
Abraham Cahan

by William M. Feigenbaum

Published in the *New York Call*, National Edition, v. 11, no. 84 (April 7, 1918),
The Call Magazine section, dated April 6, 1918, pp. 20, 8.

It is not everybody who can achieve fame in more than one line of activity. It is not everybody who can be a successful editor, a Socialist agitator, a recognized novelist, and several other things, all at one time.

Abraham Cahan has done these things. Twenty-five years ago, he was at it, and already a veteran. Twenty years ago, he had written his first English book, a novel which was hailed as a landmark in American literature. And last fall, he was found night after night, on the street corners, in the halls, in committee meetings, fighting for the success of the Socialist Party with the vim, the fire, and the enthusiasm of a new convert.

The author of the successful novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* would be an important figure in the literary world if he had done nothing else. The editor of *The Jewish Daily Forward* would of necessity be a man of importance. And as a worker in the Socialist ranks, and in his day, a worker in the grinding tasks of organization, Cahan has long ago won his spurs as a leading American Socialist.

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It was in the summer of 1893 — a long time ago — that Cahan, then a young man of 33, took a young fellow of 6 on his lap, and outlined to him the rudiments of baseball. I have since learned that his knowledge of the national game was rather — shall

we say? — a priori; it was scientific, rather than empirical. But his idea in trying to teach me the rudiments of the game, that played a great role in the life of the country, was exactly the idea that he had in writing *Yekl*; just the idea that he had in writing *David Levinsky*.

Here were hundreds of thousands of people who had come to this country with a life, with traditions, with a *kultur* — if you please — so different from the American mode of life that it seemed as if they touched at no point. The hordes of Jewish immigrants, streaming over to America from Rus-

sia and Germany and Romania came to this country. They settled in ghettos. They did not diffuse themselves over great areas. They made Jewries for themselves in New York and Philadelphia and Boston and Chicago.

Many of them were revolutionists. They believed in Socialism; many of them in Anarchism. They tried



to make the Americans believe in Socialism. They organized unions, and tried to work with Socialists of native stock. They found that their lives touched in very few points. And so many of them began to feel that they were altogether self-sufficient, and did not need to get along with the non-Jews.

But there were many who felt that there must be some way of getting into touch with the American people. Cahan was one of them, and this feeling has colored his whole life work.

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And so he has worked all his life to make the Americans understand the Jews, to make them see that they are brothers under their skins. And he has labored to make the Jews see that the Americans are regular people, too, to break down a particularism that sometimes cannot help but grow up when a vast population with one life is precipitated into a set of circumstances, dominated by another.

Cahan saw that the children of immigrants were apt to have a feeling of aloofness towards American institutions, because of these things; so he tried to make them adopt the customs of the Americans. Baseball is neither better nor worse than any other game. But it happens to be the American game, and those who live in this country should know it. So he reasoned, and so he taught.

He saw the ignorance of the American people regarding the Russian Jewish immigrants, and of their great, teeming East Side life. So he told them about that life. He wrote *Yekl* in 1895, to tell them about the life on the East Side, and show them that the Jews, with all their different ways, were brother and sisters under their skins to those who had lived here before.

Abraham Cahan was born in Vilna in August 1860. He was educated in the schools that trained teachers; but he never became a Russian pedagogue. He came to America in June 1882, a slim, youthful-looking, fiery-spirited boy, full of revolt at the land of "*proclamatia*." That is, in the revolutionary movement of Russia, it was necessary to issue "proclamations" to the people through underground channels, because of the strict watch that the government kept upon them, making regular periodicals impossible, and his first feeling at the political freedom of America was the case

that there would be of printing all the proclamations he wanted.

When Cahan came to New York, the East Side was hardly what it is today. East Broadway was still a boulevard, and the swarming ghetto had not yet developed. There were colonies of Jews here; most of them were of the earlier German immigration, and the old Portuguese Jew was still prominent. The Russians were just coming in; when Cahan writes of that influx, in *David Levinsky*, he writes of what he knows at first hand.

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At that time, Cahan was 22 years old; he was very slender, beardless, very youthful looking; he has told me that he looked no more than 16. Also, he was a violent anarchist. He very soon came to his first meeting. There was a speech by some leader of the radicals of the city. He spoke in Russian. The idea of the leaders of the anarchists was to organize the Jews, but the Jews were mostly ignorant of Russian, and these Jews, Russians of the *intelligentsia* type, who did not know Jewish [Yiddish], sought to appeal to them in a language that they did not understand.

Cahan listened to the speaker. It seemed as if something was lacking. The theory was all right, but the means of applying it was at fault. The boyish looking fellow stood up, and said in a very quavering voice, "Mr. Chairman!" The audience looked, and laughed at him. How dare a kid talk at them. And chagrined at their merriment, he strode to the platform, determined to make good. And he did. He was swept away by the passion of his own eloquence. He spoke as no youth had ever spoken. He was carried away by his own fervor. And the audience returned to the seats that they were about quitting, and mad him the hero of the movement. At least, this is Cahan's 35 year old memory of the event.

There were few enough men of education at that time willing to surrender their energies and time to the cause; and Cahan became a leader. But within a year, he had become a Socialist, a change that made the anarchists condemn him as a traitor.

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In 1890, Cahan was editing the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, a weekly Socialist paper in Jewish [Yiddish]. He had been a night school teacher, but he had been fired. A year or two later, that paper became the *Abend Blatt*, a daily, the *Arbeiter Zeitung* remaining the weekly magazine. There was growing up a group of brilliant Socialist writers among the Jewish colony in the city. They organized unions; the powerful garment unions of today largely date from that period. Incessantly working, writing, lecturing, organizing, the great Socialist victories of last fall are largely due to the leaven that was planted at that time.

Among the men who did this work, many of them still active in the movement, were Cahan, Louis Miller, M. Zametkin, B. Feigenbaum, Joseph Baroness, Philip Krantz, and a man about 10 years younger than the rest, Morris Hillquit.

It was about 1896 that there was published in the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, in serial form, a story entitled "Yekl der Yankee." This attracted such wide attention that Cahan translated his own work into English and it was published as a book under the title *Yekl*. It was a remarkable book, and no less a critic than William Dean Howells hailed it as marking an epoch in American letters.

It is a simple story. Nothing much happened. But it was written masterfully and it told the truth. Those who read it knew that the immigrant Jews were just people, "brithers, for a' that."

You can get the book in the public library. It is worthwhile reading it and comparing it with the later, more polished, more artistic *David Levinsky*. But the intent is the same — to show America the Russian Jew as he is, neither better nor worse than anyone else.

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In 1897, the Socialist ranks began to split. The principle party of Socialism in America had been the Socialist Labor Party, dominated by Daniel DeLeon. There was a good deal of dissatisfaction with the dogmatic and domineering ways of this leader, and there were rumblings of revolt.

The party was entirely of foreign origin, or nearly so; at that time, there were rumblings of other things, too. Eugene V. Debs had led the great railroad strike, and he had served 6 months in jail. He went in a Demo-

crat and came out a Socialist. He had organized the Social Democracy of America. There were zeal and propaganda fire and a crusading spirit in that movement that appealed to many. It came from the soil. It was American. It may have been a bit unsound scientifically, but it was spontaneous and fresh and clean, and American.

And a large section of the Socialists of New York broke away from the SLP and joined the SDA. Among the men who joined were Cahan, Zametkin, A. Schonberg, M. Gillis, Miller, Baroness, I.A. Hourwich, and many others. They joined hands with the Debs group, and in Massachusetts, the party won a series of notable electoral victories. Although not a part of this sketch, it is interesting to note that within 2 years, there was another split, and that then all of the Socialist factions united, with the exception of a small fragment that followed DeLeon, and formed the present Socialist Party.

Cahan was active in the first realignment, and he founded the *Jewish Forward* in 1897, which he edited at first, because he felt that the movement was being Americanized. The names of the Western farmers and workingmen, the men who had fought in the great Western strikes, those were the ones to make the great Socialist movement what it should be, and that it is today.

Shortly after, Cahan left the *Forward*; there were factional fights that made it necessary. He took a position on *The Mail and Express* — now *The Evening Mail* — and for several years devoted himself to "straight" journalism. He wanted to get at the heart of real American life. He interviewed noted Americans. It was the Spanish War period, and he secured interviews with men like Admiral Dewey, General Miles, President McKinley, William J. Bryan, and many other men in the public eye. He perfected his English style. He perfected his knowledge of American institutions.

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It was in 1902 that he was brought back to the *Forward*. The paper at that time was a sort of Socialist "opposition" sheet. The rancors of two splits had not died down, and the feeling was still bitter. It was not until 1904 that it became a regular party. In that year, the first noteworthy Socialist campaign, the first bid

was made to capture the 9th Congressional District, now the 12th — the district that has been captured by Meyer London. The overwhelming sentiment of the East Side at that time was to have Cahan the candidate for Congress. He declined, but he supported Joseph Barondess, the man ultimately named, with vigor and loyalty. As a matter of fact, Cahan has run for public office but once; in 1914 he stood for the Constitutional Convention, together with Meyer London and Morris Hillquit, for the East Side district. They were beaten.

In 1903, the Kishinev massacres took place; that event was the signal for a recrudescence of Jewish nationalism that exists today.† Not abating one whit his work in bringing Americans and Jews together, Cahan nevertheless took something of a nationalistic point of view; not that he believed that Jews are either better or worse, but he felt that the Jews had their own life and their own interests, and he emphasized the Jewish point of view in *Forward*. An example of this was in the Leo Frank case; Cahan went to Atlanta and exploited the case in the paper, not because of its inherent importance, but because of its Jewish interest.

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Cahan has always been actively associated with the Russian revolutionary movement in this country. In 1905, at the time of the revolutionary outbreak that nearly unseated the tsar and all his works, he wrote a novel of the revolution, *The White Terror — and the Red*. Although he had not seen Russia for 23 years at the time of the writing of that book, his constant association with the actors and heroes in the revolution and his knowledge of the situation, and his eager reading of the literature and press of Europe, made him fully conversant with the situation.

When the revolution broke out last March, he was one of the leaders of the Russians in this city in

the jubilee meetings, in all the organization work that was needed to put the American workers in touch with the Russian situation.

It was in 1909 that he decided that the Jewish workers needed a real history of the United States. He began to write it — 7 volumes! I do not know just how many have been finished, but I remember how he began work on the first, and I know that his work was going to produce the sort of history that would tell the truth; not the sort that one usually gets to sugarcoat the tale.

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The story of David Levinsky is well known. The writing of that book has made Cahan again a notable literary figure. He told me that he did not think that the book would make many friends for him among the Jews. He does not blacken them; but he does not gild them. He shows Levinsky to be a man — a man with all the passions and the conceit and the deceits and the human frailties that all men have. There are Jews who do not like this, just there were Irishmen who threw eggs at *The Playboy of the Western World*. In the book, Cahan comes back to his early formula; he comes back again to his early work. He is again the author of *Yekl*; ripened, a better writer and a better man, but doing the same work, with the same purpose in mind.

Today we find Cahan a man of 57; well built, robust in health, in spite of a serious illness and stomach operation of 5 years ago. He is ruddy with tan, and his great head of hair sweeps back from a fine forehead. He is bubbling over with youthful enthusiasm, and the last campaign found him on the street corners, night after night, speaking for the Cause with the same fire, the same vigor, the same devotion, and with infinitely more sense than was shown by the beardless, youthful, callow boy, 35 years before. And there are many, many years of it before us, yet.

†- The Kishinev pogrom of April 1903 was a seminal event of Jewish history in Tsarist Russia. The death toll ran into the hundreds and in the aftermath the Jewish community was increasingly radicalized.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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