

What a Leading Soviet Writer Told Suler About Jewish Culture

By CHAIM SULER
(Second of a Series)

I had heard from several of the writers that if I wanted information of an official nature concerning what was being done to re-establish Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union, I would have to see Alexei Surkov.

I already knew that Surkov was a prominent Russian poet. In Moscow I had learned that he was the first secretary of the Union of Soviet Writers and that he was a member of the central committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. When I learned this I asked the office of the Writers

Union to arrange a meeting for me with Surkov.

I was warned that he is a very busy man, that he was now out of town, and that he was preparing to leave for France. Nevertheless they promised to try.

In the meantime, I went to Leningrad for several days to visit with my family. On my return I telephoned the Writers Union and they informed me that an appointment had been arranged for me to meet Surkov on Wednesday, June 2, at 2 o'clock. At the appointed time I was in his office.

Surkov looks something like "our" Arthur Godfrey. He is a solidly-built man in his late 50s, with clever eyes.

A grey-blond lock falls towards his right eye, and a light, friendly smile hovers constantly around a corner of his mouth.

He entered his office with quick steps, apologized profusely for being late, pressed my hand warmly, and our conversation began.

Before I had a chance to ask him anything, he began to talk. He talked for a long time. He told me how, as a young worker, he came to Moscow from the "depths of Russia," how here in Moscow he met and got to know a number of Jewish writers. Before he had finished he had given me a historical resume of Soviet Yiddish literature. He was well-acquainted with that literature and expressed his thoughts about several of the Yiddish poets.

According to his opinion, for instance, David Hofstein was the most talented of the entire group of Soviet Yiddish poets. Of A. Kushnirov who died in 1949 of cancer, he spoke with great warmth. Surkov told me that during the war, Kushnirov, then 57, had joined the army and actively participated in several battles.

In the area where Kushnirov had fought, the Germans had smashed four Red Army divisions. Kushnirov had been among those surrounded by the enemy. (Surkov stressed

the fact that Kushnirov was not a member of the Communist Party). Kushnirov, when they had been surrounded, had not become panicky.

The first thing he did was to bury his papers in the ground. Then he gathered together a number of others and they broke through the Nazi lines. They had then made contact with another active sector of the front. There he began to write verses and agitational literature in Russian. After the war he returned to his Yiddish pen. Surkov told me that Kushnirov had lost a young son in the war. Surkov's words were extremely moving.

We turned to the subject of Yiddish culture.

The Soviet Writers Union is now engaged in reestablishing Yiddish literature. At the same time, Surkov spoke of the fact that Jews were more and more going over to Russian, or Ukrainian, or other languages. Not ALL the Jews—and therefore the project to rebuild Yiddish literature—but significant numbers of Jews were going through such a process.

I told Surkov that from my experiences during my short stay in Moscow and Leningrad, I had seen how eager Jews were for the Yiddish word. Also, that I had heard from the Yiddish writers that the Yiddish language still lives in cities and towns of Ukraine, White Russia, Lithuania, etc. Surkov, however, was thinking mainly of the Jews in Moscow, with whom he was in closer touch. That certain sections of the Jews are being assimilated or integrated is apparently correct.

He believes very strongly in publishing the works of Yiddish writers in Russian, Ukrainian, and the other languages of the Soviet people. He pointed out that some Yiddish writers want to write for a broader audience and are themselves beginning to write in Russian. He cited Emanuel Kazakevitch as an example of a Yiddish poet who has become one of the best known Russian writers.

The transition from Yiddish to Russian is not always successful, Surkov added. No matter how well a writer may know Russian, if he has "suckled the Yiddish language with his mother's milk" then he will think in Yiddish and will be a better artist in his mother tongue. Surkov spoke of Babelini, who grew up in Odessa's poor Jewish quarter and during the civil war fell in with a Cossack regiment in Siberia. In his work, said Surkov, you could feel a mixture of "Yiddishkeit" and the Cossack-Siberian environment. "The transition from

one culture to another is, to a certain degree, a tragic one for many individuals."

Surkov also said that he does not like the Sholem Aleichem translations which recently appeared in Russian. Not knowing the original, he still felt that the translation was no good and that they had to find a better one.

Alexei Surkov tried had to convince me that there was no anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. According to his thinking, there may have been some among certain sections of the Ukrainian and White Russian population, especially in the western districts, which before the war had been part of Pilsudski's Poland. He pointed out that Jews were prominently represented in various branches of Soviet society. The Soviet Writers Union, he called to my attention, has about 100 members. Jews make up more than 35 percent of this number and are to be found among the most prominent—Boris Polevoi, Maria Oliger, Ilya Ehrenburg, Samuel Marshak, David Zaslavsky, Emanuel Kazakevitch.

When Surkov finished, I told him that I had not come here to accuse the Soviet government of anti-Semitism. I did want to know, however, why the Jewish writers had been executed; why there is no Yiddish theatre; what was being done now to reestablish Yiddish culture. And what really is the truth about certain "deeds" which smelled of anti-Semitism.

Surkov then began to talk with great agitation about the nightmare which the Soviet people had lived through in the postwar years until Stalin's death. He explained that the security organs had become a power above the government and that they had often done terrible things. He spoke painfully of the death of the most talented Jewish artists. He spoke of Izzy Charik and Moshe Kulbak, whose talent he had greatly esteemed, and who had been killed in the late 1930s. Surkov stressed again that it was a general evil and affected not only Jews. The percentage of casualties among Russian writers was much, much higher than among the Jews. In most cases the imprisoned or executed writers were accused of Trotskyism or of treason to the government.

About the Yiddish theatre, Surkov said that it was "decapitated" by the death of Solomon Michoels and B. Zuskin. Michoels was killed in an auto accident in Minsk, in January 1948, long before the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was shut down. (100,000 people came to Michoels' funeral). Zuskin was arrested at the beginning of 1949. Nevertheless, Surkov assured me, the Yiddish theatre will be rebuilt and Yiddish literature would live again.

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