

20 *Jewish Fortunes in Russia*

In Russia itself, faced by the savagery of the White and Green armies, all the young Jews could do was to join the Soviet forces to defend Jewish lives and the honor of their wives and sisters, which they did.

During the Bolshevik agitation against the Kerensky government, the Jewish community was solidly hostile to them. The three parties of Jewish labor, the Bund, the United (Sejmists-territorialists) and the Labor Zionists, were fundamentally gradualist and democratic bodies. The Bund had often called forth the bitter sarcasm of Lenin.

To be sure, there were Jews among the Bolsheviks, and leading figures too. Sufficient to mention Zinoviev, Kamenev, Litvinoff and Trotsky himself. But they were completely assimilated and had no ties with Jewish life. Nor could they talk or read Yiddish, the mother tongue of the mass of people. And when the Communists took over and had to establish their power in cities in the Ukraine and Byelorussia, thickly populated by Jews, they had practically no one to fill the local Soviet apparatus, not to speak of their local party units. Only at the end of the civil war did the Jewish youth, once compelled to take up arms on the Soviet side, enter local Soviet service.

A more involved task for the Bolsheviks was to penetrate Jewish labor. On the general Soviet pattern, their new Jewish apparatus consisted of two sets, each paralleling the other. One was the Jewish Section of the All-Soviet Communist Party—*Yevsectzia*—with branches in the larger cities. The second set was the Commissariat for Jewish National Affairs, formed in January 1918 as a special

section of the People's Commissariat for National Affairs, under Stalin, also with branches in the larger cities. And, similar to the general pattern, the leading members of the Jewish Section were also members of the Commissariat, fashioning its policies in tune with those of the party.

THE YEVSECTZIA STARTS WITHOUT JEWS

At first neither the *Yevsectzia* nor the Commissariat had any line of communication with the Jewish people. They lacked even the small cadres necessary for administrative purposes or for publishing the *Warheit*, and had to hire outside writers to translate Bolshevik material into Yiddish. The head of the Commissariat, S. M. Dimandshtein, and his chief assistant, Samuel Agurski, arrived in Russia only after the first revolution. Dimandshtein was an old Bolshevik, living in Paris, and Agurski had been an active anarchist in Chicago. Only a small group of Left Poale Zion joined the Commissariat. Dimandshtein, personally a pleasant and peaceful man,⁴¹ tried vainly to negotiate with the Socialist parties for cooperation. But the latter insisted on a certain degree of autonomy for their work.

However, the ground was slipping away from under the Democratic Socialists. Victorious Bolshevism was making steady inroads among their followers. Pro-Communist groups were formed in the Bund and among the United, and the parent bodies were soon banned. The Bolsheviks at first permitted the split-off groups to exist, knowing that they would eventually be absorbed. And absorbed they were.

Only a number of leading Jewish Socialists could withstand the terrific pressure exerted on them by the ruling party; they suffered imprisonment and exile. The rest went over to the victor: Moses Rafes, Esther (Frumkin), Max Goldfarb, Shachno Epstein, among the Bundists; Moishe Litvakov, Novakovski and M. Rashkes, of the United, and the Auerbach brothers of the Left Poale Zion. Others, who did not join the party but remained pro-Soviets, worked at various levels of the Soviet apparatus, some occupying high posts. The Right Poale Zion were an exception. Their majority remained faithful to their ideal. Some were able to migrate to Palestine; the rest spent their days in Siberia.

Once the Bundists and the others were integrated, the Bolsheviks could fasten their rule over the Jewish population, through a chain of Jewish administrative, educational and propaganda institutions.

The new converts could not entirely discard their past. A part of the old luggage followed them into the *Yevsectzia*. And the latter was torn by several tendencies, each reflecting the heritage of the respective groups. The first controversy revolved around the issue of Jewish cultural autonomy. The former United and Bundists had always demanded some sort of autonomy. But the original Bolsheviks and the former anarchists were against Jewish "separatism." A second important issue was the direction of Jewish rehabilitation. The former Left Poale Zion and the United believed in settling a substantial part of the *declassified* Jews on land, but the ex-Bundists, who had always ridiculed large scale colonization plans, emphasized industrialization. The Bundists being a majority at the third conference of the *Yevsectzia*, July 1920, their viewpoint prevailed. A dispute arose also over the structure of the Jewish apparatus. The original Bolsheviks were against centralization lest it evolve into a Jewish Communist Party.*¹⁵⁰

MOSCOW TRIES TO BREAK UP POLISH BUND; ALTER'S ARREST

At this juncture, it may be opportune to touch upon the sporadic efforts of Moscow to break up the Jewish Socialist parties in the new republics, notably Poland, and thus carry away an important labor segment there.

The Jewish working youth in the new border states, poverty-stricken and disillusioned with the moderate Socialists, were lured by the still smoldering fires of the October Revolution. They had witnessed the civil war and had seen the Red Army in action. Left-Wing tendencies emerged in the Bund and the Poale Zion, and still stronger ones in their youth sections. As in other countries, the Left demanded that their parties adhere to the Third International. The Comintern and the Youth Comintern employed these groups to drive a wedge between them and their parties. The Polish Bund and the Poale Zion were invited to send fraternal delegates to the third congress of the Comintern, August 1921, and there to negotiate for affiliation.

The Bund delegates were Victor Alter, a "Centrist," and Chaim

Wasser, a leader of the Left. There was also a Poale Zion delegation. In Moscow they encountered the stiff opposition of the Polish Communist Party, its small Jewish section, and the *Yevsectzia*, who kept arguing that there was no room in the Comintern for Jewish separatists and nationalists. And though the Bund's fraternal delegates arrived in Moscow June 13th, they had little contact with the Comintern due to the latter's procrastination.

Meanwhile, an incident occurred that shook the confidence of the Bund delegates in the decency and justice of the Communist regime. Victor Alter was suddenly arrested, and placed in Butirki prison, incommunicado. All the efforts of his fellow delegate, Wasser, to contact him and to bring about his release were futile. Institution after institution gave him the run-around. After a couple of weeks, and Alter's hunger strike, Wasser was able to see him and find out the reason for his arrest.

A Russian woman whom Alter knew had given him a letter addressed to Sylvia Pankhurst, the prominent British suffragist and a leading member of the British Communist Party, who was supposed to have been a delegate to the congress but was detained for some reason. Alter did not know the contents of this letter, and innocently handed it over to a British delegate named Gray to be delivered to Pankhurst. Gray had obviously turned it over to the Soviet authorities.

The letter was a strong protest against Communist injustices made by the jailed Left Social Revolutionaries, previously partners with the Bolsheviks in the government. The Soviet security police were not interested in Alter; they were trying to "break him" to divulge the name of the woman to be able to destroy the link between the arrested and the outside world. But Alter, aware of the consequences, refused to name her. In the end, his hunger strike, the presence of many foreign delegations, and, particularly, the threat by the Bund, in a telegram to Moscow, of a public exposure, brought about Alter's release. He was ordered to leave the country immediately. (The ECCI, resisting pressure, had not approved his arrest.)

Wasser had refused to participate in any negotiations during Alter's imprisonment. He was sufficiently disillusioned to return home cured of his Leftism.*¹⁵¹

As a follow-up, the Comintern addressed two open letters, in the

spring and fall of 1922, to the members of the Bund to arouse them against the "Centrist" leadership, urging them to organize a Left Wing within the Bund to win it over. But the Bund, thanks to its long tradition of cohesiveness, avoided a split, losing only an insignificant number of members.*¹⁵²

The experience with the Youth Comintern was not happier. The young Bundists and Left Poale Zion hoped to get the Youth Comintern to recognize the specific Jewish problems. But the latter was willing to go no further than the formation of a Jewish Bureau for propaganda only. The theses of the Second Youth Congress of 1921 emphatically rejected the resolutions of the two Jewish groups. Instead, they stated, "The historically conditioned uniqueness and the abnormal situation of the Jewish working masses cannot be the basis for a special national program. The question of liberating all workers, including the Jewish, from all kinds of exploitation, national suppression and suffering, is . . . a general workers' problem. . . . The demand of the Bund for a national cultural autonomy is reformist and nationalistic. . . ."*¹⁵³

The idea of a Jewish state in Palestine was condemned more severely:

The revolutionary Jewish labor movement must categorically divorce itself from such demands which are used by the bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties to becloud the minds of the workers.

The congress turned down the proposal for a world alliance of Jewish youth, and even refused the formation of Jewish sections in the youth bodies.*¹⁵⁴

But, despite this rejection, a majority of the youth groups went over to the Communists.*¹⁵⁵ +⁴²