just as numbers did not portray the real strength of the Communist Party. A few thousand Party workers, for example, in the needle trade unions, carried with them thousands of non-Party workers. And for the Yiddish-speaking-and-reading leftists, the *Freiheit* was its voice, its daily portion, its oracle.

The *Freiheit* was not just a newspaper to its followers. Its singing societies, reading groups, yearly celebrations of its birthday, and the mass meetings called by the *Freiheit* made the paper a way of life, and for the current few thousand reader-subscribers, it remains so. Because of its lack of commercial advertising, the yearly campaigns (going on for decades) to keep the paper alive called for (and still do) financial sacrifices from the readers.



Paul Novick

The paper had, prior to the McCarthy era, close ties not only with the Communist Party, but with the International Workers Order (IWO), a Communist front-fraternal organization, whose largest single ethnic group was the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order (JPFO). There were summer camps: Kinderland, the largest for children (still operating in Toland, Massachusetts) and Lakeland, for adults. There were *shules*: Yiddish secular schools for the young, burial societies, and a significant insurance organization providing health and death benefits.

Life for the secularist-leftist Jew for some thirty years (from the mid-twenties to the mid-fifties) could be as full, as active, and as all-encompassing as one would want: you could read the *Freiheit*, attend its frequently called meetings, participate in mass demonstrations it organized, help raise money or sell subscriptions, send your children to the IWO schools, attend IWO-JPFO meetings, sing in choruses, join a book reading group, go to a summer camp, read magazines dedicated to Yiddish culture, and so on throughout a calendar year punctuated not by the religious cycle, but by a secular cycle of events, at the core of which was the *Freiheit*.

For the secularist-leftist Jew, the *Freiheit* was far more than a newspaper. Values, morals, and goals were prescribed, concretized, and directed; good and evil were exemplified and personified. Socialism, brotherhood, unions, Lenin, and Stalin were good. Among the evils were racial exploitation, capitalism, imperialism, and bourgeois nationalism. It was the gospel according to Olgin, then Novick—explained in Yiddish; it was struggle, the good struggle using the example of the Soviet Union and its Yiddish writers that exemplified the New Life.

Taking the elevator to the sixth-floor office of the *Freiheit* on 24 Street in New York, I had to wonder what of all this was still alive, besides Novick, now 95 years old, Chaim Suller, assistant editor, now in his eighties, and David Platt, the brilliant film and cultural critic, who in his eighties had recently written a new introduction to a reprinting of a 1935 WPA book on film in the thirties.

Surely, anyone reading the *Freiheit* today knows a great deal has changed, perhaps most of what the paper stood for in earlier years. Most dramatic was the break with the Communist Party, and belief and trust in the way of life of the Soviet Union. Involved in this change is more than mere disenchantment; it reflects the outrage of betrayal epitomized in the virulent anti-Semitism extant in the Russia of today. The *Freiheit* vigorously supports Israel's right to exist within secure boundaries. For these changes, the paper and its editors have earned constant attacks from the *World*, the Communist Party paper, and Communist Party leaders who excoriate what the paper has become.

Paul Novick's office is modest. It is the office of a working editor, with copy and proofs littering the desk. His grip is firm as he greets me and my wife. His eyes are bright and the room is cool; the summer heat is kept at bay by the large window air-conditioner. He glances at his watch, which he lays on his desk; he has promised no more than an hour—he hopes less. His work is heavy because, he explains, his main proofreader is on vacation, so he has to read proofs of editorials and articles he has written.

Sabin: How do you explain the survival of a Yiddish-language paper for over sixty-four years when so few read Yiddish and so many papers have closed down?

Novick: Because we still have thousands of readers that need the *Freiheit*, here in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami—they need the *Freiheit* to understand our nation and the world. Our circulation is small, but our influence is much more than our circulation. Indirectly we influence scholars. Our readers share the *Freiheit* and its views, its positions with others, because we represent a paper true to secular Judaism, to the Jewish Labor Movement and its traditions. We survive because we get assistance from those who don't read the paper but believe that there should be a *Freiheit*.

At my age, well, it is a struggle, but I still have a couple of books to write and I have a responsibility to those thousands of readers that need the *Freiheit* to understand American and international Jewish life.

For instance, this August 7 edition will feature a demand for the Soviet Union to acknowledge and answer the deaths of the Soviet Yiddish writers, the anniversary of which is August 12; every year we have a special issue. We hold meetings. Sometimes I speak; this year I will speak with Morris Schappes [Morris U. Schappes, editor of *Jewish Currents*, a leading secular Jewish monthly in English] and we will send a message to Gorbachev as we do every year, and it has an effect; I know it has an effect even if they don't answer, because they do want the friendship of the Jews.

So I would say there is significance in the existence of *Freiheit*, not only in the general struggle against chauvinism and Khomeinism, but to educate the Jew on the streets concerning the Lubovichers and others, the terrible situation in Israel highlighted by the fight between secularists and the ultra-orthodox. In all of this, we [the *Freiheit*-Yiddish secularists] are more important than before. We are less in numbers than we were, but, as has been said, with less Jews everywhere, each Jew is "bigger" now.

Sabin: When I was a youngster, the English Section of the *Freiheit* was one column; now it is four pages. Are you attracting the English-reading public?

Novick: Not as many as we could. The *tsoris* is that of the *captzn* [poor man]; we are always the *captzn*. To mount a campaign for



Paul Novick points to photo of himself with Soviet Yiddish writers.

readers such as the *Wall Street Journal* takes money, lots of money. It would cost us \$20,000 for a campaign, for office personnel, mailings, lists. This we haven't got, so we haven't got enough English readers.

Sabin: The *Freiheit* was the voice of the Jewish Left—specifically, the Communist Left for many, many years. From time to time the Communist Party has condemned the *Freiheit*, as it did in 1929, for example, because of the *Freiheit's* position on the Arab riots against the Jews in Palestine, but, for the most part, the *Freiheit* followed the party line. Today, the *Freiheit* has totally broken with the Party; the leadership and voices of the Party now condemn you and the *Freiheit* without reserve. How did this change take place?

Novick: There was a process; you don't just grow out of your skin overnight. Khrushchev's speech [1956] was a breaking point. Then there was Howard Fast's *The Naked God* in 1957. Stalin was exposed as a murderer—one of the greatest murderers in the history of humanity. The more we found out about this—what

happened especially to the Jews in the Soviet Union—the more we questioned, the more we moved.

Then came 1967. I was still a member of the Central Committee [of the U.S. Communist Party] and the resolution condemning Israel came up for a vote. I raised my hand and looked around. I was the *only* member to vote against the resolution. That was almost the end; it is not easy to break away, you know.

The struggle of Israel to survive—that was the issue that broke us away. A meeting was called of *Freiheit* leaders from all over the country. We discussed the matter and took a vote. Our decision: we are an independent paper—no more Party paper. We belong to the cause of Jewish culture; we represent our readership.

We moved away, condemned by the Party press. We began to expose anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union—I keep challenging about this book and that. But they can't answer—they won't answer. This writing, I say to them, is anti-Semitism—not Socialism. That is what I and what the *Freiheit* say.

They [the Communist Party and Soviet Union] killed Socialism for 100 years! [You can't] talk to American workers or British or French about Communism; the word *Communism* is not a good one; they ruined themselves, the Soviets did, and killed the political Left.

I was told back then, "You be a good boy and you'll get money" [for the *Freiheit*]. I turned them down. I still get invitations, communications from the Soviet Embassy, copies of their communiques.

The *Freiheit* still stands for détente—against war and against Reaganism. We are critical of the Soviet Union from the standpoint of Socialism. If you are a Socialist, you can't publish anti-Semitism; you can't chop off the millions of Jews in Israel. Even during the tsarist regimes there was no such overt anti-Semitism as from the [Soviet] government itself!

Now in the Soviet Union you can't teach Yiddish or Hebrew. You are arrested, punished! This is what we attack and our attacks have some influence. There is some movement in the last few years—a poetry book here, a storybook there, but [clapping his hands] so long as you can't teach your children Yiddish, can't teach the history of the Jewish people—you have nothing.

They just published [in Russia] a history of Vilno. In it no Jews

are mentioned. Vilno without Jews? There was an article in *Soviet Life* on Pinsk. Not a Jew mentioned. Pinsk, the city of Chaim Weizman? What is this? This is a lie!

Sabin: Your paper claims to have done more to expose Soviet anti-Semitism than any other, is that true?

Novick: Certainly. The Soviet Union is the only Western country to officially sanction the publication of anti-Semitism. We—the *Freiheit*—couldn't take it—we won't take it!

There was a time when the *Daily World* [U.S. Communist Party paper] was concerned about this anti-Semitism. Eugene Dennis [former General Secretary of the Communist Party] had an article that included condemnation of the killing of Jewish writers. *Pravda* reprinted the article and took out that section. I asked Gene Dennis: What is this? He smiled and said nothing.

I went to the Soviet Union in 1959, for example. I carried a letter of introduction from Dennis. Wherever I went I said there has to be Yiddish culture. They wouldn't listen to me; they accused me of wanting to go back to the ghetto.

I have a recent Gorbachev speech; he says we are against anti-Semitism and Zionism. What a statement! If you are against anti-Semitism, why do you publish anti-Semitic literature? I can show you a recent Soviet article reprinted in nine languages, including Arabic; it is vicious anti-Semitism. We reprinted the article in full in our English section.

And here in the U.S., did you know that the *World* [former *Daily Worker*] had two reviews of *Shoah* without mentioning the word *Jew*?

[I then read to Novick a definition of secular Judaism as it appeared in an article in *Jewish Currents*:

Judaism as a culture, an aggregate of historical experience, memory and aspiration. A totality of communal responsibility that was unique for 2,000 years of dispersion. Judaism as a contributor, beyond all statistical proportions, to the development of new ideas of freedom, of culture, of social advancement

asking him whether he agreed with this as a correct definition.]

Novick: Yes, to a great extent it is correct. What is missing is the failure to include the Jewish tradition of struggle. In every revolution, in every labor movement, in all movements for progress, Jews are there. Our suffering gave us a special sense, a special sensitivity in the fight for human rights; there is a stamp on us that makes us sensitive.

•

Paul Novick at 95 is an astounding representative and spokesperson for left-wing secular Judaism; astounding on the personal level because his mind, body, and work belie his years, but also because he is articulate in defining a living role, as he and his followers see it, for secular Judaism. When I mentioned to a friend that I had gone to New York to interview Novick, she responded with, "Did he complain about the sweat shops?" It wasn't a question, but rather a comment that supposed he, and left-wing secular Jews generally, would be stuck in the 1930s with Depression issues.

Listening to Novick, reading the *Freiheit*, *Jewish Currents*, *Yiddische Kultur*, and other publications of the secular Jewish left, one comes away with some clear impressions: their agenda is current; it's definitely left-wing, but not pro-Soviet. It is pro-Israel, favoring the stance of the Peace Now movement.

What is gone is the attachment to the Communist Party; what is there is the belief in détente, juxtaposed with their outcries against Soviet anti-Semitism and the destruction of Soviet Jewish culture. The lingering of a love-hate relationship with the Soviets is clearly discernible.

The rest of their agenda is no different from generally espoused liberal Jewish thought. They frequently reprint—with approval—statements and positions of the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, and Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

What a far cry this is from the militant agenda of the 1930s and 1940s and the support it gave to Soviet and American Communist leadership! A choice had to be made, evidently a very difficult one, between following the Party line in the 1950s and 1960s and

breaking away. That they broke away speaks to the strength of their Jewish identity. Ultimately they chose to be Jews ahead of being Party-led leftists.

The result is a Jewish group of secularists unashamed of where they have traveled and of the battles they fought, fervently believing that socially and politically active secular Judaism has a rightful place in American Jewish life.

The speech

HENRY ALAN PAPER

I WAS on the front lawn just coming down from a dangerous drug when my parents passed in their formal dress and reminded me of the speech I was to give in two hours. They continued across the lawn and with the *swoosh* of my mother's gown entered the family car.

I looked down at my own suit; then gasped: when had I put it on?

My parents had clearly spoken in that tone of combined expectation and admonition that wasn't any easier to dismiss after my two years' absence. No, it wasn't difficult to assume there was something I had forgotten.

But what was it they expected and what was it I had forgotten?

I looked up, just as an unspeakable premonition began to emerge through the layers of my dreaded catatonia:

A speech.

My brother's bar mitzvah speech.

My brother was being bar mitzvahed that morning and I, no doubt with a first-born's unfailing fidelity, had promised to give the traditional speech honoring him.

I rode over to the synagogue in the back seat, pressed between my corseted aunt and my coarse-suited uncle, feeling trapped and feeling scared. The countless hairs on the custom upholstery stood up like a tropical forest somewhere in which I was desperately lost. I who, just a short while ago, had looked forward to the long trip (the trip!) home with an innocent's anticipation (yes, I remembered now: I had even placed my brother's bar mitzvah at the top of my