

were hastily making their preparations for a mass funeral, Marmor's son, an anti-Communist, spirited the body away and gave his father a quiet Jewish burial.

It was the only time Marmor ever failed his party comrades.

A. BITTELMAN, MORE POLITICIAN THAN THEORETICIAN

The story of Alexander Bittelman, however brief, cannot be told outside the Communist Party. Unlike Olgin, Shachno Epstein and Marmor, his rise began only with the Left Wing. He was young and unknown before that.

Osher (Alexander) Bittelman was born in 1890 in Odessa, on the shores of the Black Sea. His parents later moved to Berditchev, the classical Jewish city in the Ukraine. He was sent to the *heder* and later to the government school. Bittelman joined the Bund while quite young, and was exiled for two years to the Province of Archangel. He came to this country in 1912. Unwilling to remain a shop worker, he, similar to other semi-educated immigrants, studied civil engineering in the evening classes of Cooper Union. But he never worked in that capacity. He left the shop to work in the Harlem section of the People's Relief Committee during World War I. He was then active in the large Harlem branch of the Jewish Socialist Federation. Harlem was considered a center of the advanced immigrant youth.

The federation top was studded with more than a dozen luminous figures—Vladek, Hardman, Olgin, Zivyon, to mention but a few—and a dry unimaginative man like Bittelman had to remain obscure. Neither a forceful speaker nor a lucid writer, his influence was confined to a group of branch comrades. He would have had to wait many years, meanwhile performing routine tasks, before he could hope to climb to leadership. However, the ferment in the Socialist ranks evoked by the Bolshevik Revolution moved to the front a number of younger people who were agitating for a sharp turn to the left. These people formed the Left Wing. Bittelman was one of them, though not among the very first.

Shrewd and calculating, with cold eyes and an impassive face, Bittelman had a hard doctrinaire approach to life and a limited emotional range. He was the right man for the shabby maneuvers

and double dealing that tore the Left Wing from its very inception.

His advance was rapid: secretary and editor of the Jewish Federation of the CP and secretary of the Jewish Federation of the Workers Party. In 1923, Foster, in control of the party, needing an associate better versed than he in Communist terminology and one who knew Russian, brought Bittelman to the national party office in Chicago. He soon became the theoretician of the Foster caucus. It was Bittelman who astutely led the inexperienced Foster through the maze of inner-Kremlin politics, finally hitching his wagon to the Stalin star. In 1928, when Foster was reluctant to accept the Leftist platform, formulated largely by Bittelman to gain Stalin's favor, Bittelman was the one to browbeat Foster to remain loyal to the faction that bore his name.

Bittelman's strength lay in his singleness of purpose and his self control. He was bent on reaching the summit of party authority, and employed devious moves to gain that end, manufacturing issues and manipulating weaker people. A Leftist by inclination, with a flair for hair-splitting discussion—Bittelman was the one to advance the reasoning, in 1920, that "action by the masses," in the platform of the CLP, was quite different and less revolutionary than the "mass action" of the CP. But he was elastic enough to bend quickly before a "Right" Comintern course. It is not an understatement to say that Bittelman and the Communist Party were made for each other.

HE WANTED TO BE ON THE GROUND FLOOR

These harsh words are not meant to imply that insatiable ambition was the sole motive that brought Bittelman to the Left Wing. Undeniably, he was affected by the lure of the Bolshevik Revolution. But those who followed him closely throughout the factional warfare in the party, for which, by the way, he bore more than a single man's share, will not dispute the opinion that his overriding principle was power. A chance remark often reveals the man. In the early stage of the movement, his friend, Hendin, once asked him why he did not return to Russia as others did. Bittelman, in a moment of rare candor, replied, "In Russia they will never forget that I was not there during the revolution. Here I am on the ground floor."

During that period, some of Bittelman's articles in the *Funken* were signed, for greater piety, Lentrov—for Lenin and Trotsky.

Bittelman's massive concentration on party affairs was doubtlessly made easier by his singular—for the time and environment—family life. He was perhaps the sole Communist leader in the 20's about whom there was no gossip in the party ranks. His devotion to his wife, Khave, was exemplary. And they had no children.

In a casual conversation on the beach in the summer of 1923, Bittelman remarked to the author that he hoped to write the history of the American Left Wing while the records were still clear and his impressions fresh. And it seems that he did start this work. A couple of articles—fragments—were printed by him in the party's monthly. But no book appeared during the 20's. In a letter to Kalmen Marmor in Russia, in the early 30's, Bittelman mentioned that he was working continuously on his history, had already completed 500 pages, and had only the last chapter to do. But no book of his was ever published. The only plausible reason that could be suggested for his failure was the numerous shifts in the party's course and in Soviet policy, which robbed him of a dependable guiding line for his treatment of the period and its characters.*425

Another of Bittelman's disappointments, though less significant, had to do with his ambition to become an authority on the history of Russian Bolshevism. After the Ruthenberg people took over the party in 1925, Bittelman, having enough time on his hands, began a diligent study of Zinoviev's history of the Russian party, taking copious notes. He was also searching for weapons in the factional struggle. But when he was ready to take advantage of his studies, Zinoviev was thrown out and his name and opinions were taboo for Communists.

THE LEADERSHIP HE CRAVED ELUDED HIM

Bittelman did not avoid ultimate frustration. It seems that Stalin, disliking Lovestone, felt no liking for Bittelman either. For all his unremitting activity in Stalin's service during the factional struggle, Bittelman's reward was to be sent to India—his stay there was futile—while the new leader, Browder, was creating his own apparatus. Only when this task was achieved was he permitted to return to

America. And then Bittelman, the brain of the Foster-Browder caucus, was not even first in Browder's team. But he was a member of the political committee and, for a time, editor of the *Communist*.

During World War II and immediately afterward, winning over the Jews assumed great importance, and Bittelman was made boss of the Jewish movement. The Jewish party fractions were abolished, and the Freiheit Publishing Association, reorganized on a wider basis, became the center of Jewish Communism. Ben Gold was president, and Bittelman secretary, actually the leader. This was his first taste of power, and, commissarlike, he dictated to the *Freiheit*, *Jewish Life*, and all other institutions.*426

Wooing American Jewry required a positive attitude toward Jewish life. Bittelman, a semi-assimilationist, immediately blossomed forth a man deeply concerned with Jewish problems.

At the annual conventions of the Freiheit Association, he read long papers on the urgency of Jewish unity and the task of building Jewish culture. His papers were published in Yiddish and English booklets. Bittelman was so immersed in his new Jewish role that, shrewd as he was, he at first failed to grasp the full meaning of the famous Ilya Ehrenburg article in the *Izvestia* of October 21, 1948, that signaled the oncoming destruction of what was left of Jewish culture and social life in Russia. But when the ominous significance of the Ehrenburg article was brought home to the party here, Bittelman executed a sharp turn. He immediately suppressed any reference to the Jewish people and Jewish culture as such. Under his watchful eye, the IWO *shules* moved back to their earlier Leftist "internationalist" curriculum, to the deep dismay of the Jewish-minded teachers. Still, the initial mistake cost Bittelman his power over the Jewish movement. He was again kicked upstairs.

Bittelman was among the second layer of party leaders to be sentenced under the Smith Act in the early 50's, and was released from Federal prison in the summer of 1957. He was also brought up on deportation charges; politically active in this country for more than four decades, he was not a citizen, and admitted that he had never applied for citizenship. He was ordered deported, but the verdict was appealed.

It might be interesting to add that during his interrogation by the immigration officers, August 17-18, 1949, Bittelman referred to anti-Semitism as a major factor in his conversion to Communism.

"Jews," he said, "were rarely employed, if at all, by railroads, steamship companies, gas, electric and telephone companies. . . . (They) were in the position of second or third class citizens, politically, economically and socially. . . ." *427

Needless to say, neither the subject nor the reason came anywhere near the truth. No more genuine was his charge at the hearing that anti-Semitism was behind his prosecution. The party line in that dismal period demanded throwing at the American "ruling circles" the accusation of anti-Semitism in addition to reaction and warmongering. Communists of Jewish birth dragged in the issue of anti-Semitism before congressional hearings and in court proceedings.

BITTELMAN A REVISIONIST

As yet before entering prison in 1952, Bittelman wrote a book on the party's prospects; the book was suppressed by Foster. Out of prison, his voice was not heard in public in the intense controversy in the party between the Stalinist die-hards and the revisionists, set off by the explosive Khrushchev speech to the 20th party congress in Moscow, February 1956. No outsider could tell whether he sided with the Foster-Dennis-Thompson faction or with the oppositionists, led by John Gates and Joseph Clark.

But in the fall of 1957, Bittelman, in a series of articles in the *Daily Worker*, set a new major task for the CP, to take the initiative in building a "party of leading Marxists." It was an ambiguous task, and Bittelman was using his old technique of raising a dust cloud to hide his real meaning. And his meaning became clear a few months later from his reply to Foster's accusation that he was a revisionist of Marxism-Leninism.*428

Revisionism as a weapon against adversaries was fashioned by Khrushchev in the late 50's in his struggle for absolute power. It became an offense more serious than deviation from the party line. Tito of Yugoslavia was called a revisionist when the break between him and the Kremlin became official in 1958. (The term "revisionism" was not invented by Khrushchev. He took it from the old Social Democratic controversy in the first decade between Edward Bernstein, the father of revisionism, and Karl Kautsky and his friends, orthodox Marxists.)

Bittelman a revisionist was news indeed. And his reply was that

of a confirmed revisionist. Fortifying himself with Marxism-Leninism—Bittelman would not budge without Marx and Lenin—he arrived at the glaring heresy that American capitalism "is displaying a number of distinct and important national peculiarities and characteristics. . . . As a result, capitalism in the United States was developing in width and strength at the same time, and *still continues to do so* (italics his)." *429

What is more, Bittelman now embraces the Welfare State: ". . . Only the struggle for the Welfare State will create the conditions and realize the objective possibility for the peaceful transition to Socialism," he wrote. And in this struggle "the middle classes and sections of the non-monopoly bourgeoisie" are fit to be partners.

In 1928, Bittelman was the brain behind the Leftist caucus, whose chief weapon against the majority group was the accusation of believing in the vitality of the American economy—American exceptionalism—and "lagging behind the radicalization of the masses." It took him precisely three decades and three-and-a-half years in prison to recognize the validity of this American exceptionalism.

For this heresy, Bittelman was dropped from the party payroll in the fall of 1958.*430

ISRAEL AMTER, A SAINTLY COMMUNIST

Of all the curious types that gravitated to Communism, Israel Amter was perhaps the most unusual. Amter was born in Denver, Colorado, March 1878, of Jewish-Hungarian parents. His father was a prosperous farmer, one of the pioneers of the West. As he told it in his autobiography, he never mingled with the children of the Eastern European immigrants, who lived on the other side of the tracks. Nor does he mention receiving any sort of Jewish education. His friends in school were mostly gentiles.*431 Israel showed musical promise, he studied piano, and was given a good musical education. But he became interested in the radical movement and joined the first SP branch, formed in 1901.

His parents sent him to Germany to prepare for a career as a concert pianist. He stayed there 11 years, dividing his time between his musical studies and activity in the Social Democratic Party. On returning to America, Amter rejoined the SP, became a Left-Winger in 1919 and a Communist in 1920.