

# Toward Revival of Soviet Jewish Culture

While the Soviet Union maintains silence,  
there are encouraging developments

By THE EDITORS

ABOUT 100 of our subscribers in the New York area accepted the invitation of the Editorial Board to meet on May 22 to talk over the recent revelations about Soviet Jewish culture. It was an evening of frank discussion opened by a reading of the Editorial Board statement published in our June issue. After an hour of comment and questions from the audience, the evening ended with remarks by each member of the Board.

The discussion showed our readers to be deeply disquieted by the revelations. Nor could all the questions be answered, since we do not as yet have full information on what happened. However, the U.S. government release on June 4 of a copy of the Khrushchev report on Stalin at the Twentieth Soviet Party Congress does give us wider basis for grasping the events.

Among the numerous and shocking crimes detailed by Khrushchev, his speech corroborated reports that several small peoples were entirely uprooted by Stalin's criminal de-

parture from socialist policy on the national question. Khrushchev referred to the mass deportation of the Karachi and Kalmyk peoples from their ancestral territories and the brutal dissolution of the Chechen-Ingush and Kabardino-Balkar Autonomous Republics. The crimes against Jewish culture and Jewish leaders and writers were one phase of this violation of nationality rights.

## Why no Reference to Jews?

The Khrushchev speech makes clear that Stalin was personally responsible for the extortions of false confessions in the Moscow doctors' case. It is hard to understand why Khrushchev did not mention anti-Semitism in his allusion to the case. The *Pravda* editorial of April 6, 1953 had made it plain that the perpetrators of this frame-up "attempted to inflame . . . feelings of national antagonism which are profoundly alien to the socialist ideology," that is, tried to incite anti-Semitism in violation of socialist principles.

Furthermore, why did not Khrushchev even refer to the execution of Jewish leaders and writers and the snuffing out of Soviet Jewish culture when he discussed Stalin's perversion of the national policy mentioned above? It may be, as Harrison Salisbury writes (*N.Y. Times*, June 6), that this subject "is apparently scheduled for treatment only later in the Soviet Union."

But why the delay? If the full text of the speech contains material on the Soviet Jews, it is time that the authentic text be published in its entirety. If not, a declaration by the Soviet government on this subject is not only long overdue to the Jewish people throughout the world but to all democratic opinion, which is rightly concerned with this matter.

The cause of peaceful co-existence also requires Soviet official clarification of the facts and of its plans to reconstruct Jewish culture in the Soviet Union.

## Moves Toward Greater Liberty

Meanwhile, reports are received almost every day of steps toward greater liberty for the people in the socialist states. On April 23, for instance, the Supreme Soviet decreed the rescinding of wartime rules providing imprisonment for workers for changing jobs. Factory and office workers may now quit their jobs on two weeks' notice.

The whole Soviet criminal code is up for revision. On April 19 a decree was issued forbidding speedy trial and immediate execution of persons



Part of an audience in a Moscow concert hall obviously enjoying a recent concert of Jewish folk song and readings from Yiddish classics.

accused of counter-revolutionary acts. Accused persons will have the right to counsel during the pre-trial investigation, instead of only at the trial itself. And a recent issue of the Soviet party theoretical organ, *Kommunist*, states that the Soviet legal code will incorporate the principle that a person is innocent until proven guilty. Further, a French delegation to the Soviet Union was told in May that all internment camps would be closed within 18 months.

Especially important is the law with regard to confessions. For the Khrushchev report makes clear that one of the main weapons of repression in the Soviet Union had been the use of forced confessions to obtain convictions. A recent article in the authoritative journal *Soviet State and Law* rejected as a "glaring violation of the principle of Soviet legality" the doctrine developed by the late Andrei Vyshinsky that a person could be convicted solely on the basis of his own "confession."

Among further steps toward insuring strict observance of Soviet law is the setting up of a new group empowered to inspect and oversee all the work of security organs, from the prosecutor's office to the prisons. On June 4, the *N.Y. Times* reported from Moscow that Soviet State Prosecutor R. A. Rudenko criticized the Ministry of Justice for its failure to carry out plans for codification of the law. The Ministry of Justice has been abolished and its functions given to Republic ministries.

### **Jewish Delegations Going to USSR**

It is heartening to learn that rabbis have been given permission to send delegations to the Soviet Union to study Jewish religious life there.



*Max Resnik-Martov, Soviet Yiddish monologist, reciting from Tevey the Milkman, by Sholem Aleichem, in a Moscow hall recently.*

Five members of the Rabbinical Council of America (Orthodox) will make up the delegation led by Rabbi David B. Hollander (New York), council president, and including Rabbis Samuel Adelman (Newport News, Va.), Gilbert Klapperman (Lawrence, L. I.), Emanuel Rackman (Far Rockaway, Queens, N. Y.) and Herschel Schachter (Bronx). (*N. Y. Times*, May 14.)

On May 28 it was announced that a group of six Reform and Conser-

vative members of the New York Board of Rabbis led by Rabbi Morris Kertzer will visit the Soviet Union this summer for the same purpose. In a letter received by the Board recently, Rabbi Solomon Shlifer of Moscow wrote: "We, the leaders of the religious community of Moscow, will receive with honor and great love the declaration of the New York Board of Rabbis which intends to visit our country and see with their own eyes our spiritual condition."

Dr. Nahum Goldmann, president of the World Jewish Congress and also the newly-elected president of the World Zionist Organization, has by now arranged to visit the Soviet Union to discuss with the high Soviet officials Jewish life there and the possibility of emigration to Israel.

In the meantime, Rabbi Shlifer announced to his congregation at the Shevuoth service on May 17 that a new theological seminary would be opened, that government shops in Jewish neighborhoods will sell kosher meat and that the government would open kosher restaurants (*N.Y. Times*, May 20.)

### **Sholem Aleichem Commemoration**

There have been developments also in the area of Soviet Yiddish culture. Reporting a Yiddish cultural event in Moscow, I. Katznelenson, Moscow correspondent of the Polish Yiddish paper *Folks-Shtimme*, said

in mid-May that the Jews of Moscow are insistently asking when a Yiddish theater and newspaper will appear.

In concluding his article, Katznelenson, himself a Soviet Yiddish writer, conveys his sense of the present feelings of Soviet Jews.

"I recall the few warm-hearted words spoken by David Bergelson at the grave of the Soviet Yiddish writer, Ezra Finenberg, who died prematurely," wrote Katznelenson. "For us in the Soviet Union, the wish



*Clara Vaga, Soviet Yiddish folk singer, performing at a recent Moscow concert.*

is fully realized that the work of those who have died will be carried on by the living. Let us carry on Ezra's love for the people.

"The best remembrance of our  
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## SOVIET JEWISH CULTURE

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dead is to carry on their creative work for the people to whom they were so closely bound. We are not sitting *Shiva* (mourning); we do not rend our clothes; we do not harbor thoughts of despair. We are carrying forward our work of advancing our socialist land, building our culture of brotherhood and peace."

A significant observance of the 40th anniversary of the death of Sholem Aleichem was held at the Central House of the Soviet Writers Union in Moscow on May 13. An extended account of the affair was published in the Soviet *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Literary Gazette) on May 15. Leading writers, actors and musicians, both Jewish and non-Jewish, attended.

### *Yiddish Cultural Activities*

Chairman of the evening, Soviet writer Vsevolod Ivanov, made opening remarks in tribute to the great classic Yiddish writer. He announced that an edition of one million copies of a Russian translation of Sholem Aleichem's stories for children will soon appear. The Yiddish scholar, Riva Rubin, spoke about Sholem Aleichem as man and writer, memorial poems by S. Halkin and S. Marshak were recited, excerpts from his works were read and a scene from *Tevey the Milkman* was presented in Yiddish. A few days later com-

memorative meetings attended by distinguished audiences were held at the Moscow Institute of Science and at the Moscow Philharmonic Hall.

An article by Mikhail Levin sent out on May 28 by the Press Department of the Soviet Embassy in Washington reports numerous concerts of Yiddish song and literature by two seasoned Soviet Jewish performers, Clara Vaga, singer, and Max Reznik-Martov, monologist. The latter studied under Solomon Mikhoels and his style is reminiscent of the late great Jewish master and director of the Moscow Yiddish Art Theater.

The pair performed a series of concerts to full houses in Moscow recently. Both have been touring throughout the Soviet Union with their programs of Yiddish folk song and literature, giving as many as 20 concerts a month. Clara Vaga has recently performed in Leningrad, Sverdlosk and other towns in the Urals, in Central Asia and Siberia. She plans to give concerts soon in Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa and other cities.

Following one concert, Levin reports, a Dr. Isaak Altshuler of Moscow remarked: "Like most people who read Yiddish, I have known *Tevey the Milkman* from childhood. Reznik-Martov conveys the charm of this wonderful Jewish classic beautifully." The popularity of these occasional concerts indicates the existence of an audience for the

## AFTERMATH OF THE PRAGUE TRIAL

ON MAY 13, Mordecai Oren, a leader of the left wing Zionist Mapam Party, was released from a Czech jail after having served four and a half years of a 15-year term for "espionage." Oren testified at the Prague trial of the Slansky group. After his release Oren said that there are people still imprisoned in Czechoslovakia "whose only crime is love of Zion." Back in Israel, Oren related details of his great ordeal—endless interrogation with hardly any food, water or sleep. He said that he had been forced "by means foreign to fundamental and socialist practices to confess to what never happened." "In all the charges and confessions I signed," he said "there was only one true thing, and that was my name. All the other things were lies, fabricated by those who desecrate socialist ideals and socialist regimes." He said that he had been a victim not of a socialist regime but of those who had brought down its moral tone.

Artur London, a defendant in the Slansky trial itself, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment, has also been released. In an interview at his home in Prague in May, London said that "methods of violence" had been used to make him confess to crimes of high treason and espionage of which he was innocent. He said that a court had completely exonerated him on Feb. 2. London added that he had never lost faith in socialism and he has become a Communist Party member since his release.

The Prague *Rude Pravo* reported on April 12 that some police officials had been discharged after an investigation and that some would be punished for having used "inadmissible methods."

revival of a Yiddish theater and press.

### *A Soviet Statement Still Needed*

So long as such an audience exists—even if it is diminishing—nationality rights under socialism require that cultural provision for this audience be made. Violation of this principle with respect to Soviet Jews did great harm to the Soviet Union and the cause of peace in the post-war period. Khrushchev is reported to have told a French delegation (*N. Y. Times*, June 6) that the topic

of Jews in the Soviet Union was "of small general interest." It was only, according to the report, on the delegation's insistence that Khrushchev went on to discuss the question at greater length. Post-war actualities have demonstrated, however, that the question has deeply concerned not only Jews but democratic-minded people all over the world. No statement on the matter has yet come from the Soviet Union. We believe that such a statement should be forthcoming, if for no other reason, because the interests of peace require it.