

# THE THIRTIES—AND THE JEWISH MASSES

By *Morris U. Schappes*

IT was a decade that began in economic crisis and ended in the anti-fascist World War II, but that also witnessed mass struggles for recovery and broad movements for peace through collective security. Hitlerism rose in its fury and advanced like lava on its appeasing neighbors, scorching the working class movements, Jews and democracy itself as with flame-throwers and giving transatlantic nourishment to native American reaction. But the democratic resistance formed, organized itself on many fronts and beat back the recurrent charge of fascism. The infant New Deal was pushed by the needy, impatient and organizing masses onto the path of reform and minimal social security as they rallied around the uncertain leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt and made him the great figures he became. In these struggles, sharing the general problems of the American people but especially alarmed by Hitlerism abroad and the anti-Semitic wave in our own country, the Jewish masses distinguished themselves in all phases of the conflict.

In 1930 unemployment and hunger wracked the people. The workers had no cushion of government relief or social insurance. Hoover was indifferent. William Green and his fellow-bureaucrats of the American Federation of Labor could, in their hide-bound impotence, do nothing but appeal to the workers as Americans proudly to refuse the "dole" that workers in Britain had won. Initiative in the fight for relief therefore came from the Communists and other left forces. A call by the Trade Union Unity League for national demonstrations of the unemployed brought more than a million workers onto the streets in a dozen cities, 100,000 of them in New York alone, where Israel Amter was one of the leaders arrested and imprisoned. The Unemployed Councils sparked by the T.U.U.L. rapidly became a mass organization in 46 states and Puerto Rico, with thousands of Jews among its most active members and militants like Herbert Benjamin and Sam Wiseman among the top leaders. Louis Weinstock, a leader of the New York painters' union, headed the A.F.L. Committee for Unemployment Insurance and Relief, which, despite denunciations by William Green, won support of 3,000 locals, 35 city Central Labor Unions, six state federations of labor and five internationals for such federal legislation.

Jews were active in the nationwide hunger marches on

Washington that brought 1800 persons there on December 7, 1931 and 3000 on December 6, 1932, and when thousands of hungry workers marched on Ford's River Rouge plant on March 7, 1932, among the four workers shot to death by the police was the 16 year old Joseph Bussell, a Jewish member of the Young Communist League. When the Workers' Ex-Servicemen's League brought almost 20,000 veterans to Washington in a Bonus March in the summer of 1932, Emanuel Levin was one of the main leaders and hundreds of Jews were in the ranks.

Added to the participation of many Jews individually in these movements, there was born on March 30, 1930 a Jewish fraternal organization that speedily brought thousands into activity. Harassed by the rightwing Socialists dominating the Workmen's Circle, the left forces founded the International Workers' Order, basing themselves on the platform of alert defense of workers' interests that the Workmen's Circle leaders had abandoned. From about 5,000 in 1930, the Jewish Section of the I.W.O. grew to 51,000 in 1939, of whom 15,000 were in English speaking lodges. Moreover, the Jewish fraternalists also led in the building of the I.W.O. into a multi-nationality organization of 15 sections that in 1939 had a membership of 161,624. So influential a force for democracy and progress did the I.W.O. become that McCarthyite reaction later singled it out for special attack and succeeded in formally liquidating it in 1954.

## *Spurt in Labor Organization*

It was in the framework of these massive struggles that the electoral will of "the forgotten man" placed Roosevelt in the White House amid the crash of banks and rising unemployment. Driven by need and heartened by Roosevelt's moderate encouragement of unionism, the working masses began the greatest movement in their history. Millions were in motion. From 1934 to 1936, some 3,397,000 workers were involved in tremendous strikes, including the San Francisco General Strike of 1934. Although 88 workers were killed in action, important concessions were won. The drive to organize the unorganized rolled. On August 31, 1933 the A.F.L. had only 2,126,796 members, the lowest number since 1916. In 1940 the A.F.L. and the

Congress of Industrial Organizations combined had a membership of 8,057,761; in three years the C.I.O. had grown to over 3,800,000. The biggest gains were in heavy industry, but new unions were also being established in fields where Jews were very numerous, in the white collar and professional areas.

Many tens of thousands of Jews, children of shop and factory workers, had responded to the "American dream" of getting out of the working class. Taking advantage of opportunities uniquely available in the metropolitan centers in which Jews were concentrated, they had found their way into professional and white collar pursuits. Frustrated by the crisis, they fought back. Where their parents had built Socialist unions, this new generation organized progressive, anti-fascist unions, or infused new militancy in old unions like the Teachers'. The first to move were the Jewish social workers in New York; in 1931 they transformed the Association of Federation Workers into a *union* for the staffs of Jewish agencies to fight a wage cut. In 1933, unions appeared for artists, for architects, engineers, chemists and technicians, and for newspapermen. In 1935 there were born the Interne Council of Greater New York, the Pharmacists Union, the Psychologists League and the Lawyers Security League of New York City. In 1937 the state, county and municipal workers, the office and professional workers, and the federal workers organized. In all these movements there were thousands of Jews and they were heavily represented in the leadership.

Communists were a vital factor in these organizing drives, both inside and outside the C.I.O. "[John L.] Lewis did not hesitate," Foster Rhea Dulles observes, "to draw upon their experience and skill in building up the C.I.O."<sup>1</sup> In this period, the Communist Party was growing rapidly: from 14,000 in 1932 to 41,000 in 1936, and to 75,000 in 1938, while Young Communist League multiplied from 3,000 in 1933 to 22,000 in 1939. Many Jews were attracted to this movement by its socialist perspective, its militancy in fighting for the improvement of the conditions of the masses and especially by its clear and vigorous program against fascism, anti-Semitism, racism and war.

### *Fight Against Hitlerism*

This last threat was embodied in Hitlerism which, backed by German Big Business and the Prussian big landowners, came to power on January 30, 1933 and launched its program of terrorism for the workers, Jews and democratic masses, and of conquest and war for the world. Outside the left, which had been signaling the danger for months, there was at first incredulity and indecision. Had not 29 leading and wealthy Jews of Germany sent a message in October 1932 to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise assuring him that "Hitler will never come to power?"<sup>2</sup> And if Wise did not believe such assurance, others did, and were

disarmed even after it proved false. The *Jewish Daily Forward*, its vision distorted by its bitter anti-communism, had a Berlin report from Jacob Lestchinsky, published February 16, to the effect that Goebbels had ordered an end to pogroms and that Hitlerism, now that it was in power, would "have to become well-behaved." Even on March 6 this newspaper speculated editorially that the Hitler-Von Papen regime would "now give up a significant part of its hooligan and terroristic tactics."

The plutocracy around the American Jewish Committee of course would not hear of any demonstrative anti-nazi actions. Why, *such* deeds would stir Hitler to anti-Semitic acts and surely endanger the Jews of Germany! This nonsense could paralyze the B'nai B'rith, but not the American Jewish Congress, which during the remainder of this decade played a decisive role in rallying the huge Jewish middle class to anti-nazi activity. The first big action consisted of mass meetings in a score of cities on March 27, 1933. In New York, Madison Square Garden was packed. Rabbi Wise had been subjected to enormous pressure from the State Department and the German Embassy in Washington to call off the meetings, but, backed by Brandeis, he stuck to the decision. Hundreds of thousands took part.

The Jewish people wanted more actions. Hitler had announced the burning of the books on May 10. The government in Washington, although called upon to speak out, was mum. "We went ahead," writes Wise, "pressed forward by the Jewish masses who could not be expected to understand such silence," and organized a great street parade in New York on May 10 to protest this infamy.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile a movement to boycott German goods and services had gotten under way on April 1, 1933. Conceived by the journalist Abraham Coralnick, and initiated by the Jewish War Veterans, it was pushed vigorously by Samuel Untermyer, the prominent lawyer, through the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League, although the American Jewish Committee and the B'nai B'rith sharply condemned it. With Wise hesitating, Dr. Joseph Tenenbaum, then chairman of the Executive Committee of the American Jewish Congress, promoted the boycott until the Congress officially backed it on August 20, 1933. The first big achievement was the resolution for the boycott passed by the A.F.L. convention on October 13. The boycott became in time a mass movement involving not only consumers but organized workers who refused to work on materials imported from Germany, as did the Furriers and many other groups.<sup>4</sup>

### *Workers' Anti-Nazi Action*

From below, especially from the Jewish workers, there was continual pressure for demonstrative action. The Jewish Labor and People's Committee against Fascism and German Pogroms called for such a demonstration for June

<sup>1</sup> Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America*, New York, 1949, p. 317.

<sup>2</sup> *Challenging Years, the Autobiography of Stephen Wise*, New York, 1949, p. 234-35.

<sup>3</sup> Wise, work cited, p. 251, 244-45.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Tenenbaum, "The Anti-Nazi Boycott Movement in the United States," unpublished paper read at the Annual Meeting of the American Jewish Historical Society, February 13, 1955.

24, 1933, and, despite a red-baiting editorial in the *Forward* of June 18 urging people to stay away, the workers came in great numbers. A general movement in which Jews were strongly represented was launched on September 29, 1933 at the founding convention of the American League Against War and Fascism (the name was changed in November 1937 to "For Peace and Democracy"). Initiated again by the left, this movement at its height embraced about 4,000,000 people and became the central organized force fighting for collective security. The inspiring records of the period abound in dramatic actions and campaigns, including opposition to the sending of delegations to the Berlin Olympics in 1936, to the Heidelberg University 550th anniversary celebration in 1936 and the Goettingen University 250th anniversary in 1937.

One daring action that became a world-wide symbol was the climax of a demonstration on July 26, 1935 of some 4500 persons on the dock alongside the German liner *Bremen*, when one daring soul ripped the Nazi Swastika Flag from its staff and tossed it into the Hudson River. While the staunchly anti-nazi world cheered, timid elements frowned and the *Forward* even condemned the demonstration editorially on August 3, but Magistrate Louis B. Brodsky expressed the deepest feelings of all anti-nazis, especially the Jews, when he released five of six persons arrested at the demonstration with the remark from the bench that the swastika was "similar to the black flag of piracy."<sup>5</sup> Yet, because the German ambassador protested, Secretary of State Cordell Hull apologized officially for the incident.

### ***Action on International Scale***

From the left workers came not only the pressure for militancy but for Jewish anti-fascist unity in action. But the rightwing Socialists, making red-baiting and not anti-fascism their guiding line, continually opposed all unity movements. Working mainly through the Jewish Labor Committee, born in 1933, the leaders of these rightwing unions and other organizations, with the *Forward* as their organ, brought confusion into the ranks. In 1936, after the American Jewish Congress had refused to admit representatives of certain left groups like the Jewish Section of the I.W.O., there was formed the Jewish People's Committee against Fascism and Anti-Semitism, which for several years was a dynamo of activity. When in 1937 the institution of "ghetto benches" in Polish schools was followed by a pogrom wave, and when even the American Jewish Congress contented itself with the quiet submission of a memorandum to the State Department, the Jewish People's Committee brought almost 1000 delegates representing over 400,000 Jews to Washington for a national conference on November 19-20, 1937 that thundered its protest against Polish anti-Semitism.

The nazi onslaught against the Jews, which also quickened attacks against them in Poland and Rumania, had

<sup>5</sup> *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 38, Philadelphia, 1936, p. 178-79.

led thousands of Jews to seek to escape from these countries. With the doors of the United States virtually barred by the 1924 anti-immigration law, Palestine became the main other way out. From 1933 to 1935, immigration to Palestine numbered 134,540, which was greater than the total of 122,600 that had come to Palestine in the entire period from 1917 to 1932. The need for overseas aid to the stricken Jews was acute and from 1933 to 1939 more than 20 million dollars was spent by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee for this purpose. The Hitler atrocities and the flight to Palestine compelled an ideological shake-up in the entire Jewish population here. Membership in Zionist groups, which had been 150,000 in 1930, reached 400,000 in 1940. There was a general upsurge of Jewish identification in many forms in all trends of Jewish life, from right to left.

Overseas aid to refugees did not of course exhaust the need for attention to problems overseas. Hitler was systematically carrying out his time-table of conquest, aided by the foreign offices of Great Britain, France and the United States, which appeased Hitler in order to turn his assault primarily against the Soviet Union. Franco's uprising against the democratic Spanish government on July 17, 1936, backed by Hitler and Mussolini, became a major test of strength between the forces of aggression and appeasement on the one hand and those of collective security to quarantine the aggressor on the other. While the Western Big Three followed a cynical policy of "non-intervention" that exposed Spanish democracy all alone to the fascist aggressors, the vanguard of the anti-fascist forces of the world rallied to its defense. Part of this aid to Spain came in the form of the International Brigades, with some 30,000 men coming to Spain from 54 countries (including Palestine) to fight Franco and Hitlerism.

From the United States there came the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, formed on January 6, 1937. About 3000 Americans volunteered to fight in Spain, half of whom died there. There were many hundreds of Jews, perhaps a third of the total, in this heroic Lincoln Battalion. They went to Spain for a great variety of reasons, all of them essentially anti-fascist. One level of consciousness was expressed by a Jew who wrote home to his mother while he was convalescing from a thigh wound that "I took up arms against the persecutors of my people—the Jews—and my class, the oppressed. I am fighting against those who establish an inquisition like that of their ideological ancestors several centuries ago, in Spain."<sup>6</sup>

### ***Fighting Anti-Semitism at Home***

Anti-Semitism, however, had to be fought not only overseas but at home. The soil that Henry Ford had fertilized with anti-Semitism in the Twenties was ready for the plow in the Thirties. From 1933 to 1939 there were 114 anti-Semitic organizations formed, and 77 of them were

<sup>6</sup> Bulletin of Council of Jewish Organizations, Local 16, United Office and Professional Workers of America, quoted in *Jewish Life*, March, 1938 p. 21.

active in 1940. Towards the end of the decade the radio-priest, Charles E. Coughlin, was reaching an audience of ten million with his anti-Semitic propaganda and the strong-arm men of his "Christian Front" organization were roaming the streets of New York peddling his magazine, *Social Justice*, which used the forged Protocols of Zion as a guide. In addition the German-American Bund, the Silver Shirts and the Black Legion were among the organizations that added the storm-troop flavor to their anti-Semitism. New York City had 26 of these anti-Semitic outfits (17 of them units of the Hitlerite Bund), Chicago 18, Los Angeles 7. Hoodlum violence was added to demagogy. And in August 1936 a bacteriologist for the Detroit Board of Health was fired for failing to report a Black Legion proposition made to him "to breed typhoid germs to infect milk sold to Jews."<sup>7</sup>

The Coughlins demagogically exploited two anti-Semitic stereotypes: the "Jew-banker" and the "Jew-communist." When the New Deal was attacked from the right as "socialistic" and "communistic," it was labeled the "Jew Deal" and Roosevelt's real name was declared to be "Rosenfeld." Many Jewish organizations were involved, together with democratic general groups, in combating this tide, conspicuously the Jewish War Veterans, the American Jewish Congress and the Jewish People's Committee, which included the Jewish Section of the I.W.O. Of course the American Jewish Committee resented the vigor shown in this work and had its own way of "meeting" the anti-Semitic challenge. Thus when Hitler told the United Press that he was against the Jews because they were Bolsheviks, Dr. Cyrus Adler retorted fatuously in another interview with the same agency on December 5, 1935 that Hitler well knew that it was the German generals that had paved the way for Bolshevism by breaking down the Eastern front in 1917!<sup>8</sup>

### ***Solidarity with Negroes***

That there was a connection between anti-Semitism and racist theories of white supremacy also become clearer to masses of Jews in this decade. Jews began to be conspicuously active, both as rank-and-filers and as leaders, in the fight for total democracy for the Negro people, especially the agricultural masses and the workers. When the left established *The Southern Worker* in Chattanooga on August 30, 1930, its first editor was a former Jewish university instructor, James S. Allen. The Scottsboro case, which dragged nine young Negroes in Alabama into a frame-up on a charge of rape, brought thousands of Jews into the fight for justice. When Joseph Brodsky, an International Labor Defense lawyer (and also general counsel for the I.W.O.), took over the defense of the Scottsboro Boys on April 9, 1931, he became a target for anti-Semitic attack by the Southern white supremacists.

When in 1934 Samuel Leibowitz joined the defense, the

prosecution Jew-baited him right in the courtroom. But the nine were saved. Later, when Negro miners struck in Alabama and five were killed on the picket line, protests were voluminous and those that came from Jewish workers were so notable that the governor of Alabama complained and a member of the American Jewish Committee in Birmingham urged the Committee to look into such dangerous activity on the part of Jews! In these and many other ways bonds of solidarity were being forged, which were to expand tremendously in the Forties and Fifties.

Among the important democratic movements of the Thirties, those of the intellectuals and creators of cultural values were of enduring significance as, in loose alliance with the organizing workers, they moved into battle in their own fields. In the colleges the fight against fascism and war attained great heights, influencing millions. Jews were active at all levels in the National Student League (born in 1932) and the Student League for Industrial Democracy, and then in the product of the merger of these two in December 1935 into the American Student Union. The campus did in fact become, as Roosevelt put it, a "fortress for democracy." When the first nation-wide anti-war student strike was held on April 12, 1937, there were over 180,000 students in it. Coughlin's *Social Justice* howled that red Jews were running the colleges. In the general and broader movement known as the American Youth Congress, Jews were also very active.

Among the writers there was an outburst of progressive creativity that left a permanent mark on our culture. This activity was intertwined with work in the anti-fascist movement. When a Call for "a Congress of American revolutionary writers" was issued in January 1935, one third of the 70 signers were Jews, with a Waldo Frank, a Michael Gold, and a Yiddish writer like M. J. Olgin in the lead, and when the League of American Writers emerged from the Congress on April 26-28, 1935, the majority of the Executive Committee of 17 was Jewish. And as this movement broadened its platform and included hundreds of more writers, the Jewish element continued to be a vital factor.<sup>9</sup>

The decade was one of democratic vitality. Faced with the looming blight of fascism, the mass movements strove to loosen the strangling bands of Big Business over democracy and to infuse a people's content into its traditional forms. The Jewish people, their need for democracy sharpened by Hitlerism and Coughlinism, the opportunities to exercise democracy increased by the expansive New Deal, used these opportunities with special zest. Despite the American Jewish Committee and the rightwing Socialists, Jewish liberalism and democratic radicalism rose to new heights to meet the fascist horror. The Jewish masses had everything, life and survival itself, to lose under fascism; with conspicuous energy they fought back on all fronts in the people's movements.

<sup>7</sup> *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 39, p. 253; Donald S. Strong, *Organized Anti-Semitism in America*, Washington, D. C., 1941, p. 144-146, 174.

<sup>8</sup> *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 38, p. 625; vol. 41, p. 651.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Hart ed., *American Writers' Congress*, New York, 1935, p. 11-12, 188; Hart, ed., *The Writer in a Changing World*, New York, 1937, p. 252, 255.