

## 36 *The Outstretched Hand*

Saving the Jews in Europe, fighting anti-Semitism here and fortifying Jewish culture: these three tasks formed the pattern of Communist behavior in their ceaseless efforts for Jewish "unity." And as the situation of the European Jews steadily worsened in the late 30's, saving them became the paramount lever by which Jewish Communists hoped to break their isolation.

Failing to be admitted into the bona fide Jewish bodies, the Communists' Jewish People's Committee decided on a bold move, a "united Jewry" of their own. The committee called a "unity convention" for March 12-13, 1938, "to save the Jews in Eastern Europe." It was preceded by local conferences and a great deal of publicity. "The representatives of the Jewish people will gather here tomorrow," wrote the secretary of the committee, E. Schwartzman. Among those who spoke at the convention were Congressman Sirovich, City Councilman Michael Quill, Vito Marcantonio and Dr. Greenfeld. Reuben Brainin was elected honorary chairman.

Commenting on the convention, which ostensibly spoke for a quarter of a million Jews in 14 states, the *Freiheit* boasted and pleaded: "We (Jewish Communists) are now in the mainstream of Jewish life. . . . We are ready to cooperate with anyone who is willing to support the struggle for Jewish rights. . . ." But few seemed ready to accept the outstretched hand. Excepting a couple of unions which had become involved in a United Front, several societies, the B'nai Brith from Pittsburgh and from several small towns, the convention "united" only the Left Wing.<sup>279</sup>

The unity convention, like similar ventures, could not hide its Left face. Its manifesto asserted that "The Soviet Union has abolished anti-Semitism." \*280

(A week earlier, March 6th, the Jewish Labor Committee had held its convention. Its resolution stipulated that the JLC would enter into United Front deals "only with those Jewish and non-Jewish bodies who adhered to the viewpoint of broad state liberty and democracy in all countries." This excluded the Communist-led Jewish People's groups.)

Angered at being left out of the Council for Jewish Rights, formed August 15, 1938, by the Big Four—American Jewish Committee, Jewish Congress, Jewish Labor Committee and the B'nai Brith—the *Freiheit* charged that the founders had followed an undemocratic procedure, that "the will of the people had not been taken into account. . . ." \*281

#### THE BEST SONS—WITH RESERVATIONS

Stepping into the "midstream of Jewish life" was not without complications. Back of the Communists' minds lurked the fear that a change in line might find them caught up in the current, and a return would prove neither easy nor comfortable. Every document relating to Jewish life, therefore, was hedged in with qualifications. An example was the paper read by Olgin for the Jewish Bureau at the tenth state convention of the New York party, May 1938. Olgin usually went the whole hog, and with a margin. But in Jewish affairs the memory of yesterday's nihilism was too fresh not to put him on guard against the chance that it might reemerge tomorrow. The tenor of his speech was fully for unity. Yet reservation was piled on reservation.

"The other day I had a personal compliment," he began. "I attended a conference . . . as a delegate from the ICOR. A delegate from a religious congregation said, 'Why, he is talking like a real Jew, and I was told he was a Communist.'

"Comrades," Olgin sorrowfully admitted, "We . . . managed to alienate the Jewish masses. More than that, we managed to convey . . . that the Communists are hostile to the Jewish national aspirations. We fought Zionism, which was correct, but . . . we forgot that many progressive elements . . . were Zionistically inclined.

We forgot also that the craving, the desire, for nationhood is not in itself reactionary. We conveyed the impression that the Jewish people . . . in Palestine are our enemies and we are theirs. . . .

"We state that the Communists are the best leaders of the Jews. . . . The party must know what is going on in the life of every national group. . . . We have traveled far from those days in 1935. . . ." \*282

Touching on the cultural field, Olgin continued his reservations, "However, as Communists, we must distinguish between the broader aspects of the people's culture . . . and that which is an actual proletarian contribution. . . . Therefore, it is necessary that we, Communists, should create Communist culture within the framework of the people's culture. . . .

"But there are two dangers. The danger of nationalism is one. . . . The other danger is national nihilism. . . . We must remember what Lenin said about this and also Stalin and Dimitrov." \*283

Philip David, secretary of the Bronx County committee, did not march back and forth like Olgin. Reporting on the party task in his territory, he stated, ". . . a major problem in the building of the Democratic Front is the winning of the Jewish people. . . . The most important factor (is) the popularization of the revolutionary, progressive and democratic tradition of the Jewish people. Our party must begin to make a thorough study of the history of the Jewish people." David followed this with a glorified thumbnail sketch of Jewish participation in the struggles for liberty, including the American Revolution and the Civil War. \*284

#### THE CHANGED ATTITUDE TOWARD UNION LEADERSHIP

The Democratic Front caused a notable change in Communist behavior toward the AFL trade unions. Leaders of the garment trades unions, hitherto the object of a flood of abuse, were now spoken of with respect. The party press volunteered to advise them, but in a friendly tone.

Communist noisy conduct at union meetings, insulting speeches and points of order stopped as if by magic.

But all the party's courting of the higher command in these unions could not batter down or weaken their old distrust of Communism. Dubinsky and most of his associates as well as the leaders

in the other unions were waiting for more tangible evidence than mere words of Communist conversion to democracy. However, in a few places, the Communists did succeed in entering the leadership on the local level. Such was the case in the Cloak and Suit Operators' Union Local 117, in the Ladies' Tailors' and Finishers' Union Local 9, and the Dressmakers' Union Local 22, of the ILGWU, and in the Pocketbook Workers' Union. (In the ILGWU, this experiment with the Communists was of short duration.)<sup>+79</sup> They also made headway in the Painters' District Council 9 and in the shoe workers' and the grocery clerks' unions.

The general reason behind these local Communist advances was brought out by Zivyon. "It is difficult to fight someone," he remarked, "who keeps professing his love for you."

Some of the people who entered into agreement with the Communists were allied with the Militants in the Socialist Party, who then sincerely believed in the desirability of common action with the Communists; others had personal reasons. The support of the Communists enabled them to hold power, the Communists being satisfied with minor posts.

The new harmony was not always healthy. L. Finklestein, an old-timer and labor editor of *The Day*, was impelled to complain that "Only in those unions without a United Front can one still hear criticism of the leadership; in the others the criticism . . . is heard only from the Right."<sup>+285</sup>

#### JEWISH REACTION TO THE CIVIL WAR IN SPAIN

The Spanish Civil War, July 1936 to the spring of 1939, involved no immediate or direct issue bearing on Jewish destiny. Except for a small group of refugees from Germany and a still smaller one from Poland, there were no Jews in Spain to speak of. Still, it is not an understatement to say that no other ethnical group outside the Spanish was so deeply touched by the fighting in Spain. With a keen intuition, the Jews, by and large, accepted the premise that the struggle among the barren hills of North and Central Spain was a proving ground for Hitler and Mussolini, and that a fascist victory in Spain would reinforce fascism in Europe. Jews watched closely the course of the battles and many responded generously to appeals for aid for Loyalist Spain.

Eastern European Jews, living under a darkening cloud of discriminations and physical threats, were greatly concerned over the fortunes of the belligerents in Spain. Jacob Pat, secretary of the JLC, then in Poland, related: "Jews in Poland listened anxiously to the 6 PM radio broadcast. News favorable to the Loyalists heartened them; reverses encouraged anti-Jewish assaults on the streets."<sup>+286</sup>

There were Jews whose concerns took a different direction. The French Consistory, the central body of the synagogues, ordered a prayer for the Spanish and Mexican clergy on the Day of Atonement in 1936. (President Calles was then waging his drive against the Church in Mexico.) The prayer finished with "because Israel must always stand with the persecuted and not with the persecutors." David Einhorn, poet and essayist, who told this story from Paris in his article in the *Forward*, added, "Rumor has it that when the Paris Bishop Verdier heard of the Jewish prayer, he sighed, 'It is not a happy omen for us when the Jews pray for us. . . . How can their God help us when he is unable to help them?'"<sup>+287</sup>

The Civil War caused a peculiar international smuggling. Young Jewish workers from Eastern Europe, living in semi-legality in France and Belgium, hurried to Spain to enlist in the Loyalist militia. One month after the outbreak of the fascist rebellion, there were about 150 Jewish militia men on the Aragon front alone. When the author left Spain, at the end of 1936, the number of Jewish militia men from Eastern and Central Europe was well above 500, and they were still coming.<sup>+80</sup> Young Polish Jews, without passports or money, overcoming innumerable obstacles, smuggled across four borders, including that of Nazi Germany, walking over the Pyrenees Mountains, to reach Spain.<sup>+288</sup>

Jewish volunteers formed a sizable part of the Communist-controlled German Ernest Thaelmann and the Polish Dumbrowsky battalions. The same was true of young Jews exiled from Nazi Germany. Because they spoke several languages, they were entrusted with most of the communication lines at the front.

In later months, a Jewish company, mostly of Polish Jews, was organized in the name of Naftali Botwin.<sup>+81</sup> It carried through a successful attack on the Ebro River. (A description of the battle, by one of the soldiers, appeared in the *Freiheit* September 5, 1938.)



The company participated in the battles of Madrid, Guadalajara, Huesca, Brunete and Saragosa. It was a part of the 13th International Brigade. The commander of the company was Karl G., from Poland. The political commissar was Micha Reger (an assumed name). In a letter to a friend, Reger described "the warm friendship between the various nationalities in the International Brigade. Even the Poles see the truth that Jews are not cowards, and the news of a pogrom in their homeland outrages them. . . ." \*289

The company published the *Botwin Front Paper* (a photostat of the masthead appeared in the *Freiheit* February 24, 1938). It was later changed to the illustrated *Freiheit Kemfer*, subtitled "For Your and Our Liberty." Aware of the moral prestige of the fighters in the trenches, the *Freiheit Kemfer* issued fiery appeals to the Jews in Europe and America to forge common action against fascism. They appeared only in the Communist press. The *Freiheit* also printed many letters from Jewish volunteers, American and European.

Sympathy for Spain and enlistment in the Spanish militia crossed party lines. However, international Communism, the first to act, was able to impose a semi-monopoly on fund-raising and enlistment, deriving great advantage from both. Moscow's part was of incalculable help. After several days of hesitation, the Kremlin began clandestinely sending armed aid to Spain. Contrasted with the "neutral" attitude of Western Europe and the United States, which placed a legitimate republican government and a fascist rebel force on the same legal scale, Moscow's action appeared a bold anti-fascist move. The glory gained by its arms shipments and through Litvinoff's thundering in the League of Nations against Hitler's and Mussolini's intervention reflected on Communism generally. The Comintern and its parties did not fail to dwell on the differences in attitude between the Socialist Fatherland and the capitalist democracies.

The initiative in recruiting gave the CP here the edge over all anti-fascist groups. Moscow sent a special man here for the recruiting, and the campaign was carried out with quiet efficiency. More than 2,000 young Americans were sent over to Spain by the party. +82 They were organized in the Abraham Lincoln and the George Washington battalions. Socialist recruits and others began coming

in later. But before they could realize their plans for their own units, the foreign volunteers were evacuated from Spain.

The CP set up several agencies combining propaganda and collections: the North American Committee to Aid the Spanish Democracy, Spanish Aid Committee, Medical Aid to Spain, and similar bodies among the ethnical groups—all their letterheads displaying a battery of prominent liberals. No one will ever know the sums these agencies collected and what part ever reached Spain. But, again, they widened the party's sphere of influence and were also a vehicle for party recruiting.

#### JEWISH LABOR REFUSES "UNITY" ON SPAIN

American Jews were conspicuous in the Spanish relief campaigns, Jewish doctors and nurses volunteered for work in Spain, and Jewish boys were among the dead and wounded of the Abraham Lincoln brigade—Ben Laider, a pilot, was killed in Spain. But the separate action for Spain started by the Jewish Bureau, to be used as additional pressure to force acceptance, fizzled out.

Jewish labor, strongly for the Loyalists, refused common action with the Communists. On the contrary, in the first months the Trade Union Red Cross for Spain, unofficially initiated by the ILGWU, outmaneuvered the CP, compelling it to hand over the funds collected by the party for the Loyalists. All the money was sent to Walter Citrine, head of the Spanish Relief Committee of the International Trade Union Congress. David Dubinsky's cable informing Citrine that he was sending him \$20,000 plus \$8,000 raised by the CP appeared in the *Freiheit* August 22, 1936. +83

Early in 1937, the first reports of GPU terror in Spain began to reach this country. The *Forward* immediately pointed out that by these acts Moscow was gravely undermining the strength of the Loyalists. The kidnaping and disappearance of Mark Rein, son of Raphael Abramovich, in Barcelona, in the early hours of April 9, 1937, was a crime that could be motivated solely by revenge against his father. Young Rein, politically to the left of his father, came to Spain to affect unity among the German anti-fascists, Socialists and Communists. No clue was ever found of him.

Several Communists, disgusted with their experience in Spain,

broke with the party. Yet, Spain remained for a time a source of prestige and revenue for the CP. However, hostility to Moscow and to Communism spread as the full story of Moscow's violence in Spain was unfolded. Stalin was blamed for the defeat of the Spanish Republic. But, in the opinion of the author, Stalin's high-handed and brutal methods were only one of the causes.