

"Commitment and Crisis: Jews and American Communism"

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Introduction

During the 1920s, Jews formed the American Communist Party's most important base of support. The party's Jewish Federation, its Yiddish-speaking section, claimed around 2,000 members or 10% of the party's overall membership in mid-decade. Yet that figure hardly conveys the extent of Jewish involvement with Communism during the 1920s. To begin with, a significant number of Jews were members of the party's English-, Russian-, Polish-, and Hungarian-speaking units. Moreover, Communism's influence among Jews extended far beyond the narrow precincts of party membership. The Communist Yiddish daily, *Di frayhayt*, enjoyed a reputation for literary excellence and reached a readership of 20,000-30,000, a higher circulation than any Communist newspaper, including the English-language *Daily Worker*. Jewish Communists built a network of summer camps, schools for adults and children, cultural societies, theater groups, choirs, orchestras, and even a housing cooperative in the Bronx that encompassed tens of thousands of Communist Party members, sympathizers, and their families. Finally, Communists won a strong following among Jewish workers in the needle trades and even came close to capturing control of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union between 1923 and 1926. (A remarkable seventy percent of ILGWU members belonged to Communist-led locals during those years.) Viewed through the lens of immigrant Jewry, then, Communism's golden age was not the Great Depression but rather the preceding decade. To be sure, Jewish Communists were in the minority, but

they were far from isolated. As their numbers grew, Communists had reason to believe they represented the vanguard of Jewish labor.

Communism's popularity among immigrant Jews was extraordinary in the context of the conservative 1920s. In a decade characterized by isolationism, nativism, and labor retrenchment, Communism made little headway among workers of other racial, religious, or ethnic groups. The only foreign language federation larger than the Jewish one was the Finnish, which claimed around 7,000 members in 1924. However, the organizational strength of the Finns was undercut by their demographics. The total Finnish immigrant population in the United States numbered only 150,000 in 1920, less than 1/15 the size of immigrant Jewry. Furthermore, Jews operated within a more expansive social and organizational arena. Whereas Finns lived mainly in rural mining areas of the upper Midwest, Jews were concentrated in major cities (where they often comprised a plurality and even, in certain places, a majority of party members).¹ In New York, for instance, Jews comprised the city's largest ethnic group, numbering 1.75 million or almost 30% of the city's population. Jewish workers also dominated New York's clothing industry, the city's primary manufacturing industry, which gave them a strategic position in the city's economy. For those reasons, Communist Party leaders viewed Jewish workers, who were already highly organized into pro-socialist unions like the ILGWU, as an important entryway into organized labor as a whole. As Nathan Glazer noted in his 1961 study, *The Social Basis of American Communism*, "no detailed understanding of the impact of

¹ In Los Angeles, according to a 1929 report, Jews made up 90% of the party's membership. In Chicago, Jews were the party's largest foreign language group, comprising 22% of party members in that city. Fifty-two percent of all Finns lived in the copper-mining regions of Michigan and Minnesota. Peter Kivisto, *Immigrant Socialists in the United States: The Case of Finns and the Left* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1984), p. 72. On similarities and differences between Finnish and Jewish Communists, see Paul C. Mishler, "Red Finns, Red Jews: Ethnic Variation in Communist Political Culture during the 1920s and 1930s," *YIVO Annual*, vol. 22 (1995): 131-154.

Communism on American life is possible without an analysis of the relationship between American Jews and the American Communist Party.”²

Glazer’s observation might seem less than surprising: after all, it has never been a secret that Jews provided a disproportionate number of recruits to the Communist movement and were highly represented in the party leadership. And yet the relationship between Jews and Communism remains under-examined by historians. Even as the scholarship on Communism has increased tremendously over the last four decades, a full-fledged historical treatment of Jewish Communists does not yet exist. An important reason (though not the only one) has to do with the widely felt need to uncover the American roots of Communism in indigenous radical traditions. Those who make this argument do so, of course, in response to the charge that Communism was imposed from Russia and was therefore un-American. In its anti-semitic variation, the charge of foreign domination indicts Jews as masterminds of an international Communist conspiracy. To focus on Jews, then, carries the risk of indulging old stereotypes and misperceptions. If one aims to distance American Communism from Russia, then immigrant Jews (most of whom came from Russia and maintained strong ties to their country of origin) do not make attractive historical subjects.

The Jewish-Communist nexus, however, cannot be understood apart from Jewish ties to Russia and, more specifically, American Jewish concern for the well-being of Jews there. In the years after 1917, many Jews became enthusiastic supporters of Soviet

² Nathan Glazer, *The Social Basis of American Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961), p. 131. Perhaps as much as half the membership of the Workers Party (a party controlled by the underground Communist Party in 1921-1922 and would become the official name of the Communist Party for a brief period starting in 1923) in the early 1920s. Auvo Kostianen, “For or against Americanization? The Case of Finnish Immigrant Radicals,” in *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920s: Recent European Research*, ed. Dirk Hoerder (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 261.

Russia, not only because they viewed it as a beacon of social progress, but also because they saw the Bolshevik government as providing solutions to urgent Jewish problems, starting with the survival of the Jewish people itself. The mass slaughter of Jews by counter-revolutionary forces during the Russian Civil War convinced many Jews in the United States that the Bolsheviks' triumph was an existential necessity. In addition, the social, economic, and cultural reconstruction of Jewish life directed by the Soviet government suggested to many American Jews that Communism had made significant improvements in the lives of Russian Jews. Immigrant Jews in the United States thus saw their interests tied to Soviet Russia to a degree unmatched by most other immigrant groups (the Finns, again, can be considered an exception).

A useful way to explore Communism's allure to immigrant Jews is through the case of Moissaye Olgin (Moyshe Yoysef Novomiski, 1878-1939), a Russian-born Jewish intellectual who immigrated to the United States in 1914. During the 1920s and 1930s, Olgin emerged as the leading figure within the Jewish Communist movement, more beloved by Yiddish-speaking workers than any General Secretary of the party. Highly educated and respected in certain English-speaking intellectual circles, Olgin was a versatile writer, editor, lecturer, and novelist fluent in English, German, Russian, and Yiddish. His expertise in Russian affairs earned him a place in the party's upper echelon, a position few other ethnic-based Communist leaders, Jewish or not, attained. It was a sign of Olgin's popularity that when he died in 1939, at the age of sixty-seven, some 45,000 people attended his funeral in Manhattan, according to the *New York Times*.³

In 1917, nobody, least of all Olgin himself, would have predicted his future role as a Communist leader. He had originally opposed the Bolshevik seizure of power and,

³ *New York Times*, 27 Nov. 1939, p. 14.

although he would grow more sympathetic to the Soviet government within the year, he opposed the creation of the American Communist party in 1919. Not until December 1921, in the wake of a trip to Soviet Russia, did Olgin forge a political alliance with the Communist party, and not until 1923 did he identify himself wholeheartedly as a Communist. Olgin, in other words, did not undergo a sudden conversion. He took short steps and made the required compromises along the way, a trajectory that provides a window into the larger political trend.

Moissaye Olgin: The Reluctant Bolshevik

Like many Jewish men and women of his generation, Olgin journeyed from traditional Judaism to revolutionary socialism in a matter of years. He received a solid religious education from his father, a pious man yet also a *maskil*, an enlightened Jew, who exposed Moyshe to secular literature in Hebrew and Yiddish, and permitted him to study the Russian language.⁴ Eventually, Olgin's studies led him away from religion. He enrolled in a gymnasium at the age of fifteen and, after graduation, entered Kiev University, where he joined a student group that evolved into the Bund's Kiev branch.⁵ From that point forward, Olgin devoted himself to the Jewish socialist movement. He served a month in prison in April 1903 for helping to organize a Jewish self-defense group and was jailed again the following year in Vilna. During the 1905 revolution, Olgin, now based in Dvinsk, wrote proclamations for the Bund's Central Committee and

⁴ The following biographical information is drawn, unless otherwise noted, from Olgin's entry in Zalmen Reyzen, Ed., *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologye*, vol. 1 (Vilna: Vilner Farlag fun B. Kletskin, 1926), 92-97 and Olgin's posthumously published memoir, *Amerike* (New York: Olgin Ondenkomitet, 1941), pp. 59-60.

⁵ On the Bund's activities in Kiev, see Natan Meier, *Kiev: Jewish Metropolis: A History, 1859-1914* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 264-65.

for party organs.⁶ After the uprising's defeat, Olgin immigrated to Germany, where he attended the University of Heidelberg and continued to write for the Bundist press. He cut in an impressive figure in Russian émigré circles. Rosa Levine-Meyer, the future wife of Eugene Levine, leader of the 1919 Munich Soviet Republic, viewed Olgin as “a man of great erudition” and looked to him for guidance. “He was,” she recalls in her memoir, “twenty-two years older [sic] than I and I thought he could help me in my search for the meaning of life and further my sparse education.”⁷ The former Torah student from the Ukrainian woods had grown into a worldly European intellectual.

Olgin belonged to the Bund's important second-tier leadership. Members at this level, just below the Central Committee, carried out orders, attended conferences, formulated policy, edited newspapers, wrote proclamations, lectured, and executed other tasks. “These essential second-level members,” writes one historian of the Bund, “were expected to devote their lives to the demands of the movement... They moved from town to town, their lives forming part of the lore of the Bund.” Olgin, as a propagandist, reporter, literary critic, and teacher ranked among the best-known Bundists.⁸ He was also among the party's staunchest advocates for Yiddish culture. Like all party members, Olgin shared in the Bund's demand for “national cultural autonomy” (Jewish communal control over state-funded educational and cultural institutions) in a future revolutionary Russia. Beyond that, Olgin touted a cultural renaissance in the Yiddish language, a goal shared by many, though not all, Bundists. Olgin urged party intellectuals to speak

⁶ His writings from 1904 to 1907 are reprinted in M. Olgin, *1905* (New York: Olgin Ondenk Komitet, 1940).

⁷ Rosa Levine-Meyers, *Levine: The Life of a Revolutionary*, Intr. E. J. Hobsbawm, (Hampshire, Eng.: Saxon House, 1973), p. 2. Rosa was born in 1890, thus Olgin was, in fact, twelve years older than her.

⁸ Henry J. Tobias, *The Jewish Bund in Russia: From Its Origins to 1905* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1972), p. 246.

Yiddish rather than Russian in their private lives, formulated guidelines on how to write Yiddish correctly, advocated for Yiddish children's schools, and, despite his atheism, insisted on the need to celebrate religious holidays (albeit in ways compatible with socialist principles) on the grounds that even a secular Jewish culture required hallowed rituals to lend it emotional depth.⁹ “[W]e are convinced,” Olgin argued in 1911, “that [Jewish workers] require a separate Yiddish culture...[W]e want to awaken the masses and help raise them to a higher level of economic and intellectual life.” In Olgin’s eyes, the struggle for working class emancipation from capitalism and for the creation of a secular Yiddish culture went hand in hand: both sought to liberate oppressed groups and required a radical new consciousness. “Yiddish cultural work,” according to Olgin, “is, in the peculiar Jewish context, part of the class struggle.”¹⁰ This combination of Marxism and Yiddish cultural nationalism cemented Olgin’s political outlook.

When the First World War broke out in the summer of 1914, Olgin found himself in Vienna at work on a dissertation on the origins of Russian Marxism. Fearing deportation as a foreign national of a hostile country, Olgin opted for immigration to the United States. He settled in New York City, where he encountered a Jewish community like none he had seen before. Numbering a million and half souls, New York Jewry dwarfed the largest Russian Jewish communities. The difference was not limited to size. Whereas censorship and repression hindered Russian Jews, America’s largest, most cosmopolitan city unleashed Jewish cultural and political energies. Yiddish theater,

⁹ See, for instance, the following articles by Olgin: "Di yidishe shprakh un unzer privat-lebn," *Frag fun lebn* (1911), 39-49, reproduced in *Never Say Die: A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters*, ed. Joshua Fishman (Hague: 1981), 551-564; Also see, "Vi men darf nit shraybn yidish: notitsn far a lezer," *Di yidishe velt* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1915), 43-53 (for abridged version, see *Di pen* 57 [Winter 1998], 57-62); "Di alte un naye yontoyvim," *Di yidishe arbeter velt* (22 April 1910), 4.

¹⁰ Olgin, "Naye natsyonale shtrebungn bay yidishe sotsyalistn," *Di yidishe arbeter velt*, 28 April 1911, p. 5.

literature, periodicals, public lectures, café life, reading circles, and self-education groups thrived, much to the approval and fascination of social reformers, reporters, and downtown literati. Socialism was also on the march in 1914. After five years of epic strikes, nearly the entire Jewish working class had organized itself into powerful unions. In politics, Jewish voters elected Meyer London, the beloved labor lawyer, to Congress in 1914, followed by a string of other Socialists over the next six years. New York was home to the largest and, arguably, the most culturally dynamic, political radical Yiddish-speaking population in the world

Olgin rose to prominence in Jewish New York. Émigré Bundists, who numbered in the thousands, certainly knew of Olgin. So, too, readers of the *Forverts*, to which Olgin had contributed since 1907. After his arrival, Olgin's reputation grew quickly. He joined the staff of the *Forverts*, America's most widely read daily, and served as the literary editor of *Di naye velt*, the weekly newspaper of the Jewish Socialist Federation (JSF). The federation was Olgin's new political home, a surrogate for the Bund. Émigré Bundists founded the JSF in 1912 as the Socialist Party's Yiddish-language sub-section. Although formally attached to the party, the JSF acted with full autonomy on the principle, carried over from the Bund, that Jews required their own political party (or, in the case of the JSF, section of a party) to address their distinct political and cultural interests. The JSF was not the largest of Jewish labor organizations. Its peak membership of some 12,000 was a fraction the size of the Arbeter Ring fraternal order or the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Nonetheless, the federation's influence was much larger than its numbers would suggest. Its members were active participants in all major Jewish labor organizations, often occupying important leadership

positions. It exercised wide influence, if not actual power. As a member of the JSF's National Executive Committee, Olgin played a prominent role in Jewish labor and communal affairs, appearing at countless meetings and rallies during the tumultuous years in and around the First World War.

Even as Olgin immersed himself in the world of immigrant Jewry he moved beyond it with apparent ease. He learned English quickly and, in 1915, enrolled in Columbia University, where he earned a Ph.D. in economics.¹¹ In November 1917, he published his dissertation under the title *The Soul of the Russian Revolution*, a 400-page history of the Russian revolutionary movement up to the tsar's downfall in March 1917.¹² Olgin's timing could not have been better. Interest in Russian politics ran high, but English-speaking Americans knew little about the country. Differences between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks or Socialist Revolutionaries and Social Democrats eluded even many radicals. Olgin's book provided an informed overview that garnered favorable reviews in *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and the *New York Times*, not to mention Yiddish journals.¹³ His second book in English, *A Guide to Russian Literature* (1920), was also highly regarded.¹⁴ All the while, Olgin lectured and wrote on Russian history, politics, and literature,¹⁵ and joined the faculty of the New School for Social

¹¹ M. Olgin, *Amerike* (New York: 1941), 103-124.

¹² Moissaye J. Olgin, *The Soul of the Russian Revolution* (New York: 1917). The book appeared in a two-volume Yiddish translation under the title *Di neshome fun der rusisher revolutsye* (New York: M. Gurevitsh's Farlag, 1921).

¹³ *Nation* (6 Dec. 1917), 638-639; *New Republic* (22 Dec. 1917), 220-221; *New York Times* (13 Jan. 1918), 14. According to the economist, Isaac Hourwich, *The Soul of the Russian Revolution* was "surely the best" recent book to appear on the Russian Revolution. Dr. Itsik Ayzik Hurvits [Isaac Hourwich], "Olgin's bukh iber der rusisher revolutsyonerer bavegung," *Di tsukunft* (Aug. 1918), 494.

¹⁴ Clarendon Ross, "A Handbook of Russian Literature," *New Republic* (24 Nov. 1920), 334; Jacob Zeitlin, "A Guide to Russian Literature," *Nation* (18 Sept. 1920), 327-328.

¹⁵ For reports on Olgin's lectures, see Phebe M. Bogan, "Notes and News," *Hispania* 7, no. 5 (Nov. 1924), 335; Lewis S. Feuer, "American Travelers to the Soviet Union, 1917-1923: The Formation of a Component of New Deal Ideology," *American Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (part 1) (Summer 1962), 128.

Research in 1919.¹⁶ As both veteran revolutionary and newly minted scholar, Olgin became a recognized expert in Russian affairs.¹⁷

When the Bolsheviks seized power in November 1917, Olgin responded immediately. At the time, he agreed with the Mensheviks that Russia was not ready for socialism. The war had left the country's economy in shambles. The industrial working class constituted a mere 20% of the population. Most peasants wanted redistribution of land, not the abolition of private property. Neither the peasantry nor the proletariat was prepared to build a socialist system. In the Bolsheviks' blind commitment to revolution, Olgin charged, they refused to recognize the situation at hand. Lenin was "a man who sees life only from the angle of his own ideas," Olgin wrote in the *New York Times*. "Ignoring the most striking facts, or interpreting them away, [is] a peculiarity of [his] mind." The so-called proletarian leader was actually an authoritarian demagogue, who could only bring harm to the people he claimed to represent. Russia's plight would surely worsen if the Bolsheviks insisted on pushing forward. "It would seem that Lenin's 'radicalism' only blocks the road of the Russian revolution by calling forth a reaction and by adding to the disorganization of a country shaken to its foundations," Olgin wrote. "Here, as ever, Lenin's tactics, seemingly extreme, are in reality weakening the strength of democratic Russia."¹⁸ He characterized the Bolsheviks as rigid, fanatical, and dangerous demagogues.

¹⁶ See, for instance, the following articles by Olgin: "The Intelligentsia and the People in the Russian Revolution," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 84 (July 1919), 114-120; "Maxim Gorky," *New Republic* (18 Jan. 1919), 333-334; "A Wounded Intellect: Leonid Andreyev (1871-1919)," *ibid.* (24 Dec. 1919), 123-124; "A Sympathetic View of Russia," *ibid.* (26 May 1920), 426; "A Flashlight of the Russian Revolution," *ibid.*, (27 July 1921), 250-251.

¹⁷ *New York Times* (30 Sept. 1919), 20.

¹⁸ Moissaye J. Olgin, "Bolsheviki's Chief," *New York Times* (2 Dec. 1917), 21. "Lenine" is Olgin's spelling of the name in this article, which originally appeared in the December issue of *Asia*. Also see Olgin, "Lenin's program," *Forverts* (18 Nov. 1917), 9 and Olgin, "Iz Rusland fartik far sotsyalizm?" *Forverts* (2 Feb. 1918), 4. See also, Olgin, *The Soul of the Russian Revolution*, pp. 376-77.

Yet Olgin softened his hostility over the following year and into 1919. The process was gradual, marked not by sudden shifts in opinion, but subtle modifications in tone and substance. An early sign of change became evident in March 1918 with the publication of *Our Revolution*, a collection of Leon Trotsky's articles translated into English and introduced by Olgin. The volume made available Trotsky's writings to American readers for the first time. Olgin did not agree with all of Trotsky's ideas and policies, but he heaped praise nonetheless, marveling at Trotsky's intellectual integrity, cogency, and prescience:

Whatever our attitude towards the course of events in the 1917 revolution may be, we must admit that, in the main, this course has taken the direction predicted in Trotsky's essays. There is a labor dictatorship now in Russia...The liberal and radical parties have lost influence. The labor government has put collective ownership and collective management of industries on the order of the day. The labor government has not hesitated in declaring Russia ready for a Socialist revolution. It was compelled to do so under the pressure of revolutionary proletarian masses. The Russian army has been dissolved in the armed people. The Russian revolution has called the workingmen of the world to make a social revolution. All this had been outlined by Trotsky twelve years ago.¹⁹

Olgin's positive assessment of Trotsky did not extend to the Bolsheviks as a whole.

Trotsky had arrived at Bolshevism comparatively late. Prior to 1917 he had steered an independent course, sometimes joining with the Mensheviks, sometimes the Bolsheviks, and other times striking out on his own. Thus, by declaring Trotsky, not Lenin, the genius of the Russian revolution, Olgin evinced a new appreciation for the Bolsheviks, but without reversing his earlier criticisms of Lenin.

As time went on, Olgin continued to express disagreement with the Bolsheviks, but usually without elaboration. He devoted more energy to defending the Soviet regime. At

¹⁹ Leon Trotsky, *Our Revolution: Essays on Working-Class and International Revolution, 1904-1917*, collected and translated by Moissaye J. Olgin (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1918). See reviews in *New York Times* (17 Feb. 1918), 62 and *The Nation* (21 March 1918), 66.

a large public gathering in Cooper Union in January 1919, Olgin expressed dismay over the course of the revolution, but commended the Bolsheviks for maintaining stability. "I must say," Olgin wrote in the *Times*, "that the Bolsheviks were the only ones who introduced order out of chaos." He denounced foreign military intervention against Soviet Russia and called on western governments to begin economic assistance.²⁰ (This position provoked a rebuke from George Kennan, the most prominent commentator on Russian affairs in the United States.²¹) Five months later, he acknowledged that Bolsheviks had strong, popular support and attributed this to their resolve and effective propaganda. The Bolsheviks "were the only ones who cast out to the masses clear, understandable slogans." "It became clear why the weak political organization of Kerensky's government, without a backbone, without will, had to cede to those who had strength and courage, who had the masses behind them."²² Olgin, at this point, still held that the Bolsheviks would have to permit some measure of commercial trade and private financial investment in order to develop Russia's economy, but this view, formerly the lynchpin of Olgin's anti-Bolshevism, was reduced to a qualification, an aside. By 1920, Olgin praised the Bolshevik revolution in ebullient terms and scoffed at critics who adhered to a pre-determined schema of how the transition from capitalism to socialism should proceed—a jab at the Mensheviks and their supporters abroad. "We are now living through the springtime of humanity," Olgin declared in *Di naye velt*, "and its name is -- socialism. It is here, springtime, it has already come. ... Let the weak-hearted be afraid. Let the weak-headed see no other way. Let them be afraid of the first messengers of the socialist order. ... Let them look at the newborn child of the future and

²⁰ "Plea for Economic Aid to the Russians," *New York Times* (20 Jan. 1919), 6.

²¹ George Kennan, "The Bolsheviks and Their Apologists," *New York Times* (23 Jan. 1919), 12.

²² M. Olgin, *Di tsukunft* (1919), p. 337.

shrug: 'Is this socialism? Is this what we have waited for so many years?'... Those who have eyes to see and the intellect to understand will not be afraid of the venom from enemies, of the despair of supposed friends."²³ Olgin had now reversed his original critique of the Bolsheviks

Olgin's path paralleled the general trend among Jewish socialists in New York. As early as 1918, a spirit of revolutionary romanticism overtook otherwise moderate social democrats. Abraham Cahan, the *Forverts'* editor-in-chief and therefore the most influential voice in the Yiddish press, applauded the new Soviet society taking shape. "One thing is sure," he editorialized. "The socialist government, the government of the workers' soviets, is becoming all the more strong, established, and secure." Cahan was especially moved by the Soviet government's celebration of Karl Marx's 100th birthday. "A statue of Karl Marx in the very heart of Russian darkness and Russian despotism! It can barely be believed. But it is true. It is a historical reality. Yes, we have lived to see our golden dreams realized." Cahan did not deny the Bolsheviks deserved criticism, but, in his opinion, the crucial fact was that they and only they had undertaken the great task of building socialism:

It seems to me that even the most bitter anti-Bolshevik, if he is a socialist, must forget everything and become filled with love for them when he imagines the statue of Karl Marx standing in the Kremlin. We have criticized them. Some of their utterances often irritate us; but who can help rejoicing in their triumph? Who can help going into ecstasy over the Socialist spirit with which they have enthroned the country, which they now rule?

By 1920, Cahan all but banned criticism of the Bolsheviks from the pages of the *Forverts*. The Menshevik and Bundist leader, Raphael Abramovitch, recalls that Cahan told him in November, 1920, when the two saw each other in Berlin, that he could not

²³ [no first name noted] Olgin, "Der yontev fun friling un frayhayt," *Di naye velt* (30 April 1920), 3.

write for the *Forverts* because “our line is entirely different from yours.” Abramovitsh tried to inform Cahan of the political repression in Russia, to which he responded by covering his ears and crying out, “Don’t destroy my illusions; I don’t want to hear.”²⁴ The belief that the dream of socialism was finally being realized in Soviet Russia was hardly unique to Cahan. Baruch Charney Vladeck, a New York City Alderman and *Forverts* staff member, expressed similar feelings. In his introduction to the Yiddish version of John Reed’s *Ten Days that Shook the World*, translated by Olgin and published by the *Forverts*, Vladeck gushed with emotion, “Like a pious Jew hopes for the Messiah, so we hoped for [the social revolution]. Now it is here. Whether it has unfolded as we wanted or expected, is another question. But she came, the true social revolution, which we studied in all our holy texts by all our rebbes...”²⁵ In a more sober vein, the leader of the Jewish Socialist Federation, Yankev Salutsky, gave a qualified endorsement in *Di naye velt*, noting that the Bolsheviks “have committed more than one crime against the very principles in whose name they committed the errors and crimes,” but adding socialists had an obligation to support them lest they “pla[y] into the hands of reaction.” Yet by 1920 Salutsky gave the Bolsheviks unqualified praise.²⁶ Only a few anti-Bolshevik holdouts existed among New York Jewish socialists by that point.

A number of factors contributed to the pro-Soviet consensus that took shape between 1918 and 1920: limited reliable information about the harshness of Soviet rule, military invention by foreign powers, feelings of solidarity with the world’s first socialist government, and counter-revolutionary efforts to restore the hated Romanov dynasty. Of

²⁴ R. Abramovitsh, “Afn keyver fun a fraynd un lerer,” *Forverts*, 5 Sept. 1951, p. 4.

²⁵ Djan Rid [John Reed], *Tsen teg vos hobn oyfgerudert di velt*, trans. M. Olgin, (New York: “Forverts” Publishing Asosyeyshon, 1919), p. 5.

²⁶ “Editoryele notitsn,” *Di naye velt*, 23 Aug. 1918, 1.

these factors, the devastating results of the Civil War deserve special mention. Between 1918 and 1920, counter-revolutionary forces carried out more than 1,500 pogroms in the Ukraine alone. According to the historian, Oleg Budnitskii, anywhere between 50,000 to 200,000 Jews were killed outright or mortally wounded, and another 200,000 seriously injured. Thousands of women were raped, at least 50,000 were widowed, and 300,000 children were orphaned.²⁷ Well aware of the bloodbath underway, American Jewish socialists came to view the Red Army (which itself contained units that carried out pogroms before the high command imposed strict discipline) as the sole force capable of restoring order and protecting Jews. Nearly the entire Jewish labor movement wanted the Bolsheviks to win the war because the alternative threatened unimaginable catastrophe. The choice seemed clear: either Bolshevism or death.

Alexander Bittelman and the Jewish Left Wing

Enthusiasm for the Bolshevik revolution grew during its first year, but few, if any, Jewish socialists proposed imitating the Bolsheviks on American soil. The situation changed suddenly, however, in 1919. In January the newly established Communist International (Comintern) instructed radicals around the world to split their existing socialist parties by “separating out the revolutionary elements, in a pitiless criticism of its leaders and in systematically dividing its adherents.”²⁸ The goal was to purge moderates for the purpose of creating revolutionary organizations prepared to seize state power “at once” and establish dictatorships of the proletariat modeled on Soviet Russia. In the United States, the Comintern’s call appealed mostly to members of the Socialist Party’s

²⁷ Oleg Budnitskii, *Russian Jews Between the Reds and the White, 1917-1920*, trans. Timothy J. Portice (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), pp. 216-17.

²⁸ James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), p. 192.

foreign-language federations, which totaled fifty-seven thousand people, or 53 percent of the party's membership. By April, self-defined Left Wing factions gained control of the Hungarian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Polish, Russian, South Slavic, and Ukrainian federations. In addition, the Left Wing controlled Socialist Party locals in ten cities and three boroughs in New York, as well as the Michigan state party organization. The Bolshevik revolution had come to America.

Within this fervent atmosphere, a small number of Jewish radicals turned to Communism. Most Jewish Leftists were little known, local activists in the Jewish Socialist Federation. Nearly all were in their twenties, in other words, ten to twenty years younger than Olgin and his cohorts. None sat on the federation's National Executive Committee or published articles in *Di naye velt* with any frequency. Yet over the course of 1919 these young radicals rose to positions of leadership in a new American party linked to an international revolutionary movement based in Moscow. The rise of Communism thus signaled a generational rebellion as part of the political one.

The foremost leader of the Jewish Left was Alexander Bittelman (1890-1982). Born Usher Bitlmakher in the Ukrainian city of Berdichev, Bittelman had ten years of revolutionary experience behind him when he immigrated to the United States in 1912. The son of a poor shoemaker, Bittelman joined the Bund at the age of thirteen, just weeks after he became a bar mitzvah. He was not an intellectual, like Olgin, but a worker-activist at the grass-roots. Bittelman's first major action was a May Day demonstration in 1903. Although the police handily dispersed the gathering, Bittelman later described the event as a milestone in his life: "I felt I was doing something worthwhile for the revolution, which I could feel coming, and for Socialism which became the ideal of my

living. I felt part of something big and great and good.” In addition to his clandestine activities, Bittelman studied the Russian language, socialism, the history of culture, elementary physics, and chemistry in courses offered by the Bund. All the while, he organized anti-government demonstrations, joined an armed self-defense unit, and led Berdichev’s Central Trade Union Bureau. But, as dedicated as Bittelman was to the Bund, repeated arrests and impending conscription into the military convinced him that the time had come to immigrate to the United States.²⁹

Bittelman settled in Harlem at the urging of friends who had already immigrated. The area had its attractions. It was home to New York’s second largest Jewish community and a very active branch of the JSF. Bittelman joined and was eventually elected secretary of the Harlem branch. He was a reliable activist, capable and hardworking, with intellectual aspirations. Bittelman enjoyed spending time in the JSF’s headquarters, discussing politics with the organization’s leader, Yankev Salutsky, who encouraged and advised the up-and-comer.

Before 1919, Bittelman harbored no desire to mount a rebellion in the JSF, but the Comintern changed that. He learned about the first Jewish Left Wing group on the Lower East Side and entered into discussions with its members. Bittelman had been pro-Bolshevik since at least 1917, but had no intention of fomenting a civil war within his own organization. After the Comintern’s call to arms, Bittelman grew intoxicated by the prospect of revolution in the United States. He became convinced that a proletarian revolution would break out soon and began to imagine himself manning the barricades. As a first step, Bittelman and other Left Wingers from around New York City banded

²⁹ Alexander Bittelman, “Things I Have Learned,” typed manuscript (1963), pp. 31-7, 54-67, 184-235. Alexander Bittelman Papers, box 1, folder, 5, Tamiment Library, New York University.

together under the name Jewish International Socialists of America and published a weekly newspaper with the appropriately militant title, *Der kamf*.³⁰ Convinced that they had the unquestionable authority of Lenin and the Comintern on their side, the Leftists went on the attack. They demanded Salutsky's ouster and denounced nearly everybody in a position of responsibility. Their incitements turned JSF branches into battlegrounds at a peak moment in its membership.

The JSF's leadership fought back. Olgin, Salutsky, and other JSF leaders—Marxists all—were certainly radical by any reasonable definition of the word, but not prone to revolutionary fantasies. They were level-headed, middle-aged men rooted in solid organizations. None wished to see young upstarts like Bittelman wreak havoc in the JSF. “The young men of this group,” Olgin mocked in the *Forverts*, “live in a little world created in their own imagination where everything is as they like it to be. The workers are united, class-conscious, organized, and armed. Only one thing remains to be done: begin the final conflict.”³¹ Tsivion (pseudonym of the journalist Ben-Tsien Hofman) recommended detaching the “ultra-left wing” from the JSF for the sake of its own survival. The final showdown came at the JSF's national convention in June. The Leftist delegates arrived fully aware of their disadvantage after having failed to win a majority in a single JSF branch in New York. Yet the Leftists refused to compromise or back down. If they could not control the JSF, they would break from it. As Bittelman recalled decades later, their plan of action was to attend the conference, initiate a fight, and walk out as a group. And so they did. Leftist delegates introduced resolutions mandating an immediate break from the Socialist Party and committing the JSF to the

³⁰ Edited by Herts Burgin, a *Forverts* staff writer and one of the few veterans to offer support.

³¹ Olgin, “An oysgetrakhte velt,” *Forverts*, 7 June 1919, p. 3.

goal of dictatorship of the proletariat. When defeated, Leftists complained of malfeasance. They stood on chairs, tore up membership cards, and bolted. “The program and organization of the Left Wing is for us more dear than the unity of the Jewish Socialist Federation,” Bittelman’s group proclaimed in a post-convention declaration. “We were therefore forced to leave the convention.”³²

In the meantime, the Socialist Party expelled tens of thousands of members from all over who had joined the Left Wing opposition. Many of them now wanted to create a new, truly revolutionary, party, but because they could not agree on a common program, the Leftists established two parties: the Communist Party and the Communist Labor Party. The Jewish Leftists sided with the Communist Party and they convened in early October to establish themselves as its official Jewish section. According to its report, there were 45 branches with 3,000 members in twenty cities. The numbers were respectable, but the Jewish Federation of the Communist Party led a precarious existence from the start. Between November 1919 and January 1920 federal agents twice raided the federation’s national office, confiscating Yiddish translations of Lenin, Trotsky, and *The Communist Manifesto*. *Der kamf* ceased publication and three subsequent Communist Yiddish newspapers failed over the next eight months. In February, the Jewish Federation went underground with the rest of the party. Its second convention, held secretly in June, reported a “great shortage in intellectual forces” and “material means.” The federation’s membership shrank to less than 380 in twelve branches. Thus a year after the Left Wing came into existence in a fury, the Jewish Communist movement had little to show for itself.

Olgin Goes to Russia

³² “Farvos mir hobn farlozn di konvenshon,” p. 2 (M-13, #55, Bund Archive, YIVO).

While the underground Communist Party and its Jewish Federation limped along, pro-Soviet feeling intensified in what remained of the Jewish Socialist Federation. Bolshevik concepts and terminology gained currency even among those, like Olgin and Salutsky, who harbored no intention of becoming Communists. Articles and pamphlets explaining Bolshevik ideology, as well as translations of works by Soviet leaders, continued to appear in the Yiddish press. JSF leaders increasingly spoke of “workers soviets” and “dictatorship of the proletariat” as superior forms of government worthy of emulation. By the end of 1921, two and half years after the first split in the JSF, Olgin, Salutsky, and their colleagues would join with the Communists. How did they shift course?

In the fall of 1920, Olgin embarked on a six-month trip to Soviet Russia that marked the final turning point in his evolution toward Bolshevism. He left New York a sympathizer, but returned enamored. Other Americans journeyed to Russia around the same time, but Olgin traveled more extensively than most visitors, for a longer period of time, and published lengthier accounts.³³ Not since *Ten Days that Shook the World* had an American penned such detailed eyewitness reports of the revolution. Olgin’s fluency in Russian and Yiddish, deep knowledge of the revolutionary movement, and numerous political contacts served him well. During his travels, he met an array of individuals: workers, victims of pogroms, government officials, political oppositionists, and so on. Olgin’s trip generated a great deal of interest and fanfare in the United States. When he returned in April 1921, the *Forverts* organized a grand reception attended by “thousands of people” who “came to hear the truth” about Russia. Over the following days and

³³ Benjamin Schlessinger, President of the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union traveled to Russia earlier in 1920, but spent only five weeks there.

weeks, Olgin lectured around New York and in other cities.³⁴

Olgin published two, quite different versions of his trip. His six-part series in *The New Republic*, addressed to a general, English-speaking audience, presented an overview of the new Russia. In broad strokes, Olgin described a momentous social experiment. He did not ignore ugly realities, bluntly acknowledging, "There is hunger in Russia... There is no personal liberty in Russia. ... There is no political freedom in Russia. ... There is no equality... There is corruption in Russia."³⁵ Even so, Olgin absolved the Bolsheviks of blame. Russia's problems, he maintained, were the result of war and foreign intervention. And yet for all Soviet Russia's difficulties and shortcomings the revolution had already brought major improvements in the lives of the masses. Workers had gained access to education and the arts, dominated the instruments of government, and were taking control of factories and land. The common man, Olgin reported, "has come to the top. He is a new man. Everything is done in his name and for his welfare. In principle he is the master. He enjoys the fruit of the revolution, no matter how irksome his everyday existence may be."³⁶ Olgin assured readers that whatever mistakes the party made would soon be corrected. Bolsheviks, as he described them, were capable, persistent, principled, and resourceful.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the new man is intrepidity... His intrepidity is carried into the realm of practical affairs. The new man approaches unknown difficulties with a boldness and vigor which spell success. He assumes that there is nothing on earth or heaven that a man with general intelligence and great willingness cannot learn in a brief time. He does not refuse to occupy a position whose duties are foreign to him. He is convinced that what looks baffling at first sight will become clay under his hands upon nearer acquaintance. Sometimes he is

³⁴ For a thorough account of Olgin's trip, see Daniel Soyer, "Soviet Travel and the Making of an American Jewish Communist: Moissaye Olgin's Trip to Russia in 1920-1921," *American Communist History* 4, no. 1 (2005), 9. See footnote on Simon Solomon.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁶ Moissaye J. Olgin, "Mechanics of Power in Soviet Russia," *New Republic* (15 June 1921), 70.

mistaken. But he is difficult to dishearten. He would easily recognize an error, he would retract when need be—a trait closely related to the lack of obligations towards an all embracing and subtle theory—but he would not give up. The thing must be done at whatever cost—is his slogan.

It follows that the new man has an obstinacy unknown to the intelligentsia of the former period. His working capacity is larger. His endurance is equal to his physical strength. We call it self-sacrificing spirit. In his eyes it is work that must be done. Overtime after eight hours of crushing labor in the mills, late hours of exhausting activities in governmental departments, sleep in the mud of the fields at the front in warfare with the foreign invaders, travel in overcrowded, unclean box-cars on official errands, attendance at meetings and committee sessions in cold, unfriendly rooms after a day's fatiguing work, does not seem extraordinary to him and does not dismay him as it does the intellectual of the older style. The new man is of a stronger fibre.³⁷

Olgin depicted the Soviet “new man” as a veritable superman, quite unlike the fanatical demagogues of Olgin’s 1917 writings. Furthermore, Olgin had little sympathy for the government's left-wing opponents—the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries—who he characterized as pathetic losers, adrift without a viable program, base of support, or practical experience in government. They had removed themselves from the stage of history. In response to those who denounced the Bolsheviks’ one-party state, Olgin warned against the dangers posed by democracy during such a precarious period. Free elections would inevitably contribute to instability. The Bolsheviks had no choice, regrettably, but to suppress political freedom. It was rough business, but better to get one’s hands dirty, than stand aside helplessly, bitterly.³⁸

Olgin published a second series in the *Forverts* that differed significantly from his *New Republic* articles. Written in Yiddish, it reached an exclusively Jewish audience of more than 200,000 readers, who wanted to know as much as possible about the situation

³⁷ Moissaye J. Olgin, “The Type Which Rules Russia,” *The New Republic*, Sept. 28, 1921, pp. 133-135.

³⁸ Moissaye J. Olgin, “A Study in Dictatorship,” *New Republic* (29 June 1921), 132-137.

of Jews under Soviet rule. Olgin's series in the *Forverts* viewed the revolution from a Jewish perspective.³⁹ He acknowledged that Jews suffered from the suppression of private trade, but that they generally benefited from the revolution. First and foremost, the Red Army had rescued Jews from horrific violence, about which Olgin reported in some detail. He recounted the case of a 25-year-old man who had been snatched up by a group of soldiers, shot twice in the arm, tortured, ridiculed, and held captive for five days until he escaped.⁴⁰ In another incident, a woman had been taunted and beaten by a jeering crowd in a town square.

Beyond ensuring the physical survival of Jews, the revolution transformed Jewish cultural, economic, and communal life in positive ways, according to Olgin. In his profile of Orshe, a small city in White Russia, he hailed the reconstruction of its 20,000-member Jewish community. Yesterday's traders, shopkeepers, and bookkeepers had found a new sense of purpose in building socialism, he reported. Workers no longer had to suffer bosses. Jewish cultural life flourished. The city boasted a Jewish youth club, several Jewish children's homes, two evening schools for adults, two amateur Yiddish theater groups, a choir, and a workers' library in Yiddish. Remarkably, the government had opened a "people's university" in which literature was taught in the Yiddish language. Branches of the Bund and the Marxist-Zionist party, Poale Zion, continued to function, thereby indicating the survival of independent Jewish politics. And although a significant amount of antisemitic feeling persisted among the Gentile population, the government suppressed it. "We don't care if they like us," one man reportedly told Olgin, "we just

³⁹ Soyer, "Soviet Travel and the Making of an American Jewish Communist," 9-10.

⁴⁰ Olgin, "Olgin shildert di shreklehste pogrom-stsenes, vi a korbn hot es far im dertseylt," *Forverts* (15 May 1921).

want rights, equal rights."⁴¹ In an article titled "The Bolshevik Rabbi," Olgin described his visit to a *shul* in Minsk, where the rabbi delivered a Friday-evening sermon praising the government and urging members of the congregation to organize collective farms and factories. Even Orthodox Jews, readers of the *Forverts* were meant to understand, supported the Bolshevik revolution.⁴²

Among the notable aspects of Olgin's trip were meetings with old comrades who now occupied important positions in the Soviet government. Max Goldfarb was one such person. Goldfarb (b. Dovid Lipets) lived in New York City between 1912 and 1917, and knew Olgin well. The two former Bundists sat on the JSF's National Executive Committee and worked for the *Forverts*, in Goldfarb's case, as the labor editor. After the tsar's downfall in March 1917, Goldfarb returned to Russia. He became mayor of Berdichev and head of the city's Jewish communal body, but a pogrom in January 1919—the first openly planned and coordinated attack against Jews during the Civil War—caused Goldfarb to flee to Moscow. He joined the Bolsheviks, changed his last name to Petrovsky, and, by 1920, became director of the Red Army's officer training schools. He was one of thousands of Jews who flooded into the Soviet state apparatus during the early years of the revolution.

In Moscow, Olgin sought out Petrovsky, who gave him special treatment.⁴³ He arranged a car for him and invited Olgin to attend a graduation ceremony of young officers presided over by Petrovsky and the Red Army commander, Leon Trotsky, whom

⁴¹ Olgin, "A yidische shtot unter di Sovetn regirung," *Forverts* (9 July 1921).

⁴² Olgin, "A rov a Bolshevik halt a droshe in a Minsker shul," *Forverts* (11 Sept. 1921).

⁴³ Benjamin Schlessinger, "Five Weeks in Soviet Russia," pt. 4, *Justice*, Dec. 10, 1920, p. 3.

Olgin had met on a number of occasions in Europe and New York.⁴⁴ A dramatic moment in the ceremony came when a former tsarist general dismounted his horse and saluted Petrovsky and Trotsky as they inspected the troops. The scene impressed Olgin. There, in Red Square, stood a former pillar of the old regime now subordinated to a former Yiddish journalist, who had escaped a pogrom less than two years earlier.⁴⁵ And beside him stood Trotsky, an “outlaw Jew,” as Olgin described him, the most important Soviet leader after Lenin. At that moment, Olgin witnessed a world turned upside down. It was a scene that could only confirm the worst fears of anti-semites unwilling to distinguish between a Russia inclusive of Jews and one dominated by them. But a profound new reality had, indeed, come into being: anybody loyal to the revolution could play a role in building Soviet Russia.⁴⁶

Olgin’s report must have made a strong impression on readers. Petrovsky/Goldfarb and Trotsky were not faceless figures in some distant land, but, until recently, well known leaders in New York City. Although Trotsky professed no identification with the Jewish people (he famously told a reporter that he was neither a Jew nor a Russian, but a Social Democrat and only that), New York Jews had embraced Trotsky as one of their own. When Trotsky’s boat arrived in New York harbor a representative of the Hebrew

⁴⁴ Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed. Trotsky: 1879-1921, vol. 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), pp. 241-42; Moissaye J. Olgin, “Who Is Trotzky?” *Asia* (March 1918), p. 198. Levine,

⁴⁵ Olgin, “A parad fun royte soldatn in Moskve,” *Forverts* (2 June 1921). For recollections of the parade and Olgin’s visit, see Danyel Tsharni, *A yor tsendlik aza* (New York: 1943), 292-293. Abramovitch, *In tsvey revolutsyes*, p. 148. see Olgin, “A yid, Goldberg, komandevet iber hunderter rusishe generaln,” *Forverts* (23 April 1921); and Soyer, “Soviet Travel and the Making of an American Jewish Communist,” 17-18.

⁴⁶ Later in the decade, Goldfarb/Petrovsky was appointed head of the Comintern's Anglo-American secretariat, where he played a significant role in the formation of its policy on “the Negro Question.” He eventually changed his name again, to A.J. Bennet and served as a Comintern agent in England. See Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 168; Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917-1930* (Princeton: 1972); Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (Jackson, Miss.: 1998), 68-91.

Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society met him at the pier.⁴⁷ The *Forverts* greeted him with a front-page interview. The caption to his photograph read: “This is Comrade Trotsky. The Russian-Jewish revolutionary driven from all of Europe because of his revolutionary ideas.” The reception held in his honor at Cooper Union featured speeches by leading intellectuals, including none other than Max Goldfarb.⁴⁸ The *Forverts*, *Di tsukunft*, and *Di naye velt* published his articles in Yiddish translation.⁴⁹ He also wrote regularly for the Russian-language weekly, *Novi Mir*, and took an active role in the Socialist Party’s Russian Socialist Federation, alongside other future Soviet leaders, Nikolai Bukharin and Alexandra Kollantai.⁵⁰ In cafes, lecture halls, and public parks (the northeastern corner of Central Park was dubbed “Trotsky Square” by Harlem socialists) frequented by Jews, Trotsky had “a large and responsive audience,” to quote *Outlook* magazine.⁵¹ His powerful oratory was legendary. “He is always on the aggressive,” Olgin wrote in 1918. “He is full of passion,—that white-heated, vibrating mental passion that characterizes the intellectual Jew.” “This relaxed and reflective man,” one memoirist recalls, “became a pyrotechnic orator when he mounted a platform before an audience. His hands would shoot into the air. He would pivot from foot to foot. His voice, at one

⁴⁷ “Expelled from Four Lands,” *New York Times*, Jan. 15, 1917, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Jan. 16, 1917, *Forverts*, p. 1; “A geshprekh mit genose Trotski,” *ibid.*, p. 5; “Donershtik der kaboles punim far Gen. Trotski,” *Forverts*, Jan. 23, 1917, p. 1.

⁴⁹ In its interview, the *Forverts* stated, probably without full regard for the truth, that Trotsky could understand Yiddish fairly well, but not read or write it. The *Forverts* hired him and he wrote for the newspaper until an argument with Cahan over the war ended their relationship. “Genose Trotski’s artikln in ‘Forverts,’” *Forverts*, Jan. 30, 1917, p. 4; “Fun unzer post,” *Forverts*, March 8, 1917, p. 7; Dovid Shub, *Fun di amolike yorn*. On Trotsky’s Jewish upbringing, see Joshua Rubenstein, *Leon Trotsky: A Revolutionary’s Life* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2011), pp. 1-24.

⁵⁰ Ian D. Thatcher, “Leon Trotsky in New York City,” *Historical Research: The Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, vol. 69, no. 169 (June 1996): 106-180. For English translations of Trotsky’s articles published in *Novi Mir*, see Trotsky’s Reflections on the Russian Revolution from New York, *Journal of Trotsky Studies*, 1, 1993: 95-122.

⁵¹ August Claessens, *Didn’t We Have Fun! Stories out of a Long, Fruitful, and Merry Life* (New York: The Rand School Press, 1953), p. 89; Henry Moskowitz, “Trotsky on the East Side,” *Outlook*, Jan. 30, 1918, p. 181.

moment soothing, would suddenly shriek with indignation and his whole body would tremble. Then, suddenly composed, he would be soulful and lugubrious.”⁵² Thus Leon Trotsky’s ascendancy from the streets of immigrant New York to the height of power in Moscow contained symbolic importance to Jews, for he embodied the revolution’s possibilities. “Leon Trotsky—a few months ago he lived in a poor apartment not far from my street in the Bronx,” the Hebrew writer, Rueben Brainin, recorded in his diary in November 1917. “He made ten dollars a week working for *Novi Mir*. And, behold, today he is the foreign minister of Russia and he stands at the head of government in that country.”⁵³

In the *Forverts* and *The New Republic*, Olgin hailed the arrival of the future, but what about the Jewish past? Six years of expulsions and slaughter had obliterated Jewish communities throughout the old Pale of Settlement. Olgin witnessed some of the devastation with his own eyes, which must have taken an emotional toll. A booklet he published after his return to New York, an elegy to his hometown, entitled *Mayn shtetl in Ukrayne*, reflected the depth of his grief, though not in a straightforward way. Olgin did not, in fact, grow up in a town (*shtetl*), but a tiny village (*dorf*) in a forest where few Jews resided. He noted this fact in the booklet’s final chapter, but without explanation.⁵⁴

True, Olgin lived in a shtetl during his late teenage years, before he moved to Kiev, but only briefly, a fact he failed to mention. Equally strange, Olgin identified “his” shtetl by the initial “B,” but the name of the shtetl where he lived was named Rogachev. Did Olgin

⁵² Olgin, “Who Is Trotzky?” p. 195; Maurice L. Malkin, *Return to My Father’s House*, ed. Charles W. Wiley (Arlington House: New Rochelle, NY), p. 50.

⁵³ Ruben Brainin, *Kol kitvei Reuben Ben Morecai Breinin*, Vol. 3, (New York: Ha-va’ad le-hotsa’at kol kitvey Rueben Ben-Mordecai Brainin, 1940), p. 322.

⁵⁴ In a posthumously published memoir and his biographical entry in the *Lexicon of Yiddish writers*, based on information provided by Olgin, he again stated that he was born in a dorf, not a shtetl.

write about a real place or paint a composite portrait of what he imagined shtetl life to have been? To what extent did he base his account on his own life or draw from other sources? Was *Mayn shtetl in Ukrayne* fiction or fact?

Historical context may help clarify matters. Four years before the publication of *Mayn shtetl in Ukrayne*, a Yiddish writer, a colleague of Olgin's, named A. S. Zaks published a tribute to the *shtetlakh* of Lithuania entitled *Khoreve veltn* (Worlds in ruin). Zaks wished to create a literary monument, to the Jewish communities of Lithuania destroyed by war and wholesale expulsions. "As we write these lines," Zaks noted, "the news which arrives from the battle fields, where the fate of nations is being determined, is not entirely happy for us Jews. With shuffling of the political cards in Europe Jewish life becomes torn apart, broken to pieces, shredded to bits, and who knows if the separated parts will be able to grow back together in one whole organism?" At a moment when the very future of the Jewish people stood in jeopardy, Zaks wished to pay tribute to the traditional Jewish way of life, which, had actually been eroding since the mid-nineteenth century, but was now marked for death. Zaks was well aware of the irony of his project. He had broken with the traditional Judaism of his parents back in the 1890s when he joined the Bund. A Marxist and a social scientist, Zaks had no use for religion. Yet the war prompted a reassessment. He now saw much of value in the old ways. "Many customs from the old fashioned Jewish way life were infused with a certain grace, with a certain sympathy, and no civilization, no culture, can replace them"⁵⁵ The old Judaism was not all darkness and backwardness. It contained values that were in some way exemplary. Zaks' book undertook to capture that world for posterity.

⁵⁵ A. S. Zaks, *Khoreve veltn*, second edition, (New York: Literarishe Farlag, 1918), p. 8.

Horeve veltn resonated with American Jewish readers. The first edition sold out several thousand copies within eight months and immediately went into a second printing. An expanded English-language edition appeared a decade later under the softer, insipid title, *Worlds that Passed*. The leading Yiddish literary critic and historian, Shmuel Niger, credited *Khoreve veltn* with opening “a whole new chapter” in modern Yiddish literature: memoirs commemorating the lost world of European Jewry.⁵⁶

Khoreve veltn signaled an enduring cultural phenomenon among American Jews. In response to the calamities of the First World and the Russian Civil War, American Jews increasingly commemorated “the shtetl” in the form of memoirs, memorial books, literary works, and public ceremonies. The Yiddish literary scholar, David Roskies, has described this as a “secular covenant” in which those who had long ago lost their religious faith invested the shtetl with quasi-sacred meaning. “The place of the shtetl in the self-understanding of millions of American Jews now became fixed for all time,” Roskies writes of the post-World War I era. “The shtetl was reclaimed as the place of common origin (*even when it wasn’t*—emphasis added), the source of a collective folk identity rooted in a particular historical past and, most importantly, as the locus of a new, secular, covenant.”⁵⁷ In the face of catastrophe, American Jews forged a new emotional bond with Eastern Europe, in which the shtetl—previously synonymous with economic stagnation and cultural backwardness in the minds of socialists and Jewish modernizers

⁵⁶ Sh. Niger, “A. S. Zaks’ *Khoreve veltn*,” in B. Ts. Goldberg, ed., *Shtudyas in sotsyaler visnshaft: lekoved dem fuftsikstn geburts-tog fun A. S. Zaks* (New York: Farlag Yidisher Lerer-Seminar, 1930), p. 32; Dr. Herman Frank, *A. S. Zaks: Kemfer far folks-oyfhebung* (New York: A. S. Zaks Gezelshaft, 1945), pp. 200-17.

⁵⁷ David G. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*, (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1999), p. 57. On literary responses to pogroms during World War I and the Russian Civil War, see David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 101-132. Roskies writes, “Never before had the memory of past destruction resurfaced with so much force as during the Ukrainian civil war of 1918-19, for no other area of eastern Europe was so steeped in Jewish calamity.” (p. 101).

of all sorts—was now seen as a wellspring of Jewish civilization, cruelly torn at the roots by external forces. Roskies’ insight helps to explain why Olgin felt compelled to eulogize a place where he may or may not have lived and that may or may not have existed.

Olgin, unlike Zaks, did not state explicitly his purpose in writing *Mayn shtetl in Ukrayne*, but he set an elegiac tone at the outset. “Ukraine, Ukraine! You were such a beautiful home, such a happy corner. What have you made of all of us? What are we to you?” Olgin made no attempt to capture shtetl life in its entirety. Whereas Zaks’ sociological memoir presented finely grained descriptions of communal institutions, formal religious practices, social and economic relations, and intra-communal politics, *Mayn shtetl in Ukrayne* conveyed what Olgin felt was the essential spirit of the shtetl: the ordinary folk. Elites are almost entirely absent in Olgin’s rendering, as are social conflicts, and less than admirable human qualities. He describes a world rich in values and traditions: respect for learning over wealth, an ethos of mutual responsibility, genuine piety, humor, an appreciation of simple beauty.⁵⁸ His account was sentimental and nostalgic in the extreme. From today’s vantage point, it comes across as a send-up of the saccharine sentiment toward eastern Europe familiar since *Fiddler on the Roof*, but Olgin’s mawkishness was sincere. In a chapter entitled “Artists, Singers, Performers, Musicians, Poets, Olgin stated baldly, “My shtetl loved beauty. My shtetl longed for such people who could pry us from the mundane, everyday life. My shtetl respected and valued Sabbath festiveness” In another chapter, “Happy Occasions,” he writes, “In my shtetl, we danced and sang, it seems, more than in other Jewish towns.” “At circumcision

⁵⁸ M. Olgin, *Mayn shtetl in Ukrayne* (New York: M. Gurevitch Farlag, 1921).

rituals and weddings, the Jews gathered, and beamed, and their eyes sparkled. Rich and poor Jews celebrated together. But they didn't wait for major occasions. They used to celebrate just as much on the Sabbath." Olgin's shtetl was a humble community filled with good, honest, people.⁵⁹ His nostalgic tribute reflected nothing of his Marxist worldview, and the same was true of *Khoreve veltn*. Neither showed major internal divisions or conflicts (quite unlike Soviet historical scholarship produced during the 1920s). "In my shtetl we did everything together," Olgin claimed. "We were one big family."⁶⁰ Olgin and Zaks suspended their Marxism when looking backward, but did not discard it otherwise. The catastrophe not spur a return to religion, but impelled a commitment to Bolshevism. Their sadness led them to see in the Bolshevik revolution salvation for the Jews. Their pro-Bolshevism, in this sense, was as much a political expression of Jewish emotion and grief, as it was Marxist commitment.

Olgin Becomes a Communist

Olgin returned to the United State thoroughly enchanted by Soviet Russia, but he still did not wish to join the Communist party, which he had not stopped thinking of as a deluded sect. The prospect of revolution in the United States had grown more remote than ever in 1921. The post-war strikes had subsided and the Communist insurrections in Germany and Hungary were crushed. What point was there in maintaining a clandestine organization? At the same time, Olgin became increasingly frustrated by and critical of the Socialist Party. The party, decimated by the Left Wing rebellion, showed few signs of life. Salutsky called it a "rotting corpse." Olgin and Salutsky implored their fellow Socialists to join the Communist International, which they believed could invigorate their

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 17, 31.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 34.

party with a badly needed fighting spirit. When their efforts failed and the Socialist Party declined to apply for admission, Olgin and Salutsky called on the JSF to break from the Socialist Party, which it elected to do during a special convention in early September. In response the *Forverts* promptly fired Olgin and other staff writers who voted in favor of the split. Over the following three months, the JSF dwelled in the political wilderness until an opportunity arose that would result in a merger with the Communist Party.⁶¹

In the fall of 1921, the Comintern concluded that revolution was no longer an immediate prospect in the United States and, on that basis, ordered the American Communist party to create a new, aboveground party in alliance with non-Communists. This provided an opening to the JSF and like-minded organizations that had broken with the Socialist Party over the previous two years, but had not wanted to join the Communist Party. Olgin and Salutsky represented the JSF at the negotiating table. Olgin was amenable, but as the negotiations proceeded, Salutsky came to suspect the Communists of acting in bad faith. He believed the party had no intention of creating a truly independent party, but rather aimed to dominate the proposed new party. Shortly before an agreement was reached, Salutsky called a meeting in Olgin's apartment to convince the other non-Communists to back out of the proposed merger. However, neither Olgin nor most of the others present could be persuaded. According to Salutsky's retrospective account, Olgin viewed a merger with the Communists as a means to remain connected to Soviet Russia. "What the hell do you want with this business?" Salutsky claims to have asked Olgin during the negotiations. "I want to be free to come to Russia," was Olgin's

⁶¹ For more detailed accounts, see Y. Sh. Herts, *Di yidishe sotsyalistishe bavegung in Amerike* (New York: 1954), 188-198; Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, Mass.: 2005), 228-238.

reply.⁶² Salutsky went along with Olgin and the majority of other non-Communist delegates; it seemed too late to turn back.

Olgin and Salutsky led the JSF into a new organization, named the Workers Party, which was supposed to be independent of the underground Communist party. Although affiliated with the Comintern, the WP was not designated as its official representative in the United States (that status was reserved for the underground Communist Party). Olgin did not define himself as a Communist at the time of the merger. He was what Communists derisively called a "Centrist," that is, someone who had taken the correct step of aligning with the Communists, but was not yet willing to go all the way and convert to Communism. Whatever their differences, Olgin believed that Centrists and Communists could cooperate in order to achieve shared goals. In a pamphlet published in early 1922, he promised readers that the Workers Party would not be the Communist party under a new name. There could be no room for an underground, conspiratorial party in the United States, he wrote. As long as the social revolution remained a distant prospect, the WP would play primarily an educational role, propagating a militant brand of socialism so as to prepare workers for their historic task. The party's newly created Jewish Federation would ensure a "pure, sustainable, serious spirit in the Jewish labor movement" by fighting against the "cheap, watered-down, formless, hurrah-socialism" espoused by the *Forverts* and other "official socialists" who led the movement.⁶³

Olgin's pamphlet neglected to mention several important details that would suggest his optimism was premature. He failed to acknowledge that a delicate balance of power

⁶² Transcribed interview with J.B.S. Hardman (Salutsky) (23 June 1962), 58, Tamiment, J.B.S. Hardman Collection, box 38, folder F-399.

⁶³ M. Olgin, *A proletarische politishe partey* (New York: Farlag fun der Yidisher Sotsyalistisher Federatsye, 1922), 61.

existed within the WP and its Jewish Federation. The federation was governed by an 18-member executive committee divided equally between Communists and Centrists. This deprived Olgin's camp a free hand in organizational affairs, contrary to what his pamphlet implied. As long as the power-sharing arrangement held, the Centrists needed to secure the assent of the Communists. Furthermore, Communists were allocated a slight majority of seats on the WP's Central Executive Committee (CEC), so that they controlled the party as a whole, thereby strengthening the position of Communists inside the Jewish Federation.

A final problem ignored by Olgin was the relationship of the underground Communist party to the WP. Olgin and Salutsky expected the Communist Party to dissolve itself altogether after the establishment of the WP, so that the latter would supersede the former. Yet it soon became clear that the Communists intended to maintain the underground party ("Number One," as they called it), which would secretly control the Workers Party ("Number Two"). In Bittelman's words, the WP would function, not as an independent party, but as the "transmission apparatus between the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat [the Communist party] and its less conscious and as yet non-revolutionary masses."⁶⁴ The historian Theodore Draper maintains that Olgin and Salutsky were aware of the Communists' intentions when they agreed to the merger, but this seems unlikely.⁶⁵ Both men had always opposed the existence of an underground party and would continue to do so after the foundation of the Workers Party. It seems more likely that Olgin and Salutsky were given reason to believe that the underground party would soon be dissolved, although no formal promise had been made. In any case,

⁶⁴ Alexander Bittelman quoted in Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 174.

⁶⁵ Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, 449, n. 23.

the status of the underground party was left unresolved at the time of the merger in December 1921. Olgin evidently believed that differences of opinion between the Communist and non-Communist camps would be worked out amicably and that Communists would honor the terms of the merger.

By the middle of 1922, it became apparent that the Communists had no intention of dissolving the underground party or respecting the power-sharing arrangement within the Workers Party. Arguments between Communists and Centrists consumed the Jewish Federation. The Communists' strategy, dictated by the party leadership, was to propagate their ideas until they wore out or coopted the Centrists. The Communists believed that they would win sooner or later given their dominant position in the Workers Party. Gaining control of the Jewish Federation and its daily newspaper, *Di frayhayt*, was deemed of utmost importance by the Communist Party leadership. The Jewish Federation was among the largest foreign-language federations in the Workers Party (and one of the most resistant to Communist domination), but it served as a gateway to the mass-based Jewish labor organizations, and through them the larger American trade-union movement. In a report to the Comintern, the Communist Party's Central Executive Committee stated, "We consider this fight in the Jewish movement an absolute condition for the development of our influence among other sections of the organized working class; for to be beaten in this fight may mean complete extermination of our forces from the Jewish labor unions which will undoubtedly diminish our chances of progress in other labor unions." At the time this report was sent in October 1921, the Communists did not believe the time was yet ripe for a "decisive battle" with the Centrists. Its strategy was to abide by the original power-sharing arrangement established in December 1921 "until

such a time when Communist ideas have taken a stronger hold upon the advanced section of the Jewish workers.”

The battle between Centrists, led by Olgin and Salutsky, and Communists, led by Bittelman, raged through the fall. Tensions came to a head in October, when three members of the Jewish Federation's executive committee defected from the Communist faction, thus tipping the balance of power in favor of the Centrists. Bittelman's group demanded a return to the *status quo ante* but Olgin's side refused. Bittelman and the executive committee's other five Communists resigned in protest and enlisted the support of the Workers Party's highest authority, the Central Executive Committee. Controlled by the Communists, the CEC naturally ruled in favor of Bittelman's faction. It demanded not only restoration of the lost seats to the Communist faction, but also the installation of a representative to be selected by the CEC. Furthermore, the CEC ordered the Jewish Federation to turn over half of *Di frayhayt's* ownership to the Workers Party. Communists had faulted *Di frayhayt*, a first-class literary newspaper, for paying too much attention to Yiddish culture, allegedly at the expense of working-class interests. "The struggle against the Forward," according to Bittelman, "must be ... on the basis of communist principles. We fight the Forward not merely and mainly because it is not a decent literary paper, but because it serves the reactionary and socially treacherous union bureaucracy."⁶⁶ A proper Communist paper, according to Bittelman, should not seek to advance Yiddish culture but rather function as the Yiddish mouthpiece of the party.⁶⁷

The Jewish Federation was scheduled to decide who should control *Di frayhayt* and the Jewish Federation at its national convention scheduled for December 20. As the

⁶⁶ Quoted in Melech Epstein, *The Jew and Communism, 1919-1941* (New York: 1959), 108.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 100-112; Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 244-246.

convention approached, the Jewish Federation came under intense pressure to comply with the CEC's ruling. The December 9 issue of *The Worker*, the party's English-speaking organ, published a statement by the CEC condemning Olgin and his allies for disrupting party unity.⁶⁸ A week later, all of the party's foreign language federations, which represented some 90 percent of the total party membership, published a statement in *The Worker* criticizing the Jewish Federation for disrupting party unity. None other than the Comintern's Secretary, Grigorii Zinoviev, wired a cable ordering the Jewish Federation to obey the CEC. "We decisively condemn [the] frivolous breach of discipline against [the] Central Committee of the Workers Party," Zinoviev wrote. "We request [that] all Jewish branches and members carry out decisions of [the] Central Committee ... to reestablish unity[,] otherwise [the] Central Committee [will] have to carry out energetically immediate disciplinary measures against leaders of revolt."⁶⁹ The Comintern and the entire Workers Party stood against the Jewish Federation.

As late as December 19, Olgin and his negotiating partner, George Vishnak, refused to back down. Yet, at the last minute, they relented. They agreed to restore the balance of power on the Jewish Federation's executive committee, to allow Bittelman to assume leadership of the federation, and to turn over full ownership of *Di frayhayt* -- not merely 50 percent, as originally demanded -- to the Workers Party.⁷⁰ It is not clear what happened behind closed doors. Melech Epstein, a member of the Communist faction at the time, later claimed that Olgin was bought off by the promise of sole editorship of *Di frayhayt*. Another factor influencing Olgin's decision may have been the Communist

⁶⁸ Statement by the Central Executive Committee of the Workers' Party, *The Worker* (9 Dec. 1922), Tamiment, Noah London Collection.

⁶⁹ Zinoviev to Ruthenberg, n/d, Tamiment, reel 8, delo 147).

⁷⁰ "Conditions of Agreement" (signed by Olgin, Vishnak, and six others), Tamiment, reel 17, delo 115; Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 238-248.

party's recent decision, on Comintern orders, to dissolve itself as an underground organization and merge fully into the Workers Party. Considering that the existence of the underground party had been one of Olgin's chief grievances, the Comintern's decision may have made Olgin more amenable to the WP's Central Executive Committee's demands.

Whatever motivated Olgin, his concessions did not stop the infighting. Factional struggles continued into 1923, as Communists and Centrists jockeyed for position inside the Workers Party. The fighting grew so fierce within the Jewish Federation that Olgin threw up his hand and quit *Di frayhayt* in the spring. The Workers Party's CEC installed a new editor, Benjamin Gitlow, to supervise *Di frayhayt* and to make sure it would be "more working class" and "less devoted to literary affairs." An American-born Jew, Gitlow was "not at home in the Yiddish language and had no qualifications as a writer in this field," in the words of Communist leader James Cannon.⁷¹ Gitlow was instructed, as he himself writes in his memoir, to "watch over every line the writers wrote, give attention to the raising of money ... and convince the membership [of the Jewish Federation] that the paper was not being destroyed through the changes made by the Central Executive Committee of the Party." Thus *Di frayhayt*, a newspaper regarded for its high literary standards, passed into the hands of a "commissar" who had little knowledge of, or regard for, Yiddish.⁷²

One might wonder why Olgin did not quit the Workers Party altogether in 1923. He had already resigned from *Di frayhayt* -- and by this time, the Workers Party had fallen under full Communist control. Before the year was over, the party relinquished any

⁷¹ James Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism: Report of a Participant* (New York: 1962), 108.

⁷² Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess* (New York: 1940), 160.

pretense of political independence and had become recognized by the Comintern as its "official section" in the United States. Centrists were co-opted, expelled, or resigned from the party. Tsivion, for instance, quit and returned to the *Forverts*.⁷³ Not long afterward, Salutsky was expelled for violating party discipline. Under the name J.B.S. Hardman, Salutsky started an English-language magazine, the *American Labor Monthly*, and continued to serve as the educational director of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.⁷⁴ Yet Olgin chose to remain loyal to the Workers Party and defined himself henceforth as a Communist without reservation or qualification. He did not make a dramatic final decision but assumed gradually a new political identity as he came to accept Communist control of the Workers Party.

Why did Olgin take that small, but important, final step toward Communism? The question can be answered, in part, by considering Olgin's options. Tsivion's path back to the *Forverts* could not have appealed to Olgin, as it would have required pleading for forgiveness from Cahan and accepting a subordinate position under his notoriously imperious editorship. Assuming Cahan would have permitted Olgin's return, this would have involved an embarrassing loss of status for Olgin. A respected intellectual with a doctorate from a prestigious university, Olgin could have only cringed at the thought of returning to the *Forverts*, where he would have little hope of ever becoming its editor-in-chief. At the same time, he could not have considered Salutsky's turn to English-language journalism a desirable choice. Whereas Salutsky harbored no special affection for

⁷³ Dr. B. Hofman [Tsivion], *Komunistn vos hobn oyfgegesn komunizm* (New York: 1923); idem, *Far 50 yor* (New York: 1948), 335-346; Tsivion to Olgin, n.d., Bund Archives, ME-40; Cahan to Tsivion, 29 Oct. 1923, *ibid.*

⁷⁴ In December 1922, Salutsky had invited Olgin to join the *American Labor Monthly*, but Olgin wished to evaluate the "tone" of the magazine before accepting the invitation. See Olgin to Salutsky, 28 Dec. 1922, **Tamiment [any other file information? IT'S IN THE J. B. S. HARDMAND COLLECTION, BOX 3, FOLDER 5.]**

Yiddish, Olgin loved the language too much to abandon it. Thus Olgin's attachment to Yiddish kept him from moving completely to the English press, while his own status as an intellectual leader, achieved in part by his English-language journalism, prevented him from returning to a second-rung position at the *Forverts*.

Furthermore, had Olgin quit the Workers Party, he would have necessarily severed a direct link to Soviet Russia, an unthinkable sacrifice. Whatever frustration he might have felt toward the Workers Party, Olgin had lost none of his ardor for the Russian Revolution, "the greatest event in the history of the working class and in the history of the world."⁷⁵ Olgin understood that if he wanted to stay directly connected to Soviet Russia, he needed to remain a member of the Workers Party. Standing on the outside as a sympathizer would not do. During his first trip to Soviet Russia, Olgin had witnessed firsthand the sad fate of anti-Bolshevik revolutionaries -- some of them former friends and comrades -- who had been swept aside by events. Olgin did not want to end up like them, as he had made clear in his articles for the *Forverts* and the *New Republic*.⁷⁶ Not only was he a true believer in the revolution, but his status in the party's upper echelon rested on his expertise in Russian affairs, for instance, as editor of the party's Russian-language daily, *Novi Mir*, and as American correspondent for *Izvestia*. And, unlike Salutsky/Hardman, Olgin could not count on an institutional base of support outside of the Workers Party. He had no union position waiting for him. If Olgin wanted to be "free to come to Russia," as he reputedly told Salutsky in 1921, he needed to stay with the Workers Party. This benefit would be confirmed in 1924 when Olgin was sent to

⁷⁵ Moissaye J. Olgin, "The Mad Dog of Menshevism," English trans. of an article appearing in the American, Russian-language Communist daily *Novi Mir*, dated 27 Jan. 1925, Tamiment, reel 21, delo 365.

⁷⁶ Olgin, "Di umgliklekhe 'Menshevikes'," *Forverts* (30 May 1921); Soyer, "Soviet Travel and the Making of an American Jewish Communist," 18-19.

Moscow as a delegate to the Comintern's fifth congress. Four years earlier, Olgin had traveled to Soviet Russia as a sympathetic reporter; now he returned in an official capacity to deliberate Comintern policy with revolutionaries from around the world. The contrast could not have been lost on Olgin, who surely relished his new role.⁷⁷

Finally, and perhaps most important, Olgin's move to Communism should be viewed against the backdrop of developments outside the party. By 1923, Communists had gained much ground in the Jewish labor movement's major organizations. They formed a powerful bloc, known as *Di linke* (the Left), which flourished beyond the narrow precincts of the Workers Party. *Di linke* consisted of two main elements. One comprised post-1905 immigrants (mostly, but not only, former Bundists like Olgin and Bittelman), who founded the first Jewish Communist organizations between 1919 and 1922. The other, perhaps larger, element was made up of young immigrants who came to the United States in the years immediately following the First World War. A significant number of the postwar immigrants -- who totaled 250,000 between 1919 and 1924 -- had been active in Russian Jewish revolutionary parties, especially the Bund and Poale Zion or their respective youth organizations. Others came without political affiliations but had been radicalized during the years of war, revolution, and pogroms.⁷⁸ Great admirers of the Bolsheviks, the new arrivals came in a mood of revolutionary fervor. In their eyes, the established Jewish socialist and labor organizations appeared staid and bureaucratic, a perception shared by some Socialist party stalwarts shared.⁷⁹ Few adherents of *Di Linke*

⁷⁷ With regard to Olgin's trip, Melech Epstein writes: "The men in the Kremlin knew Olgin from the time of their exile abroad, and Zinoviev and the others took him in hand. Highly flattered by the special attention of the mighty, Olgin returned a faithful toer of the line." Epstein, *The Jew and Communism*, 119.

⁷⁸ Epstein, *The Jew and Communism*, 197-201; Kenneth Kann, *Joe Rapoport: The Life of a Jewish Radical* (Philadelphia: 1981), 20-87; Max Perlov, "A tsurikblik tsu di tsvantsiker yorn," *Di pen* 4 (1994), 23-26; Yankev Rot, *Tsvishn sotsyalizm un tsienizm* (Tel Aviv: 1996), 131-157.

⁷⁹ Thus, Nokhum Khanin, leader of the Socialist Party's Yiddish section, conceded, "We have ceased

actually joined the Workers Party, but *linkistn*, or leftists, looked to the party for leadership and joined myriad organizations founded by party members.⁸⁰ Within *Di linke*, Communists defined the discursive terrain, operated as a disciplined group, and could always invoke the authority and prestige of Moscow when needed. Yet *Di linke* formed a broad enough arena to accommodate various elements: Communists, Bundists, Marxist-Zionists, Yiddishists and, in the words of one Yiddish cultural activist in Chicago, those "searching for ... a spiritual roof over their heads."⁸¹

Di linke found its strongest base of support in the garment unions, in particular the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. In the ILGWU's 1924 election, *Di linke* won control of three New York locals, which comprised a remarkable 70 percent of the union's membership in that city. In the following year, it gained control of the New York Cloak Makers Joint Board, a stronghold of ILGWU membership. (*Di linke* would be largely defeated within the ILGWU by 1927, after it badly mishandled the cloakmakers strikes of the previous year, but its demise could not have been predicted just a year earlier.) *Di linke* also won full control of the Furriers Union, and it made additional gains in locals of other important unions.⁸² Within the *Arbeter Ring* fraternal

thinking of ourselves as leaders of a great people's movement. We have become practical businessmen ... We have thought we could achieve everything with a little money and that inspiring the masses is superfluous. We have ceased being the center around which people could warm themselves, and therefore people have turned away from us. We have been left to ourselves. I maintain that Communism or Communist influence among Jewish workers is a protest against our coldness, a protest against our 'practicality' The masses have seen in the Communist movement an idealistic, sincere, relationship to the workers and their struggles." N[okhum]. Khanin, quoted in Herts, *Di yidishe sotsyalistishe bavegung in Amerike*, 264.

⁸⁰ In the 1924 presidential election, for instance, the Poale Zion-Left created a formal alliance with the Workers Party. Minutes of General Executive Committee (WP), 9 July 1924, Tamiment, reel 18, delo 276; Minutes of Executive Council (WP), 29 Sept. 1924, *ibid.*, reel 20, delo 303; M. Bzshoza to Central Executive Committee (WP), 5 Oct. 1924, *ibid.*, reel 25, delo 389; Workers Party of America, Decisions of the CEC, 6 Oct. 1924, *ibid.*, reel 24, delo 365.

⁸¹ *Dos naye vort* 2 (Nov. 1924), 9 (Tamiment reel 25, delo 390).

⁸² Epstein, *The Jew and Communism*, 122-143; J.B.S. Hardman, "The Needle-Trades Unions," *Social Research* 27, no. 3 (Autumn 1960), 342-343; Nadel, "Reds Versus Pinks," 60-61.

order, linkistn seized control of 26 out of some 30 Yiddish children's schools in New York, the Arbeter Ring center in Harlem, and the Kinderland summer camp. Linkistn also controlled 64 Arbeter Ring branches with a membership of about 7,000 and were influential in many others. Eventually, in 1930, members of Di linke would break away from the Arbeter Ring to form the rival International Workers Order.⁸³

While linkistn threatened to overturn the established leadership in the Jewish labor movement, they also formed dozens of new organizations with a strong cultural bent. In the Bronx, there was the Young Workers Union of Writers, which sponsored literary readings and lectures on literature and art in addition to publishing a successful journal called *Yung kuznye*, and ultimately evolved into the proletarian writers association known as *Proletpen*.⁸⁴ Readers of *Di frayhayt* formed a Yiddish choir, the Frayhayt Gezangs Fareyn, numbering 288 members in New York alone (other branches were established in a number of other cities, including New Haven, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Newark, Cleveland, Toronto, and Montreal).⁸⁵ The Arbeter Teater Klub, an amateur Yiddish theater group, offered lessons in theater history, organized group discussions and, in 1925, spearheaded the creation of the Arbeter Teater Farband (ARTEF), representing 133 organizations.⁸⁶ In that year, Communists also founded the Jewish Workers' University for the purpose of developing a "Jewish workers' intelligentsia." The school offered a two-year curriculum (three for teachers) in "general sciences and problems of the labor movement" that included courses in Jewish history, the Yiddish

⁸³ Epstein, *The Jew and Communism*, 144-150; Liebman, *Jews and the Left*, 310-321.

⁸⁴ Perlov, "A tsurikblick tsu di tsvantsiker yorn," 25-26; Dovid Katz, "Introduction," in *Proletpen: America's Rebel Yiddish Poets*, ed. Amelia Glaser and David Weintraub, trans. Amelia Glaser (Madison: 2005), 3-29.

⁸⁵ *Frayhayt gezang fareyn un mandalin orkester* (Dec. 1924), YIVO, RG 1400, box 6A, folder 13; *Gezang un kamf: yorbukh fun dem yidishn muzikalishn arbeter farband* (1928), *ibid.*, box 7, folder 17.

⁸⁶ Edna Nahshon, *Yiddish Proletarian Theatre: The Art and Politics of the ARTEF, 1925-1940* (Westport, Conn.: 1998), 13-58.

language, and Yiddish literature. Three hundred students were enrolled as of 1927.⁸⁷ There were many other Communist-oriented initiatives, groups, and organizations: art centers, workers clubs, summer camps, a cooperative housing venture in the Bronx, an agency to support Jewish colonization in the Soviet Russia, and so on. Much of what was fresh and energetic in American Yiddish culture during the 1920s occurred within the realm of Di linke.

Di linke provided an expansive organizational and social framework congenial to Olgin. The Workers Party may have been small and faction-ridden, but Di linke was large and effective. As a writer, cultural activist, educator, and political spokesman, Olgin found an enthusiastic reception within Di linke, an arena where he could pursue his love of Yiddish culture and radical politics while remaining connected to the party and Moscow. There he would remain until his death.

Conclusion

Olgin's path to Communism was in many particulars unique to this highly accomplished intellectual. Even so, his evolution reflected a larger experience: that of immigrant radicals, mostly former members of the Bund, whose dual commitments to Marxism and Yiddish cultural nationalism led them toward Communism at its formative moment during a period of crisis. Some, such Bittelman, embraced Communism in a sudden conversion prompted by the Communist International. A larger number, represented by Olgin, gradually redefined themselves as Communists as their ardor for Bolshevism intensified for reasons that had to with events in Russia and the internal politics of immigrant Jews in the United States. Jewish Communists arrived at Communism for considerably different reasons than those of non-Jewish Jews. Like their

⁸⁷ *Ershter friling yontef: Yidisher arbeter univerzitet* (April 1927), YIVO, RG 1400, box 11, folder 34.

gentile comrades, Jewish Communists hailed the Bolshevik revolution as the greatest event in human history and celebrated Soviet Russia as the world's first workers' republic. Yet they also had additional, specifically Jewish, reasons to embrace Communism. As they saw it, Jewish Communists believed that the Bolshevik government provided sweeping solutions to urgent Jewish problems, starting with the very survival of the Jewish people. The mass slaughter of Jews by counter-revolutionary forces convinced many immigrants in the United States that the Bolsheviks' triumph was an existential necessity. Immigrant Jews were also greatly encouraged by the fact that Bolsheviks outlawed anti-semitism, granted national rights to Jews, and embarked on a full-scale reconstruction of the social, economic, and cultural life of Russian Jews. Thus, Jewish Communists—as well as many as those who were not Communists—connected the well being of the Jewish people to Soviet Russia. Turning to domestic issues, Jewish Communists considered Communism a force for reinvigorating Yiddish culture in the United States, not to mention American socialism and the labor movement as a whole. To put it simply: Jewish Communists considered themselves both Jews and revolutionaries, and believed the Communist Party and Soviet Russia offered the best way to combine those two commitments.

The essential aspect of the history of Jewish Communism may be described as the history of men and women attempting to reconcile their ethnic and revolutionary commitments. These dual commitments coincided at certain points in time, such as the early years of the Russian revolution, but diverged at others in accordance with shifting and sometimes contradictory Communist policies. This made for a highly fraught relationship between Jews and Communism. It was a relationship rendered all the more

intense by the high level of expectation Jews invested in Soviet Russia and the life-and-death matters at stake during war time. Recurring cycles of expectation and disappointment, hope and betrayal, illusion and realization would play themselves out over the decades within both the Communist movement and the Jewish community.