

# TALKS WITH SOVIET LEADERS ON THE JEWISH QUESTION

By J. B. SALSBERG

## INTRODUCTION

In publishing the series of articles below, JEWISH LIFE is taking the unprecedented step of devoting about half of one issue to a single item. We do so because this series is the most extended available account from a responsible Communist source of views held by leaders of the Soviet Communist Party on the Jews in the Soviet Union. Author of the series is J. B. Salsberg, for many years a member of the National Committee of the Marxist Canadian Labor-Progressive Party and from 1942 to 1954 a member of the Provincial Parliament of Ontario. Mr. Salsberg here recounts conversations he, together with others of his party's delegation, held with Soviet leaders in Moscow last year.

But there is another reason for our deep interest. The startling revelations about what was done to Soviet Jews and Jewish cultural-communal life in the past 20 years in connection with the departure from the socialist theory of the national question and criminal actions against many Soviet nationalities, as well as Jews, pose problems for progressive and socialist-minded people in our country. The situation makes necessary a frank discussion of the Soviet leaders' approach to the Jewish question in the interests not only of fellow Jews in the Soviet Union, but also of maintaining the health of the progressive and socialist movement.

There will be many who disagree, as do the Editors, with some of the views reportedly held by Soviet leaders on the Jewish question. It is our opinion that the Soviet Union is a powerful force for

world peace, for liberation of all lands from colonialism and for socialism. In light of what we believe to be the fundamental rightness of these policies, it seems to us that errors made on the national question imperatively require correction. Only by a continuing exchange of views will the truth about this question emerge and receive recognition. It is in the hope of providing authentic material for further discussion that we publish this series and we invite comment from our readers.

We do not share any tendency to allow disagreements on this issue to distort our perspective on the primary importance of problems of the Jewish community in our own country or of domestic and foreign issues. No matter what may happen abroad, the obligation of American Jews is to fight for equality and security of our own Jewish community and the promotion of progressive Jewish cultural-communal life as a part of the essential guarantees of democracy.

And this obligation extends to strong alliance in our common interest with the brave fight of the Negro people for first class citizenship, the strengthening of democracy at home and the winning of world peace.

This series is translated from the Yiddish. It originally appeared in the Canadian weekly *Vocheblatt* in nine parts from Oct. 25 to Dec. 20, 1956.

THE EDITORS

## I: BEGINNINGS OF THE PROBLEM - THE 30's

IT is a good many years since I have spoken publicly about the painful problem of Jewish life in the Soviet Union. This silence on my part about such a great and nagging question was a most painful experience. It was a thousand times harder than speaking up because both friends and foes failed to understand it and misinterpreted it. I therefore feel an obligation, before getting into the heart of my subject, to explain certain details about the past.

As long ago as the late thirties I became worried about several develop-

ments in Jewish social and cultural life in the USSR. At that time a number of cultural, educational and social institutions that were really flourishing, with fearful suddenness began to wither and disappear. The normal channels of contact between Jewish associations in the Soviet Union and their counterparts in the rest of the world became more and more clogged. It was clear that some kind of evil blight had descended and was devastating Jewish cultural achievements. Why such a bitter frost in midsummer? This question tormented a great

many Jewish communists, left activists and a great many others who had rejoiced in the development of Yiddish culture in a country building socialism. These persons, all loyal friends of the Soviet Union, became very uneasy about Birobidjan, which had already begun to wane.

We asked questions, demanded answers, but no clear reply was received by anyone.

In 1939—and I am saying this for the first time in public—I took it upon myself to utilize my position as a member of the highest body of a communist party to pose this question in Moscow. I did this in July of that year at a meeting of the Communist International.

It is not essential to go into all of the details, all of the conversations, discussions, etc. Suffice it to say that Georgi Dimitrov, head of the International, exhibited the greatest sympathy, understanding and interest in the question. He encouraged me to pursue the matter persistently. For hours at a stretch he and I privately discussed the question and it was decided that he would set up a small commission in Moscow. I for my part undertook to form a similar commission of Canadian and American political-cultural activists. The latter would prepare a basic document on the question which would serve as a basis for discussion and for a broader conference in a short time.

Shortly after my return I had a meeting in New York. Within a matter of weeks a document was prepared. But then the war broke out and the whole project was left hanging in the air.

The problem of Jewish cultural activity in the Soviet Union did not start in 1948 when the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was dissolved, the publishing house and newspaper *Ain-*



J. B. Salsberg

*keit* closed and when the shocking arrests of Yiddish writers and leaders began. It started way back in 1934-1935.

Second, I want to make it clear that it is false to think that people like myself in several communist parties were not concerned with or ignored the fact that Jewish cultural activity in the USSR seemed to be shriveling even before the war.

Certainly there were many at that time who were infected with the disease of the cult (although unconsciously everyone of us was somewhat infected) and believed that in the Soviet Union no deliberate wrong could be committed by that party or government. But those of us who were already disturbed by the bitter doubt that the developments in Jewish social-cultural life were not only unexpected but inexplicable in the framework of our concepts about the socialist approach to the cultures of nationalities and national groups, did do something about this process.

But lastly I recall the 1939 episode in order to provide a background explanation for the fact that I kept these suspicions and my activity out of the

public eye. Perhaps, in retrospect, it would have been better if I had spoken out in 1939. But critics of the USSR there were aplenty.

I am not referring to the imperialists and the fascists. I have in mind those Jewish writers and cultural workers who criticized and attacked the condition of Jewish cultural-social life in the USSR before the war. Some did it sincerely. Others did it insincerely. But critics there were and the chorus was loud. I therefore decided for this reason and because of many serious international problems of that

period, to pursue my investigations quietly through available channels, the party and the Comintern.

Whether these investigations would have led to results, is debatable. I certainly was confident. My hopes were shared by Paul Novick, editor of the *Morning Freiheit*; Rubin Saltzman, former head of the progressive Jewish fraternal movement in the U.S.A.; J. Gershman, editor of the Canadian *Vochebnik*; Sloves and George Koenig of Paris, and a host of other Jewish writers and political figures.

## II: THE STORM BREAKS — 1948

THE outbreak of the Second World War halted all plans to place the whole question of Jewish cultural-social life in the USSR before the highest bodies in that country. With Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, however, the situation there changed radically and it appeared that outside intervention was no longer necessary.

The Soviet Union saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of Polish and other Jews who fled from Hitler. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was established in Moscow. The united voice of Soviet Jewry was heard throughout the world calling upon their "brother Jews" to join forces in the common struggle against the enemies of civilization, the worst enemies of the Jewish people. Solomon Mikhoels and Itzik Feffer, never-to-be-forgotten Jewish people's artists of the USSR, arrived in North America as the official representatives of Soviet Jewry to the Jewish communities of the United States and Canada.

The belief was strengthened in all of us that after the defeat of Hitlerism a new glowing chapter of cultural and social activity on the part of the Soviet Jews would begin. We also believed that the new relationships established between the Soviet Union and the western states during the course of the war would at the same time lead to a permanent cultural and social relationship between Soviet Jews and the Jewish communities of other countries or at least with the progressive cultural forces and institutions in capitalist countries.

After the war the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee devoted itself to the restoration of Jewish cultural and social life destroyed and decimated by the Nazi invaders. But external relations again began to shrink. Once again a fog seemed to descend over the perspectives for organized distinctive cultural activity for the USSR's two and a half to three mil-

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lion Jews. A cloud appeared in the form of Ilya Ehrenburg's article denying that Jews in one country had anything to do with Jews of another. (During my visit to Europe in 1947 despite all of my efforts I was unable to enter the Soviet Union.) Then came the sudden blow at the end of 1948—the closing of all Jewish institutions, the complete end to all contact with Soviet Jewish writers and communal leaders and the growing reports of arrests, deportations, etc.

Most of us were astounded by these developments. We consoled ourselves with the hope that sooner or later there would arrive an official statement explaining the matter. For it was impossible to believe that such an event could be ignored by the Soviet government. Days stretched into weeks, weeks into months and no statement came. As in other lands, we also began to knock on doors, send letters and make inquiries. But there was no response. Our hopes were deceptive. And while both friends and foes kept accusing us that we and the leading people particularly knew what had happened but were refusing to divulge the truth, the fact is that we really and absolutely had no official or semi-official information about what had happened. Those few activists, Jewish and non-Jewish, who did have an opportunity of visiting the Soviet Union during those years and who made it their business to inquire into this matter, returned with news which didn't make sense to me.

Readers will recall that in July 1956 (*Vochenblatt*, July 12) the Labor-Progressive Party of Canada adopted a resolution in this regard. It states among other things:

"Difference of opinion between J. B. Salsberg and the rest of the National Executive developed and persisted from 1949, when he first declared that the dissolution of Jewish cultural institutions in the USSR and action against prominent Jewish writers had been carried out by crude administrative means, without public discussion and in disregard of the interests and desires of Soviet Jewry. He therefore advocated intervention by the Labor-Progressive Party in the form of a direct inquiry to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union asking for an explanation. The Executive, and later, the full National Committee, rejected Comrade Salsberg's proposal and supported the position that: Jewish citizens in the USSR had become such an integral part of socialist society that there was no longer any real desire on their part for separate Yiddish language institutions; that the dissolution of those institutions was part of the normal process of development; that any measures against individual Jewish citizens could only have resulted from infractions of the law and were taken under the law."

I could not accept this interpretation. The fact that most progressive people did accept it shows to what extent boundless trust in the USSR existed in our ranks. It was this trust that Stalin betrayed.

I should also point out that for several years I sought an opportunity of visiting the Soviet Union personally in order to investigate the matter. Unfortunately I did not obtain this opportunity until the summer of 1955.

Since the LPP statement of July, many people have approached me with the legitimate question: why did I not make public my difference of opinion with the party? Others have expressed

anger at what they consider as silence "when I knew what had occurred."

I would therefore like to make it perfectly clear that "I never knew what actually happened." My common sense logic made me suspect what probably had occurred. But what I did do was reject the official explanation and request instead that the whole matter should be officially presented to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. I also asked for the opportunity of making a personal visit. Hence there can be no question of hiding any facts from the public.

But there is legitimate ground for criticism in the fact that I did not make my own views—which differed from those of my party—public and defend them and completely ceased to speak or to write about the question of Jews in the USSR.

So much for that. I remained with my opinions and defended them to such an extent that I ceased to be a member of the secretariat and later of the National Executive Committee of the LPP. But the truth is that I did not do this publicly. And here are the reasons.

Let us recall what was going on in those days. The cold war was at its height. The danger of a third world

war hung over our heads. The anti-Soviet hysteria was very great. Among Jewish people the question of the Jewish writers occupied a central place both among honest people whom it hurt and among those who utilized the issue as part of the general anti-Soviet chorus. And yet neither the well-intentioned nor the others were able to influence Stalin through their actions.

It was clear to me at that time that the only way to succeed was through the efforts of such parties as the LPP in Canada and through other communist parties. I exerted all my efforts in this direction.

Unfortunately this was not successful. The Stalin cult was too deeply implanted in the parties of most countries. And I must admit that during my visit to Moscow in reference to the Jewish question in the summer of 1955, when the facts about the devastation were beginning to come out, I could not free myself from the gnawing feeling that, had the communist parties of other countries acted, they might have been able to save the executed writers—both Jewish and non-Jewish. Perhaps. But they lacked that measure of real independent thinking in relation to the Soviet Union that was required.

### III: MOSCOW TALKS, 1955

**I**N July 1955 I finally received an affirmative reply to my request to go to the Soviet Union. The sole purpose of my visit was to discuss with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union what had happened to Jewish life in that country since 1948.

Upon my return I once again re-

frained from writing or speaking publicly about the results of my visit. The only exception was an interview granted to the *Naie Presse* in Paris. This interview was reprinted in the *Morning Freiheit* and in other progressive newspapers and a short interview was published in the *Vochenblatt*.

In other words, for me it once again became a question of keeping silent publicly and fighting inside the party. Here is why.

In my first conversations with responsible, although second-rank representatives of the Party in Moscow an effort was made to convince me that there really existed no Jewish problem in the USSR. When I insisted on an official discussion, the Party's Central Committee appointed a special commission to meet with me.

The commission gave me in substance the following answers to my questions.

The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was dissolved because it had ceased to fulfil the function for which it had been established. It had been created during the war for specific war needs and after the victory over fascism it became superfluous.

Bourgeois nationalist influences had

penetrated the Anti-Fascist Committee. A Jewish member of the commission added that, shortly after Golda Meir arrived in Moscow as the first ambassador from Israel, a large crowd of Jews staged a demonstration for her in front of the Moscow synagogue. He also said that he knows that secret Zionist groups exist.

Jewish writers had been arrested. This was the work of Beria and "regrettably innocent people died as his victims." Writers of numerous nationalities—not only Jews—also suffered.

The Soviet government was reviewing all cases involving Beria's arrests. All those falsely arrested were being freed and rehabilitated. A number of the Jewish writers had already returned home. I was urged to be patient and assured that those still remaining in prison would shortly be released.

When I asked when and where, assuming the Anti-Fascist Committee

was infected, the question of bourgeois nationalism was discussed with the committee, I received no answer. I then wanted to know why this committee, having outlived its usefulness, as they said, a new social-cultural committee along the lines existing in Poland was not organized. They replied that there was no need for such a committee.

I received no clear-cut answer to my question regarding the fate of such prominent writers as Bergelson, Feffer, Markish, Kvitko, Hofshstein, Der Nister. One of the members of the commission repeated, however, that he knew that "innocent people had been done away with." (I believe that the members of the commission really didn't know the details.)

The representatives of the Central Committee were exceedingly hospitable. They arranged a number of personal meetings for me with important individuals. I had a long talk with Rabbi Shliffer and some of his congregational leaders. I also met Saul Lubimov, a singer who had just returned from "Beria's exile." I attended the first of his three concerts in Moscow—the first completely Yiddish concerts for many years. Although the weather was very hot, tickets were sold out well in advance. I had a long talk with the manager of the central concert bureau. They outlined for me their plans for a series of Jewish concerts in some ten cities. They were confident that these concerts would all be sold out. I also spoke to many Jewish people in the streets, in restaurants, in stores, although not all were prepared to talk to a foreigner.

From all of these conversations, discussions and meetings it became clear to me that the sudden closing of the Jewish institutions was—as I had suspected all along—a brutal act of violence. The explanation that "integra-


tion" (Russification) was responsible for the cessation of all Jewish social and cultural activity was thoroughly false despite the fact that the process of assimilation had undoubtedly been going on.

As to the leading Yiddish writers, it appeared that a great tragedy had occurred. Although no one admitted that they were dead, no one was prepared to assure me that they were alive.

It was evident that things were obviously improving and one could expect them to improve still further. Nevertheless, even though the first signs of cultural revival were appearing, the official party approach to the question of Jewish cultural-communal activity is in my opinion both negative and inconsistent.

When I returned in August 1955, I made a full report to the National Executive of my party. My conclusion was that, to my great regret, my previous position on this question was more than confirmed, that the official position was erroneous and that the party should review its position and publicly admit its mistake. Furthermore, although I was a member of the National Committee and although my inquiries in the USSR had received the approval of the National Executive of my party, they were nevertheless of a personal character. I therefore suggested that the LLP as a whole should place the matter before the top leadership of the CPSU.

Unfortunately the executive of the Canadian party could not bring itself to agree with these conclusions. They simply could not understand that such things could have happened in the Soviet Union. After many delays it was agreed that, since a very important leader of the party would soon be in the Soviet Union, he would again take up the whole question with the



### YIDDISH THEATER AT 80

**F**OR ten days, from December 20-30, 1956, the 80th anniversary of the Yiddish theater in Rumania, where playwright Abraham Goldfaden organized the first Yiddish theater in history, was celebrated. In honor of the occasion a newly-completed building for the Rumanian State Theater (Jassy houses another Yiddish theater) was dedicated. Present were Rumanian dignitaries, personalities in Rumanian artistic and cultural life, the head of the Rumanian Federation of Jewish Communities and the chief rabbi. *Goldfaden's Dream*, which recalls the life and work of the playwright, was performed.

A statue of Goldfaden was also unveiled at the Jassy Jewish State Theater.

Recent Polish poster advertising performance of Goldfaden's Dream.

CPSU on the basis of my report.

Upon his return the discussions would be resumed in the LPP's National Executive. Under these circumstances and in the continued belief that the best way to influence the situation was through party channels, I agreed to wait. This resulted in another period of silence on my part—of pursuing the matter "inside."

Thus the situation dragged on until the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956. It was there that Khrushchev made his historic speech about

the crimes that were committed under Stalin's leadership. Now it became clear as day; especially after the famous article in the Warsaw *Folks-Shtimme* [published in *JEWISH LIFE*, May 1956—Eds.] what had actually happened to Jewish culture and its creators in the Soviet Union.

The party then adopted the resolution acknowledging its error and re-elected me to its National Executive. It was further agreed that I should leave immediately for the Soviet Union to take up anew this whole question with the Soviet leadership.

#### IV: 1956 TALKS: WHY NO SOVIET STATEMENT?

**A**FTER attempts for eight years it finally became possible to officially take up the whole question of Jews in the Soviet Union with the top leaders of the Soviet Communist Party.

On Aug. 21, 1956 an official delegation of four representing the Labor-Progressive Party arrived in Moscow to present a number of political questions to the Central Committee of the CPSU. The status of Soviet Jewry was one of these questions. I was very gratified to see this tormenting question finally placed by an entire party delegation as a central problem. With regard to this, our delegation made history. For, although representatives of many communist parties often made inquiries about developments in Soviet Jewish life that were difficult to understand, no other party—to my knowledge—had ever placed this question not as a marginal matter but as one of central importance requiring full discussion with the Soviet leaders.

We were given a great deal of time. There were many discussions and meetings with leading individuals and groups. Four official conferences with top leaders and assistants took up about 14 hours over four separate days. Among the chief leaders taking part in one or more of the sessions were Ponomaryev, member of the CPSU Central Committee; Suslov, member of the Politburo and Khrushchev, first secretary of the party.

The "Jewish question" played a prominent part in these conferences and the last session, at which all the above-mentioned leaders were present, was almost entirely devoted to discussion of Jewish problems in the Soviet Union. And whereas the other questions discussed are of great political and social significance—and I might write of them on another occasion—I will here limit myself to the "Jewish question."

For the sake of brevity I will in-

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## Visit to the Jewish Museum

By *STELLA BUCHWALD*

**I**N May 1947 a Jewish Museum was opened in New York City at 92nd Street and Fifth Avenue. The building, formerly the family mansion of Felix M. Warburg, had been donated by his widow and family to the Jewish Theological Seminary, which converted it into the museum.

As the descriptive brochure informs us, "The Jewish Museum is dedicated to the exhibition of Jewish ceremonial art and the promotion of the visual values of Judaism." Exhibits of objects used for Holy Days and in the religious ceremonies in the synagogue occupy the three upper floors. The entrance floor is given over to transient exhibitions of painting and sculpture, usually the work of a contemporary Jewish artist.

In the permanent collection are many examples of Jewish ceremonial art. Torah curtains done in expensive cloth and elaborately ornamented hang on the walls. There are cases placed around the room so that everything may be easily viewed, show groggers, mezuzahs, dreidels, phylactery cases, scrolls of the Esther story, Torah pointers and many objects used for religious ceremonies. The most numerous and most interesting display is the collection of Menorahs and Hanukkah lamps.

*The museum* directors have chosen to group these examples of the ritual art by geographical origin and by the metal used in their manufacture. Since

*STELLA BUCHWALD is a painter.*

Jews settled in many different countries in their wanderings, a geographical grouping seems warranted. Work from Italy, Germany, Russia, Poland, Persia, North Africa, Morocco, Syria, Palestine are represented.

However, why should there be separate groupings by the metal employed? It is true that in many of these countries Jews were forbidden by law to work in precious metals, that they were excluded from the craft guilds. For this reason the actual work and manufacture was done by non-Jews, although the execution was supervised by Jews. Brass and silver ornaments were very popular—silver because it was costly, and brass because it is shiny like gold. The ceremonial objects done in these metals are very elaborate and the designs are intricate.

But the grouping has little to do with the metals themselves. Some of these pieces are beautiful. There are lovely cases for the Esther Megilla done in fine filagree, delicate boxes for phylacteries, richly carved Torah pointers, artistic groggers and dreidels. On the other hand, where pewter and wood were used, the work is much simpler. Pewter, a tin alloy which is cheap, was used for household needs. In those localities where the people were poor, they decorated these utensils and used them for rituals. They have a homemade look.

On the fourth floor there is a display of medals, coins and plaques. The coins are of particular interest because they have to do directly with the life of the people. Also on this

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dicating the main questions we raised in this connection and the explanations we received. At the end I will attempt to draw conclusions.

And now to our questions.

In view of the fact that no official explanation has been given of events of 1948 and 1949 during which all Jewish institutions — including the Jewish publishing house and the paper *Ainikeit*—were closed and Jewish writers, cultural workers and community leaders arrested; and the circumstances around the arrest of the Jewish doctors have not been sufficiently clarified, there is a strong body of opinion in other countries—particularly among Jewish people—that an official or at least an authoritative statement openly drawing proper conclusions is necessary to clear the air and create the social and political atmosphere for the renewal of Jewish cultural-social activity within the Soviet Union.

The answers were in substance the following.

It is true that Jewish writers and leaders suffered at the hands of the Beria gang, but writers and leaders of all other peoples and republics suffered no less. The Ukrainian writers suffered proportionately more than Jewish writers. The same was the case with the Georgians. Russian writers also were victims.

As for the “doctors’ affair” more non-Jewish than Jewish physicians were arrested at the time. When I interjected that the official charge against the doctors was a plot to kill Soviet leaders on orders from the “Joint Distribution Committee” and Zionists and that therefore the affair

had taken on an anti-Jewish character, I was told that a number of the non-Jewish doctors indicted were also accused as agents of foreign countries. (Whether the answer is satisfactory is another question.)

Since Beria and his group were exposed, everything is being done to correct the wrongs, they said. The government has openly condemned the frame-up of the doctors and all of them are back at their previous posts. The dead Jewish writers have been rehabilitated along with others, their families are being assisted and their works published. Those who did not perish have also been rehabilitated and are continuing their work.

Regarding the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, we were told it became in its later stages a sort of aid society engaged in securing jobs and living accommodation for Jews. This called forth great dissatisfaction in some circles. People asked why this committee intervened and sought special concessions for Jewish citizens while all others took up their problems directly with local government bureaus.

About *Ainikeit*, the organ of the Anti-Fascist Committee, we were told that this paper had done great damage, playing into the hands of anti-Semitic elements by constantly exaggerating the role Jews performed in the post-war reconstruction of ruined cities and regions. “That Jew is head of the project in Minsk.—That one is head of the project in Vilna . . . and so on.” It went so far that many Jews complained about it.

When later I asked a very respected Jewish activist whether these claims were justified, he sat stunned. It is not true, he said, that the Anti-Fascist Committee engaged in such work. What may be true is that Mikhoels, eager to help everyone, may have given letters to individuals needing a

place to live in those post-war years. But even if he did that, he did it as a member of the Moscow Soviet.

“These things were thought up by Jewish renegades who played the part of informers. The same was true,” he argued, “about *Ainikeit*.”

The answer to our request for a public explanation was that in their opinion it was neither necessary nor well-advised. Not necessary because the wrongs are being corrected and

actions speak for themselves. And not well-advised because such a statement would create much dissatisfaction. Other peoples and republics who also suffered from Beria’s onslaught on their culture and artists would wonder: why a statement only about Jews?

Well, again it’s the same. Whether the answers are satisfactory or not, is a separate matter and I will write about that below. But these were the replies to our first question.

## V: STATUS OF SOVIET JEWS

THE second group of questions that our delegation placed before the Soviet leaders dealt with the fundamental problem of the official definition of the Soviet Jews as a group. In other words, we wanted to ascertain whether the Communist Party of the Soviet Union considers the Jews a people, a nationality, a national minority, a national group or a religious community.

Superficially this may strike the reader as a strange, hair-splitting question. The truth is however that this question goes to the very roots of our problem. For under Soviet conditions it is the ideological approach of the party to any question which is generally the decisive factor in its solution. That is why the manner of our introducing this question and the nature of the reply are so extremely important and significant.

Our delegation asked whether Soviet Jews are considered a community entitled to their own newspapers, educational institutions, cultural associations, theaters, etc.

The reply was that in Birobidjan the Jews are such a community and

have a newspaper in Yiddish, schools and other institutions. Outside Birobidjan they have no special status but are considered and treated like all other citizens of a given republic. For example, Moscow possesses a large Ukrainian, Armenian and Georgian population. But none of these people have their own newspapers, schools and theaters. They read Russian newspapers, send their children to the Russian schools, etc. Imagine what would happen if each of the above groups as well as others who come to the capital from other Soviet republics would start publishing their own newspapers in Moscow. If they want newspapers or books in their own language, they can get them from their respective republics.

I pointed out that in the period following the revolution and continuing until the middle thirties this was not the approach. In those years there developed a rich and creative Jewish cultural life. A network of Jewish schools existed throughout Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, etc. Yiddish newspapers, magazines, theaters, scientific institutes and publishing houses existed in many centers. Even after

the war and until 1948, when everything was suddenly closed down, there was a significant level of cultural activity in the Yiddish language in Moscow and in several other cities.

This was the answer:

The building of socialism and the great expansion of heavy industry transformed the social structure of Jewish life. The small town with its patriarchal mode of life disappeared. Former cap makers and tailors became workers in large enterprises in the big cities. Their interests are the same as their fellow workers'. They speak the same language and belong to the same organizations. They want their children to have every opportunity, so they send them to the same school as the rest of the population. They became integrated into the life around them. Every vocation is open to them and they do not need any specific cultural or communal activity in the Yiddish language. They live their lives in the surrounding culture. Those who still desire specific Jewish activity are small in numbers and they comprise the more backward elements. It would be an "anachronism," we were told, to base the party's policy on them.

I argued that even if the situation is as described, there would still be several hundred thousand Soviet Jews who desire and need specific secular Jewish cultural and communal expression. Socialist justice, I declared, required that the possibilities be given these Jews to obtain them.

At this point one of the participants asked me how I knew that there were several hundred thousand people who desired the things that I described. I answered with another question: how did he know that there weren't? To this he did not reply.

Nevertheless we were assured the following:

First, the work of the Jewish writers is being translated into Russian and other languages. They will thus be read by many more people than in the past.

Second, there would shortly appear a Yiddish literary journal.

Third, a number of books in Yiddish would shortly be published.

And last, the number of Jewish concert groups is increasing.

(How the above outline corresponds to the integration theory is a subject in itself to which I shall return.)

This, then, led us to another question—a question which arises naturally out of the foregoing discussion and exchange of views.

On several occasions I emphasized the need to allow the Soviet Jews—those that desire Jewish cultural-communal expression—to decide for themselves the extent and nature of the cultural, educational and social institutions that were required. Naturally none of these would be contrary to the interests of socialism and the Soviet state. I argued that in order to achieve this objective the Jewish working population would require some form of democratically constituted body (on an all-Union or republic scale) that would have official recognition and support from the government. Such a committee could be elected at periodic conferences of representatives of Jewish workers' clubs (that would first have to be established) throughout the country. Such a central committee could organize, develop and co-ordinate the cultural, educational and social activity in all parts of the country. Such a committee could serve as a means of contact between the non-religious part—which is the larger part—of Soviet Jews with Jewish labor and progressive forces throughout the world. It could also participate in in-

### Recent News About Soviet Jews

**A** BROADCAST on the Moscow radio on Jan. 10 announced that a Yeshiva (rabbinical seminary) had been set up in Moscow. Chief Rabbi S. Shliffer will head the new institution.

A Jewish cultural resurgence is taking place in Vilna. In the past months a chorus of 120 has been assembled, expected to reach 200 soon, a Yiddish dramatic group of 30 is functioning with an advisory council of 19 cultural figures, and a dancing group of 30 is rehearsing. Large display bills in both Yiddish and Lithuanian in the center of Vilna invite people to join the groups. At the end of December 1956 the first public performance of the three groups was given before an overflow audience. The drama group presented the first act of Sholem Aleichem's "200,000," the chorus sang folk songs and the dancers performed Jewish and contemporary dances.

Thirty-four Soviet Yiddish writers late in December greeted their colleague Noah Lurye, a leading Yiddish fiction writer, on his 70th birthday.

On Nov. 24, a delegation of seven Soviet Yiddish writers accompanied the widow of Aron Kushnirov in laying flowers on the grave of the noted Yiddish poet and heroic fighter in World War II, Aron Kushnirov, who died shortly after the war.

ternational Jewish peace conferences and other important Jewish congresses of a progressive character.

In outlining the above propositions I had in mind the Jewish Social-Cultural Association in Poland—an organization that is responsible for the rich and widespread Yiddish cultural activity among the Jews of People's Poland and which receives such wholehearted support from the government of that country. I did not mention the Polish experience by name since I felt that Poland was not too highly regarded in Moscow at that time.

But the Soviet representatives, clinging to their previous positions about the developments and changes in the life of the Soviet Jews, maintained that such a central body as I proposed was not necessary. They did agree that it would be advisable for Soviet Jews

to participate in certain international gatherings. But this did not require a special central apparatus or committee.

(It is relevant to note that a number of prominent Soviet Jews recently issued an appeal to Jews in other countries regarding the present Egypt-Israel crisis. Furthermore, a Soviet Jewish delegation attended the unveiling of a monument in Paris to the memory of those Jewish fighters who perished in the struggle against the Nazi murders. It is significant that neither among the signatories nor in the Paris delegation were there included any of the Yiddish writers. But there did participate in both groups people who told me personally that Soviet Jews have become so integrated that there was no longer a need for specific cultural activity, let alone specific communal organizations.)

## VI: ANTI-SEMITISM IN THE USSR?

THE third group of questions concerned the charges and reports of anti-Semitism and discrimination against Jews in the Soviet Union.

From all of these conversations, including those with ordinary Jewish citizens, I was able to conclude that until the end of the war there was little evidence of anti-Jewish discrimination, that there was no significant sign of discrimination against Jews and that until then there had been absolutely no public expression of anti-Semitism. After the war there did begin to be felt and heard anti-Semitic opinions and actions in various parts of the Soviet Union. This was especially true of the districts which had been occupied for a long period by the Axis.

In the last dark years of Stalin's one-man rule there were times when his acts bore a definitely anti-Semitic character. (Here it should be noted that—although it does not make the experience of the Jewish people any less severe—Stalin exhibited even more hatred and distrust toward a number of smaller peoples. With the greatest brutality he drove these peoples from their ancient homes and sent them to distant exile without the consent of the party or government.)

The most bitter period for the Jewish people was from 1948 to the spring of 1953, when Stalin died. Bitter as gall was the period of the doctors' frameup. During the course of these four to five years very many Jews were displaced from high positions in

the party and from certain government posts (particularly from the foreign service). Jewish students also found it more difficult to enter university and certain heads of factories were not too anxious to hire Jews. Great fear seized the Jewish masses.

It may be paradoxical but it is nevertheless true that even during the worst years Jews continued to occupy innumerable positions of the highest rank. Not only Lazar Kaganovich, who to this day is one of the top leaders of the government, but actually many thousands of Jews held and were promoted in their positions as professors, teachers, writers, artists, musicians, singers, actors, engineers, factory directors, etc. In fact Jews were to be found in most trades and enterprises.

Since Stalin's death the lot of the Jews has steadily improved and the fear is disappearing.

Before I deal with the answers that were received regarding the position of the Jewish people today, I would like, albeit briefly, to deal with several of the general statements regarding Stalin's actions during the latter years of his life. This will make it a bit easier to understand some of the paradoxical situations which developed in the USSR.

According to people who were in the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party, Stalin justified all of his actions with the excuse that they were in the interest of socialism in the USSR. His false theory that as socialism advances the class struggle intensi-

fies rather than weakens, his conviction that war is inevitable and his mania that he was personally surrounded by enemies, all led to the most outrageous acts.

This has a bearing on the fact that officially the government never pursued a policy of deliberate anti-Semitism and Jews were able to hold the highest positions in the worst times. But when a certain woman doctor, who was one of Beria's agents among medical personnel, accused the doctors who attended Zhdanov of deliberately allowing him to die, Stalin's demented brain immediately sensed a conspiracy that must be rooted out. Under Stalin's one-man rule, without the slightest regard for law or human decency the whole state apparatus was set into motion with devilish speed. The press and radio began to spread the Stalin-Beria story that there had been uncovered a doctors' plot—a group of "devils in white" who were serving "the imperialists, the Zionists and the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee of America." Naturally, the doctors confessed to all of the fabricated charges. This made the position of the Jewish people very unpleasant.

And yet in the very midst of this atmosphere of terror there occurred such cases as that of a Jewish woman, resident in Moscow, a former Canadian, who could not obtain employment because she was Jewish. In her despair she wrote a letter to Stalin outlining her case and requesting either a job or to be sent back to Canada. A few days later she received a call from Stalin's office. She was asked the name of the last firm that refused to hire her and was then instructed to go there immediately and demand employment. When she arrived she was met by the director. He received her like a VIP, apologized to her profusely and immedi-

ately put her to work. So there you have the paradox occurring at the very moment of the most outrageous frame up which shook the Soviet Jewish community to its very foundations.

This poisonous admixture of false theories, despotic dictatorial practices, years of lawlessness and brutality (legitimized by the theory that the end justifies the means), suspicion of Jews, particularly the Yiddish speaking, because they might be susceptible to bourgeois and Zionist influences from abroad, and Stalin's persecution mania together with the absence of any official or theoretically justified anti-Semitism, provides us with the background to the events of 1948-49, to the doctors' plot and to the other tragic happenings which persisted until Stalin's death.

And while the major factors making up the above-mentioned Stalinist admixture have been overcome, it is my opinion that certain elements of his policies still remain in operation.

Now, regarding the charges and rumors that there is anti-Semitism and discrimination against Jews in the Soviet Union:

There is no doubt that the heritage of anti-Semitism still persists among certain of the backward elements of the Soviet population. But it is impossible to speak of anti-Semitism as an official government policy when we find Jewish cabinet ministers, Jewish writers (who enjoy nationwide popularity), Jewish artists and scientists of every description, including the head of the all-union atomic energy development. Nevertheless there does exist an incomprehensible caution, a peculiar sensitivity when it comes to taking an open, bold and militant position against manifestations of backwardness. This often leads to acts that are essentially discriminatory.

Why, for example, is there no offi-



cial declaration regarding Stalin's anti-Jewish actions? Is it because other Soviet peoples will ask why the government issues a special declaration only about Jews? I cannot be content with this reply.

I asked why it is that passports and other personal documents of Jewish citizens are marked "Yeurel" (Jew). When I asked how this practice squares with the statement that most Jews were fully integrated, I got no clear or satisfactory answer.

I inquired why *Pravda* had omitted the reference to Jewish writers from its reprint of Eugene Dennis' article. [The omitted passage is: ". . . snuffing out the lives of more than a score of Jewish cultural leaders. . . ."—*Eds.*]

One of the editors of this Soviet paper replied that this was done because it was a "controversial question in the USSR." Now what kind of an excuse is this? Since when does *Pravda* fear to handle controversial questions?

At one of the official sessions I inquired about Madame Furtseva's famous interview with the *National Guardian*. I quoted from the *Guardian* those sections in which Mme. Furtseva explains that in some government departments there was too great a concentration of Jews so that they were transferred to other jobs. [See *JEWISH LIFE*, Aug. 1956, p. 9—*Eds.*]

To my great regret and shame I must record the fact that, although one of the chief leaders who answered me neither corroborated or denied Mme. Furtseva's words, his own explanation more than confirmed the essence of her statement.

The truth is, he tried very hard to prove to me by examples that the transfer or dismissal of Jewish employees in republics which were originally backward but which now have

"their own" intelligentsia and professionals able to fill the positions that Jews or Russians once held had nothing to do with anti-Semitism. But what is the meaning of "their own" in a socialist country? Why yield to the demands of undemocratic elements?

Still worse was the example given of the importance in a state which includes many nations and peoples of always taking into account the sensitivity of these nations and peoples. He described the problem that arose when the government decided to send six talented music students to an international competition. It so happened that all of the six chosen were Jewish. But in the interests of good relations among peoples there was interference and only two Jews and four from other peoples were sent. "And the first prize in the festival was won by a Georgian," he added.

This example is not only in my opinion a slap in the face to the four eliminated Jewish students; it is also a criticism of those responsible for the Soviet Union's nationalities policy. The explanation is full of colossal contradictions. How does it jibe with the "integration" theory and the concept that Jews "are expressing themselves in the culture of the people among whom they live?" This was the explanation every time I asked why full opportunities were not provided for a rebirth of Jewish culture. Who examined, and why, the chosen student from Minsk, Moscow or Kiev, to find out if he was a 100 per cent White Russian, Great Russian or Ukrainian or if he was only a Jewish White Russian, Jewish Great Russian or Jewish Ukrainian? Are there two classes of citizens in the Soviet republics?

In my opinion such practices are in complete contradiction with the most elementary concepts of socialist equality. In my opinion this is an

example of inconsistency and of a catering to the most backward elements in Soviet society. And in my

opinion it is a form of discrimination that must be fought, exposed and eliminated.

## VII: THE VIEWS OF KHRUSHCHEV

ALTHOUGH I have hitherto avoided naming persons who said this or that, I want to make an exception in the case of Nikita Khrushchev for several important reasons.

First, because Khrushchev is now the most influential person in the Soviet party and government. His approach to, or opinion on, any question is very important, perhaps decisive. What he had to say about Jewish problems is therefore of special significance and must be carefully examined.

Second, because I was disturbed by his attitude toward the "Jewish question" as he expressed it at our conference. I am especially concerned because in my opinion the main party leadership at present orients itself on Khrushchev's central conclusions on Jewish questions in the Soviet Union, although they may not agree with all his approaches to these questions.

Third, Khrushchev's conclusions strengthened my conviction that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union is still guilty of serious deviations from the liberating socialist theory of the solution of the national question in a socialist society. This deviation leads to Jewish problems in the USSR.

For all these reasons and because I am convinced that the interests of socialism, of the Soviet Union and of Soviet Jews require a public discussion, polemic and criticism of every

development in the USSR which is in contradiction with socialist democracy, or which smacks of backward prejudice, I make an exception in the case of Khrushchev.

As I mentioned earlier, Khrushchev participated in the official discussions at the final meeting with our delegation. The session took place in his own office and lasted for approximately two hours. It was devoted almost exclusively to the Jewish problem in the USSR. The reason for this was that both my colleagues on the Canadian delegation and the leaders of the Soviet party who had participated in the previous sessions were aware that I was still dissatisfied with the explanations that we had received regarding the "Jewish question." Khrushchev was obviously aware of this fact. He therefore directed most of his remarks to me and tried to persuade me of the consistent class character of the party's approach to this matter. Unfortunately his words had the opposite effect on me. Our disagreement became crystal clear.

Khrushchev's opening remarks were devoted to the achievements and problems of the USSR. He dealt with some aspects of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and with developments in the international arena, with special stress on their effect on preserving world peace. His views and conclusions on these

general questions were extraordinarily interesting and enlightening. I intend to write about these on another occasion.

First, Khrushchev denied all slanders of anti-Semitism directed against himself and against the party. He listed the names of numerous Soviet Jews who held key positions in the USSR. He even mentioned that his daughter-in-law was Jewish.

He repeated the view already mentioned that Soviet Jews in the majority were integrated in the general life of the country. He stressed that such integration was historically progressive whereas separatism was reactionary. He disagreed with the idea of establishing Jewish schools. He showed how much better off Jewish children are if they go to the general schools and remarked that even in Kiev some comrades were complaining that the people preferred to send their children to the Russian rather than to the Ukrainian schools. In Lvov, he said, the Russian theater is competing with the Ukrainian theater.

(I should point out that at no time did I propose any separating of Jewish children only from the general Soviet school system, although I feel this right too must be granted if there are sufficient parents who desire it. What I stressed was the right of that section of the Jewish population that desires to give its children a Jewish education to have the right and opportunity of doing so. Whether this would be in the form of afternoon classes as is the case in Canada and the United States, or in the form of special classes in the regular government schools, or in the form of entirely separate schools where both the general and specific Jewish subjects are taught—as is the case frequently in Poland and Rumania—should be determined freely and democratically

by the parents who are interested in Jewish education.)

Khrushchev then turned to the question that there are good and bad in every people, whether Russian, Ukrainian or Jewish. To make his point he listed some of the negative characteristics of the Jewish people.

During the incorporation into the USSR of those parts of Rumania that reaction had captured during the revolution, very many Jews chose to return to Rumania rather than to adopt Soviet citizenship.

After the liberation of Chernovitz (Bukovina) the streets were found to be very dirty. When the Jews were asked why the streets were not cleaned, they replied that the non-Jewish population that used to be responsible for this task had fled the city.

Thousands of Soviet citizens have taken tourist trips out of the country. Only three have failed to return. All of them were Jews.

Wherever a Jew settles down, he immediately builds a synagogue.

He, Khrushchev, agreed with Stalin that the Crimea, which was depopulated at the end of the war against Hitler, should not be designated a center for Jewish colonization, because in case of war it would be turned into a "*place d'armes*" [a base for attack] against the USSR.

Solomon Lozovsky, world famous and devoted Old Bolshevik, for many years head of the "Red Trade Union International," was unjustifiably executed because he was dragged into the Crimea affair.

(According to information at my disposal, Lozovsky perished together with the Jewish writers on Aug. 12, 1952. One of Stalin's false charges against these writers and against Lozovsky was that they wanted to "tear the Crimea away from the USSR.")

At the close of the discussion

Khrushchev advised me in a comradely way not to allow myself to be saddled by the bourgeoisie and the Zionists.

I was very disturbed by the foregoing and other remarks. They express a backward prejudice against the Jews as a group, as a people—prejudice which is in sharpest contradiction with a Marxist way of thinking. It reminds me somewhat of Stalin's approach to a number of small peoples during the war that he deported because of the sins of certain individuals among them. Khrushchev himself sharply denounced Stalin for these practices at the 20th Congress. In my opinion Khrushchev's statements to our delegation smack of Great-Russian chauvinism, which Lenin so strongly fought all his life. I also feel that his approach to the question of the Jewish nationality is an unforgivable violation of socialist democracy. It can only lead to forced assimilation instead of voluntary integration, which is a historical process for generations.

I cannot agree with those of my colleagues who argue that we have to approach Khrushchev's remarks from a "class viewpoint" and seek out their "class content."

Certainly the class composition of the Russian Jews was a hundred thousand times less satisfactory in the years following the revolution than today, 40 years later. And what boundless confidence and understanding Lenin had for the Jewish masses! What love and hope did the Jewish poor show for the new society in those years!

If Khrushchev's distrust of the Jewish people as a group is justified, then it is a terrible indictment not of the Soviet Jews, but of the Stalinist crimes and distortions of their nationalities policy in general and particularly as applied to the Jewish people.

It is time that we speak plainly and enter into a public polemic with Soviet leaders on this painful matter. After Khrushchev's statements there can be no question about the need for this task.

## VIII: HANGOVER FROM THE PAST?

THE socialist solution of the national question naturally occupied a very prominent place in the theoretical, organizational and propaganda work of Russian Marxists even before the revolution of 1917. One of the first laws adopted by the workers' and peasants' government was a "declaration on the rights of the peoples of Russia."

When Stalin and several other leaders in 1922 showed, by their heavy-handed methods used against the Georgians, that they were exhibiting Great-Russian chauvinist tendencies, Lenin, although seriously ill and confined to bed, felt it necessary to address a sharply critical letter on this subject to the Central Committee. In this letter he demanded the punishment of

those responsible and their public censure. (This letter has only recently been published in the Soviet Union. [English translation in *Political Affairs*, Nov. 1956, pp. 9-14.—Eds.]

With the consolidation of the Stalin regime there began, in addition to all other manifestations of lawlessness, an assault on the rights of the various peoples inhabiting the USSR. Under the cloak of combatting "bourgeois nationalism" there were cruelly liquidated the most devoted revolutionary leaders of the Ukraine, Georgia and other nationalities. This was also the case with some of the earliest leaders in Birobidjan and with some of the Jewish leaders in Soviet Russia proper.

What I learned during my last trip to the USSR only complements and rounds out that section of Khrushchev's report in which are catalogued the heinous crimes committed against a whole number of Soviet peoples. Khrushchev's terrible indictment chills the blood of every person with the slightest sensitivity. And those who try to minimize the terrible consequences of the distorted Stalin policy on the national question do not deserve to remain as leaders and must not be entrusted with the fate of peoples.

If the violations of socialist principles disrupted the cultures of many smaller republics, in the case of Jewish culture the result was complete extinction. Whereas those peoples possessing complete national characteristics—those living in compact masses on their own national territory—were able, even in the darkest days, to continue to express themselves in their own language and other national forms, even though constricted, Soviet Jewish culture was completely cut down. Every tie between Yiddish cultural workers and those Jewish people who wholly or in part derived com-

fort and satisfaction from their creative endeavors was brutally torn apart. Every form of Jewish cultural expression was silenced at a single blow. Even Jewish books disappeared from the libraries and book stores. The only thing that survived is a dimly flickering cultural candle for the several tens of thousands of Jews in Birobidjan.

The 20th Congress touched on the questions. The resolution adopted declared:

"In its national policy, the Party has always proceeded from the Leninist principle that socialism, far from removing national distinctions and specific features, ensures the all-round development and efflorescence of the economies and cultures of all nations and nationalities. In future, too, the Party must attentively heed these specific features in all its practical activities."

However, we can deny that the party always proceeded from the Leninist principle." Theoretically, yes. But what Stalin did with this principle Khrushchev himself exposed. But—and this is very important—I am convinced that the Soviet leaders and the party have still not returned to the path of principle on the national question. Consistency of principle would require that if there can exist Russian schools in Kiev there should also be room for Ukrainian schools in Moscow. Otherwise it smacks of Great-Russian chauvinism. What socialist principle could possibly lead to a leading Soviet spokesman appearing astounded at the idea that there should be Ukrainian, Georgian or Yiddish newspapers in Moscow, if there are sufficient people who desire to read and support such publications? Even under the system of bourgeois democracy we have a multi-language press in Toronto, Winnipeg, New York, Chicago, Paris, London, etc. So why

cannot a similar situation prevail in a socialist state?

Canada is a two-nation state. The French-Canadian nation resides mainly in the Province of Quebec. But there are also French-Canadian minorities in New Brunswick, in a number of districts in Ontario, in Manitoba and in several other parts of the country. Every socialist and every true democrat would fight against any attempt to prevent the French-Canadian people in these regions from publishing their own newspapers, from operating their own radio stations, etc. We consider these rights neither as a favor or a concession but as a democratic right. So why does a Soviet leader today say that if a Ukrainian or a Georgian in Moscow wishes to read a paper in his own language, he can subscribe to it from Kiev or Tiflis?

Or take the matter of "too many Jews" in certain "government departments" (according to Madame Furtseva); or the dismissal of Jews from posts in certain republics because these latter have now developed their "own intelligentsia" who can do the job; or the case of too many Jewish music students on a Soviet delegation. These are cases of injustice from every point of view. And even in Poland recently certain people, even top leaders of the party, were advocating the Furtseva approach and agreed with Khrushchev's advice on the Abramovitch's and the Kowalskis. These Polish leaders publicly agitated for a "regulation of cadres," i.e., that there should not be too high a proportion of Jews in certain jobs.

Fortunately these so-called Marxists have been replaced in the leadership of the party and the government. The Polish party under Gomulka's leadership at its historic eighth plenum adopted the following resolution:

"The party condemns those views

and methods that introduce into the ranks of the party artificial divisions based on national origin or discriminatory practices because of nationality, that lead to the awakening of anti-Semitic prejudices and other forms of nationalist tendencies, alien to the party's ideology and tending to demoralize the ranks of the party's cadre. The party's cadre policy must be based on well defined principles such as political or professional qualifications of the comrades concerned, their outlook, ideological maturity and moral behavior, their connections with the masses and their self-sacrificing devotion to the cause of the working class and the interests of the working population."

And this resolution, you must remember, has been adopted in Poland, where anti-Semitism has deep roots and still exists among the backward sections of the population! And this only ten years after the beginning of socialist construction and not 40 years, as in the case in the Soviet Union!

The Polish party is tackling the problem the way Lenin did. Unfortunately the present leaders of the USSR are not pursuing such a policy at the present time.

Certainly the approach to the national question has been much improved since Stalin's death. Handing back to the Soviet republics certain administrative responsibilities which were previously centralized in Moscow, is the most important illustration of this trend. But there are still many things that have to be done in order to correct the fatal errors on the national question. And the hitherto official approach to the Jews and to Jewish cultural problems is the most striking example of those hangovers from the past which still persist and which illustrate the continued wrong attitude to the national problem.

## IX: THE JEWS AND SOVIET DEMOCRACY

FOLLOWING are other conclusions at which I have arrived.

1. *The Jewish Question is part of the general question of socialist democracy in the Soviet Union.*

A general conclusion to which I have come is that the rise and fall of Jewish cultural and communal life in the Soviet Union coincides with the rise and fall of democracy—socialist democracy—in the USSR. A graph showing the level of Jewish cultural activity and Soviet democracy would indicate a strikingly parallel development.

The new socialist democracy created by the Russian Revolution ushered in an era of sweeping growth in the cultural life of all the Soviet peoples, large and small, formerly oppressed under reactionary tsarism. Among Soviet Jews there developed an all-sided flowering of secular culture that played an important role in the socialist transformation of the status of the Jewish poor and that raised the cultural level of the Jewish population. Schools, all manner of educational institutions, scientific institutes, theaters, dramatic circles, newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, blossomed everywhere. There grew up and matured a whole new generation—a socialist generation—of Jewish poets, novelists, artists, singers, critics, research workers, etc.

Of course it is impossible to leave out of account a whole number of objective factors which contributed to this cultural outpouring. Neither can we ignore the damaging effect of some of the wrongly oriented leaders of the former Jewish Committee of the Communist Party (Yevsekstia). But

this is a subject in itself. What I think is most important and was largely responsible for the gradual decline of Jewish cultural life in the USSR in the middle thirties was the Stalinist suppression of socialist democracy.

The wholesale charges of "bourgeois nationalism" that were levelled at many innocent people in those years played havoc with and weakened those forces that had a healthy and positive approach to Jewish culture. It strengthened the hand of the assimilationist elements and of those who argued that it was their revolutionary duty to speed up the "historical process" of national integration. The more socialist justice was violated, the faster Jewish cultural activity declined.

The period 1948-53 was the blackest for Jewish culture and its creators. These were the bitter years when Yiddish cultural institutions were crushed, when the writers and activists in the Jewish field were arrested and when the tragic doctors' plot was initiated. This dark period coincides with the worst years of Stalin's one-man rule. Democracy was undermined more than ever before. It was at this time that the criminal frameups were organized against the Rajks in Hungary, the Slanskys in Czechoslovakia and their opposite numbers in several other countries.

With the death of Stalin new winds began to blow. They began to melt the ice that had hardened over Jewish culture. To the extent, however, that the Stalin heritage has continued, to that extent has the national question in general and the Jewish question in particular not yet been satisfactorily resolved.

From this we can conclude that the struggle for the full revival of all-sided Jewish cultural activity in the Soviet Union is part of the general struggle to return to socialist democratic norms in all spheres of Soviet life; and that every step in the direction of democratization is at the same time a contributing factor to the revival of Jewish cultural life.

2. *Do the Soviet Jews need or want Jewish cultural and communal activity?*

Many prominent Soviet Jewish personalities and many important party leaders (non-Jews) either questioned the contention that many Soviet Jews want and need distinctive Jewish cultural expression or they completely denied the existence of such a need.

This position in my opinion is false. It does not correspond to reality and merely expresses the subjective desires of those who give voice to these opinions. And it makes no difference whether these desires stem from a "class" approach, or from a general political approach or from an inferiority complex of an assimilationist. I am convinced that at this very moment there are very large numbers of Soviet Jews who desire and need—and even crave—Jewish cultural and communal expression.

It is impossible to ignore or deny that the process of language assimilation exists in the USSR. The same process can be seen in our own country, in the United States, France, England and in other lands where the Jews are in a minority. For a number of specific reasons this process has developed more rapidly in the Soviet Union. Included among the latter is the fact that for a number of years no Jewish schools have existed in the country.

But despite the foregoing considerations there are still many Yiddish

speaking people—young as well as old—in the USSR. Many of those who attended the Jewish schools up to the middle thirties still thirst for a "Jewish word." (In addition, who can say that creative Jewish cultural values cannot be digested in the Russian language; or that the establishment of Jewish educational institutions would not broaden the base of Jewish cultural and communal activity in the USSR?)

Not only representatives of the bourgeois and social-democratic press but also representatives of left-wing newspapers who have visited the Soviet Union all agree that there exists a widespread desire for Jewish culture.

The Jewish writers whom I met, without exception, believe that a Jewish publishing house could sell Jewish books today in numbers not smaller than the volume turned out by some of the smaller republics. As one writer told me: "People speak Yiddish in Vilna as a matter of principle, in Bobruisk because it's natural, and at the beaches of the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea—because it's a pleasure." The Yiddish concerts—and they are expanding in number—are sold out everywhere. I also spoke with dozens of Jews in the streets of Moscow and practically all of them gave the same positive reply, both in regard to the desire to have Jewish books, a paper, a theater, a club, etc., and to the readiness to give their children a Jewish education. Some were quite positive in their personal desire for Jewish social life, but were doubtful whether their children would be interested. True, I spoke to people in the streets, but it was not too difficult to find people to speak with.

Yes, there are many people who need and want Jewish cultural and social life. What's needed is to create

the possibilities and a free atmosphere for their expression.

### 3. *The question of "integration."*

The official line goes as follows. Since integration is progressive and separation is reactionary, therefore no progressive person, especially not a communist, should demand anything which would disturb the progressive process. The consequence of such an approach is: first, that people who demanded Jewish schools, clubs, a newspaper, theater, books, etc., are asking for things which would delay if not continue separatism and therefore are reactionary. And who wants to be a reactionary? Second, if integration is a progressive thing, why not move in that direction more quickly? Why not speed up the process and create a short cut?

I believe that such a placing of the question, and especially when one demands a priori declarations that integration is progressive, amounts to placing the question in an abstract way and not in a concrete manner in the way Marxists should place questions. It means doing away with the possibilities for immediate work, and robbing large sections of a people of their people's culture. You could just as logically argue, for example, that since socialism is progressive and will in the long run abolish classes and even parties, including socialist ones, that we should give up these parties now.

We are here dealing with a historical process of long duration, with "a time that will come" (the prophets also dreamed of the emergence of one people the world over). But we are not obliged to speculate as to how many years or generations this will take or whether it will turn out because we are products of our time and our consciousness reflects present-day reality and not that of the future.

Indeed, objective reality in the Soviet Union is the fact that there are between two and three million Jews there. They have a generations-old history and cultural inheritance. This has not disappeared overnight. They—that is, those that wish it—need, and I believe that eventually they will be given, the unbounded rights and opportunities for the fullest educational, cultural and social activity in the framework of socialist institutions.

I believe that this can and will be achieved, because I am convinced that we are here confronted with an ideological distortion which, in the new period, cannot continue forever.

### 4. *Our task is not anti-Sovietism but a friendly and persistent fight.*

My final conclusion is that we need not despair but that, on the contrary, the conditions for Jewish cultural development in the USSR can and will be changed.

My assumption is based not on subjective desire, but on a number of objective conditions.

First, despite all the Stalinist distortions and injustices, the Soviet Union remains a socialist land. There is no class there that can benefit from oppressing or limiting the rights of any other nation, nationality or people. What has happened until now is not the result of socialism but rather of serious distortions of socialist theory and morality which cannot long continue. The fact is that the bitter period that lasted for some 20 years would have had to end in any case. Stalin's death only hastened the process of the deep-going revision and gradual elimination of the bitter legacy.

Second, the international situation, which played a significant role during the Stalin regime, has become and is continuing to become more stabilized. Of course there is still the danger of

war, but the great strength of the USSR and the evergrowing desire for peace by all humanity is leading to peaceful coexistence between the two parts of the world and this will still further hasten the process of democratization in the Soviet Union itself. This will eventually improve the situation for Soviet Jews as well.

Third, the de-Stalinization process is far from over. You can't rid yourself of such a legacy overnight. I agree with Tito that there remain in the Soviet party and government many who find it hard to break completely with the approach and methods which reigned for such a long time. But the process of doing away with the distortions and evils of the Stalin period cannot and will not be stopped; this is because both the internal and external conditions have radically changed since the pre-war period.

The sole fact that socialism is now a world system, taking in a whole series of states, including gigantic China, simply forces the abandonment of the idea that the exclusive forms and methods used in the Soviet Union over a long period of time are universal. The national peculiarities and varied conditions in every country demand particular approaches, and this must inevitably also influence the Soviet Union in its approach to the various nationalities and peoples in its own country. No individual in the Soviet leadership, great or small, will be able to resist for a long time the new socialist influences and experiences coming from the other socialist countries. From this point of view, the experiences of China, the recent events in Poland, and even the tragic developments in Hungary, will influence and speed up changes in the USSR, which must of necessity affect the approach to the national question and to the Jewish question in particular.

Fourth, I have confidence in the stubborn will of the majority of Soviet Jews and their creative forces to endure the temporary restrictions and rejuvenate their social-cultural life. I do not despair of them. On the contrary, I regard their cultural re-emergence as one that will have vital effects on the life of Jews everywhere.

And fifth, I am convinced that we can play an important part in the rehabilitation of Jewish social-cultural life in the Soviet Union. I mean we who believe in socialism, who were always the friends of the first socialist state in the world, as we were and remain vitally concerned about Jewish culture and all Jewish people's problems. Of course, we should not let ourselves become partners with the enemies of socialism, of those who use the Soviet Jewish problem as an excuse for their anti-Sovietism. But we should also recognize that the time has long passed for us to be extremely reserved in our approach to events in the USSR.

We should carry on a stubborn but friendly ideological and political struggle in a whole number of countries to influence the Soviet leaders to radically change their present approach to the national question, and especially to the Jewish question in the Soviet Union. This must be done with an approach and methods which have not been utilized sufficiently until now. The detailed plan for such a political-organizational approach is an immediate necessity. This is being studied by the progressive Jewish movement in some countries.

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