



I

JEWS AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

I.

NEVER SHALL I FORGET THE DAY WHEN THE NEWS first reached the city of Rovno where I lived—a typical Jewish city in the Ukraine—that the Tsar had abdicated and that Russia was in the throes of revolution.

It was a usual day in March. Like every other day, the inhabitants of the city went out to perform their daily tasks. Spring was already in the air. Under the rays of the rising sun the snow was rapidly melting, creating puddles of water that streamed merrily through the narrow gutters.

Early that day the city was still plunged in the dark sleep of ignorance. In Petrograd, the capital of Russia, more than a thousand miles away, a new life was being born. In our city the iron fist of oppression still reigned supreme.

It was the second of March, 1917. To us students, particularly to the few Jewish students of the city's only high school, it was a usual day of "inquisition." With beating hearts we were awaiting the entrance of the history teacher, Nikolai P. Kossonogov, who

was popularly known in the ghetto as the *Yidden Fresser*.

First, I ought to say a few words about this "history teacher" who during the civil war, when pogroms against the Jews were the order of the day, made himself prominent by a most unusual ferociousness and brutality.

When it became clear to the Tsarist government in 1916 that the Russian army was being defeated on every front and that the masses were growing restless, it once more set out to search for someone upon whom to lay the blame. Again the Tsar remembered his Jewish subjects. For the Jews were usually blamed for every misfortune that happened to the country. To the reactionary government, they had always been a welcome scapegoat, and the anti-Jewish agitation was invariably encouraged when it seemed desirable to divert the attention of the Russian masses from their miserable conditions.

This time the Jews were accused of German espionage, and patriotic and loyal subjects of the Tsar were dispatched from the capital to ghettos, particularly to those that were on the border, to unearth the "enemies" of the country and keep up the morale of the masses.

Thus it happened that Nikolai Kossonogov, a Cossack officer, was appointed principal of the Rovno high school and teacher of the "patriotic" subject of history.

The inhabitants of the city first became aware of his ever-watchful presence during the trial of two

young Jewish high school students, whom he accused of spreading revolutionary propaganda.

"It came to my attention," thundered Kossonogov in the courtroom, "that these two little Jews spoke disrespectfully of our Tsar, Nicholas II, by referring to him contemptuously as 'Nikolka.' Although they claim that they did not refer to the Tsar at all but to their classmate, Nicholas Scherbatov, the priest's son, the slickness of the Judases is well known to us.

"Is the honorable court going to take the word of Jews, the age-old enemies of Russia, against the words of a Christian? Is the honorable court going to take the word of Christ's betrayers against mine, a Cossack officer, who was placed here by the grace of the ministry of education to purge our youth of all heresies and teach them the very patriotic subject of history?"

"Legal defenders of our great country, it is my sacred duty to destroy this dangerous seat of revolution. I shall banish all Jews to hell or America! . . ."

As was expected, the two boys were sentenced to hard labor in Siberia. To the Jews, of course, this incident was one more cause for lamenting and crying. That very same day a group of them gathered in the back yard of our synagogue to discuss this question. But only hopelessness and confusion were the results: "What can we do? Who will deliver us from this beast in the image of man?"

In view of the long accepted myth that the Jews are natural trouble makers and revolutionists, it would be well worth remembering that among this

group of typical Jews, there was not even one who dared to think in terms of revolution. Of course, among the younger generation there were quite a few. In our city there was one by the name of Aaron Morris. But he belonged to an entirely different world. He had spent ten years in New York where he acquired socialistic and atheistic ideas, which the great majority of the Jews considered both dangerous and heretical. It was Morris who horrified this little group of ghetto Jews that day by saying:

"Crying and wailing will not help you. The day of freedom is near. Wait and be ready."

But the Jews were not ready, and when the day of liberation at last came, they did not even recognize it.

As I have already said, to the Jewish students of the city's high school that day was a usual day of "inquisition." At last the bell rang, and with military stride Nikolai Kossonogov entered the classroom. Before closing the door, as was his custom, he stood for a moment at the door scrutinizing us with his narrow, Mongolian eyes.

"Dennen," he at last said, "Leon Dennen, read the prayer: Bless our Father the Tsar, the Tsarina and their family; and don't forget Mother Russia."

I stood breathless.

"Wait," he suddenly cried out, "wait, I have changed my mind! Let a Christian, a good Christian read the prayer, lest you bring evil upon the head of his Holiness. Nikolai Scherbatov, you say the

prayer, and you, little Moses, wait, I have a surprise for you, too."

When the prayer was finished, Kossonogov walked softly over to me and put his hand on my shoulder. I trembled, but did not dare move.

"Well," he said, "let's see how the Russian State is educating you. Can you decline?"

Tears were already streaming down my cheeks.

"Foolish boy," said Kossonogov, "I don't mean you any harm. Well then, let us all hear how you can decline 'Sheeny'."

I looked at the other Jewish boys in the classroom. They were all pale, more dead than alive. Some of the Gentile boys laughed. I swallowed my tears and was about to begin to decline. Suddenly shots were heard on the street, followed by wild cries of hurrah. A band struck up a strange, hitherto unheard, tune. Kossonogov ran to the window and opened it. A fresh, restless spring breeze rushed into the room. Kossonogov stepped back hurriedly. A strange spectacle unfolded before his eyes.

A compact human mass was marching slowly. Policemen were running in disorder. The procession marched slowly and majestically. Angry fists rose above human heads. Red banners glistened in the sun. They sang a long, drawn out melancholy funeral march:

"We have fallen victims in a fatal struggle
For the people's freedom. . . ."

Kossonogov ran to the door, but on the threshold, like a statue cast in bronze, stood Aaron Morris. The

Cossack straightened up to his full height. His narrow eyes full of hatred, he gazed at the revolutionist who was blocking his exit to freedom. Aaron Morris, too, with a gun in his hand, was scrutinizing Kossonogov. But suddenly, as though he had arrived at a much contemplated decision, he took two steps toward the Cossack, spat into his face, and moved away. Kossonogov immediately ran out.

As yet ignorant of what had happened, we watched the scene in silence. But Morris' stern face gradually broke into a smile. He mounted the teacher's platform and began to speak in a kind and gentle voice. He spoke of freedom, equality and a new and better life:

"Comrades, students, the Tsar is no longer the ruler of Russia. The Russian workers and peasants, regardless of what race or religion they are, are today the masters of Russia. A new life is ahead of us. But there are many obstacles in our way. We need young blood. It is upon you, the youth of Russia, whom we base all our hopes."

A prolonged and shrill hurrah emerged from our throats. Then, a Gentile boy, a son of a school teacher who was exiled to Siberia for revolutionary activities, mounted the platform.

"Fellow students," he cried in a treble voice, "I am a member of a secret student organization. I haven't slept for nights. Our comrades knew it was coming. We are no longer students, fellows, we are citizens. Three cheers for our exiled comrades! Long live our leader, Aaron Morris!"

Again hurrahs pierced the stifled academic air of the classroom. That day, we youngsters forgot to study history. We went out into the streets, to help make it.

2.

I have indulged in this bit of childhood reminiscence in order, if possible, to inject some clarity in the long established myth about the Jew and revolution in general, and particularly, his rôle in the Russian Revolution.

To speak of the Jews as the initiators of the Russian revolutionary movement is to lack the least conception of Russian history and life. Indeed, had there been no Jews in Russia the Revolution would have occurred just the same.

There is no longer any doubt in the minds of authoritative historians that social revolt in Russia had its roots deep in the Russian soil. From the rebellion in the seventeenth century, led by the peasant Stenka Razin who, according to peasant legends, took from the rich and gave to the poor, to the October Revolution of 1917 there is a continuous thread of revolt. Needless to say, neither in the Stenka Razin rebellion, nor in the revolt led by the Cossack Pugatchov, nor in the "Decembrist" revolution of 1825 that was engineered by a group of officers who had fought in the Napoleonic war and who fell under the influence of Western, particularly French, ideas of democracy, did the Jews participate.

Even in the 60's, in the circles of Belinski, Herzen and Nechayev, when populist revolutionary ideas were flourishing among Russians of all classes, there was no evidence of the Jews having joined the movement en masse. Only as late as 1879 did the *Bund* (Jewish Workers' Union) come into existence in the textile centres of Poland, Wilno and other ghetto cities in the Ukraine and White Russia.

Also, Bolshevism, it must be remembered, is primarily a movement of workers. Its strongholds were and still are the industrial centres of Russia. In these places particularly there were no Jews. Besides, about 75% of the Jews in Russia were tradesmen and so belonged to a class whom the Bolsheviks fought fiercest. But even among the Jewish workers, as long as they spoke in terms of the Jewish race and not the working class, there was as yet no trace of Bolshevism. I believe that Dr. Pasmanik, formerly the Zionist theoretician of Russia, was right in stating that "Judaism cannot be reconciled with Bolshevism." True, there were a number of Jewish Bolsheviks, particularly among the leadership; but they did not occupy themselves with specifically Jewish problems. They spoke in the name of the working class and not in the name of the Jews. The *Bund*, on the other hand, had a revolutionary past. But under the stress of the war, which brought about a marked change in the social status of the Jews, it became transformed into a nationalist party of the lower middle class. The *Bund* was categorically opposed to Bolshevism.

During the February (Kerensky) revolution there were a number of Jewish parties that were interested primarily in specific Jewish problems. Among these were: The Jewish People's Group composed solely of the upper Jewish bourgeoisie and akin in its views to the Cadets (Constitutional Democrats); The National Democratic party, a party of the Jewish middle class intelligentsia led by the famous historian Dubnow; The Zionist Party, which was perhaps the largest and most popular organization in the large cities of Southern Russia; The *Bund* and *Agudath Israel*, a party of orthodox Jews. All these groups and parties were united in their demands for equality and cultural autonomy for the Jews of Russia.

When the Tsar was dethroned and the news spread far and wide that the old system was dead and buried, no other people of the vast Russian Empire were as sincerely pleased as the Jews. It would be difficult, indeed, to describe the joy and ecstasy with which the first revolution was greeted by the Jewish masses. If the outbreak of the war in 1914 did not find a very patriotic response among the Jews, who had not the least interest in dying for the Russian Tsar, now in their joyous intoxication many volunteered for the front. I remember how in Rovno Jewish young men who were deserters from the Tsarist army, suddenly emerged from their dark and foul cellars, and under the cover of flaming red banners, accompanied by revolutionary songs and speeches, went out to defend their new and free Russia. The February revolution

seemed to have fulfilled all the hopes, aspirations and longings of all Jewish groups and parties.

3.

Why then, we may ask, this ridiculous assertion that the majority of the Jews were Bolsheviks? Whence the fantastic idea that the October (Bolshevik) revolution was instigated and carried out by Jews?

After the Tsar's government accused the Jews wholesale of German espionage, it so happened, by a peculiar coincidence, that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were also accused of the same crime. When the Revolution broke out in Russia, Lenin was still in Switzerland. He returned to Russia in a most unusual manner. Having been refused permission by England and France to pass through their territories, he applied to Germany, an enemy country. The Germans, knowing Lenin's unconditional opposition to the World War as an imperialist war, worked out an elaborate scheme to utilize him as a tool to further their aims. They gave him a special train through Germany which later became notorious as the "sealed train".

History, however, has already proved that Lenin, the revolutionist, saw much farther than Ludendorf, the general. But when after his ascendance to power, Alexander Kerensky, the premier of the first government established immediately after the Revolution—the Provisional Government—suddenly realized that

the Bolshevik Party was gaining the upper hand, he decided to abolish his much-heralded policy of "freedom" and set out to fight it with all means at his disposal. He resurrected the fiction of the "sealed train" and proclaimed Lenin and the Bolsheviks German spies. The Black Hundreds*, who hated the Bolsheviks as much as they did the Jews, seized upon the grand idea of killing two birds with one stone. Henceforth, in their daily venomous propaganda, all Bolsheviks and Jews were German spies—all Jews became Bolsheviks. For purposes of propaganda, even Lenin, Stalin and other non-Jewish leaders of the Bolshevik Party were portrayed with Semitic features.

The history of the rôle of the Jews in the Bolshevik movement is, however, much more complex. While there is no foundation to the claim that the Jews were in the majority in the Bolshevik Party, the truth is that towards the end of 1917, when the Kerensky regime was on the verge of falling, wide sections of the Jewish population began to look more favorably upon the Bolsheviks. There were several reasons for this. While the February revolution far from fulfilled the hopes of the Jews, it did grant them certain privileges which they had hitherto lacked. Jews, for instance, were granted the right to work in factories. And it was in the factories—the seat of Bolshevism—where the Jews first became in-

* Popular name for the "Union of the Russian People"—a league of the most reactionary monarchists and nationalists who employed methods of criminal terror against revolutionists and were the chief instigators of pogroms.

oculated with Communist ideas. If until then poor and rich Jews alike spoke in the name of Judaism, there now occurred, to use a Marxist term, a sharpening of class distinction. The Jewish workers began to speak not as Jews but as members of the working class.

Another reason why the Jews and other national minorities in Russia turned towards the Bolsheviki was because although the Provisional Government promised them self-determination, it gave the key to this problematic right, as Trotsky points out, not to the oppressed nationalities themselves but to a future Constituent Assembly.

Meanwhile the counter-revolution, under the disguise of anti-Semitism, was raising its head in the traditional and with the age-old slogans: "Kill the Jews! The Jews are to blame for Russia's troubles!" Pogroms against Jews were beginning to occur more and more frequently. The Patriarch Tikhon organized his notorious "Christian Pilgrimage" during which thousands of Jews were killed. The reactionary leader of the Black Hundreds, Shulgin, wrote in his White Guard newspaper:

"When night descends upon Kiev and a military detachment passes with music and songs from one street to another, the Jews, who sometimes inhabit a whole five-story building, light candles and begin to wail. Endless groans of terror are heard. They have nothing to defend themselves with any more so they groan as though they were in their last fit of agony. . . . Ah," exclaims Shulgin, "it seems that

you are in sympathy with the Bolsheviki, you are for the destruction of the country . . . No, this shall remain a country of landlords. Perhaps torture with fear will make you come to your senses. It may force you to bend your Jewish heads before our religion and ideas . . ."

This was, of course, not the attitude of the majority of the members of the Provisional Government. But the mere fact that a person like Shulgin was associated with it and was tolerated tended to destroy the confidence of the Jews in the Government.

In contrast to such an anti-Semitic outburst, Yakov Sverdlov, the first president of the Soviet Republic, immediately after the seizure of power by the Bolsheviki, issued the following decree:

According to information received by the Soviet of People's Commissars, counter-revolutionists in many cities, particularly at the front, are carrying on agitation in favor of pogroms. A number of excesses against the Jewish population have already occurred. The bourgeois counter-revolution has adopted the weapon which has been left behind by the Tsarist autocracy which, every time that it had to divert from itself the wrath of the people, pointed to the Jews, telling the dark masses that all their misfortunes come from the Jews. . . . In R.S.F.S.R. where the principle of self-determination for all toiling nationalities is declared, there is no place for national oppression.

When Sverdlov handed this decree to Lenin to sign, relates Lunacharski, Lenin added in red pencil:

The Soviet of People's Commissars instructs all the local Soviets to take the most decisive steps in cutting the anti-Semitic movement at its root. Pogromchiks and those who carry on pogrom agitation are to be considered outside of the law.

In view of the latter declaration it is only natural that the Jewish population would begin to look with more favor on the Bolsheviks. Another thing: instead of putting off the emancipation of the national minorities for some future date, as the Provisional Government had done, the Bolsheviks immediately proceeded to solve their problems.

In December of 1917, shortly after the Soviet Government came into power, in one of the rooms of the former Ministry of Foreign Affairs (the old seat of anti-Semitism and pogrom propaganda) the First Jewish Communist paper, the *Warheit*, was organized by S. Agurski and Boris Reinstein of New York. And on the 18th of January, 1918, came into existence the Commissariat of Jewish Affairs with Dimentstein as its director.

Thenceforth the participation of Jews in the Bolshevik movement grew by leaps and bounds. The Jewish youth that so enthusiastically greeted the February revolution transferred their enthusiasm to the Bolsheviks. They joined the Red Army. In certain provinces where the Jewish population was predominant, as in Minsk, the Red detachments sometimes consisted mostly of Jews.

Because, however, the Jews were less than 4% of the Russian population and since a great majority of them were opposed to the Bolsheviks, the Jews always remained a small minority in the Bolshevik movement. At least in this instance, the Jewish Cadet Hessen was right when, in answer to an accusation that all Jews are Bolsheviks, he replied: "Some . . .

but not all." Indeed, if the Jews were represented in the Bolshevik Party by Trotsky, Zinoviev, Radek and others, they also had their Jewish White Guardists like Kanegisser who shot the Bolshevik leader, Uritski, and Dora Kaplan who shot at Lenin. If the Jewish workers fought in the ranks of the Red army, Jewish financiers, Dr. Pasmanik tells us, financed the White Guardist general and pogrom instigator, Dragomirov, to combat the Bolsheviks. There were Jewish White Guardists and Jewish Bolsheviks; in either case they were in the minority.

One thing, however, is certain. Even today, as I convinced myself during my recent sojourn in Soviet Russia, the spirit of Sverdlov's and Lenin's decree of 1917 is the guide of the Soviet Government. It is futile, nor does it help the cause of the Jews when certain professional Jews discover issues of anti-Semitism where they do not exist. The controversy between Stalin and Trotsky, for instance, is on political grounds and not because Stalin is an anti-Semite. His assistant Kaganovich is a Jew; Litvinov, the Commissar of Foreign Affairs, is a Jew; and Jewish poets, artists, workers and intellectuals, as I shall show in the following chapters, occupy a prominent place in the Soviet arena.