

CHANGE the WORLD

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The Freiheit's 35 Years

LET'S stand at attention for a moment, and with hand on heart, salute the anniversary of the Morning Freiheit. For 35 years this Yiddish daily has been fighting for socialism. This is quite an achievement, I believe. Just to survive for so many years is a triumph for any radical paper in America.



For almost 10 years I edited the old "Masses," a literary monthly of socialism. It was always touch and go. Every time we put out another issue, I thanked the amiable god who looks after fools, drunks and agitators. I remember a friendly young accountant who offered to go over our books. He said to me with a pale face: "The books show your magazine has been bankrupt for two years. Technically, you are dead!"

It was true. According to the laws of conventional bookkeeping we should have hauled down the flag and left the field. Didn't the magazine "Collier's," with a circulation of four million, do just that recently? But we kept on with our search for the lonesome face of truth in America. Somebody has to do it in every generation.

IT WAS the epoch of the Coolidge-Hoover boom. Quite a few leaders of the left, alleged Marxist thinkers and all, were spinning the fanciest and most elaborate theories.

They announced the glad tidings that a "new capitalism" had been born. An exception to the economic laws, it offered the miracle of a permanent prosperity. The people seemed drugged, as they do today. The national mind was blurred with prosperity. Nothing happened anywhere, it seemed, except that the stock market kept going up and up. Such a time more than any other needs to be reminded of the socialist idea. Socialism must be kept alive, clean and ready as a fine tool for the time when the people will need it.

They certainly needed it in the depression of 1929. The Morning Freiheit was one of the pioneers in that period. The people milled like lost sheep in the dark, icy storm of the great depression. It was the torch of the socialist idea that alone lit up the darkness. And the Morning Freiheit was there.

America is not a nation like others, but as Walt Whitman pointed out, a "nation of nations." All the peoples of the world have immigrated here. The immigrants have fertilized this vast continent with their blood, sweat and tears. It was they who built the industries that made America great. It was their fighting in the Civil War that defeated slavery and preserved a land of free labor.

THE Jewish immigrants, workers in the main, contributed more than their share to the progress of America. They formed a vanguard of the labor movement. It was the unions of the Jewish garment workers that introduced many modern advances, such as social insurance. They were also pioneers in workingclass culture.

The son of Jewish immigrants, was born and raised on the old East Side of New York. It was a stony fatherland where poverty and despair haunted every home. I am always enraged when I hear idiots repeat the familiar lie that all Jews are millionaires. My boyhood was spent amid a vast suffering of the Jewish workers. The

tenements were tall, crowded prisons, the sweatshops, hellholes where pale men and women toiled 16 hours a day.

There was a Lung Block on the East Side, so named because it contained more tuberculosis than any similar area in the world. Yes, we were world champions of tuberculosis, the poverty disease. But the Jewish workers fought on. Their strikes rocked the great city, and finally brought revolutionary change to the garment industry.

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THIS good revolution, that lifted a million people out of the pit of hopeless poverty, was accomplished in the Yiddish language. The question has come up, both here and in the Soviet Union, as to whether Yiddish belongs in the modern world. But the immigrant Jews spoke only Yiddish, as other immigrant groups knew only their native Polish, Russian, Spanish, German and other tongues. How else could they have expressed themselves?

I speak Yiddish, but cannot read it fluently. It is a folk language that touches the heart, somehow. It always seemed to me Yiddish resembled the language of Robert Burns, that mixture of English and Gaelic used by the Scottish folk. Like the Scottish language, Yiddish is intimate, affectionate and witty, poetic and close to the earth and the people.

There was the worst and most degrading poverty on the old East Side. But there was struggle, too, against that poverty, and it resulted in the birth of the mighty trade unions. The East Side of my time was a Niagara of social agitation. It elected the first socialist congressman in America, the late Meyer London.

Out of the depths also emerged a rich and universal culture. My father loved the theatre, and before I was twelve he had taken me to see plays by such classic authors as Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Gorky, Schiller, Goethe, and of course, Jacob Gordin, the East Side Shakespeare. Rarely in America at that time were these authors played in English.

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Yes, it couldn't have happened except in Yiddish. That was the language of the people. To have forced English upon them at the time would have retarded their cultural and socialist progress.

Yiddish is not as prevalent today. Americanization has driven Shakespeare and Tolstoy from Jewish life, and brought in Winchell and Eddie Cantor.

In a recent issue of "Jewish Life" there is a fine piece by the Canadian J. B. Salsberg on the Jewish question in the USSR. Kruschev repeated to him the now prevalent theory that the Jews were being assimilated so rapidly that Yiddish culture was no longer necessary. This is just not true. Many Jews remain there, as in America, who love their old folk tongue. It is a crime against socialism to forcibly take it from them. As the Chinese have well said, "Let all the flowers bloom in our garden." Yiddish is a shy and precious cultural flower of the Jewish people. Long live the "Freiheit" in a free America!

