

## 35 *Fat Years That Turned Lean*

Marching with a forced tempo toward democracy and unity, Jewish Communism had more than its share of the ups and downs of the parent body. But, unlike the latter, the downs outstripped the ups.

All Communist exertions to appear as loyal Jews and good Americans and all the "fronts" in the area of resisting fascism and anti-Semitism or strengthening cultural positions, created with so much fanfare, failed to break their perilous isolation. At a time when the party could justly claim a wide net of auxiliaries, thousands of non-Communists on their membership rolls, the Jewish counterparts, despite their busy air, were, with but few exceptions, products of the Left periphery. To paraphrase an old Communist shibboleth: Jewish Communists were badly lagging behind the general advance of the party.

This is not to minimize the Communist inroads among Jews, especially among the youth and middle class, during the Democratic Front era. Jews were in the active elements of the numerous leagues and aid committees, and in some instances formed a sizable part of their ranks.

No one would dispute that in the fear-soaked 30's there were understandable reasons for a rise in Soviet prestige. Western Europe's meekness and lack of direction in the face of increasing Nazi impudence were disappointing. The Spanish Civil War could only heighten this sentiment. Father Coughlin, the Christian Fronters, Christian Mobilizers, Gerald L. K. Smith, and their like, that infested the domestic scene, fostered the nagging thought, not easily

suppressed, that it could happen here too. Against this gloom the Soviet Union seemed to many to be a tower of anti-fascist strength.

However, by and large, people deeply concerned for Jewish spiritual well-being as well as their safety remained unreceptive to Communist overtures. They shunned Moscow and its movement here. And when anxiety for Jews abroad impelled them to consider a rapprochement with Moscow, the latter, or its columns abroad, with one rash brutal move rolled them back to their previous hostility.

### RIDING THE ISSUE OF ANTI-SEMITISM

In the short period of 1936-1939, Jewish fortunes in Nazi Germany and Eastern Europe underwent a steady and swift deterioration. Less than two and a half years separated the Nuremberg Nazi congress, in the summer of 1936, that passed the anti-Jewish laws, from the Nazi pogroms on Jews in Germany and Austria on Black Thursday and Friday, November 10-11, 1938. The economic war against Jews in Poland and Rumania became more pronounced, and pogroms and physical attacks on individual Jews more numerous. Goebbels was financing and promoting anti-Semitism in Europe and in North and South America.

Jewish Communists were furnished with ample opportunity to knock on the doors of public bodies. The sprouting of hate-mongers here was their most potent weapon. Oversimplification and plain exaggeration of anti-Semitic instances was a daily Communist practice. A perusal of the Communist press of that period is astonishing. A policeman and a school teacher in New York City were accused of passing derogatory remarks about Jews. Both denied the charge, and were investigated by the city authorities. But the *Freiheit* would not calm down. These two cases were magnified out of all proportion, and City Hall and Jewish defense groups were accused of squashing the news and white-washing the guilty ones.

Neither the American Jewish Congress nor the Jewish Labor Committee would have the Communists in the movement against the pogroms in Poland, 1937. Only in Chicago and Los Angeles did they meet with partial success. In the former some liberals persuaded the local AJC to admit the Communist order, the IWO,

and in the latter the WC did likewise, disregarding the instructions of the national office.

However, in 1938, the Communist Jewish People's Committee was the only one to call for street demonstrations against the Nazi November pogroms. The Council for Jewish Rights, comprising the four large bodies, influenced by the American Jewish Committee and the B'nai Brith, held that public opinion had already voiced its protest, and there was no need for a Jewish demonstration. "Let America speak for us," they argued. Instead, a Day of Prayer in the synagogues was proclaimed, as a "more dignified form of protest."

This inactivity—or rather, timidity—left the JPC the only outlet for the accumulated anger and apprehension. The Madison Square Garden meeting, called in cooperation with a few other Left foreign-language groups, November 21st, was overcrowded, thousands being turned away. Michael Quill and Vito Marcantonio were among the speakers. The only non-Left speaker was H. V. Kaltenborn. The press gave little space to that meeting. But the JPC gained prestige.

The Communists benefited from their initiative and alertness in Cleveland and Los Angeles, too. In Cleveland, stores were closed on the Protest Day proclaimed by the JPC. In Los Angeles, a number of societies and congregations joined the JPC in the street march. About 15,000 participated.<sup>\*267</sup> It was the only march of its kind in the country.

Moscow, too, responded in a vigorous manner to the November pogroms, to take the edge off the horror of the purges and to arouse world opinion against Germany. Many cables of protest resolutions by Soviet writers and scientists were sent to the *Freiheit*. One was a fervent article by the noted writer, Alexie Tolstoi. An editorial in the *Pravda*, November 17th, also cabled, stated, "World opinion has expressed its deepest revulsion at the pogroms on Jews organized by the Nazis. . . . They can be compared only with medieval darkness. . . . They will not save the Nazi regime from going under."<sup>\*268</sup> But none of the Soviet leaders followed the example of President Roosevelt, who voiced his horror at the pogroms.

Speaking of Los Angeles, the Deutche Folk House was the hotbed of arrogant Nazism on the Pacific Coast. And solid rumor had it that a majority of the local motorcycle police belonged to the

Christian Fronters. No wonder the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League found a sympathetic response among the Jewish middle class. Insofar as the author was able to establish, the biggest portion of the 4,000 members on the League rolls were Jews. Belonging to the League did not necessarily imply any sympathy toward Communism. The Hollywood League was the only active group in the area, and its letterhead, with so many glittering movie names, was reassuring to uneasy people.

(The one person most effective in convincing some of the influential Jews in Hollywood in 1938 that Moscow and the German Communists were the most reliable fighters against Hitlerism was August Katz, a Comintern emissary. Short, nervous and dynamic, Katz was the editor of the *Brown Book*, the first work exposing Nazi cruelty. Born in Czechoslovakia of a well-to-do family, Katz joined the Communist movement in his youth. On the strength of resisting Nazism, he was successful in raising money even from conservative people. Under the name of Andre Simone, Katz occupied a leading position in Communist Czechoslovakia, and was among those hanged in the Slansky trial, 1952, a trial where world Jewry was charged with fantastic crimes. This indefatigable worker for Communism was accused of joining the Communist Party 23 years earlier for the express purpose of spying and sabotage.)

#### THE PARIS CONFERENCES AGAINST ANTI-SEMITISM

Communists were short on candor but not on initiative. In most cases they were the first in anti-fascist action. The International Conference Against Anti-Semitism and Racial Hatred, in Paris, September 19–20, 1936, originated by the French League for Human Rights and by the Jewish Cultural Front, in France, was planned and financed by Moscow as part of its campaign against Nazi Germany. About 100 delegates from 20 countries came to the conference. The local Poale Zion and Bund groups, Histadrut from Palestine and the French synagogues were represented, as well as a few Negroes and hand-picked Arabs for better effect. It was greeted by Romain Rolland, Eduard Herriot, President Eduard Benes, Leon Jouhaux, Roger Baldwin, Vandervelde, Henri Mann, Camille Houseman and S. Branting from Sweden. J. Gershman, secretary of the Jewish Communists in Canada, was the only delegate from

North America. The conference, held one week after the Nuremberg Nazi congress, could base its appeal to the conscience of the world on the Aryan anti-Jewish laws.<sup>\*269</sup>

The second conference—now called congress—a year later in the same month, in Paris, had 300 delegates from 22 countries. The American delegation of 12 was headed by Philip Weiner and Max Bedacht. Several Negroes were included. The Communist face of the congress was now clear, and most of its non-Communist supporters withdrew. Greetings were received from Louis Untermeyer, Emil Ludwig and Thomas Mann, also from the French government. The motto of the congress was *Our Answer to Nuremberg*. Far-reaching plans were made for combating racism and anti-Semitism.<sup>\*270</sup> However, Moscow lost interest in that venture, and the congress organs withered away almost overnight. (The *Forward*, on July 4th, warned against this congress, calling it a “new Communist trick to capture Jewish souls.”)

#### THE EFFECT OF THE FIGHTING IN PALESTINE, 1936

Jewish Communists had their hearts set on the Jewish World Congress in Geneva, opening August 4, 1936. This would automatically have lowered the bars set up against them by a large segment of Jewish society. Losing hope of reaching an understanding with organized Jewish labor, due to insurmountable Right-Wing Socialist and trade union opposition, the Communists turned to the middle class as the easier to penetrate. The IWO and the ICOR entered into negotiations with the American Jewish Congress. But they could reach no agreement; the roadblock was again Palestine. The preparatory conference, June 14th, in Washington, refused to admit them. However, the Communist press did not publish the real reasons until much later. They spoke merely of “Zionist party interests preventing Jewish unity.”

The wave of fighting that shook Palestine the summer of 1936 was more widespread and of longer duration than that in the fall of 1929. Accumulated intergroup tension erupted into Arab violence against Jews, Jewish extremists immediately retaliating. It began on April 17th when crowds in Jaffe, incited by groundless rumors of Arabs murdered in nearby Tel Aviv, attacked and killed Jewish passers-by.

An Arab high committee was immediately formed, headed by the Mufti in Jerusalem, Hajj Amin el-Husseini, notorious for his hatred of the *yishuv*. (During the World War he was in Berlin cooperating with the Nazis.) The high committee assumed command of these sporadic outbreaks and proclaimed a boycott against the Jewish population. The sniping and the bomb-throwing were now planned, organized and financed by the committee. The fighting turned the two national groups into intensely hostile communities, all communications between them broken.

As the British could not for long remain neutral, as it wanted to, and had to maintain a minimum of public order, the Arab wrath later turned against the British too. Many pitched battles were fought between Arab guerrilla bands and British troops in the sandy hills and barren mountains of Northern Palestine. The fighting went on until October, when the Arab high committee called off the fighting to save the citrus export, a mainstay of the Arab economy.

Reports of killed and wounded in Palestine again hit the reader in the summer of 1936. Among the victims were people who had escaped Nazi persecution and Polish discrimination. Jewish society here was deeply grieved and angered.

This time the Jewish Communists were hard put to find the right approach to the bloody happenings. Irrevocably committed to an anti-homeland position—the Comintern line—the task of winning Jewish “unity” forbade reverting to the pro-Arab stand of 1929 (see Chapter 28). What they did was to separate the wolves from the sheep. The Zionist leadership was criticized for their ties with British imperialism, utopian plans and anti-Arab attitude, but the *yishuv* itself was showered with tender regard for its rights and growth. “The interests of the Jews and Arabs are mutual, and they could and should live in harmony,” was the theme of Communist comments.

Conditioned by long practice to sharp and abusive polemics against Zionism, the civilized tenor of the present discussion and the professed anxiety for Palestinian Jewry was not executed with ease nor with grace. But the change in tone and in emphasis could hardly satisfy the Zionists. However, the absence of the shrieking anti-Jewish headlines of seven years ago blocked a repetition of the anti-Communist boycott.



## ... FOR THE SINS OF THEIR COMRADES ...

This calmer atmosphere was soon dispelled by the Palestinian Communist party, whose leadership had been Arabized in 1929-1930. A dispatch at the end of April told of a Communist leaflet calling upon the Arab masses to unite "to fight Jewish settlement." A few days later, another dispatch told of the Communist party's openly supporting the war against the Jewish population.

The *Freiheit*, caught off guard, vehemently denied the authenticity of the dispatches. Olgin, replying to a reader, Yehudah Weinstein, who wrote that his blood ran cold on reading about the doings of the Palestinian Communists, stated emphatically that the dispatches were a fabrication.\*271 The lengthy articles from Palestine by the *Freiheit* correspondent, B. Lerner (an assumed name), virulent against the leaders of the *yishuv*, omitted any mention of the attitude of the Palestinian Communist party.

Public opinion was incensed by the news of the Communists being in league with the hated Mufti. The press, without exception, held the Jewish Communists here responsible and branded them traitors to their people. Voices were again heard calling for their ostracism.

The heightening attacks in the press made the *Freiheit* more belligerent too. "How long will the Ben Gurion's play with Jewish lives?" wrote Olgin on May 14th. A headline over another article warned, "Again They are Inciting!" Belligerency was fused with fright. Nineteen twenty-nine was still fresh in Communist memories.

Jewish Communists vigorously fought back the new wave of attacks. The *Freiheit* sought to divert attention from the Palestinian Communists by a great show of moral indignation against the *Forward* after Hearst's *New York American* reprinted two *Forward* editorials on Communist anti-Jewish activities in Palestine.\*272 The reprints were used to confirm the chief argument that *Forward* Red-baiting was leading straight into the arms of William Randolph Hearst.\*273

The Jewish Bureau called to their aid the big party guns. A mass meeting was held on May 13th, with Clarence Hathaway and Olgin as the main speakers. The slogan of that meeting was *Brotherhood Between Jews and Arabs*.\*274 As the anti-Communist campaign was growing in volume, a big meeting was held in the Hippodrome,

June 8th, with Browder and Olgin as the speakers. Both speakers assured their listeners that the "Communist party in Palestine is striving to throw a bridge between the Jewish and the Arab peoples. . . . It is striving to unite the two peoples against their common enemy, British imperialism." Browder also drew a line of demarcation between the Zionist masses and their leaders.\*275 Similar meetings were held in all larger cities.

In all fairness, it must be said that the party here was completely in the dark as to the actual attitude of the Communists in Palestine. The daily arrests of members of the Comintern staff, a prologue to the great purge, also unknown here, hindered communications with Moscow on the subject of Palestine. For that reason, Melech Epstein was secretly dispatched to Palestine for a confidential investigation, early in May. His amazing findings are outside the scope of this book. However, the news dispatches had not lied. Furthermore, the Palestinian party was proud to be admitted into the Arab high committee and participated in all its plans and decisions. It, too, was out of contact with the Comintern, and for the same reasons.

The anti-British turn in the Arab fighting relieved somewhat the pressure on the Communists here. And Jewish Communism was saved the distressing consequence of 1929. Still, it did not avoid being hurt. Communist policies in Palestine adversely affected the negotiations with the American Jewish Congress and similar moves for "unity."

## BARRED FROM JEWISH WORLD CONGRESS

Their rejection by the Washington conference of the AJC, disappointing as it was, did not deter the Communists. Audaciously, they began forming a new body for the same World Congress, hoping to exert pressure on Geneva. An initiative committee was formed in Chicago. In its "anxiety for the interests of the Jewish people," the committee called a national conference for July 12th in Hotel Astor, New York. A great deal of hard work went into drawing in outside groups.\*276

The gathering in Hotel Astor was a huge success—so wrote the *Freiheit*—over 700 delegates representing "a quarter of a million people." Actually, the entire Left was there, plus a couple of opportunist rabbis, a few innocent Zionists from far-away places and sev-

eral societies where Left-Wingers had contact. The resolution regretted "that the Zionists' party interests were placed above the general Jewish interests. . . ." A delegation of five was sent to Geneva: Dr. Charles Kuntz, H. Opoichinsky, of the furriers' union, Reuben Salzman, Philip Weiner, and, to add credence to the non-partisan character of the new body, an Orthodox rabbi, Dr. Jacob Greenfeld of the Congregation Athereth Israel, Brownsville.

In Geneva, the Left delegation received some support from Canada. J. L. Fine, from the London furniture workers' union, was the only English delegate to back them. But the Congress leaders, an overwhelming majority behind them, would not have the Left because of the Communists' antagonism to the *yishuv*. Louis Lipsky, American Zionist leader, stated this bluntly.

Following the barring of the five delegates in Geneva, the NEC of the IWO published the reason for the breakdown of the negotiations with the AJC in June.

The two Left bodies, the IWO and ICOR, had received a cable from the executive of the World Congress in Geneva stating, "AJC demands that you disassociate yourself from the stand of the Jewish Communists in Palestine which supports the barbarian attacks of the Arabs on the Jews. Our committee supports this demand. It would not imply your agreeing with the Zionist program." \*277

The cable confronted the Communists with a serious dilemma. They were anxious to enter the ranks of the Jewish Congress, but could not make a public declaration against the Communist party in Palestine. Only Moscow could permit them such a bold move. The IWO and the ICOR attempted to extricate themselves by a subterfuge. In their answer, they declared, "We have not taken any position on the events in Palestine . . . ,<sup>78</sup> but we are ready to support all Jewish elements in the struggle against fascism and anti-Semitism. . . ." \*278 Neither New York nor Geneva found this statement satisfactory.

The Jewish People's Committee also failed to be admitted into the Joint Boycott Council against Nazi goods, of the American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Labor Committee.