

# Eyewitness Report on Jewish Culture in the Soviet Union

We are printing below the first of three articles on Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union by Chaim Suller, general manager of the Morning Freiheit.

Suller spent several weeks in the Soviet Union. He sought information about Yiddish culture there and this is his first-hand account. Altogether Suller wrote seven articles for the Freiheit. The first four told of his arrival, his general impressions of the people and the places he visited. The following three, a translation of which we are running, describes his meeting with a group of Yiddish writers and includes an interview with Alexei Surkov, chief of the Soviet Writers Union.

By CHAIM SULER  
(First of a Series)

I don't know whether Jewish writers in the Soviet Union have been coming together lately. I myself felt that my meeting with them was the beginning of a new period, that the meeting would be "making history," in a sense. I had to wait quite a few days before the meeting could take place. The officers of the Writers Union were skeptical at first about the possibility of organizing such a meeting. They warned me again and again that most of the writers were miles away from Moscow.

One morning the telephone in my hotel room rang with quite another story. I heard the voice of Freda Anatolyevna, the young lady in the office of the Writers Union, who had done the work of arranging the meeting. She told me that on Friday, June 29 at 5 o'clock I could meet with a number of Yiddish writers at the office of the Writers Union.

Riding to the meeting, all sorts of thoughts passed through my head. . . . First, I felt, as I have said, that the meeting would be making history. This was possibly the first time that Soviet Yiddish writers had gathered to meet with a foreign visitor. . . . And after so many difficult years, finally, contact was being made. But at the same moment, the names of the writers who had been executed came to mind—men who would certainly have been central figures at such a meeting.

What sort of mood would I find among the Yiddish writers? I expected that, just as in the Soviet Union generally first place was being given to the work of today, of repairing the damage, of correcting the evil, so it would be among the Yiddish writers. This much I knew from my talk with Aron Vergelis and Noah Luria. They are thinking less about yesterday—more about today and tomorrow. But still, what would be the feeling among a larger group?

I got my answer, in a certain sense, as soon as I entered the Writers Building. I was taken into a room in which stood a large table covered with a white tablecloth and bowls of fruit. There was a holiday atmosphere in the room—rather, an air of friendly curiosity. That much I could see in the eyes that were turned upon me as I walked in.

They made room for me at the center of the table. Shmuel Halken sat down at my right and Rachel Boimwohl at my left.

I had expected that they would begin with speeches "for the occasion," and in my mind I had prepared such a greeting. But it turned out otherwise. No sooner had I sat down than they began to bombard me with questions from all sides. They wanted to know about a long list of writers in America, Israel and France; about the state of the Yiddish press, publishing, theatre, schools and other cultural institutions in America, about the political situation, etc., etc.

Their questions and my brief replies took two hours. The writers were astounded when I told



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them that in all of the U. S., with its over 5 million Jews, there wasn't even one decent, permanent Yiddish theatre; that a Yiddish book is a "best-seller" at 1,500 copies. I didn't try to stop their questions, because the nature of the questions themselves revealed a lot to me. I saw in them an isolation from the Jewish world. Only a couple of the writers, those who read foreign Yiddish papers in the library, or who received the Folkshimme from Poland, showed some familiarity with Jewish cultural affairs outside the country.

One of the writers, Sh. Gordon, reminded his listeners that I too had some questions and that they ought to give me a chance, too! They served tea, and I put several questions to them. In the discussion which developed around my questions, I learned a number of things. They told me that every Yiddish writer in Moscow—and as far as they knew, in other parts of the country—was working. When I asked them how that was possible after such a long period of silence, and when there wasn't even one Yiddish publishing house, they replied: "If we are working, then that is a sign that we expect to begin publishing in the very near future."

Gordon interrupted: "You will excuse me if I use a rhyme: Fun ois literatur vet vern grois literatur!" (The sense of this is: "We will turn an absence of literature into a great literature" Trans.) Shmuel Halken picked up this thought and repeated the phrase. Another said in a confident tone: "We are writing with full vigor!"

The conversation then turned to certain New York writers in certain New York papers who are "mourning" the Soviet Yiddish writers. To this, Shmuel Halken, who spent several years in prison, said: "Tell everyone in America, and in other countries, wherever you chance to be, that we were Soviet Yiddish writers, and we have remained Soviet Yiddish writers!"

Others spoke in the same spirit. They urged that it was time to begin talking of what is being done now to correct the evil, to reestablish Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union. To my question about Biro - Bidjan they replied that a number of Yiddish writers were active there, among them:

B. Miller, Lyuba Wasserman, Yisroel Emyot, B. Bronfmon, Malinski, Rabukov, and others.

I discovered from the conversation that Jews are to be found not only in the government, in the professions, and in light industry, but also in large numbers in heavy industry—mining, steel, auto, etc. There are many Jews in agriculture. Sh. Gordon told us that in Crimea alone there are 80 collective farms where Jews work. Some of them are completely Jewish, others mixed. (He spoke of Zhankoya, from which the popular song comes.) He himself has written a long work about the Jewish farmers in the Crimea, and expects the book to be published soon in Yiddish.

(At my request the writers later prepared a partial list of Yiddish writers in the Soviet Union and the names of the works which they had completed or are working on. When I looked over the list, my impression was that among the works there were none which dealt with present-day life of the Jews in the Soviet Union. It seems to me that most of the works continue a thread which was cut off in 1948, when everything stopped.)

I told them about the theories of "assimilation" and "integration" which I had heard in America and even from some people in the Soviet Union. All of the writers definitely rejected these theories. They said that there was enough room among the great masses of Soviet Jews for a flourishing Jewish culture in the Yiddish language; that in Minsk, Byalestok, Vilna, Kiev, Odessa, Biro-Bidjan, Bessarabia, Bukovina, and many other regions, there were great masses of Yiddish-speaking Jews and even many young people who spoke Yiddish.

The Yiddish writers sent warm greetings to the Jews of America. On my part, I expressed the hope that my meeting with them was only a small beginning toward many more frequent meetings of Jewish cultural forces from America and the Soviet Union, and that they might soon be able to visit us. I also promised to send them Yiddish material published by us in America.

As I took my leave, I felt that the Soviet Yiddish writers were pleased with this first contact in years with a foreign visitor. Certainly I myself was in a more hopeful frame of mind. Finally I had met and spoken with Soviet Yiddish writers, alive and creative, who look confidently toward the future, despite the difficult times through which they, have lived.

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