

books, Yiddish concerts, are welcome signs of progress in this field.) There is no question that Palmiro Togliatti was correct when he stated in the memorandum prepared by him shortly before his death:

A fact worrying us, and one we do not succeed in explaining fully, is the manifestation among the socialist countries of a centrifugal tendency. In this lies an evident and serious danger with which the Soviet comrades should concern themselves. Without doubt there is a revival of nationalism. However, we know that the national sentiment remains a permanent factor in the working class and socialist movement for a long period, also after the conquest of power. Economic progress does not dispel this, it nurtures it. Also in the socialist camp perhaps (I underline this "perhaps" because many concrete facts are unknown to us) one needs to be on one's guard against the forced exterior uniformity and one must consider that the unity one ought to establish and maintain lies in the diversity and full autonomy of the individual countries! (*Political Affairs*, October 1964.)

We are dealing here with a very serious and very complicated problem. There must be no simplification and no glossing over. There is no question that there is need for a *broad theoretical evaluation of the national and colonial question*, not based on conditions prior to World War I (strange as it may seem, to put it mildly), but on conditions existing in 1966, taking into consideration what transpired after the October Revolution, during and after World Wars I and II, and as a result of the historic upsurge of the nations and nationalities in Asia and Africa, etc., etc. Some struggles in India (language struggles, for instance), or in British Guiana where the Jagan forces rely on certain nationalities or races, just to cite a few examples, must be better understood. This is a big order, of course, but I do not see how a broad theoretical evaluation of the national and colonial question, in the light of *present-day realities*, both under capitalism and under socialism, can be much longer delayed.

In my article in *Political Affairs*, I tried to merely touch upon a neglected problem here in the USA—the nationalities' or national groups' problems, including the Jewish problem. I am fully convinced of the correctness of my statement in that article that "the correlation between proletarian internationalism and the struggle for national interests represents one of the most important and most delicate problems before the Marxist movement."

Yiddish Culture in West and East*

Often when anti-Soviet propagandists assert that today Yiddish culture is in a serious plight in the Soviet Union and that soon the Soviet Jews will be without a literature and language, they appear to try to leave the impression that conversely in the West, the Yiddish language and literature are flourishing. Actually the reverse is true. Yiddish literature is at a very low ebb in the USA and is virtually extinct in Britain, but in the Soviet Union there is still considerable creative activity in the Yiddish language. According to the 1959 Soviet census returns 470,000 out of the 2,700,000 Jews declared their mother tongue to be Yiddish, probably a higher percentage than in any other country in the world, including the USA which has the world's largest Jewish population, over 5,500,000.

Yiddish, a younger language than Hebrew which goes back to antiquity, was derived from Middle High German between the 10th and 12th centuries and after the Jewish migration eastward to Poland and Russia, was mostly spoken in Eastern Europe where it was enriched by new words and word formations. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries when millions of Eastern European Jews migrated to the USA, Britain, and almost every other country in the world where civic and educational equality existed, Yiddish continued to be spoken by the migrants but declined as their children acquired the new languages and became integrated into the life of the new countries. In none of the countries of migration has Yiddish blossomed forth into works of prose, poetry and drama to the extent that it did in Russia and still does.

It is not surprising, of course, for modern Yiddish literature was born in the mid-19th century in Tsarist Russia in which lived nearly 50 per cent of the total Jewish population of the world at that time. Yiddish cultural expression grew up in the Pale of Settlement, that vast ghetto set up in 1835 by Nicholas I, in parts of Byelorussia and the Ukraine, in which most of the Jews were compelled to live. The majority of Jews engaged in petty commercial pursuits and lived in indescribable poverty. They had their own distinctive language, Yiddish; their own costumes, customs and religion; were denied entry into Russian schools and universities, and had even fewer political

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rights than the non-Jewish inhabitants who had precious few themselves. They could not leave the Pale except for the discharge of business. Only the few wealthy could avail themselves of that privilege and in fact by 1859 the richest Jewish merchants were permitted to reside in all cities of Russia.

The first important Jewish writer, Mendele Mocher Sforim (Mendele the bookseller), began to write in Yiddish in 1863 after he had visited many communities in the Pale. He depicted the horrors and miseries of ghetto life and championed the ordinary people as did the other two celebrated Yiddish writers who appeared soon after him, I. L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem. These three writers constitute the classical trio of Yiddish prose. Perhaps the greatest of all Yiddish writers and certainly the most widely translated and best known is Sholem Aleichem (1850-1916), a rare humorist with a matchless style. His work represents an almost complete repertory of all the sufferings and humiliations, the economic hardships and the religious and political intolerance which, without respite, the Jews had to endure in the Tsarist Empire between the years 1880 and 1915.

Outside of the Tsarist Empire in Europe where the bourgeois revolutions (first in 17th-century England and later in France in 1789) gradually brought the Jews civil and political emancipation, Yiddish died out, particularly after the French revolutionary armies battered down the old ghetto walls in Germany. The new era of educational equality emerged both steadily and sporadically (some German states now and again re-introduced disabilities) and the 19th century saw the appearance of Jewish writers in the language of their countries, like Heinrich Heine in German and Benjamin Disraeli in English.

The Russian Jews did not acquire full civic, political and educational equality until the establishment of the Soviet Union, although the Pale had been abolished by the March revolution in 1917. Prior to that time, from the 80s with the incessant pogroms which cost thousands of Jewish lives, went a tightening of the Pale, a further limiting of education in the Russian schools to which an increasing number of Jews aspired despite their love of Yiddish.

Between 1881-1914 no fewer than 2,000,000 Jews from Tsarist Russia left their homes, the largest number going to the USA where there was an acute labor famine. By 1915 over 1,500,000 Jews in Russia were living on charity parcels sent by Jewish philanthropic organizations in the USA and Britain. During that whole period more and more Jews began to participate in the Russian socialist and labor movements as distinct from the separate Jewish labor organizations. This was partly the result of the spreading of Marxist ideas in the

ghettos of the cities of the Pale and in Poland by Jewish intellectuals fortunate enough to receive education in Russian schools and universities. There was also a growing understanding that emancipation could not come about by the effort of the Jews alone, but only in co-operation with Russian democratic, labor and socialist movements. The words of the famous German-Jewish writer Ludwig Boerne, the contemporary of Marx and Heine, were widely quoted:

He who wants to work on behalf of the Jews, must fuse their cause with the demands for universal freedom.

From the 80s Jewish socialists began to make an outstanding contribution to the Russian socialist movement and they were among the founders of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. The attempt to separate off Jewish socialists and the Jewish working-class movement in a separate compartment from the general socialist movement, was the policy of the Jewish Bund, against which Lenin battled.

This conflict, as indeed the whole question of integration or assimilation which as a rule was accepted and encouraged by the European socialist movement, was increasingly discussed in the Yiddish press that arose in Odessa and Warsaw. Even then Russian culture was beginning to exercise a profound influence on Jewish intellectuals and workers, largely because of the universal character of the ideas that animated it, the ideas of writers like Tolstoy, Plekhanov and Lenin. At the turn of the 20th century significant numbers of Jews were turning to the Russian language and Jews began to enter Russian culture and literature. However, Yiddish remained the language of the Jewish masses, and in all the towns and villages of the Pale and in Poland there was some Yiddish cultural activity, theaters, readings and publications, often bound up with the Jewish labor movement.

In the 80s and 90s in Britain the Russian-Polish immigration initiated new trends within the Jewish community which led to the formation of the working-class movement among the Jews. In 1884, a year before William Morris launched his socialist paper, *The Commonweal*, the migrant Morris Winchevsky began to publish in London the first Yiddish socialist paper in the world which was also the first Yiddish paper in England.

In less than 25 years the Yiddish labor and general press declined as Jewish labor gradually became part of the general labor movement, for it was largely the migrants that had supported the Yiddish press. The need for separate organizations diminished with the drying up of immigration and the growing up of an English-born generation

going through the council schools and many of them battling their way to higher education.

As though symbolizing the rapid change, Morris Winchevsky emigrated to America where he became the bard of the Jewish workers in the New York sweat shops. Living to a great old age, he took part in the foundation of the American Communist Party, and in 1927 visited the Soviet Union where he was received by President Kalinin and honored in the same way as Eugene Pottier, the author of the "International."

Nothing of the Yiddish press which continued in an enfeebled form until the end of the second world war remains today. Nor did Britain produce one Yiddish writer of note, probably not one British-born Yiddish writer, although many Russian Yiddish writers, including Sholem Aleichem wrote about the Jews in Britain. Except as a private family language, generally imperfectly spoken, Yiddish has disappeared from the Anglo-Jewish world. The *London Jewish Quarterly* in its summer issue 1964, commenting on the visit to London of the Polish State Jewish Theater, asked:

How many of those who were clamoring for the revival of Yiddish in the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries went to see the Polish State Jewish Theater on its recent visit to London for a four weeks season of Yiddish plays? Judging by the attendance figures, not very many. Was it, perhaps, because they were not really concerned?

And in truth they are not, except for a handful of devotees, and even anti-Soviet propagandists, who although allegedly disturbed by the fate of Yiddish literature in the Soviet Union, would never dream of writing their own books in Yiddish even if they could. Jewish life in England has gradually found expression in an expanding Anglo-Jewish literature precisely because English has become the only language of the English Jews.

In the first thirty years of this century there were two distinguished Anglo-Jewish writers, Israel Zangwill and Louis Golding. Since 1945 there has been a veritable wave of Anglo-Jewish writers. Some of the best known are Arnold Wesker, Alexander Baron, Gerda Charles, Frederic Raphael, Wolf Mankowitz and Harold Pinter, all of whom have been understood and accepted by the non-Jewish public as well as the Jews, a significant fact which underlines the break-up of Jewish separatism in England.

An even greater outburst of Jewish literary creativity in English has taken place in the USA in the last 40-odd years. There were first the New York East-End novelists and in the 30s Clifford Odets,

Nathaniel West, Meyer Levin and Michael Gold, famous for his *Jews Without Money*. Since the second world war their numbers have increased. These include Irwin Shaw, Arthur Miller, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, Bernard Malamud and J. D. Salinger who have all drawn from Jewish life as well as from the general American scene.

But during the same time the American Jewish community, which has been the world's largest since 1918, has not produced a Yiddish writer of stature, although many Yiddish writers like Sholem Aleichem emigrated to New York. American propagandists however do not hesitate to lay claim to the famous Yiddish writers, I. J. Singer, J. Opatashu, Sholem Asch and Z. Schneour because they lived in the USA, although all of them were born in Poland or Russia and were mature writers when they emigrated to the USA.

Yiddish literature and culture have catastrophically declined in the USA in the face of the integration of the American-born Jews and powerful Americanization campaigns. In an article in *Time* on December 28, 1962, dealing with the anti-Communist Jewish *Daily Forward*, one of the few Yiddish dailies remaining in the USA, it said:

The children of *Forward* readers do not read the paper, because they cannot. As the second generation sons and daughters of Jewish immigrants, they have forgotten the mother tongue, that backward running curious cross of Hebrew and medieval German. Like Yiddish itself, the *Forward* is an anachronism, born in a departed past to meet a need that no longer exists.

The well-known Yiddish authority David Flakser writing about Yiddish in the USA on the occasion of the Second World Congress for Yiddish culture held in New York, which has the largest concentration of Jews in the world, said:

During the ten years between the Congresses the number of Yiddish-speaking and Yiddish-reading Jews had decreased greatly. . . . Hardest hit has been the Yiddish book. The number of readers has declined steadily. Yiddish books are now read by Yiddish writers and the narrowing strata of the Yiddish intelligentsia. Talented Yiddish poets and novelists and essayists are forced to publish and distribute their books at their own expense.

The Yiddish theater in the USA is even more moribund than Yiddish literature. There is not one permanent Yiddish theater in New York. In the *London Jewish Chronicle* on July 14, 1961, the American-Jewish actress Stella Adler, the daughter of the late Jacob Adler, one of the greatest figures in the history of the Yiddish theater, said:

"The Yiddish theater is dead. Part of it died with my parents. Maurice Schwartz tried to keep something of it alive, but it could not be done. The pressures of American life, the commercialism, the things people search for. It isn't a world in which art can thrive."

The Polish state established after the first world war had a Jewish population of over 3,000,000, most of whom lived in virtual ghettos in Warsaw and other cities and towns, crowded into tenements, usually large blocks with three or four courtyards, dozens of miserable small workshops, primitive factories and flats and rooms equally overcrowded. For the majority of the Jews, Poland was a land of poverty and oppression, one third living at a low subsistence level. Although the Jews were natives of Poland in the same sense as the Polish people, having lived there for ten centuries, the semi-fascist governments conducted a discriminatory policy against the Jews and after Hitler's coming to power in Germany intensified anti-Semitic measures. As the American critics Irving Howe and E. Greenberg said in their introduction to *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, the Polish Jews lived "always on the edge of dispossession and terror."

Nevertheless there was a lively Yiddish literature in Poland and the fame of a number of Polish Yiddish writers like Sholem Asch, I. J. Singer and I. M. Weissenberg spread to many countries. Yet a high percentage of Yiddish writers found it necessary to emigrate to the USA, France, Argentina, Canada and Australia, as it was difficult for the Yiddish writer to make a living in Poland.

There was little association between the Jewish and Polish peoples, and the Yiddish and Polish literatures existed in separate compartments. The Polish authorities were quite contemptuous of Yiddish literature, regarding it as something vulgar and inferior and many leading Polish writers were barely aware of the existence of the Yiddish literature in their midst. But just as in Czarist Russia, significant numbers of Jews were educated in Polish schools, and from Rosa Luxemburg onwards, many Jews played prominent parts in the Polish Socialist and Communist movements as distinct from the Jewish labor movement. In the inter-war period Julian Tuwim and Anton Slonimsky, both Jews, were the most eminent poets writing in Polish.

The Nazi occupation of Poland resulted in the almost total extinction of the Jewish community and the loss of the Yiddish cultural tradition. Out of 3,250,000 Jews living in Poland at the beginning of the war, 2,900,000 (85 per cent) were killed by the Nazis and every cultural institution destroyed.

Soviet Jewry also sustained great losses at the hands of the Nazis. The same Anglo-American committee of Inquiry estimated that in the Nazi-occupied parts of the Soviet Union a total of 1,500,000 (71.4 per cent) were killed. Many Jews were saved however. As Professor Hyman Levy says in his book *Jews and the National Question*:

It will always stand to the credit of the Soviet military authorities that they took immediate and timely steps to evacuate Jews from these danger spots to regions far distant from the actual fighting front.

Most of the Jews killed by the Nazis lived in towns and cities of the Ukraine, White Russia, Lithuania and Latvia, in compact Jewish communities that still used Yiddish as its principal language, although shortly before the war Russian was seriously challenging Yiddish, due to the Jewish parents sending their children to Russian schools in preference to Yiddish ones, with the result that the latter closed.

Fortunately the revolution which had liberated the millions of Jews from the enforced ghettos enabled them to settle in Moscow and other cities that remained out of reach of the Nazis, otherwise Soviet Jewry would have met the fate of Polish Jewry. Even some of the Jews in Moscow and towns close to the front lines were evacuated into the deep hinterland.

Thus the post-war period saw a new distribution of Jews throughout the Soviet Union. The Jewish communities had ceased to be as cohesive as before the war. Jews were far more scattered all over the Soviet Union and there were new concentrations of young, principally non-Yiddish speaking Jews in Kiev and Odessa replacing the Yiddish communities destroyed by the Nazis. The Jewish populations of Moscow and Leningrad increased greatly as Russian-speaking Jewish students and professionals thronged to these cities.

As the Yiddish-speaking section was now so much smaller in Odessa and Kiev, once the backbone of the Yiddish cultural world, there was a general lessening of Yiddish cultural activity, apart from the repressive actions against Yiddish writers and Yiddish cultural institutions in 1948 which temporarily brought Yiddish cultural activity to a stop.

Excluding this dark period that lasted from 1948 until 1953 the history of the Soviet Union has been one of party and state support for Yiddish literature and culture, from 1917 until 1948, and then resuming again after Stalin's death in 1953. This support for Yiddish culture went hand in hand with efforts to effect a complete social and economic transformation of the Jews as the bulk of the Jewish population were of the lower middle class without experience in industry

or agriculture. Within three decades the character of Soviet Jewry was substantially altered; great numbers graduated from the general schools and the universities from which they had been excluded in Czarist Russia and they were now steeped in the Russian language and culture. If in 1917 Jewish scientists could be numbered at less than a hundred, at the beginning of the Hitler attack in 1941 their number ran into hundreds of thousands. After the war, the age of electronics, of nuclear energy, rocketry and space travel, and of the automated factory—the second industrial revolution—was well under way. This was the unfolding Soviet world into which the bulk of the Soviet Jewish trained scientists had entered, and to the construction of which they made a contribution far greater, as official figures record, than their proportional size among the general population.

The post-revolutionary era also saw the appearance for the first time of a large group of Jews in the Russian literature, as Isaac Babel (considered by critics everywhere to be one of the finest 20th century European writers), Pasternak, Mandelstamm, Svetlov, Slutzky, Marshak, Ehrenburg and Kasakevich.

This was in part an expression of the waning Jewish separatism as was in another field the failure of the experiment of Birobidjan. This had offered an opportunity for those Jews who wished to establish a territorial nation-state under socialist conditions. The experiment served to prove that the overwhelming majority of Soviet Jews had no wish to go back to Jewish separatism.

In his *Pictorial History of the Jewish People* (Crown Publishers, New York) Nathan Ausubel speaks of the extensive government-supported cultural activities in the early '30s when Yiddish cultural activities were at their zenith and goes on to say:

In a late census, before the nazi attack on Russia, more Jews claimed Russian than Yiddish as their mother tongue.

Yet despite this dramatic development, impressive achievements were recorded in Yiddish literature between 1917 and the war. Some of the greatest writers in the history of Yiddish literature, after the classical trio, were then publishing in the Soviet Union. They included the novelist David Bergelson, world famous for his monumental novel *By the Dnieper*, and Der Nistor whose novel *The Family Mashber* is one of the most outstanding novels in Yiddish literature, an epic story of the disintegration of an old Jewish community in Russia. The poets included Peretz Markish, David Hofstein and Leib Kvitko all of whom are now also considered Soviet classics.

In the '30s a number of well-known Yiddish writers including the

poet Isi Kharik fell victim of the purges. Most of them have been posthumously rehabilitated and republished since the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in 1956. These historical miscarriages of justice cannot however be considered a form of anti-Jewish persecution, as many non-Jewish writers as well as political and cultural personalities fell during that period on similar charges.

Right through the '30s Yiddish writers continued to produce impressive works and many of them took part in the war at the front and in the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Perhaps the most remarkable Yiddish work to appear at that time was Peretz Markish's epic poem *The War* which gives moving expression to the sufferings of the Jews and mankind generally in the life and death struggle against the nazis.

It was in 1948 as previously noted, that all Jewish cultural institutions and Yiddish publications were closed down and a group of leading Yiddish writers and cultural workers arrested. As in the '30s these arrests were part of a drive against alleged opposition groups, non-Jewish as well as Jewish, and prominent leaders of the Communist Party were among those imprisoned and executed.

The arrested Jewish group included Peretz Markish, David Bergelson and Leib Kvitko, devoted supporters of the Soviet system as well as great writers. After years of imprisonment they were secretly tried and executed in 1952. Less than a year later, shortly after Stalin's death, it became known that the whole affair was a travesty of justice and that a monstrous crime had been committed. The poet Samuel Halkin was the only one among that group of eminent names who survived the wave of insane destruction.

Only a literature with deep roots in the life and language of a people could have survived this terrible blow, the loss of some of its greatest representatives. After 1953 there were still enough Yiddish literary forces to begin the slow, difficult task of reconstruction.

The Ukrainian-Jewish poet Abram Gontar expressed the determination of his fellow Yiddish writers to continue, in a poem published in the Soviet Yiddish monthly publication, *Soviet Homeland*:

I won't put out the flickering light.
As long as its flame will last, I'll let it burn.
Should someone lose his way in the night,
It will guide him on the road of safe return.
For I believe, as surely as I know,
He will remember it in years to come—
The unexpected light of long ago,
That blazed forth from the window of my home.

The 160-page *Soviet Homeland* has over 20,000 readers which places it among the biggest Yiddish literary publications in the world, probably the biggest. It has not only been republishing the older Soviet-Yiddish writers but also new writers who have appeared in the last decade. It is a singular fact that a number of talented Yiddish writers have begun to publish in recent years, supporting the view that Yiddish literature in the Soviet Union has not become exhausted and that the 490,000 Soviet Jews who still consider Yiddish as their mother tongue, form a reliable basis for the continued development of Yiddish literature. In the 1964 Soviet-Yiddish poetry anthology there were at least 7 new Jewish poets of distinction. There were new prose writers among the 50 living Soviet-Yiddish writers included in the prose anthology published in 1965. This anthology was edited by the editor of *Soviet Homeland*, Aaron Vergelis, himself a comparative newcomer to Yiddish literature. Born in 1918 in the Ukraine he was educated in Birobidjan where his parents took him when he was 10. What is not well known about him is that he is an exceptionally gifted poet and his poem to the memory of Peretz Markish is one of the most striking to have come out of the Soviet Union since 1953. It begins:

He lives, he lives
I keep for him his bread.
And now and then my pain grows
Hard and harder
How do I know that he's already dead?
Did they tell you then that it was murder?

A Soviet-Yiddish poet who has recently attracted international as well as Soviet attention is the Vilna poet, Hirsh Osherovich, described by Joel Cang, the former foreign editor of the *Jewish Chronicle*, as having "great gifts which place him among the finest Yiddish poets in both parts of the world today, East and West." Equally the Soviet-Yiddish novelists Nathan Lurya, Eli Shechtman and Yechiel Falikman have made big impressions with their new novels and are making a substantial contribution both to Yiddish and Soviet literatures. Many Yiddish critics throughout the world regard Lurya as the outstanding Yiddish novelist of the present time, and his novel *Call From the Steppes* also won praise in the Russian and Ukrainian press. A gifted new prose writer who should be mentioned is Alexander Gubnitzky, a lorry driver and not a professional writer. Skilfully he has described the life of Jews in the remoter parts of Russia, and their role in the development and construction of the new industrial centers.

Is there a future for Yiddish and Yiddish literature? As far as the

British speaking countries are concerned the outlook is indeed bleak. As David Daiches, Professor of English at the University of Sussex and an authority on Hebrew and Yiddish literatures, said in the *Jewish Quarterly* (summer 1955):

As for Yiddish, it represents a much smaller part, both historically and geographically, of the Jewish tradition, and though it has an appealing color and warmth and is in itself an admirably literary language, it is surely thoroughly unrealistic to look forward to a flourishing, creative Yiddish literature in England or America . . .

This is just as true for Australia and Canada where there are a few Yiddish writers, but for the majority of the Jews in both countries English is their native tongue. Literature can finally only be made out of the speech of a people.

The State of Israel offers no hope to Yiddish. In their introduction to *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, Irving Howe and E. Greenberg say:

For the State of Israel, through a variety of semi-official devices, has discouraged the use of Yiddish among its citizens. The language is looked down upon for the very reason that Yiddish writers cling to it so fiercely, and with so desperate an affection: because it is the language of the Jewish dispersion, stained by exile, defeat and martyrdom.

It is not quite so true now of Israel as when those words were written back in the 'fifties. Nevertheless Yiddish is not encouraged, only Hebrew which is the official language. It is repeatedly stated by Israel's leaders that Israel's cultural consciousness is Hebrew, and draws its historical nourishment from the Bible and the Talmud.

It would seem then that only in the Soviet Union has Yiddish literature a better chance of survival than anywhere else. This is not only because it has deeper roots in the Soviet Union but also because Soviet Yiddish literature has adapted itself to the new life and does not draw on a ghetto sensibility which is still the case with Yiddish writers elsewhere. Another factor is the possibility of increased official support which has been suggested in a recent Tass statement. And not least, the re-publication in very large editions of Yiddish poetry and Yiddish novels in Russian, Ukrainian and other languages of the Soviet Union, is a tremendous encouragement to Yiddish writers to continue writing in their native language, for they can express one area of the Soviet-Jewish spirit and at the same time address the vast Soviet world. This point was made to me by the Yiddish novelist Yechiel Falikman on the Kiev railway station as I left for Odessa and he for Moscow with the manuscript of his new novel in his suitcase.