

Wrecking the Polish Jewish Community

The process as seen by a Polish socialist Jewish leader

By YUDEL KORMAN

I CONCLUDED my previous article with the question: what were the effects of the campaign of incitement against "Zionism" in Poland in 1968?

Of course, when 75 per cent of the leading activists (in the Jewish community) left the country or withdrew from activity, when thousands of Jews felt compelled to leave Poland, it is obvious this would automatically affect the entire social and cultural work carried on among the Jewish popula-

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tion and weaken the activity in all the existing cultural positions.

However, this did not proceed so simply, so automatically as some may imagine. The fact is, and this needs to be stressed, that the leading activists and the largest section of the Jewish population did not hastily or lightly decide to leave the country.

For the record it must be noted that for many months the Presidium of the Association made strenuous representations to have the campaign of incitement halted. The Presidium addressed letters to the leadership of the Communist Party, knocked at the doors of the leaders of the Party and of the government, attempted to explain and to warn of the consequences. A section of the Presidium members even took the obsequious step of publishing in behalf of the entire Jewish communal leadership a document which will remain a stigma upon the until then bold and courageous Jewish community in Poland. (This document conceded Israel acted as an "aggressor" in the June, 1967 War.) All this was to no avail. The campaign of incitement persisted and even intensified.

The Polish public was flooded with the pamphlets of the Walichnowskis, Krascickis and others. Everyday the newspapers were filled with the most outrageous libels against Jews gen-

right. But we have to leave it to him to define who is and who is not an extremist. And there, as they say, is the rub!

*What, then, can alert Jews do to prevent the Jewish Defense League from infecting Jewish public opinion with right-wing hysteria? The job is by no means a simple one. Even though Kahane was fired by the publisher of *The Jewish Press*, Rabbi Sholom Klass, in Oct., 1969, because of personal and political differences between the two men, it is possible that he will be able to start his own weekly with the help of some wealthy rightist supporters. As editor of his own newspaper, he will be in an advantageous position to push his specious brand of Jewishness.*

First, we must redouble our efforts to bring about freedom and social justice in the United States—to eliminate the causes of hatred and violence, and not just the symptoms of the disease. To combat “white backlash,” white people must participate in the struggles for better housing and schools, fair and full employment and greater access to college education for all disadvantaged people, black and white. The JDL must not be allowed to pretend that opposition to landlords and other profiteers who exploit the poor is motivated solely by anti-Semitism. There is a vicious circle of injustice-racism-injustice from which only the chauvinists of the JDL and the anti-Semites benefit. It must be broken.

Second, the few vociferous anti-Semites who have attempted to find a home on the left or in the black liberation movement must be discredited. Racists of all varieties belong on the right, not the left, of the political spectrum; and the same standard must be used for judging the

HANUKA IN PEACE ACTION

At Duffy Square in Times Square Dec. 11 the Vietnam Moratorium Committee and the National Jewish Organizing Project brought out 225 persons to a Hanuka Peace Action. Rabbi Fred Raskind and Burton Weiss of the Jewish Peace Fellowship conducted the Hanuka Candle Lighting Ceremony. Then the procession went to Town Hall for a Rally to End the War in Vietnam. Speakers included Rabbi Yitzhok Greenberg, Orthodox, Rabbi Alan Miller, Reconstructionist, Rabbi Burt Segal, Reform, and Morris U. Schappes.

statements of black leaders as of white leaders. In particular, there is a major task to be accomplished by correcting the enormous amount of misinformation about the Middle East which is circulating in left circles.

Third, and perhaps most difficult, it must be made clear to all that Meir Kahane speaks for only a small minority of the Jewish public. Pious platitudes about the evils of “vigilante” tactics and “extremism” will not do, since no one is handier with the pious platitudes than Rabbi Kahane.

It would be well for the major Jewish organizations, recognizing the fears and desires of the Jews, to lead them in more active struggle to end the war in Vietnam, to implement programs for black equality, to oppose the reactionary thrust of the Nixons and Agnews. The JDL can best be fought by organizations which appeal to the same sort of people—college students, high school youth and workers. In the long run, it is fairly certain that the American Jewish community has what it takes to defeat this “enemy from within.”

erally and the leaders of the Jewish institutions in particular. The radio and television, for example, would inform the listeners and viewers many times a day that every Jew in Poland had received \$5,000 a year from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (and, of course, the Joint doesn't hand out money for nothing in return).

The leaders of the Communal and Cultural Association of Jews in Poland, it was alleged, had for years conducted illegal trade by bringing into the country, with the aid of the Joint for its own cooperatives, various raw materials (furs, plastics, etc.) and swindled the customs' office of many millions of zlotys. When the leadership of the Association and the editorial staff of the *Folks-Shimme* sought to register their denial of the disgraceful accusations and explain these matters truthfully they were prohibited from doing so.

In these conditions all the efforts of the leadership of the Association to maintain and further develop its cultural and social functions came to a dead end.

The Jews became frightened of the Association and its activists. In a number of Party organizations in Warsaw and in the provinces it was enough for any hooligan to accuse a Jewish Party member of being an active member of the Association for the latter to be labeled "an agent of imperialism." Such a charge sufficed for the majority of those assembled to exclude this person from the Party.

In many cities various members of the Association were summoned to the security organs, where they were investigated for hours: what does he do in the Association, how did he happen to belong to it, what is discussed there and did they really make a celebration for Israel's victory?

As this procedure repeated itself other Jews became fearful. They became frightened of their own shadows. They ceased coming to the club of the Association and began to avoid one another. To attend Association functions meant to go to a suspected place and could lead to the charge of being a "spy," "an agent of imperialism."

In such an atmosphere, and despite the exertions of many leading people, the sections of the Association began to languish. They slowly stopped every activity. To call meetings, to organize lectures or reading circles or other functions for which the Association was so famed before meant to invite dangers and, above all, meant certain failure since Jews were afraid to come to the Association, which was now viewed as a subversive, anti-government organization.

In these conditions a large number of Jews and among them a major part of the membership of the Association felt compelled to leave the country.

May I here be permitted to pause a moment and attempt to clarify the words "they felt compelled to leave."

It is obvious that for the most part this was a matter of moral compulsion. You have people who devoted their entire lives to the revolutionary worker's movement; some of them spent their best years in the pre-war Pilsudsky jails for Communist activity. Now along comes a member of the Central Committee of the Polish United Worker's Party (A. Werblan) and seeks to prove in a lengthy "theoretical" treatise that they, the Jews, ruined the Communist Party of Poland and, in general, there were too many Jews in it. Then along comes the former chief of the anti-Semites in prewar Poland, Boleslaw Piasecki, and publicly accuses these veteran revolutionary Jewish worker activists of being spies, agents and what not.

Nor was this only a matter of speech and writing, only of "theoretical" concepts. All this was accompanied with deeds. These vilified people were frequently and in a brutal manner thrown out of the Party and their jobs, spat upon and insulted on all sides. Is this not sufficient to force a person who wishes to maintain his human dignity to depart?

This attack was not directed only against persons, against leading activists and members of the Association; the attack also struck the Jewish cultural institutions. This proceeded according to a prearranged plan on all fronts, on the political, cultural and social life of the Jewish community in Poland.

How did it work out in practice?

Let us examine the Association itself and its 27 sections. The Association was prohibited from engaging in any type of social welfare activity. The Jewish Old Age Home in Warsaw, which was set up with funds provided by the Joint Distribution Committee, was completely removed from the Association's supervision. The occupational training courses conducted by the ORT were liquidated. The Social Assistance Commissions were dissolved. The youth and children's clubs were closed down. The song and dance ensembles were dissolved. In the summer of 1968 the Association was forbidden to organize summer camps for the Jewish children. For a period of nine months the Presidium of the Association was not allowed to convene a meeting of the leadership.

The Association's budget was so severely cut it really became impossible to conduct any activity. As if all this was not enough, one Control Commission after another was installed in the Association's headquarters at Nowogrodzki 5 in Warsaw so as

further to intimidate the responsible leaders.

Simultaneously with this an attack started on the Jewish schools. The course in Jewish history was prohibited. It was argued that the number of Jewish children was small and class room space was lacking in Poland. Thus non-Jewish children must be allowed to enter the Jewish schools. In this way, of course, the Jewish schools lost their distinctive character and became transformed into general Polish schools.

Let us examine the principal Yiddish cultural institutions, such as the newspaper *Folks-Shtimme*, the literary monthly, *Yiddishe Shriften* and the publishing house, Yiddish Buch. It began with an edict against the *Folks-Shtimme* which required the editorial staff to submit to the censor a Polish translation of the entire text of each issue. For a newspaper which was published four times weekly this was physically impossible to accomplish. In addition, and this is most important, this edict was a gross insult to the editorial staff, to the Jewish public and to our Yiddish language. Such discrimination against our Yiddish language was unknown in semi-fascist Poland and not even in Tsarist Russia was it practiced.

Did they lack a Jewish censor in whom they had confidence. No! They surely could have found more than one. What was involved here was the imposition of a humiliating discrimination against Yiddish, against the Jewish cultural workers and the editors. They thus sought to demonstrate to people who were Party members for many years that not the least trust was placed in them any longer.

This edict was then extended to include the magazine *Yiddishe Shriften* and the publishing house, Yiddish Buch. Every poem, novel and short

story, every book, even those of the old classical Yiddish writers, had to be presented to the censor in a Polish translation.

Naturally, these demands could not be met. Well, *Yiddishe Shriften* was liquidated and the publishing house was liquidated. The type forms of a few Yiddish books which were already set up were broken down (among them two books commissioned by foreign writers and paid for with foreign money). The *Folks-Shtimme*, as is known, was changed into a weekly paper with an anonymous editorial staff and is now almost completely divested of any Jewish content.

The Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw was also not spared by the vicious campaign of incitement, libels and discrimination. The associates of the Institute, it was charged, had falsified the history of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April, 1943 and had also transmitted documents to West Germany, particularly excerpts from Ringelblum's diary. (According to the version of the "anti-Zionist" incitement the Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto was made primarily by Poles and not by Jews.) When the director of the Institute presented an official denial of the charges made against it to the newspapers, none of them would publish it.

Neither did this campaign of incitement avoid the Jewish State Theatre. On a designated day many newspapers issued a financial reckoning of the amount of money the government had put up for every Jew who attended the performances of the Jewish Theatre. Ida Kaminska and other artists were described in an insulting manner. In order further to intimidate them, they installed infamous Control Commissions in both institutions, which in the course of many months virtually terrorized the staff workers.

HANUKA WITH INDIANS

To the 400 Indians who have occupied Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay since Nov. 20, members of the American Jewish Congress and Rabbi Roger Herst brought food and blankets Dec. 7 and a Menorah with which to celebrate Hanuka as a liberation festival with the Indians. The Indians claim the Island, abandoned as a prison fortress in 1963, by the terms of a century-old treaty with the United States, one of the innumerable treaties with the Indians that have been violated.

It must unfortunately be stated that the culturally and socially organized Jewish community in Poland has practically been liquidated. That vibrant, warm address, Nowogrodzki 5, is no more. It is true that the present Communal and Cultural Association of Jews in Poland has been given a new office in a new building on Gzebowski Place, but this is no longer the Jewish cultural address of before. The Association has been emptied of everything which has any connection with progressive Jewish culture.

Those who wrecked and liquidated the creative Jewish community in Poland need to maintain on paper the existence of the Association and of a supposed Yiddish weekly paper so they can claim, "It is untrue there is anti-Semitism in Poland. The proof of this is in the Jewish organization and the Yiddish institutions we maintain."

Why then are so many Jews, the majority, leaving Poland? Their answer is, "These are Zionists," "these are alien elements on the Polish body."

Why did this happen? Did it all begin with the Six Day War?

These questions will receive separate attention in the Feb. issue.