

21 *Ambitious Projects*

Communist fuming against Jewish relief abroad, Russia included, had to stop after the Jewish-Soviet organs in Moscow sent out an urgent appeal for various forms of aid for Soviet Jewry.* But Moscow's intransigence could only hinder the flow of relief to the victims of war, revolution and civil war.

Dr. D. H. Dubrowsky, Moscow relief commissar here, a dentist from Brownsville, Brooklyn, had neither the personality nor the tact required for such a task. He was also a total stranger to the community and the labor movement. Rumor had it that his only qualification was a friend high in the commissariat in Moscow.

A wilful bureaucrat, Dubrowsky became the bottleneck for Russian-Jewish relief by his refusal to permit the People's Relief Committee or the many *landsmanshaften*, able and eager to send aid to their stricken home towns, to have a voice in relief distribution. Dubrowsky insisted that all the funds be turned over to him. He later procured a mandate from the YIDGEZKOM, in Moscow, and aid from here had to be directed to that body. Too insignificant to interfere with the ARA or the JDC, Dubrowsky became the all-powerful boss of the smaller relief groups, and all efforts to strike some sort of a compromise with him, to permit at least a minimum of supervision, came to nothing. Distrusting the Communists in Moscow, the PRC broke relations with him, October 1921, turning over its funds to the JDC, which concluded its own agreement with the Moscow authorities. The *landsmanshaften* did likewise.

* For the story of the Communist anti-relief policy, see Chapter 9.

THE NEW RELIEF EMISSARY TRIES IT WITH A SMILE

Dubrowsky's failure to get relief moving had a sobering effect on YIDGEZKOM. The mandate was taken away from him, but he still remained in the general Russian relief setup.⁺⁴⁸ Michail Rashkes, the new relief emissary, urbane and with a ready smile, a former territorialist, was more tractable than his predecessor. He managed to resume relations with the *landsmanshaften* and with the PRC. His drive for tools for Jewish artisans was supported by the PRC and the entire press. His second campaign, for Jewish books to satisfy the hunger of people who were denied books during the war years, met with warm cooperation from all those to whom a Yiddish book was dear. The conferences for this campaign became a united front in miniature. However, this writer had a strong suspicion that the many boxes of books never left New York harbor. Whether this campaign was mainly a goodwill tactic on the part of Rashkes or someone in Moscow put his foot down on bourgeois books is beside the point. The Soviet Jewish press never mentioned receiving books from America; on the contrary, a campaign against Jewish bourgeois literature was beginning.

Rashkes stayed here until about the end of 1923. The PRC was in the process of liquidation. It dissolved in the summer of 1924. In the *landsmanshaften*, too, the first relief rush was over. Besides, they were also veering more and more toward the JDC, whose facilities in Russia were expanding and who could, of course, be trusted more than the smiling Rashkes.

HILLMAN'S CLOTHING PROJECT FOR RUSSIA

An episode interesting for its background and lesson was Sidney Hillman's extensive plan to modernize the Soviet clothing industry, as his share in Russian rehabilitation. Behind the project lay a sincere sentiment interwoven with political expediency.

On his first visit to Russia, summer of 1921, Hillman was appalled by the misery and industrial backwardness he encountered, and impressed by the strong men in the Kremlin. Lenin was then introducing the New Economic Policy, and to Hillman, the restless planner, the NEP looked like a breather for the vast plans for Russian reconstruction.

Hillman's concept of power as the most essential ingredient for social action could be a clue to his respect for the Soviet leaders. He was contemptuous of those who could not hold on to power. On the eve of his first trip to Russia, he spent an evening at the home of J. B. S. Hardman. Hardman's wife, Hannah, was interested to know what idea he had in mind in going to Russia. Hillman's answer was frank and direct: "If I find the men in the Kremlin willing and able to maintain their power, I will support them."^{*156} This was an indirect reference to the German Social Democrats who lost the government after the first parliamentary elections.

Hillman brought his project to the fifth convention of the ACWA, in Chicago May 8, 1922. A Russian-American Industrial Corporation—RAIC—was to be formed, to operate clothing factories in Russia equipped with modern American machines and run along American production lines. RAIC was to sell shares at \$10 each to the amount of \$300,000.

The project was enthusiastically approved, the Communist and Left delegates taking the lead in the cheering. And a few of the Lefts who were reluctant to barter their opportunity to oppose Hillman's new production standards for his aid to the Soviet clothing industry were rebuked by Robert Minor, the party rep at the convention. Minor piously told them at the caucus meeting that the interests of Soviet Russia had to take precedence over their own.^{*157} And Olgin, who went to Chicago to cheer in the *Freiheit* the anticipated Left criticism of Hillman, ended by throwing literary bouquets at him.

Surrounded by the active antagonism of the AFL, which supported the rival UGW, and faced by the resistance to the ACWA in several important clothing centers, a demonstration of solid unity at the convention was imperative to Hillman. And only a friendly gesture to Soviet Russia both in words and in deeds could silence the Left-Wing opposition. His union's isolation from organized labor was a basic reason for Hillman's quiet support of Foster's TUEL in the beginning. He hoped that the TUEL would be instrumental in creating a second labor center to which the ACWA could belong. It also explains his financial contribution to the *Freiheit* on the eve of its publication. Neither the TUEL nor the *Freiheit* were then open Communist institutions. Besides, Hillman never doubted his ability to control the new movement or to disengage himself from

it when it would become necessary. The latter he did in 1924.

The agreement with the Soviet authorities was concluded in September 1922, on Hillman's second visit to Russia. The RAIC appointed George Wishnak, a former officer of the ILGWU and manager of the *Freiheit*, as Russian director. It modernized three clothing factories, in Moscow and Leningrad, and taught the Russians improved methods of production. As the response to the stock selling campaign was below expectations—it was confined largely to the Jewish members of the ACWA—the RAIC could not expand. However, its initial success brought it into friction with the proper Soviet organs. And the totalitarian bureaucracy that engulfed the Russian economy after Lenin's death could not tolerate in its midst an independent economic unit however small. The RAIC had to liquidate in 1928, and its original investment was returned in full.

HUNGRY PEOPLE STARTED THE RUSH TO THE SOIL

The much-heralded Jewish colonization did not originate in Moscow: the *Yevsectzia* was against settling Jews on the soil. Hungry and despairing people in Byelorussia occupied, in the spring of 1923, several estates deserted by their owners. With only a few rudimentary tools, they formed cooperatives to work the land. Their example was followed by groups of Jews in the Ukraine and Southern Russia. The local Soviet organs noticed these little settlements and called the attention of the higher bodies to them. The central government, knowing full well the economic misery inflicted on the Jewish community, grasped at this opportunity for a partial rehabilitation of the *declassified* Jews.

Two institutions were created for this purpose in the summer of 1924: one on a government level, the KOMERD—KOMZET in Russian—a mixed body of various commissariats, headed by P. G. Smidovich, secretary of the Soviet Central Executive Committee; and the GEZERD—OZET in Russian (abbreviation for the revived Society for the Resettlement of Toiling Jews)—a quasi-public agency tightly dominated by the Jewish Section of the Communist Party. These two institutions had to carry out the program for Jewish land settlement.

Two years later, June 15, 1926, the Presidium of the Soviet CEC approved a plan by the KOMERD "for the transfer to agriculture

of 100,000 Jewish families to take place in the course of a few years." The ultimate goal was to settle one-quarter of the entire Jewish population in agriculture in Crimea, the Ukraine and Byelorussia.^{*159}

The goal was high, but the tone of the decree was restrained. This restraint did not suit the Jewish Communists here. Their stand against Jewish nationalism did not deter them from asserting that this decree might lead to the cherished territorial concentration. Colonization became the Communists' "best seller."

COMMUNISTS HERE TAKE OVER; THE ICOR

The first news about Jewish agricultural settlements reached here in the fall of 1924. No time was lost in calling a conference for December 21, 1924, to form the ICOR (Organization for Jewish Colonization in Russia). Despite the initial efforts to dress the new body in non-partisan garb, the conference was boycotted by all sections of the community except the small group of Left Poale Zion and a few pro-Soviet intellectuals.

Shmuel Niger, the noted man of Yiddish letters, expressed a general sentiment by suggesting in his article in *The Day*, that if the Communists were sincere they would dissolve the ICOR, stand aside and let bona fide groups engage in the colonization work. But Niger was asking too much.

In a short time the ICOR had 50 branches. The first English booklet, published in April 1925, tried to mask the pro-Communist face of the ICOR, asserting that it was strictly non-partisan and "stood between two extremes, Communism and Zionism." But a few years later the membership application card read: "I am a friend of the Soviet Union and of Jewish colonization in the USSR." The ICOR's fund-raising was quite satisfactory.⁺⁴⁴

Since the beginning of the Enlightenment, settling Jews on land had been the cherished dream of *Maskil* and philanthropist. A class of farmers seemed to them indispensable for Jewish economic and social reconstruction. Many a grandiose blueprint was discussed—one was that of the OZET, in Czarist Russia—and many a song was composed in praise of Jews tilling the soil. Eliakum Zunser's famous lyric poem, "*Die Sokhe*" (The Plow), written in 1880, was sung all over the Yiddish world. It went like this: "In the plow lies bliss and

blessedness, life's true essence. The morning comes, the tiller of the soil goes forth into God's world, full of health and cheer, breathing the clean air of freedom. Unknown to him are the worries of the city dweller, who has to engage in speculative ventures and rack his brain to eke out an unproductive livelihood." *159

The large-scale, though only semi-fulfilled, colonization plans of Baron Hirsch in the Argentine and in Palestine, in the last century, and the attempts by his fund to settle Jews on land in the United States, at the turn of the century, testify to the fond hopes placed on agriculture as the most effective "normalizer" of the Jewish group. The Zionist ideology, too, gave agriculture high priority. Tilling the soil would purify Jewish life and make it wholesome.

The chief reason for the irresistible attraction of agriculture lay in the centuries-long denial to Jews of the right to gain a livelihood from the soil and in the old idyllic concept of farming as the healthiest, the least hazardous and the most honorable of occupations.

JDC ENTERS COLONIZATION

The Soviet allotment of large tracts of land for Jewish colonization and its readiness to contribute to its financing was bound to create a stir here. As men of big affairs, leaders of the JDC, Louis Marshall and Felix M. Warburg, were fascinated by the vast potentialities of the Soviet project. Colonization work in Russia became a major part of the JDC relief activities. This new policy was adopted at the two national conferences for relief and rehabilitation, in Philadelphia and Chicago, 1925 and 1926 respectively.

Only the Zionists opposed this work. At the Philadelphia conference, the Zionists, Louis Lipsky, Morris Rottenberg and Emanuel Newman, spoke angrily against the colonization in Russia. Their chief argument was that the Jews were being settled on land illegally taken from their owners; it was, therefore, dangerous to tie them to that land. It was quite an experience to listen to Louis Marshall's booming voice defending the right of a revolutionary government to confiscate the land of its internal enemies. The Zionists broke with the JDC over this issue.*160

Throughout this heated controversy, Socialist opinion, represented by the *Forward*, continued to side with the JDC. The raging conflict with the Communist-Left all along the labor front did not

deter them from supporting colonization in Russia, which indirectly spelled giving support to the Soviet regime.

The JDC entered into an agreement with the KOMERD, formed the Agro-Joint, and spent heavily on the new colonies. Its director, Dr. Joseph Rosen, the Russian-born agriculturist, tactfully avoided collision with the KOMERD. The new Jewish colonies in the Ukraine and the larger number of colonies on the Steppes of Northern Crimea, near the Azov Sea, built with the help of the JDC, stood out in comparison with the new neighboring non-Jewish settlements. The settlers proved to be willing and adept farmers.*161

Concerted plans of the JDC for creating a sizable group of independent Jewish farmers were frustrated by the forced collectivization of agriculture, begun in 1929. To continue the aid program would have meant helping the government and not the colonies, which had lost their title to the land. For the same reason, the JDC and Dr. Rosen could not very well transplant their program to far-off Birobidjan either. Agro-Joint withdrew from Soviet Russia in 1930, but the JDC continued there until 1938, helping a number of technical and trade schools. (The Agro-Joint helped to build 215 colonies with 2,000 families. Altogether, the JDC spent \$27 million on aid in Russia.) *162

JEWISH PROBLEM "SOLVED" IN RUSSIA

The seemingly comprehensive Soviet program for Jewish "economic productivization" became a major component of the Communist build-up of the glorious Soviet Russia. It compared well with their picture of the harsh and cruel America. The build-up was made easier by the extensive measures for cultural survival: four Jewish *rayons* (districts), three in the Ukraine, one in Northern Crimea; Jewish sections at scientific academies, a pedagogical institute, Jewish people's courts, a school system, theaters, dailies, magazines and publishing houses—all at the expense of the state—were parts of a pro-Jewish policy unknown and hardly feasible in another country. All these were presented to an eager audience here as a final solution to the "Jewish problem."

Jewish Communists steadily hammered the idea that only the country that had abolished the exploitation of man could do away

with national oppression. This premise was buttressed by a stream of cheerful news of steadily increasing Jewish coal miners, steel workers, railway workers, farmers, students and scientists. Not that all the news was false; part of it was true. But it was a tailored version of the truth, and, therefore, the net impression conveyed was a lie. That the Russian Jew had another face, one that cried—to paraphrase a French saying—was stoutly denied.

In the beginning, there was undeniably a genuine desire in the Kremlin to provide the numerous nationalities of that vast state ample opportunity to develop their own identity and attain a higher cultural level. The Jewish group was included in that cultural pluralism. But Stalin's later definition of Communist culture as national in form and Socialist in content, a crafty formula to disguise its shallowness, left the "Jewish culture" in Russia meaningless. The textbooks narrowed down the long and tragic Jewish past to a struggle of the poor against the rich. The children were taught that the most significant era in Jewish history had begun in October 1917. The few scholarly works published in the early 20's were later suppressed. However, few people here were in a position to appraise the barren character of the education being dispensed in the Soviet Jewish schools. Nor did they have an inkling of the unenviable position of the Jewish coal miners and railway workers who encountered the unconcealed antagonism of the local Soviets and of their fellow-workers, particularly in the Ukraine.*¹⁶³