

## 28 *Battling the Community*

A preview of the revolutionary illusions spread by the Third Period was given, with distressing clarity, to the Jewish Communists in the Palestinian situation in the fall of 1929. It proved extremely costly to them.

Jewish Socialists in their majority had always been antagonistic to Zionism, for obvious reasons. Communist antagonism was still more emphatic. As early as the summer of 1920, the Comintern congress voiced vigorous opposition to Zionism. And the third congress, in 1921, in a communication to a Labor Zionist Left group, that ultimately joined the Communist ranks, labeled Zionism "reformist and utopian."

The *Freiheit*, mouthpiece of Communists and former Bundists, was hostile to Zionism from its first issue. Zionist ideology, Zionist practice in Palestine and its "links" with the British were under steady fire. Still, the *yishuv* as such was never attacked. And the demand for Jewish minority rights was always included in any mention of the *yishuv*.

In this context, the word "pogrom" applied by the *Freiheit* to the first Arab attacks on Jewish settlements in Palestine, August 23, 1929, was logical. No other term could fit the massacre of 40 young students of an Orthodox *yeshivah* in Chevron. In fact, the first news item in the Moscow *Izvestia* was headlined POGROMS IN PALESTINE.

A front-page "box," written by Olgin, and an editorial by Melech Epstein, August 25th, fixed the final responsibility for the pogroms on British imperialists, who possessed sufficient police and military forces to prevent the massacres, had they wanted, and partly on the

Zionist leaders for their anti-Arab policy. The large dose of blame given the Zionists was not merely in conformity with the old Communist approach, but aimed, in a large measure, as a safeguard against possible criticism from the party. The new Leftist course was already visible.

Calling the attacks pogroms did not placate Jewish public opinion. It was angered at the *Freiheit* for placing any blame at all on the Zionists for the spilled Jewish blood. And the lengthy excursion into the evils of British imperialism was no safeguard with the party. Putting Arab attacks in the category of pogroms drew the party's wrath.

#### THE PARTY BLAST AGAINST FREIHEIT AND YISHUV

The reaction of the party would have been perhaps less vehement were it not for a leaflet distributed by the expelled Lovestonites immediately after the *Freiheit* appeared on the streets. The leaflet labeled the attitude of the *Freiheit* a "crass Right-Wing deviation" committed by a party paper "under a so-called Leftist leadership." The party secretariat, new, insecure, and in the midst of internal confusion, could not remain silent at the accusation of Right-Wing opportunism by "Right-Wingers." A lengthy and severe criticism of the *Freiheit*, in the form of a declaration of principles on the Palestinian situation, was hastily composed. Its very beginning set the pace for the battle with the community:

The war in Palestine is not a race war. It is a class war, carried on by the expropriated Arabian peasants against British imperialism and their Zionist agents. . . .

Then came the ominous phrase: "We sharply condemn the position of our Communist Jewish daily, the *Morning Freiheit*, as absolute opportunist and *hardly, if at all, different from the stand of the Jewish nationalist, Zionist and the capitalist press. . . .*" (italics M.E.) The party was particularly incensed at the argument advanced in the *Freiheit* editorial that the British could have, had they wanted, stopped the pogroms: "These views are counterrevolutionary Zionist views, characteristic of the Social Democrats and the bourgeoisie. The line is sharply condemned by the political committee of the CP, and all responsible for such articles . . . will be taken to task by the party.

"The roots of the revolt of the Arabian masses are to be found in

the economic exploitation of the Arab peasantry, whose land has been expropriated by British imperialism through the reactionary Jewish Zionism. . . . The establishment of a Jewish country in Palestine is the fig leaf of British imperialism in its land-grabbing aggression in this part of Asia. And the Zionist movement is willingly and knowingly lending itself to this mission. . . . The colonial policy of Great Britain was to use Jewish immigrants as a tool in expropriating the land of the poor Arabs, which was turned into orange groves and fruit plantations controlled by a parasitic group of Jewish financiers, where Arabian and Jewish workers are mercilessly exploited." \*186

This document was brought to the *Freiheit* in the evening of August 29th for publication in the next issue. Olgin and Philip Weiner, the new secretary of the Section, meekly agreed. But the objection by Melech Epstein that the party's sharp censure at a time when the Jewish press was condemning the *Freiheit* would be an unwarranted double blow to the paper caused Petersen, the party's representative, to waver. But, while he gave up his insistence on immediate publication of the statement, Petersen did not inform the three that it had also been given to the *Daily Worker*, and would appear there the next morning. The statement, also carried by the *Freiheit* a couple of days later, burst like a bombshell, driving the *Freiheit* into a pro-Arab position, stirring up more anger in the community.

#### FREIHEIT APPROVES ARAB TERRORISM

The new setup in the Jewish Section—Philip Weiner, Joseph Sultan, Hyman Castrell, Max Steinberg and George Hochberg—staunch Bittelman men and the end products of the poisonous factionalism—eager to vindicate their Leftist reputation, did their bit in rushing the *Freiheit* into a policy with clear anti-Jewish overtones. In but a couple of days, the paper's news stories, editorials, articles and cartoons were fighting the battle of fanatical Arab nationalism. One big headline announced: THE ARAB UPRISING IS SPREADING THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE MIDDLE EAST (in the imagination of the news editor), and a subtitle asserted, "The Zionist-Fascists have Provoked the Arab Uprising." \*187

To round out the pro-Arab case, the paper dragged the Socialists into the crimes against the Arabs. "The Imperialist Zionists and the Labor Fakers of the Second International Continuously Organ-

ize Pogroms on the Arabs in Palestine," screamed one of the sub-headlines.

Olgin tried to do penance for his grave Right deviation. In a furious article, he blamed the Zionists for all the trouble: They were colonizers and exploiters of Arab labor. The expression "pogrom" was a bitter mistake and a result of nationalistic influences. And, to show that these influences were still strong among the Left and had to be rooted out, he quoted a letter from a reader, B. Wachtfogel, 2039 Washington Avenue, Bronx, saying, "Everything that you write about the Zionists is true. But, for Heaven sake, it is Jews who are being beaten. . . . Zionist colonies, why not say Jewish colonies. . . . Jewish blood is being shed. . . . I beg of you, don't justify the shedding of Jewish blood."

"You (the Zionists) are playing with the blood of misled people . . .," Olgin's article went on. "You are out to satisfy your nationalistic robbery instincts at the expense of an alien people on an alien land. . . . The blood will fall on you. . . . You are murderers. . . ." \*188

To justify calling Jewish blood Zionist blood, Olgin cited the "example" of Nicaragua. "American blood was spilled in Nicaragua," he argued, "and still it was imperialist blood."

To counteract the effect of the street march, August 27th, in protest against the murder of Jews in Palestine, the *Freiheit* appeared with a banner headline, ENGLISH TROOPS AND JEWISH LEGIONNAIRES IN BLOODY MASSACRES ON ARABS; THOUSANDS DEAD AND WOUNDED; HAIFA IN FLAMES. The subtitle was just as inflammatory, "Weitzman is Sure that the Blood Baths in Palestine will Bring 'Yeshuah' (salvation) for the Jews." \*189

The Section did not limit the fight to the *Freiheit*. It called a protest meeting in Irving Plaza Hall, August 28th. The hall was crowded and the air tense. W. W. Weinstone, of the secretariat, was there to express the party's sharp disapproval of the earlier stand of the *Freiheit*. His mission alone exerted pressure on the speakers—Olgin, Melech Epstein and Sultan—and influenced the wording of the resolution adopted by the meeting. The resolution opened with, "The assembled Jewish workers send their brotherly greetings to the rebellious masses in Palestine." It ended with several LONG LIVE'S: LONG LIVE THE REVOLUTIONARY UPRISING OF THE ARAB MASSES IN PALESTINE, . . . LONG LIVE THE INDEPENDENT ARAB REPUBLIC WITH FULL RIGHTS FOR THE JEWISH AND OTHER MINORITIES. . . . \*190 The last,

designed as a cover for the close political embrace of the Arab terrorists, was too transparent to have any meaning.

The greetings to the Arabs were followed by such provocative banner headlines as ZIONISTS SLAUGHTER ARAB MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN. . . . The *Daily Worker* lent a hand to the new crusade.

#### COMMUNITY OUTRAGED; FREIHEIT BOYCOTTED

The greetings to the Arabs and the first LONG LIVE of the resolution were interpreted—and not without justification—as a direct encouragement for the Jewish massacres. The community recoiled in anger. A rising tide of denunciations poured down upon the *Freiheit* and the CP. Spearheaded by the *Forward* and the Zionists, a cry went up for a boycott of the Jewish Communists and their paper. Many leading personalities joined in. News dealers in New York refused to handle the *Freiheit* for five days in succession. That this boycott did not last longer was due to the energetic efforts of the wholesale distributor and the paper's loyal readers and sympathizers. As the *Freiheit* was read almost exclusively by Communists and Lefts, the loss of readers was negligible.

But a different sort of boycott, quietly carried out, proved nearly catastrophic. The *Freiheit* had labored for years, through petitions by its readers and primarily by sympathetic grocers throughout the country, to get a share of the national advertising. To the big advertisers, the *Freiheit* was just another foreign-language paper, and the revenue helped to cover the large deficit. Now, various committees called upon the advertising agencies and conveyed to them the deep Jewish resentment against the *Freiheit*. In two short weeks all national advertising was lost. Local ads followed. Even the Yiddish theaters, eleven in number, always careful to avoid offending a newspaper, had to yield to the general indignation, and withdrew their daily ads.

Meanwhile, the anti-*yishuv* campaign was running away with the *Freiheit*. One headline cried out: THE BLOOD IS ON YOUR HANDS, ZIONISTS AND ZIONIST FELLOW TRAVELERS.\*191 An editorial the same week stated it more pointedly, "It is not innocent blood; it is the blood of people who went to war against another people on alien land." \*192

In its fight against the *yishuv* in Palestine and the community here, the *Freiheit* could call upon the powerful media of Bill Gropper's cartoons. Gropper came to the *Freiheit* in the early 20's and



remained for many years, working at a low salary. Had he chosen, Gropper could have been one of the highest paid cartoonists in the country; he left the *New York Tribune* because of his opposition to the war. A quiet, good looking fellow, with a charming smile, Gropper could achieve a devastating effect with a few bold strokes.

A poor East Side boy—his father came from Rumania—Gropper drifted to the syndicalists during World War I, and later into the Left Wing. He never belonged to the party, but was drawn into the inner politics and maneuvering of the John Reed clubs and the *New Masses*. He only scanned the daily papers, and was poorly oriented in political events. But it was sufficient to give him an inkling of the idea of what the paper considered the proper cartoon for the day, and Gropper, with his keen artistic intuition, would soon come up with a drawing to delight the readers and infuriate the adversaries.

By no means a cynic, Gropper was still easily egged on to ridicule cruelly any person, whatever his standing, as long as he was on the other side of the fence. During the great and violent contest for power in the garment trades, his cartoons were perhaps more telling than the editorials or the news articles. When Morris Sigman, president of the ILGWU, turned up as the target, Gropper obliged the labor editor, Paul Yuditz, and his pal, Paul Novick, with a cartoon depicting Sigman's small weekend resort in Iowa as a shady amusement place with a "hot mamma." And Sigman was a scrupulously honest man. Men of diverse standing and prestige, such as Ab. Cahan, the poet Chaim Nachman Bialik, Dr. Chaim Weitzman and Dr. Stephen S. Wise were treated by him with a brusque disregard for their individual merits.

In the Palestinian situation, Gropper strikingly illustrated the shrieking banner headlines, filling the community's cup of anger to the brim.

#### DISTINGUISHED WRITERS BREAK WITH FREIHEIT

The wrath against the Communists had its repercussions on the Left periphery too. Hardest hit was the Left furriers' union. About 200 shops demonstratively went over to its rival, the Right-Wing Joint Council, and the union nearly went under. Only lack of a competent leadership handicapped the Right Wing in utilizing the

situation to full advantage. Many workers in other trades, too, deserted the struggling Left groups, going over to the "enemy."

The anti-Communist boycott spread to other cities. In many places, Communists could not hire a hall for the meeting to explain the party stand on Palestine. And such meetings were indispensable to dispel the uneasiness that was permeating the Communist-Left.

In the midst of this explosive situation, the group of prominent contributors publicly severed relations with the *Freiheit* in protest against its anti-Jewish position. The very presence of the names of Abraham Raisin, H. Leivick, Menachem Boraisha, David Ignatoff and a few others had secured for the *Freiheit* a place of significance in the Yiddish-speaking community. Their pieces had served as a seal of approval on the genuineness of the concern of Jewish Communists for the cultural values of their people. And their resignation was a blow from inside inasmuch as it was a clear endorsement of the grave charges against the *Freiheit*.<sup>+65</sup>

The *Freiheit* would not allow these writers to leave with their reputations intact. Replies to their charges were few, but abuse was plentiful. Gifted poets were called nonentities, and their motives were impugned. They were accused of being "attracted by the fat roast," meaning the capitalist papers. (Moisha Nadir, who coined this phrase, was a decade later himself a victim of it.)

About a week later, the staff of the *Freiheit* was expelled from the Yiddish Writers' Union for anti-Jewish activities.

The tight corner into which Jewish Communism was pushed did not soften the new party top. They kept hammering at the nationalist, opportunist mistakes committed by the *Freiheit*. Two more statements were issued, September 3rd and 7th: the first, a thesis by the Agit-Prop department on the Palestinian situation; the second, a declaration by the political committee. The latter was largely a sharp reaction to the steady sniping of the Lovestonites, who continued to embarrass the new leadership by turning the tables on them and charging them with Right-Wing deviation.<sup>\*193</sup>

#### NO LET-UP IN PARTY PRESSURE; FREIHEIT IN DANGER

The party continued to whip the *Freiheit*. Its September 7th statement reminded the membership that the position of the *Freiheit* "in the first days . . . was correctly condemned . . . as a Social-

Democratic belittling and underestimating of the political significance of the revolt of the expropriated Arabian masses. . . . However, the mistakes of the *Freiheit* have a basis, and the party . . . must mobilize . . . against the national-bourgeoisie tendencies and the Right Wing." \*194

The statement denounced the distinguished writers who broke with the *Freiheit*: "The resignations . . . prove conclusively that in a period of direct struggle with the enemies of the working class all petty bourgeois elements who formerly posed . . . as supporters of the CP joined the camp of the enemy. These . . . poets and literary writers first saw the great influence of the *Freiheit*, they saw the Jewish proletarian masses following the CP, and . . . proclaimed their support of the Communist movement and the Soviet Union. However, . . . when they had to choose between counter-revolutionary Zionism and the national liberation movement . . . and the struggle of the exploited Jewish masses, they became open supporters of imperialism and reactionary Zionism. . . ." \*195

This gratuitous solicitude for the "exploited Jewish masses" was an attempt to legitimize the pro-Arab utterances, and to soothe the feeling of pain and confusion permeating the auxiliaries.

The party statements were not the last words. For a number of days, the *Daily Worker* kept printing news items extremely hostile to the *yishuv*. One news item told of a statement by the newly formed World Anti-Imperialist League bitterly denouncing Jewish policies in Palestine. The full statement was promised for the next issue of the paper, but it never appeared.

Surrounded by such implacable antagonism and facing a huge financial loss, it appeared that the *Morning Freiheit* would have to put a padlock on its door. (Only a short while ago, the paper had undergone a reorganization, e.g., a bankruptcy, and its name was changed to *Morning Freiheit*.) But by then it became clear to the Communist-Left hard core that the true design of the campaign was to silence the paper forever, and that the old adversaries were behind it. The frantic appeal of the *Freiheit* (for reasons of economy, the paper will be called by its original name) for \$30,000 in 30 days to save it from "the conspiracy of Zionist-fascists, wealthy reactionaries and social-fascists" brought in the amount necessary to prevent its closing. Disturbed as many of the Left were by the extreme pro-Arabism, they hurried to the aid of their paper.

#### EVEN PARTY FUNCTIONARIES ARE BEWILDERED

Melech Epstein, at the convention of the TUEL in Cleveland, the end of August, was hurriedly dispatched on a tour throughout the Middle West to help the local people. In Cleveland itself, it was impossible to obtain a hall for a meeting. In Chicago, Detroit and other cities, the meetings had to be held in the halls of friendly organizations and under the protection of picked non-Jewish Communists. In Chicago, the *Freiheit* headquarters were besieged that Saturday night, September 12th, by a crowd of hooting and jeering men and women. Rumor had it that the notorious Levine gang was there, and only the narrow stairway leading to the second-story *Freiheit* office and the appearance of police saved the assembled Communists from a little pogrom. Several who were careless enough to leave in the early hours had their heads split. But the *Freiheit* was evicted and had difficulty in finding an office in the heart of the old Jewish neighborhood.

(An incident characteristic of the anti-Communist feeling of the ordinary men and women is the experience the author had in Chicago, Wednesday, September 9th, the day the Orthodox rabbis declared a *taunis* [day of fasting] to mourn the victims in Palestine. He asked the middle-aged woman at the corner news stand for a *Freiheit*. Her reply was, "I am too weak to fast, so the least I can do is not to sell the *Freiheit* today.")

Not merely rank and file but local party functionaries as well were perplexed by these crazy-quilt happenings. The new party secretary in Detroit, a Bulgar called Antonov, a tall, strapping automobile worker—appointed in tune with the proletarianization of the party—could not hide his bewilderment. "I read the party statement," he told the author, "condemning you people of the *Freiheit* for behaving like any other bourgeois nationalist paper, and here I see the Jewish population bitterly against you, and you coming to ask me for protection for your meeting. How is that?" The author, knowing that any true explanation would be too complicated for Antonov's simple mind, shrugged his shoulders in answer.

The first storm over, the Jewish Section replied to the "Zion orgy"—their favorite term—with a counteroffensive. Conferences and meetings against the "imperialist Zionists" and "Jewish reactionaries" were held in all parts of the country. In Communist fashion,

"public trials" were arranged in the large cities to condemn Zionism. The "trial" in New York, September 22nd, brought over 3,000 people. The speeches by the prosecution—Melech Epstein and Olgin—and the "verdict" were received with cheers. This meeting greatly heartened the beleaguered Jewish Section. It did not matter that the warm response was not necessarily a sign of approval of the *Freiheit* position, but rather reflected the determination to keep the enemy from crushing the paper. What counted was that the bulk of the followers had remained loyal and could be depended on. With a sigh of relief, mixed with a tone of triumph, the *Daily Worker*, in a front page editorial devoted to that meeting, called it unmistakable evidence that the "Jewish masses were not misled by nationalistic hysteria, but were firmly behind the correct Communist line on Palestine." \*196

Every auxiliary body of the movement was involved in this campaign. The ICOR was made to forget colonization in Birobidjan. Anti-Zionist propaganda became its new major task. (The first reaction of the non-party people in the ICOR was a resolution by its management committee condemning the party's anti-Jewish stand in Palestine. The vote was eight to four. The *Freiheit*, embarrassed, tried to minimize the resolution by saying that it was a "casual majority." The ICOR was soon forced back into line, but some of the non-Communists had to resign.)

A special Jewish Labor Anti-Zion Committee was formed. But it remained on paper. As late as 1931, a primary slogan in the appeal for funds for the *Freiheit* was *In the Struggle Against Zionism We Must Have the Freiheit*. \*197

#### COMINTERN ABETS VIOLENT ARABISM

The Weiner-Sultan-Steinberg-Castrell combination was victorious over those few who cautioned the party against the plunge into the camp of violent Arabism. As usual, the decision was Moscow's. It seems that the Kremlin, too, was "confused" in the beginning. The *Pravda*, as late as August 29th, headlined the events as "Pogroms in Palestine Continue; Murder and Arson by the Arabs." But two days later, August 31st, the chief Communist organ called the pogroms an "Uprising by the Arabs; People's Revolutionary Movement in Asia." This drastic reversal in definition was immediately

taken up by the Comintern. In a long statement issued by the West European Communist Parties, the anti-Jewish excesses were viewed as an expression of a national liberation movement. It was indiscriminate Communist courtship of Arab nationalism.\*198 (Each time the Kremlin wanted to avoid friction with the Western powers, Comintern declarations were issued by a fictitious committee outside the borders of the USSR.) The outbreak in Palestine coincided with the Comintern policy to "Arabize" the small Communist Party there. The Third Period was not for the West alone; it extended also to the Middle East.

The Palestinian events were the first major collision the community had with the Communists outside the labor arena. That fall Communism was rounding out its first decade. The ultimate consequences would have been much more serious had not the anti-Communist-anti-*Freiheit* campaign been drowned in the reverberations of the financial crash, October 29th of the same year. The happenings in Palestine were relegated to the background. The rapid fall in prices, the closing of channels of credit and the spreading unemployment occupied men's minds. As the first victims were the small businesses and the semi-essential garment trades, the Jewish people felt its impact quite early. The number of bankruptcies mounted alarmingly.

The depression that followed brought misery and despair. But the suffering of the many provided Communism with its first opportunity to gain the ear of a multitude previously closed to it. That Jewish Communism could not derive full advantage of this rare chance can be attributed to the isolation into which it had been driven by its untenable stand on the *yishuv*. No single group had ever met such a solid demonstration of animosity. The harm done was irreparable.