

## THE JUBILEE OF THE JEWISH LABOR MOVEMENT<sup>1</sup>

**I**T WILL BE twenty-five years in July since the Jewish workers in Russia went out on their first mass strike and the Jewish labor movement began to assume a more or less planned and conscious character. This was the first important step of the Jewish labor movement not only because of the extent and the duration of the strike (all workers in Bialystok mills were on strike for two months) but also because of its wonderful organization. These first steps towards organization of Jewish labor date back to 1887, exactly ten years before the rise of the *Bund*.

Broadly speaking, the Jewish labor movement is not as young as is commonly thought. In two years we shall celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the first known Jewish trade union. I mean the association of women's clothing workers in Mohilev, organized in 1864. [This association was described by S. Tatischev in the journal, *Promishlenost i Zdorovie*, (May, 1903); by Sarah Rabinowitch ("The Organization of the Jewish Proletariat", 1903); and by S. A. Margolin in *Voskhod* (May 1906).] However, the whole period between the organization of this labor association and the rise of the *Bund* has not yet been thoroughly investigated. For that reason I hope the reader will bear with me while I try to acquaint him with at least the most important events of that period.

The Jewish labor movement in Russia is fifty years younger than the Russian labor movement, yet it has had its interesting aspects from the very beginning. The above-mentioned women's tailors association functioned not only as a regular fraternal organization, offering financial aid or sick and death benefits to its members, but also led the struggle of the workers against the employers. Naturally the employers were very much averse to the association, which had already a great influence among the workers, and reported it to the authorities. Consequently the leaders of the association suffered severely at the hands of the police. The strikes which the association waged against the employers were very important, not only because of the number of workers involved and the size of the plants, but also because of the nature of their demands. The great majority of Jewish workers were employed by small industrialists. It is no wonder that the first steps toward labor organization were made in the manual trades rather than in the large factories.

The first traces of economic struggle in Jewish industry appear in the seventies. In 1875 some very interesting correspondence from the southwest section of Russia was published in *V'Period* (illegal journal of the celebrated Russian revolutionary socialist, P. Lavrov). There we have descriptions of some of the unorganized strikes of Jewish workers in the tobacco factories of Vilna and other cities. Due to the "conspiracy" laws, the exact dates of the strikes were not given nor were the letters signed.

<sup>1</sup>Written in 1916.

We know now, however, that they came from the pen of one of the first Jewish socialists, A. Zundelovitch.

One finds very little information about the Jewish weavers of Bialystok in the first issue of the illegal *Bialystok Worker*. In its leading article (April, 1899) it says in part: "Who of the older weavers does not remember the terrible strikes that took place some decades ago? The 'rebels', as they were then called, threw a scare into the manufacturers and the master weavers." The writer tells us that during those strikes the workers quite often invoked terrorism, broke factory windows, and were responsible for similar disorders. Most of the strikes were of a defensive nature. They were called to combat oppressive measures instituted by the employers such as wage cuts, lengthening of the working day, fining the workers excessively, and harsh treatment of employees.

The *Rabotchia Dielo* (Nos. 4-5, part I, p. 34) gives us a description of a huge aggressive strike. It took place during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. The manufacturers were doing a booming business filling army orders and sending exports to Roumania. The workers demanded higher wages. After a three day strike they won. All the Bialystok workers participated in the strike: Jews (about 1,500), Germans, and Poles—involving a total of 15,000 workers.

All the above conflicts, however, belong to the pre-history of the Jewish labor movement, because the element of class consciousness and planned organization was lacking. In that distant past the movement was blindly groping. Even the Mohilev association of women's tailors had a strongly religious character. Like all the associations of that period it had, for example, its own *Sefer Tora* (Biblical Scroll) and met in the synagogue, but employers were rigidly excluded from membership.

With regard to the economic struggle, the history of the Jewish labor movement may be divided into short periods.

(1) The early period with which we have already dealt, in which the socialist ideology and the economic struggle of the workers existed in separate spheres. Both were weak and divided, with no point of contact between them. The workers occasionally went out on strike but they had no conception at all of socialism or class struggle. The few Jewish socialists of that time (with the exception of Zundelovitch) had not yet begun to think in terms of the class struggle. Socialism had not yet found the path to the Jewish workers and the latter did not know how to proceed towards a class conscious organization. This period lasted from the sixties to about 1889.

(2) The preparation period for a broad organization started in the Russian Pale of Settlement with the general strike of the Jewish weavers in Bialystok in 1887, and with the founding of the first small strike fund in Vilna in 1888. We can therefore consider 1887 as the beginning of the organized Jewish labor movement in the Pale. In the next decade the workers and the socialists sought and found each other.

(3) The economic and political organization began with the founding of the "General Jewish Workers' Alliance of Lithuania, Poland and Russia", the *Bund*, in September, 1897, and continued until 1901-1902. A new Jewish labor movement then appeared on the scene—the Poale Zion or Socialist Zionists. The *Bund* on its part ceased to rely solely on the economic struggle of the Jewish workers and assumed an outspoken political character.

(4) The period of political splits can be divided into two sub-periods: from 1901 or 1902 to the Revolution of 1905, and from the Revolution to 1907.

The fifth period begins now, and it is not up to the historian to consider it; that is left to the party spokesman and publicist.

All this concerns only the Jewish workers in Russia. In the remaining countries with Jewish communities, the course of events, naturally, was different. It is interesting to note, however, that at the time that a broad movement bearing a clear-cut mass character began in Russia, a similar manifestation appeared in other Galut countries. The first large strike of Jewish tailors in New York occurred in 1886, and in 1889 ten thousand Jewish tailors went out on strike for the first time in London. The Polish socialists began to organize the Jewish proletariat of Galicia early in the nineties. In 1894 in Amsterdam, the first general strike of Jewish diamond workers broke out and resulted in the organization of the powerful Diamond Workers Union.

Although we have treated the beginnings of Jewish labor struggles in Russia before those in other countries, the almost simultaneous rise of broad mass movements in the other large Galut centers must be kept in mind. There is good reason for this development: the eighties and nineties were a period of world-wide economic recovery which contrasted markedly with the terrible crisis of the late seventies. Parallel with this upward swing was the growth of socialism throughout the world. In America (Chicago) huge labor disorders broke out during 1886, and in Europe the Socialist International was revived in 1889. Deeply significant events also took place in Jewish life: a powerful anti-Semitic agitation developed; emigration from Russia, Galicia, and Roumania to America, England, and Holland rose tremendously. The eighties and nineties were a period of blind groping, of universal uncertainty and dissatisfaction. Due to the common need for emigration, a living bond tended to unify the Jewish masses of the different countries.

World-wide horizons spread before them, and the national idea began to manifest itself. The fruit of proletarian thought from different countries was carried over imperceptible, spiritual paths from one end of the world to the other. Socialist ideas were brought from tyrannized Russia to free England and America. Filled there with a new content, they returned through London, Koenigsberg, and Vienna to the Ghettoes of Galicia and Russia. A worker who had just gone on strike in New York could exchange his new impressions with a friend who would soon be striking in Bialystok or Vilna. His head full of vague longings, the Jewish worker set out on the long road. At all points enroute, through Austria, Germany, France, England and Holland, he came in contact with comrades from all countries, weaving a spiritual thread between east and west. In that way the seed of revolutionary thought was carried to the four corners of the world. The flow of migration spread the Jewish labor movement everywhere.

It is for that reason that the years 1886 (the first mass strike in New York), 1887 (Bialystok), and 1889 (London) bring back glorious memories not only for each country with Jewish communities, but also for the whole world, wherever there are exploited and wherever a Jewish worker struggles for a better life. If the self-appointed leaders of the Jewish labor movement had even the slightest conception of their own history, they would now celebrate, throughout the world, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Jewish class conscious proletarian struggle in Russia.

In order that the reader may see why the Bialystok strike actually had the importance I ascribe to it, I shall outline the course of its events.

During the Russo-Turkish war of 1877, wages among the weavers rose greatly because of favorable market conditions and the pressure of a successful strike. This was a golden era; they earned from 10 to 15 rubles a week. Taking into consideration the low cost of living, this was a tremendous gain. (Living quarters cost one and a half rubles a month; a pound of meat was four or five kopeks.) Naturally there had to come an end to this golden era. A host of new workers were attracted to the trade; and on top of this, the manufacturers' booming business slumped after the war. Competition between the workers and the inexperience of the new hands forced wages down to such a low level, that in 1885-1886 the weavers had to adapt themselves to a starvation wage of from one to three rubles a week, working from 14 to 16 hours a day. At the same time rent and food prices rose. The workers had no choice but to go out on strike.

The strike was only against the master weavers, because their workers received the lowest wages, much less than even the factory weavers. All the two thousand Jewish workers who were employed by master weavers walked out.

The strike was organized on the following lines. The strike committee found it impossible to stop the whole trade at once, as it would have been difficult to raise the necessary funds for the support of such a large army of strikers. They therefore carried out a piece-meal stoppage. At any one time workers from only certain workshops were to stop, and the others who remained at work were to support the strikers. The discipline was exemplary; the complicated plan worked excellently. Workshops were stopped one after the other. As one group won and returned to work, others struck. A link in this strike chain lasted only a few days at the most, and the workers won everywhere.

The walk-out began in July, 1887. The governor of Grodno himself made a trip to Bialystok. He assembled all the workers and attempted to talk them into stopping the strike, but to no avail. The strike was won in September.

The socialist intelligentsia had no relationship whatsoever with the strike. Besides, it was not carrying on any socialist agitation in Bialystok at the time. In Vilna likewise, there was still not the necessary connection between the socialist propaganda of the intellectuals on the one hand and the economic struggle of the working masses on the other. Socialist propaganda in Vilna had been carried on since 1885, but the correct approach to the workers had not been found. It was only during 1893-1894 that the mutual search for each other by both parts of the socialist movement—the intellectuals and the workers—ended.

During these early years of groping, both sides made considerable progress. In 1887 there is record of only one strike of Jewish workers in Bialystok; in 1888, four strikes; in 1892, three strikes; in 1893, seven strikes; and in 1894, nine strikes. (There were only several small strikes in Vilna and also a strike of brush makers in Vilkovisk.) Socialist agitation was already bearing some fruit, as witness the celebration of May First as early as 1892 by some Jewish workers in Vilna.

During 1893-1894 almost all the socialists perceived the necessity of leading the economic struggle of the worker so as to educate him through his daily needs. In this way the problem of bringing socialism to the

working masses was finally solved. This rapprochement on the basis of the economic struggle brought new strength to the Jewish labor movement, enlarging and enriching it. For the first six or seven years the movement had almost exclusively an economic and cultural character. Only in 1900-1902 did the Jewish worker step into the political struggle.

The extent of the economic struggle in Lithuania and Poland can be seen from the following figures, which show how many Jewish workers struck during the decade 1895-1904.

Year	Number of Strikes (Jewish)	Approximate Number of Striking Jewish Workers
1895	83	4,700
1896	92	3,300
1897	150	23,800
1898	179	11,000
1899	223	18,600
1900	277	16,000
1901	453	22,000
1902	455	28,000
1903	340	41,000
1904	166	8,000
Total	2,418	176,400

If we calculate the average size of the strikes for each year, it will be seen that the largest occurred in 1897—160 men per strike. The *Bund* was organized towards the end of that year of militant struggle. Going further, we discover that the smallest strikes (averages of 58, 49, and 62 men per strike) occurred in 1900-1902. In these years the Jewish labor movement began to split; Poale Zionists appeared and the *Bund* expelled them from its organizations. This proves to us that the history of the Jewish labor parties has an interesting relationship to the development of the Jewish struggle on the economic front.

I close with the following observation: This year we have a four-fold celebration. It is 35 years since the Jewish workers spontaneously took their first, not as yet conscious step; 25 years since their first planned movement; 15 years since the founding of the first Jewish labor party, the *Bund*; and 5 years since the founding of the World Confederation of the Jewish Socialist Labor Party, Poale Zion.

1877, 1887, 1897, 1907! Four historic years in the formation of Jewish proletarian revolutionary activity. At each step the movement is ten years older; each time it is ten years riper in its consciousness; in each decade it takes a step forward to a new, broader perspective. From a chaotic state to the first spark of consciousness, and from a strong organization to world-wide unity—that is the development of the Jewish proletariat.

## REMINISCENCES

*On the Occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of the Poale Zion in Russia, 1906-1916*

THIS PURIM will mark ten years of the founding convention of the Poale Zion Party in Russia. Ten years! It is impossible to transcribe the emotions that rise up in the mind of an "old" Party worker like myself when he is reminded of that memorable event. However, let us narrate the rather dry historical facts of the small, hardly distinguishable beginnings from which the convention arose. Let us consider also those historical events which raised our weak and limited undertaking to its present high level.

Here are the facts. The convention, the jubilee of which we shall soon be celebrating, was not the "first". The Party had actually existed five years previously and during that time had called several conferences. The Poale Zion idea, the concept of organic unity between socialism and Zionism, had already attained quite a respectable age. Our idea is not much younger than socialism proper. It was originally formulated by that celebrated German socialist and member of the First International, Moses Hess. A more concrete and modern form of Socialist Zionism was first propounded by our comrade, Nachman Syrkin, who is justly considered in our movement as its spiritual father.

Nachman Syrkin first developed his new and militant concept in his speeches and articles on the Jewish question. His lectures were delivered to Russian Jewish youths studying abroad, and his articles were published in *Das Deutsche Wort* in Vienna. Syrkin's propaganda continued from 1898 to 1901. Its first tangible result was the organization of a group of "Socialist Zionists". Under its auspices in Berlin, in May, 1901, Syrkin issued his widely circulated Russian pamphlet, "An Appeal to the Jewish Youth". This was the first official manifesto of Poale Zionism, even though it did not bear that precise name.

Syrkin's ideas were developed independently, having little connection with the forgotten philosophy of Moses Hess. Similarly, in Russia proper, there arose an independent Socialist Zionist movement which had no relationship to Syrkin's propaganda abroad. The first group of socialist, class conscious Poale Zionists in Russia was formed in November, 1900, in Yekaterinoslav. Its founders were the writer of these lines and Simon Dobin, who later went over to the *Seimists* Party<sup>1</sup> and there earned a reputation for being a clever and wholesome Jewish writer.

You will permit me to say a little more about this first organization. From September, 1900, to May, 1901, the writer, who belonged to the Russian Social-Democratic Party in Yekaterinoslav, delivered a series of papers on Socialist Zionism to an educational club of intelligent young

<sup>1</sup> See footnote 8, p. 97.