

Readers' Forum on Jews in International Brigades

By ALVAH BESSIE, ALBERT PRAGO, MORRIS U. SCHAPPE

IT is good to have the tear-sheets of Al's forthcoming pamphlet on *Jews in the International Brigades*, and not only because such a document has been so long delayed.

It would be even better if, as Al suggests, a book were to be developed from this material that would be detailed and as definitive as such a work could be, considering the fact that documentation those days was few and far between and may be mostly lost by now. (I am delighted that I will not be doing the research!)

There is one point that Al makes a few times that I would like to address: he says there is no book or pamphlet in English on the subject and "This silence of 40 years in the English-speaking world is strange."

Is it, really? Al himself makes the point more than once that even though Jews may have been between 15 and 17.5% in the International Brigades, and perhaps as many as 30% of the American volunteers were Jews, "Many of the Jews who came from England, Canada, France and the United States did not identify as Jews."

I would change that word "many" to "most" and apply it to almost all the International Brigade Jews I ever met in any outfit.

Why didn't they identify as Jews? Because, in my opinion—as in my own case, for example—they did not consider the fact of being Jews germane to the job they were engaged in. Nor did the vast majority of them practise whatever Judaism they had started out with; because most of them were radicals of Communist leanings, if not actual affiliation, and

as Communists we were taught that religion of any kind diluted and even sabotaged the struggle of the world working people to be free of their oppressors. Am I wrong?

I may be a special case: I have always known I was a Jew; I have always refused not only to deny it but have tried to understand the cultural background of my people, to learn more about it, to be proud of their capacity for struggle and their heroism, but like my parents before me, I never practised the religion and I do not now see any reason for the practise of any religion—if you are as intent as we all are on seeing a socialist world that will be both democratic and human and permit each man and woman to develop to the full capacity as a human being.

Al says it himself, that neither Rolfe's book, nor Landis', nor mine for that matter, make any but the most casual mention of Jews in the Lincoln Battalion, because "the level of Jewish consciousness among much of the left at the time was minimal." Should not the pamphlet and any further development of this material explain why this was so? And how it could not have been otherwise?

ALVAH BESSIE
Terra Linda, Calif., March 11, 1979

DEAR Alvah, I agree with you that the subject matter of *Jews in the International Brigades* deserves a full length book in English. I hope some interested scholar (with a knowledge of Yiddish and at least two of these languages: Polish, Russian and French) will be inspired.

In your letter there is a shadowy

area upon which some light should be cast. As one possible explanation of the low level of Jewish consciousness among the American volunteers you suggest that most were radicals and consequently did not "practice whatever Judaism they had started out with." Lurking in the shadows is an illogical equation of Jewish consciousness and religious practices. Alvah, you are thereby ignoring the existence of secular Jews—which you and I are. We are just as Jewish as the religious variety. Furthermore, practicing the Jewish religion—or any other—does not preclude identification with political radicalism; witness the practicing Italian, Spanish and French Catholics who are radical activists. In short, as holds true for any ethnic community, among Jews there has been considerable variation of political and religious beliefs and combinations thereof.

As you know, rabid anti-Semites and unsophisticated non-Jews do not make any fine distinctions between Jews religious and secular, poor and rich, exploiters and exploited, radical and conservative; they all are simply—Jews. It is a perception which we must recognize, appreciate and learn how to deal with.

You write that you are proud of the Jewish people's "capacity for struggle and their heroism." You, and so many other Jews, continued that noble tradition in Spain. However, how would the world know about it if the facts are not related? And how are the facts to be known if the Jewish volunteers, lacking Jewish consciousness, did not openly and proudly identify as Jews? As did the Botwins, for example.

What strikes me is that many of the Jews who came to Spain from Eastern Europe and Palestine proclaimed their Jewishness—whether

they were communists, socialists, Zionists or simply anti-fascists. But, the American and other Jews, while not denying their heritage *did not declare it*. A very few Americans—I cited some examples in my essay—announced, so to speak, their Jewishness. We others said nothing. Why? You are eminently justified in asking why there was so low a level of Jewish consciousness among the American left. Let me essay some introductory observations.

Historians and sociologists have long since replaced the discredited "melting pot" myth with the theory of cultural pluralism. The latter conforms to reality. We have long noted that ethnic minorities did not dissolve in the non-existing pot prepared by theoreticians purveying Anglo-Saxon doctrines of racial superiority. Most, if not all, ethnic, national, cultural minorities have persisted in maintaining their identity while simultaneously striving to integrate into American economic and political life. Among them were the Jews. It was a fact that the Old Left—of which you and I were a part—largely ignored, most of us being content to follow tenets developed abroad by brilliant ideologues somewhat ignorant of specific, complex aspects of the American scene.

However, leaders of the Comintern and of the CPUSA made a signal contribution in the course of grappling with the Negro question. It was, they said, a national question which demanded a special solution not found in a simplistic class struggle analysis. But when it came to the Jewish question that same Communist leadership of the 1920s and 1930s argued that it would be resolved as a by-product of the victory

in the class struggle and the establishment of socialism.

I am indebted to my colleague Morris Schappes for the knowledge that the dogma of the Old Left about the Jewish question had a peculiar historical continuity in that it derived principally from the dogma of the *Old Old Left*, namely the Socialist Party (and the Socialist Labor Party, and the 2nd International) of the 1880s and onward. (See Schappes' *The Jewish Question and the Left—Old and New*, 1970.) Their leaders had averred, repeatedly, that Jews should and would assimilate (see how successful they were in Germany and Austria and what the consequences were). The Jewish Bund in Tsarist Russia, whose political tactics had serious shortcomings, was unfortunately attacked for its positive role in asserting Jewish identity and fighting for Jewish rights. To do so, it was argued, would detract from the class struggle, which stood above all other questions. The woman question, the national question, racism, etc. and the Jewish question somehow would be resolved automatically following socialist victories in the class struggle.

Perverse adherence to that hoary dogma ignored the meaning of the obvious growth of anti-Semitism in Germany and in our own country in the 1930s. Among the progressive left there were some elements, for example the *Freiheit* readers and members of various radical Yiddish organizations, who continued to proclaim Jewish identity. That stood in apparent contradiction to the assimilationist position of all other radicals. Assimilationism, or national nihilism (denial of the significance of ethnic identity) separated us from the mainstream of American Jewry, so many of whom were concerned

with clear and present dangers. With the exceptions noted, the left stubbornly proclaimed as internationalism what was in fact cosmopolitanism ("citizen of the world" concept) divorced from those growing dangers. The dangers were seen. The growth of anti-Semitism was apparent. Its relation to fascism was duly noted. But we Jews could go to Spain to fight against fascism *without making reference to our specific Jewish stake in that fight!* Yet Queipo de Llano, as I noted in my article, was broadcasting that the Franco generals were fighting to save the world from the Jews and their devilish plots against Christendom!

The New Left, in the 1960s, so critical of the Old Left in many respects, nevertheless adopted the Old Left's ostrich-like posture which ignored the realities of the Jewish question. Apparently the same sectarian view still characterizes the American Communist Party and much of the left despite the lessons of the Holocaust. For example, how have radicals dealt with the Jewish question in the labor movement? A slight digression is in order here.

Labor historian Herbert Gutman has remarked that general labor histories are faulty in that they do not integrate in the body of the text the ethnic composition of the immigrants (or one generation removed) of the majority of the American working class. Surely the Slavs, Mediterranean peoples, the Chinese and other groups suffered discrimination and struggled against it. That, argues Prof. Gutman, should be an important aspect of any history of American labor, not just as separate treatments of each ethnic group but as a feature of any general history of labor. Else such a history suffers from a passive

acceptance of Anglo-Saxon superiority or an evasion of the special problems affecting this nation of immigrants—including Jews. American workers fought on grounds common to workers in any industrial country but each ethnic group, including Jews, faced special problems very adroitly manipulated by the ruling class. One consequence of exploring the problems raised by you in your letter has been an enriching of my own perception, as a labor historian, of the complexities involved in having a comprehensive, multi-faceted understanding of American labor.

I return to the matter at hand. How have radicals dealt with the Jewish question in the labor movement? I'll refer to six books, all with varying degrees of merit, published after 1945, i.e. after the events of the Holocaust were common knowledge:

1. Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais in their *Labor's Untold Story* (1955) corrected some of the injustices and made up for many omissions of conventional labor histories. The index discloses three references to Jews; one has no relation to the labor movement; the one on page 128 has a brief phrase or two regarding tens of thousands of Jewish garment workers in Chicago; and the third on page 246 has a phrase indicating that in the fur and needle trades of New York in the 1920s a majority were Jews. The contribution and problems of Jewish workers remained an "untold story."

2. Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step* (1964)—not one reference to Jews or anti-Semitism.

3. Len de Caux, *Labor Radical* (1970)—Ditto. (There is nothing in the table of contents or in the index.)

4. Philip S. Foner's *Organized Labor and the Black Worker* (1974)

has an extensive discussion on the anti-Black practices and attitudes of some Jewish labor leaders; there is virtually nothing on the progressive actions of Jewish workers and leaders in solidarity with Black workers. The omission cannot result from Foner's ignorance of the Jewish role in this connection because elsewhere he has given considerable evidence of it.

5. James Matles and James Higgins, *Them and Us* (1974), has nothing.

6. Gil Green, *What's Happening in Labor?* (1976), has not one reference to Jews in the labor movement, past or present, not one reference to anti-Semitism in the labor movement.

Were not these radical labor commentators aware of the contributions made by Jews in the labor movement? What is quite clear is the continuing failure of radicals to give the Jewish question, and the national composition of the working class, adequate attention. It is a continuing failure to recognize the insidiousness of anti-Semitism (and anti-foreignbornism) as a divisive force in the labor and progressive movements.

Despite our assimilationist posture, there remains the stubborn, pregnant fact that so large a percentage of American volunteers were Jews. Your explanation of their failure to identify as such "that they did not consider the fact of being Jews germane to the job they were engaged in," is a quite plausible assumption. Does it not strike you as exceedingly odd that we did not consider "our being Jews germane . . ." to fighting against Hitlerism? It does run counter to that stubborn fact that so many of us

were Jews and *that was not an historical accident.*

Nor was it accidental that the *Morgn Freiheit* had a correspondent in Spain, Gina Medem, reporting in Yiddish. And it was Medem who wrote the little book, praised so by Luigi Longo, about the Jews in the International Brigades. It was written in Yiddish and translated and published in Spanish in Madrid. Nor was it an accident that her work was not brought to the attention of the English-reading world.

The question still unanswered is why Edwin Rolfe, Art Landis and you did not use the word Jew, except casually, in your respective books about the American brigaders, 30% of whom were Jews. (It is quite interesting to note that historian Robert Rosenstone was keenly aware of the Jewish component in his book on the Spanish Civil War, *Crusade of the Left*.) The dogma of the past apparently was so obfuscating that the horrible, planned slaughter of 6,000,000 Jews had no special significance for radicals, including some Jews—such as you and I. You state that you always refused to deny being a Jew, but is it not illuminating that it is only now that I learn that you are a Jew? Your *Men in Battle* will and should endure. It would have been rewarding to know that its author, like the heroic commander Aaron Lopoff under whom he served as adjutant, is a Jew.

If we were proud, as you write, of our heritage, should we have not informed the world that our presence in Spain was a continuation of that heritage? Why did we not know of Medem's work? Why did we not know of Gallo's (Longo) stirring tribute to the Jewish volunteers in the I. B.? Don't you agree with Longo that the Jewish contribution

to the cause of Spain should have been heralded to all the world? And if you and I and other Jewish vets did not broadcast that sterling truth, is it so surprising that other radicals in the USA were silent?

It is only in recent years that I found myself changing my outlook. While I have been pondering the matter for several decades, I adopted the more forthright view as a result of reading JEWISH CURRENTS for the past few years, after my association with its Editorial Advisory Council, and especially after my interviews in 1976 in Florence with fellow veterans Berl Balti and Emmanuel Mink. Tribute should be paid to the Schappeses and Haraps who have been engaged in the good fight for over 30 years. I am ashamed to have been so slow to learn from the past.

I am trying now to avoid repetition of past errors. As an historian, as a humanist, as an internationalist, as an American, as a Marxist, and as a Jew—I am concerned with many social issues—domestic and foreign. However, aware of the events that led to one holocaust, I have a concern in preserving Jewish heritage, I have a concern with a new fearful growth of anti-Semitism, I have a concern with survival as a Jew. Salud,

ALBERT PRAGO

Flushing, N. Y., May 23

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DEAR AL, I am neither a historian nor a political thinker of any caliber and what little I have learned about the world by the age of 75 (June 4) I have had to learn from direct and personal experience.

That is why I said in my original letter commenting on your article in JEWISH CURRENTS that perhaps I am a special case. You say you did not know until this time that I was a

Jew, which probably accounts for the fact that there is no mention of me and/or *Men in Battle* or *Spain Again* or even *The Unamericans* in your material about Jews in the International Brigades.

I did not know I was a Jew until I was beaten up on the street (124th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue) when I was returning home from school at the age of 10. They chanted that celebrated ditty, "Take a piece of pork and put it on a fork, etc."

I ran home and cried to my father, saying I had been beaten by a bunch of kids who said I was a Jew. He replied, "You *are* a Jew and you should be proud of it." I said, "Why?" His reply was anything but informative, something to the effect that the Jews were a great people with a wonderful history and when I was older I would understand better.

Neither my father nor my mother practised the religion, although my grandfather from Amsterdam (on my father's side) owned a Talmud and a Torah in Hebrew. Whether he was a communicant I do not know. And while my father never denied being a Jew, neither did he talk much about it and he had friends of every religious and no religious persuasion. He also held still for anti-Semitic cracks by his best friend, an Irish Catholic who played poker with him once a week and drank a fifth of rye during the game—which my father supplied. He always started, the friend, to make cracks about the Jews and my father politely reminded him, "I am a Jew, you know," and his friend said, "Sure, I know. But you're a *White Jew*."

Common enough, yes? My father also attempted to discourage me—as I became adolescent—from being in-

involved with "Christian" girls, with more or less success, I think. But his values were more strictly bourgeois than religious-or-culture-related. He would say, "It is just as easy to fall in love with a rich girl as a poor one." Just as my mother unconsciously linked race prejudice with class prejudice when she suddenly forbade me to play any longer with Joe, a Black boy who had been my constant companion till I was about 7, when she said, NOT, "He is Black," but, "He's the janitor's boy."

I tell you this personal history because I think it is germane to the fact that while I have always thought of myself as a Jew and openly resented anti-Semitic remarks and actions, and sometimes got beaten up again for that reason, I have never thought of myself as a Jew in any "important" way: i.e., no religion, no cultural practises were observed by my family, nor by me.

One more story: one of the most wonderful love-relationships I ever had was broken off by the lady when she suddenly recalled an incident 20 years earlier in which her husband of the time had said that I did not pick up the dinner check when we were all together—my then wife and this couple—because, "That's the Jew in him."

She apologized abjectly when I reminded her that this incident happened in the depths of the Depression, when her husband enjoyed a good salary and my then wife and I were practically living on beans. She would not continue the relationship, however, for various reasons, but she did challenge me in a way I have never been able to answer, even to myself. She said:

"Why are you a Jew? You don't

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practise the religion. You neither speak, read nor write either Hebrew or Yiddish; you don't want to live in Palestine and I have never heard of your attending so much as a Seder or following any of the other cultural practises of the Jews."

OK. What does this have to do with the question I raised in my first letter, in trying to explain the lack of or low level of Jewish consciousness among the American volunteers in Spain: that most of us were radicals, did not practise whatever religion we had started out with and probably did not feel that the fact of our Jewishness was germane to what we were doing in Spain?

I do not deny that I was aware that I was there to fight fascism, and specifically Nazi-fascism, which I hated as much as Franco's variety, and this had *something* to do with my being a Jew. But you, Al, make the point that I make an "illogical equation of Jewish consciousness and religious practise . . . (and) ignore the existence of secular Jews . . ." which both of us were at the time and I presumably still am.

I deny there is any illogical equation here, because even the Jewish cultural practises are founded in the religion and I have never felt any need for a religion and do not feel such a need today.

When one of my books came out, about five years ago, I was invited by the local B'nai B'rith—and by a Temple down the Peninsula south of San Francisco—to speak about it, I don't recall whether it was *Inquisition in Eden* (about Hollywood and HUAC) or the novel, *The Symbol*.

In any event, a local couple at-

tached to B'nai B'rith invited my wife and me to a Seder and we accepted. I was embarrassed and uncomfortable and felt distinctly out of place, even as I appreciated the significance of the ritual, and its beauty. My wife Sylviane is an ex-Catholic who rejected her religion for good and all after her first trip to Spain from Morocco (where she was brought up), and specifically in the cathedral in Sevilla when she saw the discrepancy between the wealth of the church and its "treasures," and the poor, starving *beatas* who climbed the cathedral steps on their knees, beating their heads against the stone. That was in 1956, I believe.

What I am saying here, Al, and I do not think you grapple with it in your reply, is that it was not my Jewish "nature" or "personality" or "unconscious" that brought me to fight in Spain and that made that experience—and the fight against HUAC and subsequent imprisonment—the two actions I have taken in this life of which I am most proud. It was my radicalism and the emotion I felt when I saw the newsreels from Spain in 1936-7; it was my understanding of politics, such as it was, that made me fight against all oppressive regimes and organizations, and I continue to do so as best I can every day of my life.

This does *not* mean that I do not agree with you that the nature and extent of Jewish (sic) participation in the I. B. should be illuminated and commented upon and given the prominence demanded by a proper historical understanding of the time, the place and the action. I do agree. I simply do *not* agree that most Jewish I. B. men—with the possible exception of a few Israelis and the

Botwins—went to Spain because of their Jewishness; but for the same reasons that brought you and me and many another American and foreign Jews to Spanish soil.

I thank you for your graceful tribute to *Men in Battle*, which has now been reprinted five times since it first appeared in 1939, including a Mexican edition which is now for sale in Spain. Both *Men in Battle* and *Spain Again* are soon to appear again, both in Hungary and the USSR, the two in one volume in the latter country.

Please feel free to use this letter in the way you suggest. Please do not feel guilty that we did not stress the fact that we were Jews when we joined the I. B. and were ignorant of certain facts that have since come to light: the Botwins, the publications dealing with Jews in the Brigades, the foreign tributes we never saw till decades later.

Salud!

ALVAH BESSIE

Terra Linda, Calif., June 3

Comment by Morris U. Schappes

The Editorial Board obtained permission from Alvah Bessie and Albert Prago to publish this exchange to stimulate further discussion. Obviously there was uneven development of Jewish consciousness among Jews in the left. I should say that Bessie is now about where Prago was 5-6 years ago, before he found his way to our magazine. Since Bessie is so autobiographically candid, I may say that in 1928 or 1929, in an unforgettable dispute with Sonya, who had a much higher Jewish and radical consciousness than I then had, I was denying I was a Jew except for the accident of birth, for which I rejected any responsibility. Hitler, Coughlin,

study of the Negro question and the national question and trying to apply Marxist principles to the Jewish people finally brought me out of my cosmopolitanism and nihilism.

The founding of *Jewish Life* (now JEWISH CURRENTS) in Nov., 1946 was a conscious break with cosmopolitanism and nihilism as we then understood it. Since then we have deepened our study and understanding. Some do this sooner, some later. Saul Wellman, for instance, also a veteran of the International Brigades, heartened us when, in taking out a Life Subscription after reading our magazine for a few years, he wrote (Feb., 1979, p. 40): “. . . The shattering fifties and its unmasking of comfortable myths forced many of us to rethink positions that once seemed settled. New and urgent questions pressed in on us. *Foremost* was the need for a new understanding of ourselves as American socialist Jews. Where did we fit into the broad spectrum of the American Jewish community? How did we reconcile Israel's struggle for survival with the cause of the dispossessed Palestinians? We were torn by the need to harmonize a Jewish consciousness with the struggle for a socialist alternative. These pressures were complicated by the continuing expression of anti-Semitism in the socialist world. As an aging, activist parent and dedicated socialist I am deeply grateful to JEWISH CURRENTS for providing a forum for these issues . . .” (emphasis added).

We have been holding the fort all these 33 years and of course welcome all reinforcements.

About Bessie's experience when invited to a Passover Seder—I can match it with mine in 1934 when I attended a *mock* Seder given by an atheist left-wing family in the Bronx!

Crude rejection of Judaism and Jewish religious practices certainly brought some of us into some odd postures, which some of us have outgrown. In recent years, when I attended Secular Seders, with Secular Hagadas that relate Jewish identity with radical outlooks, I have felt at home. Maybe Bessie would too.

The fact is there is a progressive secular Jewish community in our country. Alienation from the religion of Judaism need not and should not lead to alienation from the Jewish people, from progressive Jews and the progressive Jewish tradition. Consciousness-raising is a continual process (see my discussion of this matter on p. 27). Prago's pioneering article has contributed to that process not only among veterans of the International Brigades but among many others who rightly honor them and others who rightly honor them and leaders. ■

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**MAX
ROSENFELD**



For more than a year now he has been attending our Editorial Board meetings once a month, coming in from Philadelphia. Now

he has accepted the invitation of the Editorial Board to become a Member of the Board. Like Louis Harap of Vermont he will be a Contributing Editor, contributing not only his monthly column, "Our Secular Jewish Heritage," but also his wealth of experience and knowledge of Jewish culture.

Born in Philadelphia March 14, 1913, Max got his education at both Temple University and Gratz College for Jewish Teacher Training. Working in the printing trade, he began to translate from the Yiddish. His first translation of Sholem Aleichem appeared here in Jan., 1953. Since then he has been a frequent contributor of translations of poems, essays and stories, and of his own poetry, reviews and essays. In Jan., 1966 he took over the "Parents' Corner," which he broadened into the Our Secular Jewish Heritage department in Oct., 1972. From 1962 to 1976 he was the Director of the Jewish Children's School of Philadelphia; and a founder and a cultural leader of the Sholem Aleichem Club of Philadelphia for over 25 years.

He has translated many volumes of poetry and prose by Morris Rosenfeld, Sholem Shtern, Shmuel Eisentstadt and others. Welcome!