

THE JEW AND HIS CULTURE

By NATHAN AUSUBEL

In the many aspects of the fight against anti-Semitism one strong positive weapon has been conspicuously neglected, the actual contributions of the Jewish people to world culture. The editors of NEW MASSES felt that a campaign against those who use the Hitler pattern should avail itself not only of varied political actions but should also extend the understanding of both Jews and non-Jews concerning the culture of one of America's important minority peoples. We then proposed, in an editorial in our November 27 issue, that the wide observance of a Jewish History Week, comparable to the Negro History Week of February 12, could serve as an excellent focus for such an undertaking. NM sought the support and comment of other groups and individuals in this project. Here Mr. Ausubel explores an aspect of establishing fuller recognition of the legitimacy of Jewish culture in America.

THERE can never be an end of speculating why so many well-meaning, progressive Jews avoid so desperately learning about themselves as Jews! They seem to suffer from a trigger-allergy toward all matters relating to Jewish life and problems. These they regard as the parochial preserves of the political Zionists and the religionists. As social-minded, thoughtful individuals they are keenly, and justifiably, disturbed by the problems that plague the Chinese, the Negroes, the Spaniards, the Javanese and the Greeks—but the Jewish problem somehow leaves them uneasy or cold, except insofar as it affects them in a personal way. What do they know of their people's past: of Jewish history and literature, of Jewish cultural activity that has had a continuity for almost three thousand years? Out of a genuine cultural hunger they will read extensively on Mayan sculpture, Persian pottery and Balinese music. Yet these same humanists with a universal urge for knowledge and beauty are precisely those who smile disdainfully whenever something related to Jewish culture is brought up.

Why is that? Is it because there is no such thing as Jewish culture?

Only the brashly uninformed will deny its existence.

Is it because Jewish culture is inferior to other cultures?

Those who think so invariably have an inadequate knowledge of it. Is it reasonable to pass judgment on something one does not know?

Is the material hard to find? No, it is at hand and easily obtainable. The same intellectual Jew who will study the philosophical writings of Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas will ignore those of Maimonides and Hasdai Crescas, two great Jewish thinkers who were at least the equals, if not the superiors, of those Christian schoolmen, as Spinoza himself has testified. Then there is the Jewish literary enthusiast who reads Dante, Campanella and Petrarch with the awe appropriate for the canonized classics, but who has never taken the trouble to read the medieval Jewish poets Solomon ibn Gabirol, Moses and Abraham ibn Ezra, and Yehudah ha-Levi, about whom Heine wrote:

*True and pure and without blemish
Was his singing, like his soul.*

Why then does the literate Jew ignore the Jewish great?

The answer is a melancholy one. In the wilderness of the world through which the Jews have been wandering for nineteen hundred years, both they and what they produced have been despised. The learned anti-Semite has passed judgment upon or ignored the products of Jewish culture, saying: "Impossible! No Jew can create works of enduring value!" Ironically enough, the cultivated Jew has accepted this judgment. This perhaps explains why a poet of the first water like Solomon ibn Gabirol, who in my opinion was superior to Dante in profundity, in sensitive musical utterance and in the expression of civilized values, has been kept out of the pantheon of world literature. Like clothing, culture too has to be fashionable and the Jewish philosopher, poet and writer has to be crowned with reluctant Gentile laurel leaves before his talents are perceived by Jews themselves. Jewish culture, which is a step-child among the cultures of mankind, will never be able to take its rightful place in the esteem of the world unless Jews first rediscover it and take it to their hearts.

Strangely enough, many great Gentiles never felt the inhibitions toward Jewish culture that so many Jews display. The Jewish cantillation of Scrip-

ture was adopted by the Church fathers and gave birth to the Gregorian Chant. Jewish hymns, without fuss and feathers, were adopted into the church liturgy during the early centuries of Christianity. Few know, for instance, that the fourth century *Te Deum* is an adaptation of the Hebrew hymn: *Roni v'simchi bas Zion* (Rejoice, ye daughters of Zion!) Synagogal hymns were employed by Marcello for his masses. Schweitzer relates that Bach used to trudge miles to distant villages in order to hear "the pretty little tunes" of the Jewish bands (*klezmorim*). No doubt he used some of them. Nor did Beethoven hesitate to employ the *Kol Nidrei* theme in a major string quartet.

The moral of all this is: that art and truth speak a universal tongue, and that Jewish culture is as deep as a well for those who wish to drink from it.

IS IT unreasonable or "reactionary" to ask the thoughtful Jew to get to know himself as Jew? In the quest for understanding the ancient Greeks adopted the rubric: "Man—know thyself!" and became the benefactors of mankind. One would logically be led to assume that any educated and progressive-minded Jew—who is moved, if not by social motive at least by intellectual curiosity, to delve into history and literature, ancient, medieval and modern, treating of all races, nations and civilizations—would at least be intrigued by his own people's history! That, unfortunately, is a false assumption. The average progressive Jew, who takes such pride in fighting against racial and national discrimination, including anti-Semitism, is abysmally ignorant of Jewish history and culture. It is with him as it was with little Esther Ansell in Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto*—"... far keener than her pride in Judas Maccabeus was her pride in Nelson and Wellington." Only, unlike little Esther, the average educated Jew today knows almost nothing at all about Judas Maccabeus, even though his heroes are more attractive than those two kettledrums of British imperialism.

Who can deny the reality of a fact? The Jew has not risen out of thin air. He is the product of certain life-forces, bearing the stamp on himself of the events and accidents of his people's amazing history. In that sense, and in

that sense only, the Jew is unique. To deny it is to deny reality itself. For, besides being an American, a Frenchman or a Russian, the Jew is *also* a Jew by the irrevocable law of fact.

The position of the Jew in society as a member of an oppressed people is analogous to that of the Negro. The Negro is not just an American—he is also black, a member of a distinctive group with a unique historical past. It is not possible for him to understand himself, to cope with his problems as an individual in an insufficiently democratic society unless he first gets to see and know himself in the frame of reference of *all* Negroes, and then of *all* society. Therefore, as upstanding, intelligent Negroes are doing today in matters concerning their race, the Jew too must study the history and literature of his people, must acquaint himself with its socio-ethical traditions, its truly great men and women, its devotion to learning and the arts, to the sciences and scholarship, and to the social progress of mankind.

Naturally, the Jew who is determined to disidentify himself from his people has to construct a rationale for it to silence the pangs of conscience. There are two varieties of this type of Jew. There are those who see no contradiction whatsoever in being an American and a Jew at the same time. A far greater number disassociate themselves from Jewish interests out of supposed *principle*. If they are liberals they say with William Lloyd Garrison: "My country is the world!" This means they may not *morally* notice anything of less than cosmic proportions. If they are radicals they regard a serious and sustained concern with Jewish life and culture as narrow nationalism, as a "reactionary" manifestation. Of course they are honest and of course they are resolved to resist Jew-baiting, but while doing this they believe they would be surrendering to the enemy if they admitted that they are Jews in any other sense than birth. Such an admission, they fear, might subtract something from their stature as *Americans*. Rather, they uphold to the hilt the doctrine of the anti-Semites when they accuse the Jews of being "clannish" and "exclusive." Therefore, by going *away* from Jewish life and culture they think that they thus blend into the rest of society and thereby "solve" the Jewish problem.

These progressives seem to be oblivious of the fact that to be consciously a *Jew* is not only no moral crime but that it is against the very principles of

Marxism-Leninism to deny it! How can they possibly forget that in the Soviet Union, where there is full equality and cultural autonomy for all the numerous national and ethnic groups, there is taking place a dynamic resurgence of Jewish life and culture? Does this concern make Soviet Jews less of Soviet citizens? No. Does this make those who are Communists less of Communists? Perhaps better ones, for the aim of socialism is to lead a people to its fullest cultural expression. Both Lenin and Stalin recognized the progressive features of Jewish culture and its historical continuity. They did everything possible to encourage its development, but with a socialist content.

It is quite possible that without intending it to be so these Jewish progressives are working toward the goal of a Great Central Plain of undifferentiated universal culture, and that is not only a historical impossibility, not only an un-Marxist conception, but an appalling objective even if realizable!

There should be a realistic recognition that a man is what he is, that he cannot and should not try to run away from himself and from an active identification with his people. If a man's name is Mao Tse-tung—besides being a Communist he is also *Chinese*. If a man's name is Ben Davis—besides being an American, and a Communist, he is also a *Negro*. And if a man's name is Joseph North—besides being an American, and a Communist, he is also a *Jew*!

Perhaps the most important of all questions for Jewish adults to consider is that of Jewish children. Together with all other children they are the hope of the world. Every effort must be made to see that they grow up without those terrible mutilations to their psyche that most Jews in our society suffered as children because they were Jewish. Jewish parents have to show wisdom and great care in protecting their chil-

dren against the emotional effects of anti-Semitism, but they also must have knowledge of Jewish life. How can they hope to help their children if they remain ignorant of such vital matters?

How is it possible for Jewish children to grow up without emotional conflict and trauma in an environment which is unfriendly to Jews where it is not outright hostile? It forces upon them the recognition of their Jewishness by means hardly less than violent. The sensitive child, unless its parents can help it in this kind of crisis, is thrown back upon itself and that is where the blind rage, the frustration, the bitterness of injustice lacerate the delicate child-mind and leave unhealing scars upon it.

Children, tormented by anti-Semitic experiences, come to their parents and ask: "What is a Jew, mother?" "Why do they throw stones at me because I'm Jewish, father?" "Why do they call me 'Christ-killer'?" "Are all Jews crooks?" "Are Jews cowards?" And a hundred other questions. The tragedy of such a situation for both the intelligent Jewish parent and child is movingly described in Joseph North's article "A Jew Looks at His America" [NM, January 16].

How many Jewish parents are competent to answer their children properly, informatively, clearly, sanely and without further confusing their troubled minds? No Jewish parent has the moral privilege of remaining blind to this responsibility. Only knowledge of Jewish problems, history and culture can help the Jewish child whose sensibilities have been so grievously hurt to regain his human self-esteem and dignity in the greatness of his people.* Does this encourage chauvinism? Not at all! One can love one's people without blindness, without arrogance. Knowledge and culture, even Jewish culture, enlarge the vision, deepen the understanding, give human warmth to the heart. Love for one's family does not diminish love for one's country; love for one's people only leads to love for all mankind.

* While there are a number of schools for adults in New York and elsewhere devoted to the study of Jewish culture, they have a decidedly religious orientation. However, a new institution of great promise, with a progressive, secular point of view towards Jewish studies, has just opened in New York. This is the School of Jewish Studies at 13 Astor Place. Courses are given in current Jewish problems, in Jewish history and literature—ancient, medieval and modern. There are also classes in Yiddish and Hebrew, and other subjects. The faculty includes Frederic Ewen, Albert Kahn, B. Z. Goldberg, Dr. Raphael Mahler, William Zukerman, etc.



"USO," by Cpl. Leon Miller.

BIG BUSINESS VERSUS YOU

KNOW your enemy. It was the Nazis and the Japanese cabal during the war. It is American big business today. It was fascism then. It is incipient fascism now. If we look abroad, we find big business in command of our foreign policy, being tough in China, tough in eastern Europe, very lenient in Japan and Germany toward the industrial and financial combines that are the heart and head of fascism. The alliance with the USSR has suffered atomic fission, while the alliance with Britain has been converted into a battering ram against Big Three unity.

At home the two most powerful monopolies in the world, du Pont's General Motors and Morgan's US Steel, are out to crush unionism. General Motors has gone through the motions of collective bargaining; US Steel and the other steel companies haven't even bothered with that. These mastodons of monopoly can afford prolonged strikes. The workers and the country can't. "Never before, perhaps," writes the December 1 issue of *Business Week*, "has a major employer had so little direct economic incentive to end a stoppage by making concessions to a union. GM's federal tax structure is such that the net cash cost of the strike, even if it lasts well into next year, will be relatively inconsequential."

In other words, the government, through its tax laws, which for two years after the war guarantee profits at least equal to the pre-war level, has made a gift to General Motors, US Steel and other corporations of a strike-breaking fund of millions of dollars. And with the cards stacked in favor of corporate greed, President Truman has stepped in to deal out a domestic Munich. The Norton-Ellender bill, introduced to carry out the President's proposal for a "cooling-off" period, is, as an analysis by the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties points out, even worse than was indicated in the Truman message. "In his message," states the National Federation, "President Truman said nothing about breaking strikes. In his message President Truman said nothing about making assistance, encouragement or financial aid

given to strikes unlawful, which would subject union members and their sympathizers to injunctions and damage suits similar to the notorious Danbury Hatters Case. Yet the legislation proposed in his name contains anti-labor provisions which would accomplish these results." And it has opened the way to even more dangerous legislation—the Ball-Burton-Hatch bill and the subjection of unions to the Hobbs anti-racketeering act.

There is a prevailing impression that the auto strikers, the steel workers, who are set to walk out January 14, and the electrical, radio and machine workers, who have voted to strike after January 1, are asking for more money than they have been getting. If they were, they would be entitled to it in view of the fabulous profits of the corporations. But what they are demanding is the *same* take-home pay as during the war. For the highest paid among them, the auto workers, this averaged between forty and forty-five dollars a week. What they are fighting for is to be able to buy as much meat, as much milk and groceries, as many shirts and dresses, as much medical and dental care, as during the war. What they are fighting against is an actual wage-cut which lowers their capacity to buy.

Now all this may seem very remote to C. E. Wilson, president of General Motors, who, according to the latest Treasury report, received in 1944 the second highest salary in the land, \$459,041. This is \$1,257 for every day of the year, including Sundays and holidays. And it may seem very remote to Ormond E. Hunt, Albert Bradley, Donaldson Brown and Charles F. Kettering, GM vice-presidents, who, with Wilson, had a combined take of \$1,781,269—exclusive of dividends from GM stock and other investments. But for John Smith, who works on the Chevrolet assembly line and has to support a wife and three kids on reduced pay, it's part of his very guts.

And this question is no less close to all those who depend on workers' purchasing power for most of their livelihood and don't have swollen reserves, guaranteed profits and half-million

dollar salaries: the farmer, the butcher, the grocer, the retailer, the doctor, the lawyer, etc.

The corporate overlords are fighting Mr. and Mrs. America not only on the labor front, but on the production front as well. It is big business that is on strike—on strike against America. (See page 3.) And the government is cravenly knuckling under. Here is the real face of "free enterprise"—the mask of war-provoking, poverty-breeding, democracy-hating monopoly capitalism.

Know your enemy. And act.

Housing and Truman

ONE MILLION American families are living doubled up in homes and apartments built for single families. The housing crisis has reached an emergency stage and is growing more acute daily. In Europe, where millions of houses were wrecked by bombs, the liberated democratic governments treat the problem as a war emergency and a vital defense of the people's needs. In the Soviet Union, where the welfare of the people is always the paramount concern, over a million shattered dwellings have already been rebuilt. In our country the housing emergency is still treated largely as an opportunity to enrich real estate sharks and profiteers.

The Truman administration, which inherited and shelved the Roosevelt record of bold dealing with emergencies, is treating the housing problem with a typical combination of do-nothingism and appeasement. On October 15 all priority controls on building materials were lifted to make a black marketers' holiday. Now fifty percent of the materials have been ordered placed under priorities for the construction of homes of \$10,000 and under. No concrete provisions have been made for homes of \$6,000 or less, levels at which shortage is most acute. The effect in the profiteering atmosphere will be that the builders will concentrate on \$10,000 homes requiring \$100 monthly for financing and upkeep. This price will automatically shut out the vast majority of American wage earners.

To be sure, the National Association