

34 *Working at Cross Purposes*

Jewish Communism was sustained during the trying period of isolation by two elements: one, its small but well-disciplined "proletarian army" in the big city; two, the loyal cadres of sympathizers—small businessmen scattered throughout the country. A brief recapitulation of the curious background of the latter is in place.

Importance economic changes that became noticeable after World War I continued at a more rapid pace as time went on. It was a duofold process: wage-earners leaving the insecurity of seasonal work in the big urban areas for a chance at economic independence in smaller towns, and skilled workers sparing no effort to see their children through college, a combination of the traditional reverence for learning and the inherent striving for a *takhlis*.

Many a tailor, painter or carpenter, in New York, Philadelphia or Chicago, settling in a smaller town, became an independent custom tailor, a painter or carpenter contractor. A cabinetmaker opened a small furniture store; ladies' tailors ran dress stores and dry cleaning shops; shoe workers, shoe repair shops. Where business opportunities in their own trade were lacking, they opened stationery or grocery stores. The ultimate choice lay with the relative or friend who helped the newcomer to settle. After a few years of struggle, those who did well brought over more relatives, and the majority did well; small businesses thrived in the 20's.

A picture of this transition to small business is given in a letter from the industrial city of Detroit to the Right-Wing Socialist *Wecker*, May 2, 1925: "The element from which Socialists are

recruited is simply not to be found in Detroit. The few trade unions . . . are composed of workers and bosses. When a worker pays his dues in the union and speaks about exploitation and better working conditions, he thinks at the same time about laying hands on a little contract, a little order, and himself to become a boss, an exploiter. It is a general affliction; every one is rushing around chasing something."

A letter to the *Wecker* from the textile city of Paterson, New Jersey, tells of those weavers who became semi-contractors: "One manages somehow to raise a few dollars and buys a couple of looms to operate himself. For the moment it is helpful. The earnings are much larger. This is the reason why you can find many people between the hammer and the forge. . . . They are neither genuine bosses nor proletarians."²⁵⁵

From a local *tuer* in a midwest town comes this sharply drawn picture of the new *alrightnick*: "There are no workers in our town. The *genossen* or the Friends of the WC are all has-beens, has-been workers and has-been Socialists. Today they are, thank Heaven, parents of adult children of marriageable age, owners of stores, satiated and tired of plenty. To find a suitable marriage for the daughter one goes to the Jewish center. . . . Nothing is left of the previous Socialist faith. One has become a solid, respectable citizen."²⁵⁶

Discussing the social mobility of the Jewish workers in New York City, Dr. H. Frank, a sociologist, observed: "The great changes in Jewish occupation are the most important basic tendencies in Jewish life for the last ten years. Jews are leaving the old trades, such as the needle trades, and go to . . . small business and to new occupations that go under the name of service industries: hotels, restaurants, laundries, entertainment; and quite a number of young Jews have taken to an old Jewish trade, *balagoles*, but instead of a horse, they use a motor. Perhaps a majority of all the taxi drivers in New York are Jews."²⁵⁷

This trend was accelerated by the great depression. And only in the second half of the 30's did the old trades—overwhelmingly Jewish—begin to notice the steady reduction of Jewish workers—Italians, Spanish-speaking and Negroes filling the vacuum.

THE RADICAL BUSINESSMAN

For the majority of the new business people the change in economic status was accompanied by a change in outlook. They joined the congregation, the B'nai Brith and the Masons, and took pride in the sport achievements of their children. The usual parent-children relationship was being reversed; the parents, in most instances, doing their utmost to adopt the values of their American-born children. However, there remained a minority who clung to their radical ideas. Not that they differed from the rest in their business methods or manner of living—they did not. But they were still under the sway of their radical youth in Eastern Europe. This minority too were entrenching themselves, building labor lyceums, opening radical schools and forming branches of the political groupings in the big city. But their primary function was *giving*. The ideological differences were also reflected socially.

This minority was torn in two by the split in the Socialist movement in 1919 and 1921. That the Communist-Left caught the fancy of many small business people in New Haven, Norfolk, Atlanta and San Antonio, making them accept Lenin's regime as the fulfilment of the 1905 revolution in which they had participated, and to adhere to the Communist movement, in one degree or another, through all the vagaries of the party line appears anomalous. This phenomenon can be partly explained by the mystic spell cast by revolution. Emotionally ex-patriots, their eyes were turned upon the happy society forged in the Russia of the Soviets. The least they could do, they felt, was to support it, though its methods were often too harsh for their liking. The belief that the Soviet Union was reinvigorating Jewish life and culture played no small part in their unwavering loyalty.

By and large not party people, they had a great share in the growth and spread of all auxiliary bodies and the various anti-Nazi formations. Wherever they could, they started their own parochial schools and Freiheit Singing Societies, but here too their primary function was *giving*.

HIS NOT TO CRITICIZE, BUT TO GIVE

Looking upon his business dealings as a moral transgression, the more sensitive Left businessman had a guilty conscience. And be-

longing to a world-wide revolutionary movement was a sort of atonement to ease his conscience. This "moral" approach denied him the right to criticize. That is why the extreme anti-yishuv stand of the party and the *Freiheit*, unpalatable as it might have been to him, did not pry him away from the movement. He consoled himself with the thought that Moscow and New York were better qualified to judge the situation.

On the whole, both groups practiced ideological non-interference with their children. Though the Left was less passive in the indoctrination of their offspring, still it was uncommon to find a boy or girl interested in the beliefs of his Left parents.

The philanthropic nature of this sort of belonging was a common denominator of the Left and Right. A. Litwak, a keen observer, who toured this country for the Socialist Farband after his return from Russia in the early 20's, noted that the movement still resembled more a colony of the old country than a new metropolis. Disparagingly, he wrote: "They are Hebraists for Palestine, Yiddishists for Poland, Bolsheviks for Russia; and for America they are assimilationists, opportunists and generally nonentities. Everything that is being done here has, to a certain extent, the character of charity: charity Bundism, charity Communism, charity Zionism. . . ." *258

Litwak could have been more charitable to the Left. For many of them the movement was of genuine concern. Still, their part in it was necessarily confined to contributions. With the exception of the Deep South, where to receive a Negro in one's house could be injurious to business, the Left businessman hardly ran any personal risk.

TRYING TO REENTER COMMUNITY VIA MENACE OF HITLER

The transition from the frozen position of the Third Period to the fast-moving Democratic Front was not easy for Jewish Communists, nor was it smooth. The only issue they could raise to bridge the chasm separating them from the rest of the Jews was the threat of triumphant Nazism. But, though recognizing the threat, the community refused to forget or forgive the Communists' recent past. They were distrusted.

With Communist agility, the *Freiheit*, the *Hammer* and the other magazines executed an about-face in their attitude toward the rest

of labor and, later, to Jewish society. Again and again, they appealed for unity of purpose against Nazism, but they were never included in the broad anti-Nazi actions carried out by Jewish bodies in the 30's. Only once, after the Nazi burning of books in 1934, was the Communist-led anti-Nazi committee permitted to march in the last column of the great Jewish demonstration in New York City, May 10th of the same year. And this permission was wrested out by the threat of an independent march at the same time and on the same route—with a clash inevitable.*259

The first Communist attempt to employ the menace of Hitlerism as a means to end their aloofness from Jewish life was the conference in Irving Plaza Hall, February 25, 1934. The inept Jewish Bureau had been caught off guard. The Right Wing having seized the initiative with a similar conference, the Bureau had to act in a hurry. The signers of the Communist call, Louis Hyman, chairman, and Melech Epstein, secretary, were not even consulted. They were chosen because of their reputation. Hyman was a labor leader and known as a non-party member; Epstein had tried to steer clear of the firing line of the Third Period. The Left conference was purposely scheduled for the same day as the Right-Wing affair not to be outdone by them as well as to exert pressure. But the delegation of the Left that went to appeal for unity was barred from entering the Forward Hall.

On that Sunday two anti-Nazi labor bodies came into being: the Right-Wing Jewish Labor Committee, headed by B. Charney-Vladek, and the Left-Wing Jewish People's Committee Against Fascism and War; Philip Weiner, chairman, and Ephraim Schwartzman, secretary.

In the very early stage of the anti-Nazi protests, the Communists tried to gain advantage from the timidity shown by a number of Jewish leaders. The first anti-Hitler rally by the American Jewish Congress, March 1933, in Madison Square Garden, was a pale affair. Only the militant speech of old Reverend Dr. John Hayes Holmes aroused the large audience.*260 +76

IN THE NAZI BOYCOTT AND OUT OF IT

As the anti-Nazi protests developed, Jewish Communists were greatly embarrassed. The Louis Untermeyer Committee for the Boycott of Nazi Goods received popular support. Branches were

organized in various trades to campaign against the sale of German products in this country in protest against the persecution of "Jews, workers, Protestants, and Catholics." The boycott required action, and action had always been a Communist strong point. The Communist-Left was permitted to affiliate, and they picketed businesses that refused to give up German goods.

No sooner had the boycott been fairly started than the Kremlin voiced its opposition to it. True to its usual practice, a non-Russian and one with a revolutionary prestige, Bela Kun, was put forward to argue against this boycott. In his article in the *RUNA*—which replaced the *IMPRECORR*—Kun advanced the opinion that the "reformists are for the German boycott because it serves the interests of their bourgeoisie," meaning it was just a scheme to capture the German market abroad. He also hinted broadly that the reformists generally could not be trusted in the struggle against fascism.^{*261} (It is quite possible that this piece was written by someone else. The author knows of several occasions when the supposed writers of articles saw them for the first time in print.)

Quickly and quietly, the Left disassociated itself from the boycott. And the Jewish Communists and their organ were hard put to explain it, convincing no outsider. The new huge credit extended by the Hitler government a year earlier for Soviet orders in Germany was the Kremlin's true motive. Denying the validity of the anti-Nazi boycott, the Communists conducted in the same year, 1934, an energetic whispering campaign for the boycott of hosiery made of silk imported from Japan. Behind this boycott was the Kremlin fear of Japanese militarism.

(The Kremlin caused the Communists abroad further embarrassment and confusion a year later. The International Federation of Trade Unions had reacted to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in September 1935 with a boycott against the transport of goods to Italy. Both Socialists and Communists eagerly took steps to carry out the boycott in the ports of Europe. But, to the consternation of European labor, Soviet ships disregarded the boycott and sailed to and from Italy. This Soviet "crossing of the picket line" was the end of the boycott, and European and American Communists could dig up only limp excuses for the Soviet behavior.)

THE DOLLAR INQUISITION

Jewish public opinion had been greatly disturbed in 1933 by the news that the GPU was applying inquisitorial methods to Jews in Southern Russia to make them give up their hidden gold coins, jewelry and foreign currency, and forcing them to write to their relatives in America to send them drafts in dollars. This became known as the Dollar Inquisition. Chaim Nachman Bialik, the famous poet, issued a flaming call from Palestine to world Jewry to protest this atrocity. Bialik's call was followed by the proclamation by 200 Palestinian rabbis of a *tahnis* (day of fasting) on March 27th to pray for Soviet Jewry.

Communists flatly denied the entire story. The poet was denounced as a liar and an enemy of the Jewish people. He, the rabbis, and the prominent people here and abroad who took part in the protest were accused of joining the anti-Soviet conspiracy plotted by international fascism and reaction.⁺⁷⁷

The Communist denial was punctured by letters from Russia imploring relatives here to send as many dollar drafts as they could afford, and quickly. Readers of the *Freiheit* received such letters too, and, greatly perplexed, they brought them to the paper for an explanation, which no one could give them. This went on for several months. In the end, the protests from several countries had their effect. The practice stopped. The Communists lamely blamed local GPU officials for the Dollar Inquisition.

Later it was learned that some commissar had hit upon the clever idea of increasing the dollar reserves of the government in the famine year of 1933 by searching for jewels and foreign currency that some might have hidden, and by forcing people with relatives in America to ask them for dollar remittances. As most of those in the last category were Jews, they became the victims. One of the methods was to keep the prisoners for many hours in a hot room, refusing them water, until they collapsed. Another was to feed them salted food, also denying them anything to drink.

The Soviet organs in the Ukraine provided the *Freiheit* an opportunity to recoup part of the lost good will. A Jewish language conference in Kiev, May 1934, was such a happy occasion. The conference, called by the Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture, was greeted by Soviet leaders. The well-known Ukrainian poet

Khvilya, Assistant Commissar of Education, read a paper on Jewish literature. One hundred and nineteen delegates participated, among them 29 editors of Jewish publications.^{*262} (Khvilya was among those who perished during the purges.)

The Ukrainian authorities utilized this conference as a tribune from which to check the rising anti-Jewish sentiment, largely a by-product of the grave tension generated by the famine. All evidence pointed to that. But to Jewish Communism here, the conference was another massive sign of the blossoming Jewish culture and of the keen interest of the Soviets in all phases of Jewish life.

THE AUSTRIAN UPRISING; THE RIGHT DOES IT BETTER

The tragic February 1934 events in Austria—the crushing of Austrian labor by the Dollfuss fascist government—came as a second shock to Socialists and liberals. This shock was felt perhaps more keenly than the collapse of democracy in Germany. The Austrian Social Democracy, led by Otto Bauer, had succeeded in fusing orthodox Marxism with a wide range of practical reforms. The party had governed Vienna for a number of years, and its big housing program was a shining example of Socialist achievement. The cohesiveness of the movement did not leave any appreciable ground for Communism in Austria. And the Communist Party there, despite all efforts by the Comintern, remained but an inconsequential group.

When the news of the workers' uprising reached this country, the Communist press was featuring a general strike in Paris led by Communists against the *Croix de Feu*. And the uprising was treated in the routine manner—a call for a protest in front of the Austrian Consulate. Two days later, the party deemed the uprising significant enough to hire Bronx Coliseum for a meeting on February 15th. However, the needle trades unions, with David Dubinsky in the lead, jointly with the Socialist Party, called for a protest work stoppage at three o'clock in the afternoon of Friday, February 16th, to be followed by a meeting in Madison Square Garden. Matthew Woll, for the AFL, and Mayor La Guardia were to speak.

This bold gesture by "reformists" was to the CP both a surprise and an affront. "Mass action" was its exclusive preserve. The only thing the party could do was to approve the stoppage and the mass meeting, and join them without being invited. But when the Right

refused to include a Communist speaker, the *Daily Worker* ran an extra edition, a few hours before the meeting, vehemently attacking the initiators for denying the CP a voice while inviting the "notorious reactionaries," Matthew Woll and the Mayor. The paper's call to all Communists and Lefts to come to the Garden implied a threat that without a Communist speaker the meeting would not proceed.

The Garden was packed, and the Communists were seated in groups on the top balcony. The unions took precautionary measures, and had their people stationed in strategic aisles. The speakers were continuously being interrupted, and as the noise increased Clarence Hathaway, *Daily Worker* editor, started walking slowly toward the platform, while Dubinsky was speaking. Upon reaching the stairs, those on the platform, believing that he aimed to take over the meeting, unceremoniously pushed him down, hitting him on the head. Communists, shouting that Hathaway was being beaten up, rushed to the center of the Garden. The ushers tried to stop them. Fights broke out, and the big demonstration in behalf of Austrian workers fighting fascism ended in blows between Left and Right.

The repercussions of the disrupted Garden meeting were highly injurious to the CP. Its emphatic assertion that Hathaway's sole aim had been to ask the Left to stop interrupting was not taken seriously by labor and public opinion. The Socialists contended that Hathaway could have sent a note to the chairman, Algernon Lee, asking for permission to address his fellow-Communists; and they were right. Hathaway, a former machinist from Minneapolis and a graduate of the Lenin School in Moscow, was no fool. And it is unreasonable to assume that his measured walk toward the platform was not a calculated attempt to alert the Left to break up the meeting in case he would be denied the floor. Irving Potash, close to the party hierarchy, walking to the Garden with the author, had told him bluntly, "They are not going to hold that meeting!" And 500 furriers were in the Garden to back him up.

WHY FATHER DIVINE AND NOT WOLL AND LA GUARDIA?

To save face, the New York party staged a "public trial" of the "Socialist sluggers" of Hathaway. The "trial" may have been helpful in soothing the uneasiness of many Communists, but not the

public. In the party itself there were quite a few who were ashamed of this act of unabashed vengeance. The reasoning in the party press as to why Woll and the Mayor should not be permitted to speak in behalf of a workers' uprising seem to them ridiculous.

As the leadership of the needle trades unions and the audience in the Garden were predominately Jewish, the anger and resentment among Jewish labor against the CP precluded any chance for a joint labor anti-Nazi campaign, for which the Jewish Communists kept appealing.

Friday evening is the meeting time for many organizations. Communist and Left members were subjected to biting criticism that night, and their speakers were shouted down. At their Anti-War Day, September 1, 1933, the Communists had had their first "United Front" with Father Divine, his army marching behind the Communist column chanting in unison, "Father Divine is God!" And many a Communist at the Friday meetings was nettled by the reminder of the double moral yardstick the party applied, one to Father Divine, the other to La Guardia and Matthew Woll.

The *Forward* and the other Jewish papers again and again referred to the Garden meeting as irrefutable evidence of Communist irresponsibility.

The investigation by the American Civil Liberties Union into the Garden incident found that "responsibility for breaking up the meeting, . . . falls on the leadership of the Communist Party." At the same time, the ACLU criticized the Socialists for "sharpening the conflict. . . . The physical attack on Hathaway was infamous and entirely unnecessary. He could have been led away without violence." *263

Both the Communist and Socialist press sought to draw comfort from the verdict of the ACLU. The *Forward*, in an editorial, could say that a reputable non-partisan body had placed the blame for the break-up of the meeting squarely on the Communist Party, proving that the Communists were a disruptive force in the labor movement.*264 The *Freiheit* reply glossed over the denunciation of the Communists, but dwelt on the criticism by the ACLU of the Socialists for "sharpening the conflict." *265

(Moscow, in a publicity gesture, invited 400 of the Red Front fighters who escaped Austria, all skilled workers and militant Socialists, to settle in the Soviet Union. They were received with

banners and music. But their experience in the Socialist Fatherland was short and tragic. The majority were never heard from again.)

BREAKING UP MEETINGS HAS A HISTORY BEHIND IT

The easy conscience with which hundreds of Communists could break up an important anti-fascist affair can be attributed to similar acts in the past. Breaking up meetings disliked by the party was becoming a habit. A decade earlier, in the spring of 1924, the party had organized a systematic disruption of the tour by Raphael Abramovich, brought over here by the Socialist Farband. His first meeting in Hunt's Point Palace, in the Bronx, until his last on the West Coast were one continuous battle with Communists. The Farband being unaware of the Communists' designs in the beginning, the meeting in the Bronx was broken up. The others were protected by police and watched over by local Socialists. In Pittsburgh, Greek Communists, knives in hand, tried to break through the police lines.

Abramovich's meetings, conducted in Yiddish, would not have attracted national attention were it not for the violent clashes with the Communists. Because of them, Abramovich held press interviews in various cities against Soviet Russia, and the lectures netted more than \$20,000 profit for the Farband.*266

This senseless disruption, unheard of in radical America, was ordered by Zinoviev in a cable to the party. The Kremlin had somehow received "information" that the Menshevik leader's trip to America was linked with a sinister counterrevolutionary plot, and the tour had to be stopped. The Foster-Cannon-Bittelman bloc, in control, knew full well that it would hurt the party. But they obediently carried out instructions. And Bittelman was the one who came to New York from Chicago to organize the job.

Four years later, Cannon's meetings were smashed by the Lovestonites. And the following year, 1929, police protected the Lovestonites' meetings against the Fosterites.