

The *Morning Freiheit* and the Situation of the Soviet Jews (Part 2)

By N. Koppel

(The following is an English translation of the second half of a letter in Yiddish sent to the Morning Freiheit recently, with a copy to Jewish Affairs. The author, the brother of Paul Novick, editor of the Morning Freiheit, is a retired Soviet journalist living in Moscow. The Morning Freiheit has published the letter, with comment by Chaim Suller.)

Particularly when in the Soviet Union we were making preparations for the historic celebrations honoring the 30th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany, the Soviet newspapers wrote a great deal about the tremendous contributions to the victory made by many Soviet people. Among those mentioned were many Jews.

Komsomolskaya Pravda published a long article, together with a picture, about the Soviet Jewish poet, F. Kogan. He went off to the front as a youth, became a lieutenant in an intelligence unit, and was killed in battle in September of 1942. The editors appealed to their readers: "Be deeply aware that his fate was that of an ordinary young man of the 1940s, upon whose shoulders in those years fell the most difficult of experiences."

The newspaper also wrote about another poet, Captain Moishe Ribakov, who died heroically at the front in July 1943.

In another issue, the paper told how a 12-year-old, a tall Jewish girl, Zina Podolskia, fooled the military authorities into believing she was 16 years old, and was accepted in a nurses' training program. She was quickly sent to the front with a health instructor, Yitzchak Polichuk. This young girl later became the driver of a military vehicle, and by the close of the war she was the driver of a tank. She was wounded in battle several times.

The paper also described how five Komsomol members who worked together in a Moscow factory carried out intelligence forays. Among the five killed in battle were Nachem Kogan, S. Yefimtchik and Lifshitz.

On the 5th day of May, the paper wrote about correspondents who died at the front. Among the 12 journalists named are mentioned Yakov Greenberg, Michail Rosenfeld, Lazar Shapiro, V. Gordyevsky and others with obviously Jewish names.

The newspaper printed a lengthy article by the well-known Soviet Jewish movie cameraman, Roman Korman, in which he described

how on the first day of the war--June 22nd--groups of cameramen were organized within the studios for every front. Each of the cameramen carried a movie camera and a gun, and immediately joined the battles with their cameras and weapons. Many died heroically. More than forty of these cameramen died in battle, never to see the day of final victory. He mentioned Isaacson, Kogan, Elbert, Lazovsky, Scher and others.

Soviet Culture also wrote of the major contributions during the war years of the film directors, such as Donskoi, Arnshtat, Yudin, Raisman; artists Shtrouch, Partinson; writers German, Latkin, Stein, Lentsh, Fish.

The central army newspaper, Red Star, wrote considerably about how the officer, V. Geller, commander of the political division of a Leningrad air force unit, did an outstanding job of organizing the defense of the city during the 900 days of blockade.

In a long article by Meyer Kreiger, the newspaper displayed a photo of Lieutenant Joseph Utkin who was among those at the front who built the bridges over rivers and destroyed the enemy's mines.

Pravda described the role of the Soviets during the war years in the planning of military production, and mentions the names of A. Yaffe, A. Frumkin, V. Volkovitch, A. Schmidt and others. Among those involved in these undertakings, who provided this know-how, working day and night, falling from exhaustion and not going to their homes for weeks at a time, were engineers V. Gurevitch, A. Yudin and others.

In still another issue of the paper, it expressed its thanks to the commander of a 364-man artillery unit, Y. Perelman, and to others who had sent in material regarding war heroes.

In March, the Moscow newspapers reported how 1,500 workers received four distinguished guests in the Central Moscow Hall, Colona Hall, and among them were two Jews: the Director of the Youth Theater, A. Kagan, and the former chess champion, Michail Tal.

Not long ago, the newspapers printed a decision by the highest government body in which three cultural workers were awarded the title of "Honored Cultural Worker." Among them were two Jews: Israel Michaelovich Leonov and Akim Chaimovich Ostrovsky.

The political publishing house issued a booklet, Letters from Undying Russians, letters from proletarian revolutionaries who died in the struggles against the class enemies in the years 1905-1920. Among the few score letters written in their final hours by the prisoners condemned to death by the counter-revolutionary forces are published letters from M. Rabinovitch, Y. Rutman, Leo Spivak, A. Lutzki and other Jewish revolutionary fighters.

The booklet, issued in a printing of 300,000 copies, closes with a comment from the editors: "These fallen heroes of the revolution passed on to us their thoughts and feelings before their

untimely deaths. They called upon us to fight until the final victory of the liberation of mankind from exploitation, for peace in the world, and for the happiness of the people. And this generation of the Soviet people follows in their path of struggle."

The publishing house has now reprinted for the fifth time the book The Fallen Heroes Speak. These are the letters written by Soviet fighters against German fascism from within Gestapo prisons who, before their deaths, wrote to their wives, parents, children and, in general, to the Soviet people.

The book opens with an appeal by Maxim Gorky: "Granted that you died!...but in the song of your devotion and strength of spirit will always be a living example, a call to pride, to freedom, to light!"

Among the more than 100 letters from the fallen heroes are a significant number of obviously Jewish names, such as: L. Weiner, B. Luria, Lazar Fefernik, A. German, V. Bloimin, G. Landau, K. Golkin, and others.

In the foreword of the book, they state: "The cries of the heroes ring out over the fields of Russia. These sons and daughters of our multi-national Soviet Union--Russians and Ukrainians, White Russians and Latvians, Tartars and Jews, and many others--these international cries call for a condemnation of racism, and for a holy struggle against fascism.

"This book--these are the last words from those who paid with their lives to free the homeland in the struggle against fascism. Before their death, they appealed to us, to those who would read their letters, 20-30 and more years later. . . ."

These are only a small portion of the many, many ways in which the Soviet press "supresses" the distinguished, active participation of Soviet Jews in the life of the country, in its heroic history, and in the bloody struggles in defense of the first proletarian state in the world.

In order to familiarize the Soviet people with the life and history of the Jewish people, the publishing houses translate the works of Jewish writers into Russian, Ukrainian and other languages.

Beginning with the earliest years after the revolution until today, the works of the Jewish classicists Mendele, Sholem Aleichem and Peretz are issued, as well as of those who came after them, and the contemporary writers and poets of today.

A collection of stories by Mendele, including The Little Person, The Journeys of Benjamin the Third, and Fishke The Lame, 520 pages, was issued in a printing of 100,000 copies.

In the introduction to the book is described the "oppression,

disenfranchisement and the difficult economic conditions in the lives of the Jews in the confined communities in the towns of Tsarist Russia. The grandfather of Jewish literature, Mendele (Abramovich), through his creative works, opened the eyes of the Jewish masses to the horrors and terrible injustices of the social order of Tsarist Russia, and to the real content and character of the robber class--of the bourgeoisie."

In this period when the nationalistic movement, Zionism, was born, they attempted to involve Mendele, but the writer remained outside the movement. "The people need bread, and not Palestine," he briefly commented in one of his letters.

Sholem Aleichem's works have been issued many times. In honor of his 100th birthday in 1959, six of his volumes were published in sums of 225,000 copies each. A second printing of these same six volumes was re-issued two years ago, in sums of 100,000 copies each. The works of Itzik Feffer, I. Charik, Nathan Luria and others have been issued in Yiddish and translated into other languages as well. And how many Yiddish books have been translated into English and published in the United States? And in how many copies?

In their anti-Soviet propaganda, the Zionists and those who issue the call to follow them ignore the wide internationalist educational effort which is conducted among the Soviet population by the cultural institutions in the struggle against narrow nationalism (which often develops to become national chauvinism and also anti-Semitism).

Such educational work is conducted not only in the workers' clubs and culture palaces, but also in the libraries. The libraries are not only involved in the distribution of books to readers, but also with publicizing the latest books dealing with the arts, technical works, the social sciences, politics, and others.

Several times a month, book exhibits and review discussions are organized for newly-issued books. Often, meetings are arranged for the readers with the authors of these books, or with writers and literary critics in general. Several weeks before such sessions, which we call "reader conferences," the libraries display announcements referring to the scheduled appearance of the author of a particular book, and it recommends to those interested to read the book and to participate in the discussions at the readers' conference. It is necessary to describe one such conference.

In September of 1974, the Morning Freiheit printed several of my articles about a novel, He Didn't Include Himself in the Notes, by the writer B. Vassiliev. In this book he tells of a young man, Nikolai Flughnikov, who, in June of 1941, completed his studies at a military school, and was sent to serve as a lieutenant in the Red Army in the garrison of Brisk. He arrived in Brisk on the 21st of June, one day before the war.

In a restaurant in town he met a Jewish fiddler and a young

Jewish girl who worked in an officers' kitchen in the camp. He made his way to the camp with her help. Since it was by then late in the evening, the lieutenant was unable to report to his military unit. So he postponed his reporting for duty until the following morning, and spent that night with the soldiers who served in the kitchen. Early on the 22nd of June, the fascists attacked the camp--and the war began.

As is well known, the heroic defenders of the Brisk garrison held back a large force of Hitler's army in their attack against the Soviet Union for over a month. Some isolated units of defenders held out much longer, until the last drop of their blood. The legendary heroic Lieutenant Fluzhnikov, first with a small group and finally alone, held out in the destroyed part for nearly ten months and continued the battle against the fascists.

Among the three remaining Red Army soldiers was one who, in his attitude toward Jews and toward the Jewish girl, began to speak like an anti-Semite, like a fascist. The Lieutenant challenged him and damned him as a fascist, and when he attempted to join the fascists, the Lieutenant shot him.

It was this book that was discussed at a readers' conference at the Gorky Library in Moscow, which 97 readers attended. This discussion was led by a representative from the Writers Union, the critic V. Sokolov. Fifteen people participated in the discussions. Here are some of their comments:

Z. Filatova: "Quite a strong impression remains after reading the book. The story is close to me because its hero is my own age. The hero turned himself into a flag, so to speak. The book correctly portrays the experiences lived through by the heroes."

Miriam Itkina: "The book is truthful and realistic. There are a number of pages which cannot be read without becoming upset. The main theme of the book is--humanism. It permeated the entire book. In spite of the horrible experiences, the ending of the book is optimistic. It makes a strong impression."

Y. Shtefniak: "I'm in complete agreement with the comrades that the story is realistic. Even now, there are many serving with the same dedication as then, who feel their responsibility to others, who see that no one is insulted irrespective of nationality, and who fight against anti-Semitism and traitors to their country. Today's young people in the Western countries know little about the past war. A lot more should be written about the price we paid for survival."

V. Zovialova: "The main theme of the book is humanism, moral strength, the struggle of an individual to be recognized as a human being. . . We believe in the words of the hero, although he died."

Aaron Trachtenberg: "Vasiliev's book draws to itself the deepest

attention. All of the heroes, both the positive and the negative, mirror the realities of life. The author fulfilled his responsibility very well. It's a pity that he was unable to be here to listen to us."

Anna Kobzeva: "These are the sort of books on which our children are raised. The hero of the novel is my age, and although 30 years have passed, he is in every way a person of today."

Valia Ivanova: "In each of Vasiliev's works, the main theme is humanism. There still are some young people who are egotistical, and who must learn humanism from the heroes of this work."

Y. Futatina (a teacher): "Vasiliev's book disturbed my students very much. They reacted to the characters in the novel as if they were alive, and calling upon them to fight to their last drop of blood, to their last breath, against fascism and national oppression in whichever country of the world it may exist."

M. Biryukov: "One feels a belief in the moral values of the individual. Each person faces the problem: 'What do I know? Who am I?' The hero of the novel also faced this problem. The tragic experiences brought out his humanistic soul, and you identify with him. The ending of the book is very symbolic."

A. Kuznetsov: "I took part in the war to defend the Fatherland. I was in Stalingrad, Kiev, Smolensk, and in the garrison at Brisk. The novel truthfully portrays the heroism of the Soviet people in the battle to free mankind from fascist oppression, and for the equality of all peoples."

In his closing remarks to this readers' conference, the critic V. Sokolov, pointed out that in all of his appearances at such discussions, this documentary work by Vasiliev has been properly evaluated. The author takes his hero from everyday life, beginning with the last evening of peace. The 20-year-old Lieutenant Flughnikov, who was unable to join his military unit when the war broke out, did not wait for orders from a superior officer, but began to fight the enemy on his own initiative and understanding. Here, it was correctly pointed out that under the extraordinarily difficult conditions, completely isolated and without military direction, he not only fought the Nazis, but also the traitor within his own small group of defenders who had insulted the Jewish girl and wanted to defect to the enemy.

The author Vasiliev had himself participated in the war, and therefore could speak from first-hand experience, and not others' stories. That which he describes in his novel are not imaginary but historically documented facts.

A progressive newspaper, in the struggle against the Zionists and all other anti-Sovieteers, should be writing about such a wide-scale educational effort in the spirit of internationalism, which

is being carried on in the Soviet Union. No matter how great one or another difficulty, of economic growth or weaknesses, sometimes quite serious and important, as Lenin pointed out, do not permit yourself to "suppress any number of undesirable or bitter facts," don't lose "your ability to see clearly and soberly, in order to properly assess the forces." In the same manner, at the time of the New Economic Policy, some individuals had "suppressed" the facts--those who after the revolution were not capable of seeing anything but the hunger, the illegal trading and speculation, which encouraged in them an oppressed feeling.

In a letter to Gorky, Lenin wrote that our newspapers must pay more attention to how the working masses in a real sense are building something new in their day-to-day work. And this is true not only with regard to economic problems, but also in terms of the national question within the Soviet Union. Not everyone has fully achieved this understanding of the spirit of internationalism. This is a major and not easily accomplishable process. We must be aware of all the facets of our life, particularly the main feature, our educational work for internationalism.

When I was in the United States last year, several people boasted to me that a number of Jews were serving in important government positions, such as Kissinger, Schlesinger and others. They complained to me that this was not so in the Soviet Union. They didn't believe that this was so.

As is well known, elections took place on June 15 in the Soviet Union for the Soviets of every village, city and republic. Among the newly-elected deputies are also Jews. In the Central Moscow City Soviet alone are many deputies with obviously Jewish names, such as Katz, Nudelman, Khatzkelwitz, Lifshitz, Kogan, Gaberman, Berman and others. A number of them were elected as heads of important departments of the Moscow City government. Even the representative of the Moscow militia, Commander A. Gelfreich, is a Jew.

But this is not the important thing. For a revolutionary, the main thing is not who, or from which nationality one or another government representative comes, but whose class interests he represents and defends; a class approach--this is of the highest importance

The writer, David Galkin, wrote a novel, The Cymbal Players, in which he describes how the hard-working Jewish folk masses of the small villages in Tsarist Russia achieved their freedom and a happy life, thanks to the October Revolution.

The well-known Russian writer, Constantin Simonov, in his introduction to this book, touches upon the national question and says: "In the ideological struggle, if one wants to understand any form of nationalism, be it Russian or Jewish, or any other, the cornerstone of the struggle is not to divide people by their national allegiance, but according to their class approach, separating them as either the proletariat or the parasites (those who sit on the backs of others)."

When we speak of a government official, and particularly about a nation, we can never forget the class approach. I am reminded of my presence at a meeting of the Morning Freiheit where (Chaim) Suller delivered a report of his trip to Israel. All that he saw there was "good, and good." Several of the members of the committee present were dissatisfied with the report. "Are there no longer in Israel any social problems? No class struggles?" they asked him. How come, he, a "progressive" person, didn't notice? And how do the hard-working masses live there? Not a word from him about this.

Lenin warned about the dangers of national egotism, national rigidity and narrowness. He said that a true proletarian internationalist does not only consider his own country. But above it, he places the larger interest of the freedom and equal rights of all nations.

The Soviet socialist society has created a deep feeling of unity of the working people among its more than 100 nationalities, uniting them in an historically new society--a Soviet people-- and has developed a new life style--friendship among peoples, and mutual respect for national feelings.

The capitalist world has fought against the first workers' government all these years. From the very first day of the October Revolution, they supplied arms to the counter-revolutionaries and interceded with direct military intervention. When all this failed, they then attempted an economic blockade to strangle the emerging Soviet land. When our country, with intense energy, successfully industrialized its economy and began to challenge the industrially developed countries, the capitalist world unleashed on us its most reactionary advance guard--fascist Germany.

Between these two worlds there was a fierce armed struggle. And when the Soviet people destroyed them, too, the capitalists then developed a broad anti-Soviet propaganda with the goal of antagonizing the Soviet nationalities against each other.

A sharp ideological struggle is being waged--a class struggle--and individuals, if they are truly progressive, dare not waver in the struggle, and should not become diverted by individual weaknesses within the Soviet Union, or otherwise they will help (often against their own desires) the class enemy in his anti-Soviet propaganda and activity.

The General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, Leonid Brezhnev, pointed out:

The Soviet people are strangers to the concept of higher and lower peoples--and still more--the primitive ideas of national and racial superiority. The Soviet people are internationalists. This is what our Party teaches, and this is what our entire system teaches.

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