

VIII

THE TEACHER, THE SCHOOL, THE CHILDREN

I.

THE ROOSTERS WERE HERALDING THE DAWN WHEN the dancing Komsomols dispersed. I went outside. My friend Leah Botnik was already up, feeding the pigs.

"You are an early bird," I said greeting her.

"I am an early bird? Look," she replied, pointing to a woman who was passing at a distance, "there is a woman who doesn't sleep at all. Always in a hurry, forever rushing somewhere . . ."

"Good morning, teacher," Leah shouted after her.

The teacher turned around, smiled, waved her hand and walked on.

"Just look at her. Take a good look at that bundle of bones. She is a devil, a dynamo . . ."

The woman whom Leah thus greeted was Bluma Rosenblatt, popularly known among the Crimean colonists as the Teacher. One of the earlier arrivals to Crimea, the Teacher, like the majority of the colonists, came from a small Ukrainian town. The colonists who came from the same town remember her as the "Lean Dressmaker."

A shy, insignificant-looking woman of about thirty-five, in spite of her consumptive, dried-up face and body, one could not say that Bluma was ugly. It is true, as Leah put it, "she lost her flesh fighting the battles of the Russian Revolution," but her black eyes, set deeply in her protruding forehead, radiated an inspiring enthusiasm. Also, her personality captivated me.

I could listen to Bluma for hours, speaking about the struggles of the early colonists, or about her *Semiletka*—Seven Year Elementary School—where the colonists' children receive their elementary education. To my regret, she was reticent when our conversation touched upon her own life. I learned her story from Leah and the other colonists.

There is nothing extraordinary in Bluma's biography, although to some it may even seem romantic. During my visit to the Soviet Union I heard dozens of similar stories. In Soviet-Yiddish literature, Bluma's kind are known as *Shturm Feygel*—Stormy Petrels—and their bones are strewn throughout the Ukrainian fields where the struggle for Jewish emancipation raged fiercest.

Bluma was about twenty years old when the Bolsheviks seized power. Before the Revolution, her life in the small Ukrainian town was like the life of any other poor Jewish girl. Since the age of ten she was forced to earn a miserable existence as an apprentice to a dressmaker. Bluma hated her life and she was the first Jewish girl in the town to join the Communists.

Then followed the hectic and bloody days of the

civil war. Bluma was drafted by the Bolshevik party to do political work. She was thrown about from front to front until her health broke down. Given a leave of absence, she went to Kharkov, the capital of the Ukraine, where a group of Jewish teachers were then hastily organizing the "Jewish Pedagogical Institute."

While the pogrom instigator, Petlura, was advancing on Kharkov, when bombs were bursting over the city, Bluma was forging her pedagogical career.

After a short period of hasty and intensive study, the newly-ordained teachers of the "Jewish Pedagogical Institute" were sent all over Russia to organize children's schools. It was then that the famous "Children's Republic"—the *Malakhovker Kinder Colonie*—located on the outskirts of Moscow, formerly a residence of the upper bourgeoisie, came into existence.

Bluma was sent to the Crimea. Upon reaching there, she at once set out to organize a school. That was no easy task. She applied to the colonists for help.

"Comrades," Bluma pleaded with them, "remember, the future belongs to the growing generation. The education of your children comes before tractors, yes, even before bread."

In vain.

"First we must have enough bread to eat, then tractors to work with and afterwards we can think of a school," the colonists replied laconically to her passionate plea.

Disregarding all obstacles, Bluma went on with her work. She fought for the school like a lion. She applied for help to the Crimean Soviet, ran to various Government institutions, banged on tables at committee meetings until finally her efforts met with success. Thus, the colonists' children acquired a school long before their fathers acquired tractors, even long before they were assured of their daily bread.

In spite of Bluma's fourteen-year battle on "the educational front," her active life, as she told me, was only commencing.

"My life," she said, "is the school. I mature and grow as the school grows and develops, as the kolhozy grow and prosper . . ."

One could write volumes about the education of children in Soviet Russia, for Bluma's school, it should be remembered, is only one of many hundreds. Many volumes have already been written.* Even a student of Soviet life like Sherwood Eddy who finds much to criticise in the Soviet system, agrees that "one of the most brilliant achievements of the Soviet Union is in the sphere of childhood and its attainment of free, compulsory, universal primary education. This is surprising," he says, "to the newcomer in Russia who would perhaps have expected in a revolutionary government a concentration upon material things and a more Spartan rigor or even neglect in dealing with childhood. Instead,

* For the best account of Soviet Education, see Albert P. Pinkevitch's *The New Education in the Soviet Republic*. See also *New Russia's Primer* by M. Ilin.

it is as if the Revolution had taken a little child and set him in the midst of the whole system, to occupy the first place of regard and almost of reverence. Children must be considered first in every law or plan. They must have the best milk, the most humane and scientific care, the chief consideration in everything . . ."

A similar view is held by Maurice Hindus, undoubtedly one of the more competent American observers of Soviet life. In its task of reconstructing the human personality, writes Mr. Hindus in *The Great Offensive*, the Soviet Government has achieved triumph after triumph. It is fashioning a new man, he says, "with a wholly new outlook on the world and his own position in it."

Indeed, if the majority of the Russian youth, as I have already stated, still have "one foot in old Russia," with the children of Russia, to paraphrase Bluma, lies the future of mankind. Like the Komsomols, the children too are organized into a vast Pioneer organization. It is in this organization, closely connected with the schools, that they are taught to be productive members of society. Like their elder "comrades" the Komsomols, the Pioneers, too, participate actively in the creation of the new Soviet life.

2.

In order to get a clearer picture of the state of Jewish education in Soviet Russia as it was painted

for me by Bluma, I shall once more have to return to the pre-revolutionary days.

Here is my case, for instance. When in 1916, a year before the Revolution, after much trouble and red tape, I was finally admitted to the gymnasium, I was the talk of the town and the envy of many Jewish boys and parents. It was, indeed, a feat in those days for Jewish boys of the poorer class to attend any school of secondary education. The notorious Tsarist *numerus clausus* limited the number of students of Jewish faith in the secondary schools and colleges to ten per cent in the ghettos, to five per cent outside of the ghettos and to three per cent in Moscow and Petrograd.

But I was an exception. Because of the fact that I was born in New York and technically considered a foreigner, I was granted special privileges. And yet, even with those "privileges," I spent many turbulent days and nights until I was finally admitted to the gymnasium only to taste the poisonous and anti-Semitic venom of an ignorant and brutal Cossack general. The majority of the Jewish boys were less "fortunate."

Of course, even as in Poland and Germany today, the sons of the well-to-do Jews, by adopting Christianity or more often through lavish bribes, usually succeeded in "crashing" the gymnasiums and universities. They too, however, were barred from certain educational institutions. (I am not speaking here of the numerous "aristocratic" schools, cadet corps, etc., where only children of the nobility were

admitted.) Not even well-to-do Jews were permitted to study at scientific and research institutes, nor under any circumstances could a Jew be a professor at a university.

The vast majority of the Jewish population was doomed to ignorance and illiteracy. The best that parents who dreamed of educating their children could do was to send them to filthy and stifling *cheders* where they were crippled both mentally and physically by ignorant and fanatical *melameds*.

The following figures relate an eloquent tale:

Before the Revolution there were 2,000 *cheders* in Russia with a total of 40,000 pupils. In addition there were 429 Jewish elementary schools with less than 30,000 pupils. The language in those schools was either Russian or a mutilated Hebrew. Yiddish, the language in which the majority of the Russian Jews spoke was forbidden by the Government to be taught in those schools.

Since the Revolution, on the other hand, Jewish education in Russia has increased five-fold. There are today 1,479 Jewish educational institutions with a total of 170,000 pupils and with Yiddish as the language of instruction. Of these, 270 are primary, 887 elementary and 315 secondary schools.

Especially in the sphere of higher education is the growth of Jewish educational institutions phenomenal. There are, for instance, nine Jewish technical high schools with 1,900 students; 50 industrial and agricultural colleges with a total of 10,000 students and ten universities with special Jewish departments

in which 1,590 students study. Also, in the non-Jewish schools the number of Jewish students has increased three-fold. There are 57,439 Jewish students studying in general state universities, colleges and technical schools.

The most interesting feature of Jewish education in Soviet Russia, perhaps the most significant, is the type of professions for which the Jewish youth are preparing themselves.

Before the Revolution the majority of the Jewish youth, because they were barred from any other professions, were forced to study primarily law and medicine. (Again we must compare this with the situation in Poland and Germany today.) Now the majority of them turn to technical schools. Only 2,417 Jewish young men and women are studying medicine whereas 11,565 are taking technical training in agriculture, transportation and economics.

Since 1932, when the law of compulsory education was passed in Russia, one hundred per cent of the Jewish children are attending school. Many of them also study in Factory Schools where besides a general education they also learn trades.

There are today Jewish engineers in Soviet Russia, Jewish agronomists, mechanics, peasants, doctors, workers, etc.

To repeat Bluma's words:

"*Numerus clausus!* Cursed words which every Jewish child knew almost as soon as it learned to speak. The children in the capitalist countries still know what a *numerus clausus* is, but to our children

these words sound strange and unbelievable. Only the older generation remembers them as a special form of Jewish torture . . . And together with this *numerus clausus* the *cheders* and *yeshivas* went out of our existence. We have swept them out of the life of the Russian Jews . . . No longer do we teach our children to mumble prayers and dogmas. Our main task is to show them that happiness can only be achieved through coöperation. We teach them friendship and rear them in the spirit of equality . . ."

3.

When I was at the kolhoz the school was officially closed. The children, however, were entertained with games, lectures, films and plays.

I attended a performance of one of those plays, called *We Grow With October*. It was acted in Yiddish although there was nothing specifically Jewish about it.

As the title implies, *We Grow With October* was one of those ingenious Soviet plays with the aid of which the Bolshevik educators seek to develop independent judgment and thinking in its growing generation. (In Russia each of the children's plays or books does more than simply entertain; it usually teaches a moral. But the children are not, of course, denied the privilege of reading fairy tales. Most of those I spoke to, however, are opposed to any such "bourgeois nonsense.")

I have seen many plays presented for American children in American schools, and in the sense of an American children's play *We Grow With October* wasn't even a play. The audience did not sit motionless watching the actors perform, but the whole juvenile gathering, even though unconsciously, took part in the play.

Even Bluma was one of the actors. She began her part by refusing to allow the play to begin. The actors pleaded with her: "Comrade Bluma, the children are here to see the play and not to listen to your stubborn arguments." But Bluma was adamant.

"What do I care about children?" she cried.

The young audience laughed. Before they knew it they were already acting. They began to shout and whistle until Bluma disappeared behind the curtain.

"Do you want to know why Comrade Bluma is so unsocial?" asked the actors.

"Yes!" cried the audience. The curtain went up. Bluma was shown in her youthful days.

The play depicted several aspects of Bluma's supposed life: her childhood, the attitude of her father and mother towards her, and the effectiveness of the Pioneer troop to which she belonged and that of the troop leader.

The second scene was a trial. Bluma's father, mother and the leader of the pioneers were being tried for bringing up an unsocial member of society. The prosecutor and defense lawyer stated their cases. The audience was asked to judge. And the young

judges were not slow in responding. They shouted their answers at once.

When the performance was over, the children proceeded to discuss the play in the corridor. It was the first chance I had to observe closely the colonists' children. To be sure, they were like children the world over. Only they were clothed much more poorly. Their cheeks, however, were flushed; their faces animated.

"I think that Comrade Bluma herself is to blame," one boy argued.

"And I think that her father and mother are to blame," another one shouted.

"I know, I know," interposed a third one, "the Pioneer leader is to blame. Why didn't he take proper care of her?"

When I left, the play was still being heatedly discussed.

"Just think," Bluma said to me, "these are children of former *luftmenschen*." She pointed to the debating youngsters: "Their fathers remember the curse of Tsarist pogroms and persecutions, but these kids will know nothing about it. They will be free people . . ."