

### OLGIN, A MAN OF CONTRASTS

Moissay Olgin, the most influential Jewish Communist in the 20's and 30's, was born Moishe Yosef Novomisky, March 27, 1878, in a village in the province of Kiev. His father, a *Maskil*, was an overseer of lumber cutting for a Polish squire. The boy studied the Bible and Talmud as well as secular subjects.

After the family moved to Rogochov in the province of Volinia, Moishe, 15 years of age, tutored children to support himself. He graduated the local *gymnasia*, and enrolled in the law faculty of the University of Kiev. There, in 1900, he joined the revolutionary student movement. A year later, as a punishment for demonstrations, he and several hundred other students were drafted as "volunteers" into the army—a volunteer enjoyed a higher rank and a shorter term of service than an ordinary soldier.

Out of the army, Olgin joined a Jewish student group, Liberty, which later evolved as the Kiev group of the Bund. In 1904, caught in the surging revolutionary tide, Olgin left the university and became a "professional revolutionary" for the Bund. He participated in all the publications of the Bund and wrote on a variety of topics, including literary reviews, under several names. In 1906, Olgin was the Duma correspondent for the Bund's daily, *Der Wecker*, in Vilno.

After the defeat of the revolution, in 1907, Olgin went to Heidelberg to study philosophy and social science. He returned to Russia in 1909. In the defeatist mood of that period, Olgin, similar to most

of the radical intelligentsia, took to literature, the only media of communication open to them. His literary output was prolific. He wrote Yiddish readers for adults and anthologies of poetry and short stories as well as articles and essays on social topics. He also wrote poetry under the name of Yosef Neiman. Olgin's anthologies were highly popular. They satisfied a fundamental need of people denied an elementary acquaintance with literature. He also translated a few classical works from Russian and Polish. Not a theoretician nor a leader, he was rated one of the best pamphleteers of the Bund. He settled in Vienna in 1913, editing a Bund weekly, *Die Zeit*, and sending articles to the *Forward* in New York.

At the outbreak of World War I, Olgin came to America and worked as a feature writer for the *Forward*. He studied economics and sociology at Columbia University, and was one of Professor Zeligman's favorite students. He received his Ph.D. in 1918. A year later he lectured on the Russian Socialist movement at the New School of Social Science. He wrote two books in English on Russia, *The Soul of the Russian Revolution*, in 1917, and *A Guide to the Russian Literature*, in 1919. In his Communist period, he wrote *Maxim Gorky, Writer and Revolutionist*, in 1933, and *Trotskyism, Counterrevolution in Disguise*, and translated eight volumes of *Lenin* in English for International Publishers.\*413

Olgin was a hostile critic of the Bolshevik Revolution. So insulting were his remarks about the Soviet leaders that editor Cahan had to doctor them. He was one of the few radicals to accept in good faith the Sisson documents, published by the State Department in December 1918, that purported to show that Lenin and Trotsky were paid German agents. (Some of Olgin's anti-Bolshevik pieces in the *Forward* and *Naye Welt* are quoted in Chapters 9 and 11.)

However, in 1920, Olgin went to Soviet Russia and returned an admirer of the Soviets though not a Bolshevik. As he himself told friends, Tchicherin, then foreign commissar, said to him, "You are returning to America. Describe what you have seen here, don't eulogize, don't embellish. Tell the truth as you found it. Let them understand us; it will be better for all concerned." But Olgin did not heed Tchicherin's sober advice. His articles in the *Forward*—a couple appeared in the *New Republic*—and his lectures, all in his sugary pamphleteer style, did much to enhance pro-Bolshevik feel-

ing among the young immigrants. In his admiration for the Soviets, Olgin went into a minute description of the new customs and dress in Russia.

In the Workers Party, Olgin was fighting alongside Lore against the control-greedy Communists. Sent to Moscow by the Lore and trade union groups in the spring of 1923 to argue their case, he returned a steadfast defender of the Kremlin. (For the effect of his conversion, see Chapter 14.)

Twice editor of the *Freiheit* and of the monthly *Hammer*, Olgin had a style of his own, and he could be eloquent when left free. He was the first to bring Negro works into Yiddish literature. Among his translations—and he did them exceptionally well—was the *Creation*, by James Weldon Johnson.

#### BRIMMING WITH ENTHUSIASM FOR EACH PARTY LINE

A man of erudition, an avid reader and a hard worker, Olgin was not genuine on the political battle front. He gave the impression of walking on stilts. His easy sliding into each party line, his brimming enthusiasm for it, and his self-effacement before party authority could only arouse doubts as to his sincerity. To be fair to him, it was not a defect of his intellect but of his character. His spinelessness was proverbial.

While in the *Forward*, to please the strong-willed Ab. Cahan, he wrote in praise of the "*Bint'l Briev*," a feature despised by all his friends. In the *Freiheit*, he was in love with every thesis and decision of the party. On his return from the fourth convention, in Chicago, 1925, a convention distinguished by physical clashes between the Foster and Ruthenberg factions, the author asked him rather gloomily, "How was the convention?" His reply was a cheerful "We are forging a true Bolshevik party."

Olgin not merely made virtues of party or Soviet exigencies, but took pride in them. A close friend of J. B. S. Hardman, accepting his leadership in the Socialist Federation, Olgin reserved for himself the attack on Hardman when he was expelled from the WP in 1923. He did the same when another good friend of his, Zivyon, left the *Freiheit*. In the fall of 1929, when the Kremlin ordered the expulsion of the Lovestonites, Olgin, an active Lovestonite, rushed to express his wholehearted approval of the expulsion. Like most of

the Russian-born intellectuals, he had great respect for Trotsky. Yet, he was the first in America to vilify him after his exile. An admirer of Bukharin, he was again first to applaud his execution, in a series of articles "proving" that Bukharin had been a traitor for many years. And when Prosecutor Vishinsky, in summing up the case against Bukharin, Rykov and the others, said, "This is not America where the Al Capone's go free," Olgin "respectfully disagreed" with him. "They are worse than Al Capone," he piously exclaimed in his daily review of the trial.<sup>\*414</sup> Two weeks later, faced by increasing protests and ill will over the executions, Olgin came out with an article, "We Hold our Heads High."<sup>\*415</sup>

Abusing old associates and people he admired did not seem to weigh heavily on Olgin; he would rub his hands in glee before sitting down to write—perhaps this gesture was his way of steeling himself for the attack.

In a situation where the dearth of argument was too obvious, Olgin resorted either to rabble-rousing or to lofty moralizing. In a public debate with Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky, in 1936, over the new Soviet constitution, Olgin, unable to muster a convincing defense of the one-party provision, switched over to assailing the enemies of the Soviet Union. And immediately after the first purge trial, he came out with a moralizing piece about the new man forged by Bolshevism, called "The Man in Us." "A new man is being born . . .," he wrote. "The Communist absorbs the sorrow, the bitterness, the indignities, and melts it down in an iron will to rebuild the world."<sup>\*416</sup> This high-sounding but seemingly irrelevant article was intended to implant in the mind of the reader a sense of being a part of a world elite, with a superior morality that entitled it to commit deeds forbidden to ordinary mortals.

An intellectual to the core, well dressed, with gentlemanly manners, and preferring the company of the literati, his "going to the people" was definitely a condescension. He tried to hide it, but not always successfully.

Capricious and humorless, Olgin was inwardly unsure of himself, and felt a basic need for compliments. He seemed to thrive on them. Throughout all the trying years of factional warfare and executions in Moscow, he never uttered a doubt. If one nagged at him, nobody was aware of it. Always defending or attacking, he never permitted himself the luxury of silence.

Only once, at the celebration of his 50th birthday, in Carnegie Hall, did he unbutton to tell his comrades of a moment of hesitation. That was about 1919, after his two books on Russia had been published. Professor Simkhovitch, of Columbia University, proposed that they work jointly on a series of books about Russia. He assured Olgin of immediate success—the public being highly interested in Russia at that time. “When I came to his house,” Olgin reminisced, “a butler opened the door, and ushered me into a large beautiful salon. For a second the thought hit me that this comfort could be mine, and that I, too, could gain a reputation in the academic world. But immediately I realized that I would have to choose between this sort of life and the working class movement, and I rejected his proposal.”

#### A FRUSTRATED NOVELIST

There was a definite sadistic streak in Olgin. A frustrated novelist, he wrote a pseudo-psychological play and a novel on the Bolshevik civil war. In both, sexual sadism was wrapped in ostentatious piety to the Revolution. The premiere of *Her Crime*, put on at Maurice Schwartz' theater in the 20's, caused a howl in the press. All reviewers agreed that it was a discredit to the Revolution. It had to be taken off. The novel, *Joel and Gavril*, printed in the *Freiheit*, involved the rape of Joel's sweetheart by Gavril, a peasant boy, during a pogrom, and their subsequent meeting as Communists. It had the same literary merit as the play.

During the Third Period, Olgin wrote a Communist science fiction horror story: Capitalism is collapsing and a civil war on a world scale is breaking out. The Comintern General Staff is directing the battles from somewhere in the air above South America, and Communist scientists have invented a new weapon, a mysterious ray that disintegrates anything it touches. Millions are killed, but the revolution triumphs. This “vision” of the future world civil war was the topic of his speech at—of all places—a convention banquet of the IWO.

Olgin was not satisfied with his role as *melamed* (teacher) and propagandist. All his life—his Bund period included—he longed for a place among policy-makers. And the Communists were shrewd enough to play upon this ambition of his. They made him a mem-

ber of the CEC, but his voice was never heard there—he remained a pamphleteer. However, standing on the platform and addressing large audiences gave him the feeling of a leader. And he loved the platform dearly.

Olgin's stand on Jewish problems swung on the pendulum of the party line. A Jewish writer for more than two decades, he joined the assimilationists during the revolutionary rigidity of the early 30's. An editor of a Jewish daily and a monthly, he insisted on giving his summer course in Camp *Nitgedeyget* only in English. But when tolerance of ethnical groups was revived in the middle 30's, Olgin displayed a profound knowledge of Yiddish and Hebrew literature and was exuberant in his affection for the Jewish people and their culture.

Olgin became the perennial nightingale of the Soviet Union and of Communism. He went to Russia in 1934. In a series of articles in the *Freiheit* in the fall of the same year, Olgin undertook the herculean task of repudiating the reports of mass semi-starvation. In one article he copied in detail a rather enticing menu, implying that he had seen this in an ordinary Soviet eating place. A group of tourists, *Freiheit* readers, who came to Moscow a few months later, were dismayed to find that Olgin's excellent restaurant was behind the locked gates of the Kremlin. Another deceptive method was to portray a young Soviet worker or peasant who had advanced rapidly, pretending that he was typical of all young workers and peasants.

Olgin read freely the major European languages, and wrote in several of them. How this erudite and gifted man could so lightly and so long submit to a strict and degrading discipline, perhaps only a psychologist could tell. The only explanation that this author can suggest is that his inner weakness drove him to seek strength from crusading causes and from people stronger than he. The Bund was a crusading body and its leaders were men of strength. The Socialist movement in America, loose and complacent, had little of either. In Communism Olgin found both.

As an editor, Olgin strove to emulate the self-assured editor of the *Forward*, Ab. Cahan. But he was too weak.

Olgin's long involvement in an affair with a married woman must have been a part of his inner need to be humored by a person of a

stronger will than his. His gratitude was amazing. A member of the CEC of the party, one who kept preaching Communist ethics and discipline, he secretly contacted the editor of a "bourgeois enemy" paper, *The Day*, Dr. Samuel Margoshes, requesting him to publish a review of his friend's first art exhibition, that he would write under a pseudonym. This was the middle of the 20's. Dr. Margoshes agreed as a personal favor, and the piece appeared. However, the *Freiheit*, engaged in a running fight with the rest of the Jewish press, received a hint a few months later that *The Day* might come out with a story highly damaging to Olgin if Dr. Margoshes would be attacked. A discreet inquiry disclosed this story.\*<sup>417</sup> His readiness to commit a transgression for his woman was perhaps the only human weakness shown by Olgin in his life as a Communist.

For quite some time in the same period, Olgin brought in each week a short story signed by the husband of his friend, but written entirely in his fine precise handwriting. The stories stopped when he became ill.\*<sup>418</sup> They reappeared when Olgin recovered. All three lived together, the husband nursing Olgin devotedly.

Olgin was for a number of years the American correspondent of the *Pravda*, his cables being censored here by a Soviet official. For this he received \$22 a week, and could never get a raise. Like the rest, he was meagerly paid in the *Freiheit* and for his translations, and was always in debt.

In 1938, during the Democratic Front, Olgin started working on a book, *America*. It was autobiographical. The unfinished manuscript was found after his death. Some chapters were printed in the *Freiheit* only in 1942, when Stalin became a war ally and Communists were again American patriots. Olgin appeared there to have been strongly affected by America, its freedom, opportunities, and its institutions. One chapter was titled, "I Love America." A year earlier, at the 20th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, the same man poured out his love for Russia, his only fatherland.

Olgin was seriously sick in the last years of his life. His relations with the Jewish Bureau had greatly deteriorated; he was completely ignored. The managing editor permitted himself to eavesdrop on Olgin's conversations with visitors and to censor his articles already on the pages. But when he died, of a heart attack, November 22, 1939, at the age of 64, the loss to the Communist movement was not without its benefits. The *Freiheit* squeezed out every drop of pres-

tige from his name. He was given an elaborate funeral, many thousands of people marching in the procession. Thirty days later, at a memorial in Madison Square Garden, Olgin was canonized. His picture was placed on the masthead of the *Freiheit* as a symbol, and all fund-raising campaigns were conducted "to keep alive Olgin's heritage." His picture is still on the paper's masthead.

#### SHACHNO EPSTEIN, FROM A WRITER TO A SPY

Shachno Epstein, who had a considerable part in the Socialist and Communist movement here and in Russia—no relation whatsoever to the author—was born in 1883 near Vilno. His father was a businessman. Shachno studied the Talmud as well as secular subjects. His ambition was to be a painter, but his sister dissuaded him, arguing that there was no *takhlis* in it. In 1903, he joined the Bund, was arrested in Warsaw and exiled to the Far East; he escaped after three months and continued his activity in the Bund. He came to America at the end of 1909, and was one of the founders of the Socialist Federation.

Shachno was not satisfied with political writing; he felt a calling for literary criticism. The pulsating Jewish labor movement in the second decade needed intellectuals—writers, editors, educational directors. Shachno Epstein became the editor of the weekly *Die Gleicheit*, of the large Dressmakers' Union, Local 25. He also wrote for the Socialist magazines.

Epstein joined the Russian-born radicals in their trek to Russia in 1917, hoping for more elbow room in the new Russia. He re-joined the Bund, and was active in the struggle against Lenin. And, like the majority of his fellow Socialists, he went over to the Bolsheviks during the Civil War.

Early in 1921, Shachno Epstein returned to America as an "instructor" to the Jewish Communists (the reason for his choice is given in Note 22). He was co-editor with A. Bittelman of the weekly *Emes*, writing under the name of Yosef Berson. When the *Freiheit* was published, he was co-editor for the Communist group.

Shachno Epstein's ambition exceeded by far his limited talent. Neither by ability nor by aptitude did he fit the part of a leader in a Communist Party, however much he wanted to be one. But he