

# ABRAHAM CAHAN AND THE "FORWARD"

*When the nonagenarian Abraham Cahan died, he left behind him in the "Forward" a legacy of political reaction and cultural vulgarization*

*By Paul Novick*

ON the front page of the Jewish daily *Forward* on March 15, 1902, an announcement appeared detailing "improvements" that would be made in "every department" of the paper. The paper would "be written in pure, plain [the English word is transliterated] Yiddish Yiddish and we hope that every line will be interesting to all Yiddish-speaking people, young and old." Number one among the articles to appear in the next day's paper was to be about "Irish or Italian Gentiles who have become converts to Judaism because of girls in Jewish neighborhoods." This was item one of the program laid down by Abraham Cahan when he took over the editorship of the *Forward*, a position which he held until the day he died, on August 31, at the age of 91. We shall see the significance of this sort of journalism for the Jewish community.

Cahan was one of the "pioneers" of the East Side. His activities date back to the 1880's, when the mass immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe began (Cahan arrived in this country in 1882). Throughout two generations of "storm and stress," he was in the limelight. What influence did he exert on Jewish life in the United States? What type of "pioneer" was Abraham Cahan?

Despite the fulsome eulogies that followed his death, there is hardly any personality in Jewish life about whom the non-Jewish world and even part of the Jewish community has been so stubbornly misinformed. To the *New York Times*, for instance, Cahan's life was the "success story" of a "poor immigrant" who built up a rich and influential newspaper and who became toward the end of his life the "patriarch" of the East Side, a "builder" and "teacher" and what not. Some people who sing Cahan's praises must know about the sensationalism of the *Forward*, of its "sexy" material, of its letters to the lovelorn. Such praise, therefore, cannot imply much respect for the East Side.

## ***The Enemy of Jewish Cultural Builders***

The "boosting" of Cahan is hardly consistent with the fact that almost every builder of Jewish culture on the East Side and nearly every prominent Jewish socialist has bitterly fought Cahan and Cahanism. This was true of Morris Winchevsky, the "Grandfather of Jewish Socialism,"

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as he was called, one of the classicists of Yiddish poetry in the United States; of Jacob Gordin, the foremost Jewish playwright; of Leon Kobrin, the writer and dramatist; of Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky, philosopher and cultural leader; of Abraham Liessin, poet and editor; of Jacob Milch, M. Zametkin, Dr. A. Gaspe, Louis Boudin and many other writers and East Side pioneers; of the eminent M. Olgin. All fought Cahan because of his baneful influence on Jewish culture and Jewish life generally, as well as on the socialist movement. The *New York Times* of course, is not troubled by such things. For wasn't Cahan a "success"? And wasn't Cahan a violent red-baiter, with an obsessive hatred of the Soviet Union that antedates the "cold war"?

But what is the truth of the role of Abraham Cahan the editor? What was the influence of his editorship of the *Forward* on Jewish culture? What was his significance for the Jewish people?

The announcement we cited above was followed by another on April 29, 1902, which said: "We have collected piles of facts about marriages in the Jewish ghetto, about girls who remain unmarried, about girls who marry young, interesting reasons why a girl stays unmarried. For instance, are all unmarried girls not pretty? The answer is 'No' and there is a lot to tell."

And a lot there was. Immediately the *Forward* let loose a stream of stories like the following: "What is a pretty woman?" "Husbands who boss their wives," "Wives who boss their Husbands," "Unmarried girls," "The bride who was spanked," etc. Material about labor was crowded out. The struggle of tailors in the sweat shops for a 25 per cent raise got only seven lines, while the story, "Did Florence Eat Supper With Walter?" got a full column. The *Forward* was well launched on the road to becoming a sensational, "sexy" newspaper. Towards the end of 1905, Cahan introduced the "*Bintl Brif*" (a bundle of letters), now "famous" in the Yiddish speaking community, sentimental trash about the lovelorn and family life. And so it went. Other papers began to copy Cahan's methods.

The tenacity with which Cahan practiced this type of journalism over the years is illustrated by a story in the *Jewish Morning Journal* (Sept. 7) by the columnist, Jacob Glatstein. In 1922, Glatstein, then a budding young poet, came to Cahan for a job. Cahan's proposal was that Glatstein should become a "fiance" in a matchmaker's bureau and write up his experiences. This story also tells volumes

about what Cahanism did to many a writer and to Yiddish journalism generally.

### *Portrait of a Vulgarizer*

How could a labor and socialist newspaper take such a turn? How could Cahan succeed in his "sexationalist" program and follow it so stubbornly for nearly 50 years? The answer is that Cahan, an energetic, ambitious and domineering individual, based himself on a certain element among the people of the East Side and played upon their backwardness. Very many of the Jewish immigrants towards the end of the last century and the beginning of the twentieth were either petty traders or people without any trades, *luftmentshen*, who came from the then slumbering and backward small towns in old Russia and Poland or from the ghettos in the larger cities. Such immigrants had no contact with the labor movement or socialism, had not been touched by the then rising modern culture in Yiddish. Even some of the more "advanced" element among them were muddled. Cahan himself had for a short time attended an institute for reform rabbis in Wilno (in old Russia). He related in the *Forward* (May 4, 1940) that he became a socialist on board ship to America. "What kind of a socialist—a social democrat or an anarchist—I did not know," Cahan adds in that typically muddled fashion which disposes of one of the widespread legends about Cahan, that he was supposedly active in the Russian revolutionary movement prior to his departure for America.

This pseudo-intellectual, a "practical" man who hated theory (and who could not get below the surface of things even when he wanted to), was an opportunist of the first water. He was ideally suited to exploit the backwardness of certain sections of the Jewish immigration prior to 1905.

There were, of course, more developed elements, too, among the Jewish immigrants of the 80's and 90's, and they put up a fight against Cahanism. After 1905, when the tide of immigrants touched by the Russian revolution was rising, this struggle sharpened. One of the results was the birth of a new Yiddish daily, *Varheit*, which was established by the pioneers of the *Forward*, Louis Miller and Morris Winchevsky. The struggle against Cahan and Cahanism by Dr. Zhitlowsky, Jacob Gordin, a group of writers who called themselves the "Young Ones" and an element in the Workmen's Circle who called themselves "The Young," are recorded in the writings of many East Side pioneers. These cannot be overlooked by any historian who wants to give a true picture of the development of the Jewish community in the United States.

The struggle against Cahanism really began as soon as the *Forward* was established, in April 1897, with Cahan as editor. A few months later Cahan resigned to become a reporter for the *Commercial Advertiser* because Morris Winchevsky, L. Miller and others on the editorial board could not agree with Cahan on the policies of the paper. For five years the *Forward* struggled along, as socialist

papers usually did. Early in 1902, Cahan's adherents utilized the precarious financial situation to influence the Forward Association (or "Federation," as it was then called) to invite Cahan to become editor with full powers. Cahan then resumed where he left off in 1897, bringing with him the methods acquired during his five years as reporter for the capitalist press. He injected into the Yiddish press the yellow journalism at that time being developed by Hearst and Pulitzer.

### *The "Forward" Grows*

The circulation of the *Forward* soon began to grow rapidly. It is problematical whether the methods Cahan introduced were responsible for the growth. The tide of Jewish immigration had continued to rise. To the immigrant who was lonely, forlorn and dazed in the Golden Land, the Yiddish newspaper was like a lighthouse in the storm. Other Jewish newspapers, too, gained in circulation. It also happened that immediately after Cahan took charge of the *Forward*, the old Yiddish socialist daily, *Dos Abend Blat*, established in 1894, was discontinued because of the deterioration of the Socialist Labor Party.

However, the fact that the *Forward* circulation began to increase almost immediately after Cahan introduced methods of the yellow press, strengthened the Cahan group and Cahan himself. The defeat of the opponents of these methods was thus facilitated. For many years rumbling continued inside the Forward Association, even after some of Cahan's chief opponents bolted to establish the *Varheit*. But Cahan's editorship was a financial "success" and the *Forward* became a going and growing concern and Cahan's absolute control of the paper was consolidated.

The newspapers established at this time (*Varheit*, 1905; *Day*, 1914) were not socialist. Until the *Freiheit* was founded in 1922, the *Forward* was the only labor and socialist paper in Yiddish, published by an association which at that time consisted of socialists (or "socialists"), a majority of whom were also trade unionists. Some of them were led into the trap of sensationalism by the motivation that more people would thereby be attracted to socialism. The paper willynilly became the organ of the socialist and trade union movement and was utilized in various campaigns against the sweat shops and during elections. The prestige it thereby gained facilitated Cahan's efforts to play a dominating role on the East Side, which at that time was overwhelmingly Jewish with a considerable proportion, if not a majority, of Jewish workers.

But the labor and socialist movement itself was sensationalized by Cahan. The Russian revolution of 1905 was given a "sexy" angle. The paper ran front page stories about the "Jewish" wife of the then tsarist prime minister, Count Witte. On October 24, 1905, for instance, the *Forward* ran the following headline: "Madam Witte, the Jewish Girl from Shavel, Admitted to Royal Dances."

Among the famous *Forward* scandals there was the episode with the book, *Women and Socialism*, by August

Bebel, leader of the German socialist movement before World War I. Here are some of the headlines over stories that Cahan used to boost the Yiddish edition of the book: "Why Were Women in the Past More Beautiful Than at Present?" "A Moslem Woman Cannot See Even the Doctor," "King Solomon had a Thousand Wives and that Was No Sin," etc. Rumor had it that Bebel himself put an end to this scandal.

Such examples show how the sensationalism and crass opportunism of the *Forward* under Cahan could not help but affect the labor and socialist movement itself, as well as the social and cultural life on the East Side. And these examples indicate the influence of Cahan on the Yiddish language, theater and literature. The language was cheapened, vulgarized, polluted. The "pure plain Yiddish Yiddish" which Cahan promised to promote on March 15, 1902, was neither pure nor Yiddish.

### ***Corruptor of Language and Culture***

It was a matter of "principle" with Cahan to jargonize the Yiddish language with American phrases. He bitterly fought against the establishment of Jewish children's schools. Although an editor of a Yiddish daily, he was against Yiddish "in principle." According to the muddled concepts of socialism and internationalism of Cahan and his group, the Yiddish language was a manifestation of Jewish "nationalism." Cahan was a bourgeois assimilationist, that is, one who believed in deliberate surrender to the dominant ruling class culture. Since the beginning of this century he continually "predicted" the disappearance of Yiddish "in five years," "in ten years," and he did his best to make his predictions come true. With his powerful instrument, the *Forward*, he fought every attempt to build a Jewish culture. He refused to allow even a mention of the names of important cultural leaders (for instance, Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky).

He harmed the Yiddish theater in many ways. By his sensationalism Cahan influenced its repertoire and its public. He served as the paper's "drama critic" himself and suppressed mention of "unfriendly" names, thus holding a whip over the theater. The proud Jacob Gordin, foremost Jewish playwright, who refused to bow to Cahan, was Cahan's enemy to the death. True to his "principles," Cahan did not countenance, let alone help the building of a good Yiddish theater on a non-commercial basis.

Because of his bourgeois assimilationism and opportunism and because of his respect for Jacob Schiff, Louis Marshall, Felix Warburg and other representatives of the Jewish big bourgeoisie (he saw "romance" in the names of Jewish Wall Street bankers and a source of "pride" to "the poor East Side Jews"), Cahan followed the line of the American Jewish Committee on Jewish problems. This alliance of the *Forward* Association with the Jewish plutocracy also testifies to the "socialist" character of this group. Clearly, this alliance did not contribute to a proper understanding

of Jewish issues. Quite the contrary. For the lack of clarity among many sections of the Jewish community on Jewish problems and their lack of unity in action, the *Forward* bears a share of responsibility. The *Forward* has always followed the hush-hush line of the AJ Committee and rarely, if ever, supported mass action.

### ***Cahan's Legacy***

In 1927 I wrote a series of articles for the *Freiheit* on "Thirty Years of the *Forward*." A well known Yiddish dramatist, a nationalist, conveyed to me his gratitude for these articles. "The *Forward*," he said, "is the greatest misfortune that has befallen the Jewish people since the destruction of the Temple." To me this sounded bizarre. But it certainly gives some indication of the magnitude of this misfortune, which is now far more harmful than in 1927. A few examples from the recent history of the paper will show this.

1. In 1946, the *Forward* opened its columns to the tsarist General Denikin, leader of bloody pogroms in the Ukraine in 1918-19, in order to whitewash him.

2. In 1947, when the Jewish community in Rio de Janeiro excommunicated the brothers Saifman for collaborating with the nazis in the slaughter of the 20,000 Jews of Ostrowce, Poland, the *Forward* defended these two "Kapos" in a series of articles by Chaim Lieberman, one of its chief writers.

3. After the Peekskill outrages in September 1949, the *Forward* sided with the fascist bands and blamed the "communists" for the events.

4. The *Forward* has been conducting a vicious campaign against Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, who is a conservative, for his anti-war sermons at his temple in Cleveland.

These attacks caused the Chicago *Sentinel* (April 5) quite correctly to brand the *Forward* as an organ which uses "Hitler methods in Jewish life."

5. On February 16, 1951 the *Forward* published a feature article in praise of General Lucius D. Clay. Of course there was no mention in the article of Clay's commutation of Ilse Koch's sentence.

6. The *Forward* has in recent months supported the alliance with Franco and the rearming of West Germany.

From these facts it is obvious that a paper like the *Forward*, which still has a large circulation and is financially well-intrenched and owns its own radio station (WEVD), is harmful to the Jewish community as a whole. Furthermore, its influence extends into national life through the labor and political machines it has built up in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (Dubinsky) and other unions, as well as in the Liberal Party and in sections of the Americans for Democratic Action.

But we must let the facts given here suffice. No matter how important it may be to place the figure of Cahan in its historical perspective, it is still more immediately important to evaluate the legacy of Cahan and the role of his creation, the *Forward*, which is still alive.