

Critical Look at B. Z. Goldberg's Book

Reviewer questions method and facts in study of Soviet Jews

By **LOUIS HARAP**

The Jewish Problem in the Soviet Union: Analysis and Solution, by B. Z. Goldberg, with a Foreword by Daniel Mayer. Crown, N. Y., 1961. 374 pages. \$4.95.

AS THE stream of books and articles on the Jews in the Soviet Union swells, one is inclined to ask in each case, does this add to what we already know? Is it another instrumentality in the cold war? What of B. Z. Goldberg's new book?

He has been a student of Soviet Jewish life for many years as a Yiddish journalist with a generally liberal outlook. He participated importantly in the activities of the American Committee for Birobidjan (Ambidjan), of the Jewish Section of Russian War Relief and as president of the American Committee of Jewish Writers, Artists and Scientists, which co-operated closely with the Soviet Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee.

In connection with this work and as a journalist he visited the Soviet Union in 1934, 1946 and 1959. In 1934 he spent some time in Birobidjan and on all his trips he was given unusual opportunities to observe Jewish life. He speaks fluent Russian, as well as other languages.

During his three trips he was speci-

fically interested in the condition of Soviet Jews and in the book he records his talks with them and his observations on their situation. This material is intermixed with historical data on Soviet Jews since the revolution. He also attempts to probe behind the facts for explanations derived from conversations with Soviet Jews and published press reports. His intent is to give a systematic presentation of the problem rather than a chronological account and he concludes with proposals for a solution.

The book is, however, a disappointment. There is little in it that is not familiar to those who have followed the question. But this is not the trouble, for a round-up of facts has its uses. There are disturbing deficiencies. Improvements in the situation of Soviet Jews are minimized; the book is tendentious and in many places tinctured with prejudice; he omits documentation; the theoretical approach is shallow, and it shows the distorting effects of Zionist dogma.

If one compares Goldberg's comment on the trip of 1934 made within a few years after his return with his report of that same trip in the book of 1961, the discrepancies are astonishing. In an article on "The Psycho-

pathology of Anti-Sovietism on the Jewish Street" in *Yiddische Kultur* (Feb.-March, 1942), Goldberg wrote: "In 1934, when the author of this article made a journey all over the Soviet Union and came back from there with concrete, factual articles which were positive toward the Soviet Union—although they pointed to many dark (*shotndike*) aspects," they caused a furore in the Yiddish press. But the 1961 report of this same trip is predominantly negative. In the book he depicts the life of the Jews as one of unrelieved gloom and foreboding. These two reports cannot both be accurate.

On April 17, 1938, Goldberg made a speech on the tenth anniversary of the founding of Birobidjan as a Jewish territory. One aspect of a Jewish Birobidjan needs to be stressed, he said then: "The Jews in the Soviet Union need no separate territory to which to flee to escape persecution or anti-Semitism, or because they lack a healthy economic life where they live now—no, the Jews of Russia do not know anti-Semitism and we already have in the Soviet Union today a large (*groissen*) generation of Jews who never themselves experienced persecution as Jews" (*Naïleben*, New York, March, 1942, p. 10).

Yet in his account of this same period, as he published it in 1961, he tells us he heard only dour prophecies of doom from Soviet Jews in 1934! He describes, among other things in the same tenor, his visit with the "defeated men in the Kiev synagogue—their prayers for their brethren [in the Soviet Union] who find themselves in distress and captivity, who stand between land and sea." And on his departure from Soviet Russia, this thought "kept reverberating in my ears. There *was* distress, and there *was*

captivity" (p. 41). It is hard to realize that these two characterizations 23 years apart refer to the same visit. The "positive" features of Soviet Jewish life had made the deepest impression on him in 1934; they are simply dropped out of his 1961 account, thus distorting the total effect.

What is involved here is not a change of heart about the Soviet Union but a change in a reporter's story in two accounts of the same visit. In the book Goldberg seems eager to put the worst possible face on everything that has to do with the Soviet Jews. In his discussion in the book of Soviet Jewish culture during the thirties, he writes, there was "not much Jewishness in the Yiddish they were promulgating." The "national" aspect of Yiddish, he says, was reduced to "mere language" and the content was socialist "to the exclusion of any other content" (p. 27). It was true, as he writes, that the Hebrew tradition was ruled out. But does it follow that the Jewish aspect was cut down to "mere language"? The rich Yiddish of impressive artists like Bergelson, Feffer, Markish and many others, with their heavy freight of Jewish cultural connotation and saturation in Jewish life, belies Goldberg's unperceptive observation.

Moreover, the Yiddish literary historian Nahman Meisel devotes a chapter of his book, *Dos Yiddische Shafn un Yiddische Shreiber in Sovetnjarband* (Jewish Creative Activity and the Yiddish Writers in the Soviet Union), published in New York in 1959, to show with copious illustration that, in his words, the works of Soviet Yiddish poets and fiction writers had "deeply Jewish, deeply national themes" (p. 230).

Of this same period of Yiddish cul-



V. E. Dimshits, member of Communist Central Committee, first vice-president of "Gosplan"

ture, Maurice Hindus, who cannot be called partial to the Soviet Union today, writes in his new book, *House Without a Roof: Russia After 43 Years of Revolution* (Doubleday, N. Y., 1961. 562 pages, \$6.95): "Jewish fathers and mothers" complained "that their children were attending Jewish schools but were educated to be *goyim*. This was not quite true. One of the distinctive features of these schools was the extraordinary amount of attention they devoted to Yiddish literature and to folklore in song, story and dance, which kept alive Jewish sentiment and Jewish sentimentality . . . the one thing the children loved was Jewish folklore" (pp. 304, 305). It is significant that Goldberg, like the older generation, underestimates the Jewish

content of education in the Yiddish schools.

In a similar manner, and perhaps more serious in 1961, Goldberg minimizes the recovery of Jewish cultural rights—slow though it may be—since 1953. On page 271 he writes, "In the Soviet Union today there is no Jewish culture whatever in the language of the country, Russian." Yet, on page 106 he had already written, "Between 1956 and 1959, poems and stories by rehabilitated writers appeared in translation in literary magazines and books." Are not translations of Yiddish writings of both classical and contemporary Yiddish writers Jewish culture in Russian?

Goldberg tries to minimize, and even to ignore, the quantity and significance of the hundreds of thousands of copies of the many Yiddish works that have appeared in the last few years in translation in Russian, Ukrainian and other Soviet languages. Translations into Russian of Sholem Aleichem alone appeared during 1959-1961 in a six-volume edition of 225,000 sets. In March, 1960, the Yiddish poet Aaron Vergelis reported that in the three years past, individual volumes of 25 Yiddish poets had come out in Russian translation. Goldberg gives no notion of this significant development.

Goldberg passes very hastily and inadequately over other evidences of change for the better in the post-Stalin period. He underestimates the intensity and quantity of amateur dramatic and choral activities of groups in Kovno, Dvinsk, Riga, Vilna, Leningrad and Chernovitz and tours of such groups in Leningrad, Minsk and other cities. How dangerously he minimizes the degree of recovery is indicated by his statement that in 1959, "There was not a sign of Jewish life



Aaron Vergelis, poet and editor of
Sovetish Haimland

outside the synagogue. The sole possible exception was the concert given for the general public featuring "Jewish songs and musical miniatures" (p. 128). But in that year there were also *hundreds* of concerts, publication of works in Yiddish of Peretz and Mendele, dramatic, music and dance activity by ensembles in Leningrad and many other cities with large Jewish populations, publication of many translations from the Yiddish and Hebrew (some from Israel) in magazines and books, as well as celebrations in many cities of the Soviet Union of the centenary of Goldberg's father-in-law, Sholem Aleichem, which Goldberg himself mentions in another part of the book. All these and similar activities do not indicate the full recovery of Soviet Jewish culture, but does it help

anyone to minimize the improvements that have occurred?

Goldberg's grudging notice of some signs of recovery would not have prepared one for the important developments since his book went to press. In addition to volumes in Yiddish of works by Sholem Aleichem, Peretz and Mendele that had already appeared, works of recent Yiddish writers were published in *Yiddish*: a volume by Osher Shvartsman, outstanding poet of the twenties, and a thick volume of Bergelson's work.

Most important of all, in August a 130-page bi-monthly in Yiddish, *Sovetish Haimland*, containing the work of contemporary Yiddish writers, appeared in Moscow. In an interview with *N. Y. Times* correspondent Theodore Shabad (Aug. 23), Aaron Vergelis, 43-year-old Yiddish poet who edits the magazine, said: "It is often said abroad that Yiddish literature in the Soviet Union has ceased to exist. Here on the last page of the journal appears a list of 100 persons who are now writing Yiddish in this country—novelists, short story writers, poets and playwrights." Vergelis added that the journal would "promote the publication of works in Yiddish." (See our Nov. issue for discussion of the first number by Morris U. Schappes.)

Goldberg's minimization—surely a serious defect in a book that purports to set forth the present situation of Soviet Jews—casts doubt on the success of his stated intentions. He would have the reader believe that his book "is neither anti-Soviet nor pro-Soviet. It does not place this new development [concerning Soviet Jews] within the purview of the cold war" (p. 2). Yet, an animus against the Soviet Union crops out in a number of places with peculiar interpretations of

history. When the West became allied with the Soviet Union in 1941, the West "was willing to forgive and forget" (p. 43) the purges of the thirties and the Soviet-German pact—as if the Soviet Union had nothing to "forgive and forget" in relation to the West, or as if the Western governments' antagonism to the Soviet Union had been based on outraged virtue.

In a number of places Goldberg gives a naively one-sided, if not erroneous, picture of Soviet policy. In the postwar period, he writes, "the Red Goliath . . . was already pushing the little Davids around." Then he adds, "Now that the proletariat had something to lose besides its chains, its leaders might not risk their own destruction in a hazardous attempt to destroy others" (p. 94). The implications of a ruthlessly aggressive Soviet policy here hardly indicates an accurate reading of history, let alone his professed "neutral" viewpoint. "The world," he says, "anxiously grasped at every peaceful gesture emanating from Moscow despite apprehension about the Soviet competition that would follow" (p. 95). The saintly, long-suffering nature of U.S. and allied policy during this period implied in this statement does not jibe with the facts, as any calm observer would testify.

We do not disagree with Goldberg as to the existence of a Jewish problem in the Soviet Union, nor do we maintain that the book is devoid of some accurate information and observations on the problem. But Goldberg rides his thesis so hard that he sweats the horse—this is what is meant when the book is charged with tendentiousness.

The book also abounds in undocumented assertions. On the whole, docu-



Gen. Jacob Kreiser, Commander of Soviet Army of Far East; member of Communist Party Control Commission

mention is lacking in the book and this is most unhelpful in a work on such a controversial subject. Where quotations are used, the source is often lacking; and when Goldberg makes what purports to be an historical deduction, documented proof is not offered. A flagrant example is his assertion that the dissolution of the *Yevsektzia* (Jewish Section of the Communist Party) in 1930 was the first sign of a repressive policy toward Jews, "the first pull by an unseen restrictive hand" (p. 251). Goldberg offers no proof for this statement.

Goldberg's discussion of alleged discrimination leaves much to be desired. He does not point out, as Maurice Hindus does in the new book cited above, that "in the study of Soviet anti-Semitism it is well to remember that as workers, Jews, whatever their pursuits, are accorded the same rights and benefits as non-Jews. In the ministrations of social services—medical care, pensions, vacations in a health resort, an apartment in a new house—they face no discriminations.

If a Jew attains distinction on the so-called production front, the rewards that go with it, monetary and social, including public acclaim, are bestowed no less generally on a Rabinowitz than on an Ivanov. Nor are Jews segregated in the new residential sections into neighborhoods of their own" (p. 298).

Goldberg is mainly concerned with alleged discrimination in higher education and in leading jobs. "It would be an exaggeration to say that discrimination is general," he writes, "but it would be an understatement just to say that it occurs" (p. 13). The ensuing discussion leaves one unsatisfied because he accepts at face value and without further investigation stories that should have been verified before receiving the status of fact, and because he has not completely presented the problem of what data are needed to arrive at a firm conclusion.

The facts are very difficult to get at. One may say in a general way that discrimination does take place on occasion as a manifestation of local or individual prejudice. More precise than this it is virtually impossible to be. It is not easy to confirm whether any specific alleged case is accurate. In the various stories that Goldberg retails, he does not cite time nor place nor does he indicate that he had made any effort to check the report.

For instance, on page 14 he tells a story told to him by a Jewish boy which sounds like a stock story of the Tsarist era. The boy, a very good student, took an admission examination for a non-Jewish boy, a poor student, and then for himself; the non-Jewish boy was admitted, the Jewish boy was not. No more information is given. Aside from the shocking dis-

honesty of the boy's procedure, if indeed the story is true, Goldberg accepts it without question. We do not mean to imply that discrimination does not take place, but only that one cannot regard every story as gospel.

The difficulty of gaining any precise knowledge on this matter is indicated in a statement in another new book on Soviet Jews, Joseph B. Schechtman's *Star in Eclipse: Russian Jewry Revisited* (Yoseloff, N. Y., 1961, 255 pages. \$3.95).

On a recent visit to the Soviet Union, Schechtman asked a number of young Soviet Jews about discrimination. "The answers I received," he writes, "ranged from sweeping statements that no such discrimination exists to less sweeping but just as firm assertions that it is widespread" (p. 57). Hearsay evidence of this kind is no basis for any but the most impressionistic view of the problem.

It is alleged in stories of purported discrimination against Jews that the Soviet Union has instituted "national quotas" in higher education and this is said to entail discrimination against Jews. Any comprehensive, reliable set of figures to prove a case one way or another is lacking. So far as can be ascertained, the situation varies from locality to locality, from institution to institution.

Before anything like a scientific approach can be made to the question of discrimination against Jews in Soviet higher education, certain statistical data would have to be obtained. It is well known that for some years after the revolution a high percentage of students eligible for advanced study were Jewish and this was reflected in the high percentage of Jewish students.

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JEWIS IN USSR

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But profound changes have occurred in the last few decades. The number of candidates for higher education has risen enormously. New reservoirs of qualified candidates have been developed. Women now seek higher education in about equal numbers as men and a greatly increased number of qualified candidates from the many previously underdeveloped nationalities of the Soviet Union are clamoring at the university gates. The drive for higher education is intense and the competition for admission is intense.

Further, how does the actual drop in the Soviet Jewish population as a result of the war affect the relative number of Jewish candidates? In 1939, the Jewish population in the Soviet Union was 3,020,100. Despite the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of Jews to the East during the war, thus saving their lives, and the addition of hundreds of thousands of Jews from the newly-added territories (the Baltic states, Bukovina, part of Poland, etc.), the war took immense toll of Soviet Jews. The 1960 census showed a registered Jewish population of 2,268,000. Even if we accept as fact that some hundreds of thousands of Jews did not register as Jews, the percentage of Jews in the population has decreased. How does this drop affect the number of Jewish candidates for higher education in relation to the total number of those eligible?

Until those and similar objective data are taken into account in accurate statistical terms, the real situation of Jewish students cannot be known with any assurance.

Goldberg fails to prove his asser-

tion about the existence of a quota for Jews. On page 328, for instance, he cites figures alleging that in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (in which the Jewish population, according to the 1960 census, is .7 per cent of the total) Jewish students were less than four per cent of the university student body. The Jews in the urban populations where most of these institutions are, he says, form "eight, 10 and 12 per cent of the population" (p. 328). For instance, he says, Jews are 11 per cent of the population of Moscow. Yet, he goes on, "If the Jewish students are only four percent of the student body, they are actually only a little more than a third of what they would be according to their number in the population" (p. 328).

This statement illustrates the utterly unscientific nature of Goldberg's approach. If, for the sake of argument, we accept the four per cent figure of Jewish students for the RSFSR, does it follow that discrimination is being practiced at Moscow Universtiy because this does not correspond to the percentage of the Jewish population of Moscow? But the university draws its students not only from the whole Soviet Union, but from other parts of the world as well, so Goldberg's contention is groundless. Further, we do not know whether the other institutions to which he refers, but not by name, are local or all-Republic. Thus the data for reaching any conclusions are lacking.

Interesting figures from a Soviet source have recently become available. In the *Morning Freiheit*, Sept. 17, Jack Kling writes of his visit last summer with Aaron Vergelis. In response to Kling's question about discrimination in higher education, Vergelis cited the

following figures (see our Nov., 1961 issue, p. 46) :

As of Dec. 1, 1960, Vergelis said, there were 3,545,000 Soviet citizens in schools of higher education. We assume that this figure includes students in secondary professional education, called "specialized schools and technicums." (The reason for this assumption is that the 1960 census gives the number of students in higher education as 2,257,000 and in "specialized schools and technicums" as 1,868,000—see *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, March 2, 1960. It is unlikely that the university population grew by about one million in one year; and the figure cited by Vergelis is closer to the combined figure for higher and secondary professional education, which is 4,125,000.)

Of the total number, Vergelis said, 2,070,000 were Russians, 517,000 Ukrainians, 291,000 Jews, 95,000 Byelorussians, 88,000 Georgians and 74,000 Armenians. Thus the Jews are the third nationality in the number of students, though eleventh in population. The percentage of Jews in the total student population is 3.2 while Jews are 1.09 per cent of the population of the Soviet Union. Further, the percentage of Jewish students in the total Jewish registered population is 12.8 per cent.

These figures at least help us in determining whether discrimination exists. But they are not enough. We should further have to ascertain the percentage of Jewish students in the student population and in the Jewish population in 1939. If there is a drop in 1960, we should still have to investigate the influence of the sort of statistical data mentioned above. Obviously we simply do not have the data for any firm conclusions.

We have further disagreement with

Goldberg on the score that his Zionist approach leads him to a distortion of fact. Israel figures a good deal in the book because of the influence of Israel on Soviet Jewish policy. But Goldberg utters not a breath of criticism of Israel. One would think Israel a paragon of a state from his roseate allusions to it. The book exhibits not only the application of Zionist dogmas but a distorted view of Soviet-Israel relations.

The attitude of Soviet Jews is described by Goldberg in Zionist terms. Soviet Jews, he says, "were made to feel their Exile worse than ever just when the white and blue flag of Israel, the symbol of Redemption from Exile," flew near Red Square at the Israel Embassy (p. 162). If most American Jews deny that they are "in exile," why should this term be applied to most Jews outside Israel, including the Soviet Union? That there are Soviet Jews who are Zionist is altogether likely, but that the masses of Soviet Jews subscribe to the notion of "Redemption from Exile" is as doubtful as that millions of U.S. Jews do.

Goldberg dismisses the idea often expressed in the Soviet Union—and by many in all parts of the world—that Israel is a "tool of imperialism." In referring to extreme statements about Israel in the Soviet press, Goldberg would have us believe that the charge that Israel lends itself to imperialist uses is baseless.

But in one aspect, at least, of Israel policy the facts are so obvious that one wonders how anyone can so easily dismiss this charge. The most recent evidence is Israel's voting in the UN on Algeria, in which it abets French policy there. The Sinai invasion with the collusion of France and Britain, the failure of Israel to align herself

with the anti-colonialist Asian-African countries in the UN, the many Israel votes in the UN against anti-colonialist policies—these are the cold facts about the *actual* policy.

As an indication of the distorted view of Soviet-Israel relations in the book, we may cite this passage: referring to the period after the establishment of Israel, Goldberg writes: "Yet, like all people of good will, they [the Jews] hoped that as a Socialist state the Soviet Union would be a constructive force toward conciliation, peace and social and economic progress and would come forth with a plan for a neutralized and unarmed Near East" (p. 87).

But the truth is—and Goldberg surely must know it—that the Soviet Union did in fact announce a policy for the area incorporating these ideas, including "a neutralized and unarmed Near East," on Feb. 12, 1957 (see *Jewish Life*, March, 1957, p. 13). This policy was not taken up by the Western powers and still remains Soviet policy for the area. Why did Goldberg not state that this *was* the policy, instead of expressing a mere hope that it would become the policy?

Goldberg holds to the Zionist belief that the Jews are a world "nation." His allusions to the national question are curiously confused. He is even led into a flat *mistranslation*. On page 46, Goldberg states that Peretz Markish, the great Soviet Yiddish poet who was executed in 1952, had broadcast to the Jews of the world in 1941 that, as Goldberg renders it, "all Jews were now one nation." Had Markish abandoned the Marxist view of the nation and adopted the Zionist theory? However, when one consults the original Yiddish of the broadcast, which was at the time widely circulated as a pamphlet, one finds that Markish used

the word "*folk*," that is, people, and not *natsie*, nation, as Goldberg has it!

So confused is Goldberg, that he even contradicts himself. On page 14, Goldberg asserts that Lenin regarded "Russian Jewry as a nation equal to the others." But Lenin did not regard the Jews as a nation but as a nationality only. Then on page 259, in discussing Lenin's controversy with the Bund, Goldberg states that "Lenin took pains to convince the *Bundists* that the Jews were not a nation."

To the argument that Lenin affirmed that the Jews should not be denied their own proletarian culture, Goldberg adds this non-sequitur: "This might seem to contradict the absolute denial, in the polemics with the *Bund*, that Jews were a nation. But pure logical consistency never handicapped the Russian revolutionary leaders" (p. 262). But where is the "contradiction," seeming or actual? Lenin held that the Russian Jews were not a nation but a nationality, that is, an ethnic group possessing some features of the nation, such as a common history and culture, but not others, such as a contiguous territory or a common economic life, and as such were entitled to a proletarian nationality culture.

Goldberg concludes his book with his proposals for a "solution" of the problem. These proposals for full recovery of Jewish national and religious rights are not of course original with him. We, for one, have for years advocated that provision be made, for those who wish it, for a professional Yiddish theater, more extended facilities for a Yiddish press than now exist, for the teaching and study of Yiddish and of Jewish history and literature, for more vigorous steps against outcroppings of anti-Semitism.

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South is a shambles, mortally wounded by the shafts of mockery and its own rottenness.

Purlie Victorious brings up some heavy artillery for which there is neither defense nor counter-weapon, least of all from the humorless ranks of the white supremacists. Mr. Davis' characters will no doubt cast a long shadow outside the theater.

Though Ossie Davis is to be congratulated for opening a new and promising path for American playwrights, he has not, however, succeeded completely in resolving the central problem of farce. His people are two-dimensional, not real live folk in whom one can believe and with whom one can suffer. The hero is too impervious to be hurt; no one pays a heavy price for the victory, which comes much too easily to be real. The trappings of poverty and suffering are shown, but only physically—not in the drama itself. And most serious of all—no one changes from beginning to end.

It may take a Moliere or an O'Casey or a Sholem Aleichem to create live human beings out of farcical material, but Ossie Davis is to be admired for his noble assault on this most perplexing of dramatic problems. And it is a tribute to the magic of his language, the poetry of his message of human brotherhood (and the acting and directing) that you leave *Purlie Victorious* feeling more hopeful about the eventual triumph of sanity.

Greetings

I. L. Peretz Cultural Club

Long Island City

JEW'S IN USSR

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However, with one proposal of Goldberg's, and one which is close to him as a Zionist, we disagree. That is, mass emigration of Jews to Israel. Goldberg suggests that "unadjustable" Soviet Jews be permitted to go to Israel and that families be reunited there. Now a certain number of Soviet Jews have been permitted to rejoin families there and perhaps this program should be expanded. But it is not in accordance with Soviet law, so far as we know, to permit unlimited emigration. This is not, of course, a Jewish problem. For decades Soviet policy has forbidden emigration generally.

If the other aspects of the problem are satisfactorily handled, as we have advocated for years, the point of this emigration aspect would be considerably reduced.

To conclude: whatever may be factual or valid in Goldberg's book is vitiated by tendentious and often inaccurate reporting and by shoddy thinking. It is questionable whether Goldberg has really with this book furthered the interests of Soviet Jews or of Jews generally or whether he has on the whole conveyed a balanced, objective picture.

GREETINGS

**LEO, IRVING AND
JACK**

QUEENS