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### THE JEW AND SOVIET LITERATURE

#### I.

MY FRIEND SONIA WAS RIGHT: NEW LIFE IS BEING injected into the old Jewish body. More important, however, is the creation of a new body altogether. Alongside of the new Soviet culture there is also being created a new Jewish culture. Nowhere is this birth of the new Jew as pronounced as in the new Soviet art, literature and the theatre.

I happened to be present at a conference of Soviet writers in Moscow. It was an inspiring affair. Because the Soviets, following Lenin's dictum—"without culture we cannot build a Communist society"—have placed the cultural uplifting of the Russian workers and peasants in the centre of their problems, this conference assumed a character of national importance.

The hall where the conference was being held was crowded with the most distinguished literary figures of the country. Included among them were the well-known Yiddish and Russian-Jewish poets and prose writers: L. Kushnerov, Perets Markish, Ilya Selvinski, Alexander Bezymenski, Ilya Ehrenbourg, Iosif Utkin, and a host of others. They all came there, as

the glaring red banner with inscriptions in Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish and other languages announced, to assist in the creation of a new Soviet literature.

One of the most interesting features of the conference was the reports of the delegates representing the various national literatures of the Soviet Union. They, too were a vital and organic part of Soviet literature in general. (Indeed, the problem of the Jewish writer, as I shall show further on, is in no way different from that of his Russian confrères.) As the delegates reported on the most minute details of their progress and accomplishments, everyone present in the hall cheered and applauded.

I. M. Gronski, the editor of the official Government newspaper, *Izvestia*, opened the conference.

"This is the first conference," he said, "which represents all-Soviet writers. Such a conference was made possible by the fact that the great majority of the old Russian intellectuals, brought up under the influence of bourgeois culture, turned towards the Soviet Government, towards the Socialist Revolution. This turn, to be sure, did not come about at once. It was prepared by the whole past of the Proletarian Revolution.

"The old intellectuals convinced themselves of the validity of the Bolshevik viewpoint by such facts as the acute economic crisis in other countries, the successful realization of the Five-Year Plan and the widespread cultural reawakening of our country. And having become convinced, these intellectuals turned towards the Soviet Government, not as sepa-

rate individuals, but as a group—an actual mass movement.

"The writers, as you know, are not separated from life by a Chinese wall. They are the vanguard of the intellectuals, their most active social group . . ."

One of the main purposes of this conference was to save Soviet literature from the decline and chaos brought upon it by the RAPP—Russian Association of Proletarian Writers—whose leader and inspirer was the Jewish-Russian critic, Leopold Averbakh.

Since the very first days of the Bolshevik revolution, various credos and dogmas—symbolism, futurism, constructivism, dialectical materialism—have periodically dominated the Soviet literary scene. Until 1932 the RAPP was the supreme arbiter of Soviet literature. Since the main purpose of this organization, composed primarily of young communist *littérateurs*, was political rather than literary, its chief function became "heresy hunting." As a result, many talented writers who were unable to write dry political diatribes that conformed strictly to the communist line became silent, and literature in Soviet Russia sank to a low level.

It was Maxim Gorki who sounded the alarm. Under his influence the RAPP was dissolved by the Government. Since every radical change in that country is accompanied by a corresponding slogan, Soviet critics have substituted for the ambiguous slogans such as "dialectical materialism," the terms of "socialist realism," which, as defined by them, simply means: "Write as you please as long as you portray truthfully and realistically contemporary Soviet life

and reality." Or, as Maxim Gorki expressed it: "Create the history of the great Russian proletarian Revolution . . . May not a single trifle, not even the smallest detail of our inimitable heroic days of the Five-Year Plan be forgotten!"

When the RAPP was dissolved, because its chief spokesman, Leopold Averbakh, was a Jew, various "professional Jews" at once discovered an anti-Semitic plot in Soviet Russia. It so happens, however, that V. Kirpotin, the critic who was most bitterly opposed to the RAPP and who was primarily responsible for the anti-Averbakhian theory of "socialist realism," is also a Jew.

To be sure, neither Averbakh nor Kirpotin are exclusively interested in Jewish literature. They are primarily Soviet writers who have set themselves the task of creating a new Soviet literature. Their background, like that of many other Jewish young men and women who are now contributing their share to Soviet literature, is primarily Russian. Their language is Russian and naturally they write in Russian.

It was from the young Yiddish poet and dramatist, L. Kushnerov, that I first learned about the vital Yiddish literature that is being created in Soviet Russia.

A short, dark-haired fellow, bearing a striking resemblance to the popular conception of a talmudist, Kushnerov himself is the author of the famous Yiddish play, *Hersh Lekkert*. It is the story of Hersh Lekkert, a twenty-four-year-old cobbler, whose name will forever remain inscribed in the hearts of Jewish workers all over the world. Thirty-six years have al-

ready gone by since Hersh, revolting against the inhuman tortures to which the Jews were subjected in Tsarist Russia, attempted to assassinate the governor of the Wilno province, General von Vaal. The attempt was unsuccessful and the young Jewish revolutionist, as an example to others, was hanged. But the name of the obscure and illiterate Jewish cobbler has remained alive in the memory of the Jewish masses. In Kushnerov's play, Hersh Lekkert took his place among other Jewish revolutionary heroes. In Minsk, the capital of White Russia, where there was once a statue of Tsar Alexander III, there is now a statue of Hersh Lekkert.

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For more than two hours we all sat listening attentively to Kushnerov's report about the progress of Yiddish literature in Jewish centres of Kiev, Kharkov, Minsk, the Crimean colonies and faraway Biro-Bidjan.

It seems that from the very outset of the Revolution there appeared on the Russian scene a group of young Yiddish poets. Many of them were workers. Some of them, like the poet, O. Shwartzman, besides creating a new literature were also fighting in the ranks of the Red Army for a new life. It was O. Shwartzman who made the oath:

I shall not return to the country  
Until I hear words of freedom. . . .

Shwartzman was killed in action, fighting bandits in the Ukraine. Many others, however, sprung up to

carry on his work. Already in 1923 there were many Yiddish literary groups in various parts of Russia. They began to publish their own magazines and newspapers—*Jungwald*, *Roite Welt*, *Prolit*, *Der Shtern*, *Oktiabr*, *Storm*, *Yunger Leninets*, and *Der Emes*, (official organ of the Jewish Communists, edited by the well-known Jewish leader, M. Litvakoff). The works of such excellent poets as Izy Kharik, Itsik Fefer, L. Kwitko, L. Resnikoff, D. Hoffstein and a host of others were first printed in these publications.

The new poets, many of them workers fresh from the front, struck up a new tune on the "Jewish street."

Before the Revolution the creative expression of Jewish writers in Russia, whether they wrote in Russian, Hebrew or Yiddish, was melancholy, plaintive and minor in tone—an expression of the eternally persecuted Jew. The Russian-Jewish nationalist poet, Simeon Frug, was in my childhood most popular among the Jewish masses. How often have I recited his meek apologia:

Condemn me not for words of reproach  
That emerge from my lips at times . . .  
In a family of slaves, in a foster-country  
I was raised a homeless orphan.

When your mother, carefully and gently  
Led you through green fields  
And your chest full of happiness  
Was breathing freely—

I was lying somewhere in a corner,  
On a stone in the gutter, like a dog in a kennel,

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And you laughed at my shame  
And you mocked at my pain . . .

With a cruel hand the poison of hatred  
You poured into my soul . . .  
O, how much mighty strength  
You throttled within me—

And now sick, under the yoke of suffering,  
I cast at you at times  
Not a challenge and threat for revenge  
O no—but merely a look of scorn—

Understand then, understand how I grieve  
My mortal anguish let me unburden  
And for my words of scorn,  
Do not condemn me, do not condemn . . .\*

But Frug has long since died. Dead is also the system that produced him. The poetry of the new Jews is joyous and militant. It is an expression of a new faith in life:

Everywhere and  
everyone  
poets from Berlin, New York and Warsaw  
poets with sad names  
with dreamy eyes  
awaken  
and forget  
heaven, stars and clouds  
I, Itsik Fefer from the village  
of Shpala  
am speaking to you simply and warmly . . .  
Glowing  
with hot blood

\*In order to retain the gist of the poems, I have translated them literally.

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and a hot body  
I am everywhere  
a fiery Komsomoletz  
young . . .  
singing as I march along . . .

(From Itsik Fefer's *About Myself and Such as I*)

2.

Listening to Kushnerov I first realized how remarkably well the new Soviet literature reflects "the spiritual and mental currents which stir in the depths of the turbulent Russian sea and which may determine the future, the fate of the country and its people."

The life of the Jews in Soviet Russia passed and is still passing through a period of social and economic changes which came as a result of the Revolution. The same is true of the literature of the Jews. The Jewish-Soviet *littérateurs*, like their Russian confrères, are continuously struggling against what the Communists call "the bourgeois nationalist tradition," but which means simply that many of them have not as yet adjusted themselves to the new order. Most of the older and more talented writers like David Bergelson, author of one of the most remarkable novels about the civil war, *Midas Hadin*, the poets and dramatists, Perets Markish and L. Resnikoff, and the prose writer, Nister, were considered until recently merely as Fellow Travellers of the Revolution—a term applied to those writers who, while accepting the Revolution as historically inevi-

table, were not active participants of it. Bergelson, for instance, soon after the Bolsheviks seized power, left Russia altogether and settled in Germany. Only after he had convinced himself that the class whose philosophy he expressed, the radical middle class, was disappearing from Russian life definitely and irrevocably, that the Jewish workers were taking its place, did he identify himself with the proletariat. Moreover, like other emigré writers who left Russia, Bergelson soon realized that detached from the soil that produced him and inspired him, he was doomed to creative sterility. He thereupon returned to Russia, calling upon the Jewish intellectuals of the world to "pull the cart of the revolution." Other writers, too, having "convinced themselves of the validity of the Bolshevik viewpoint," have "turned towards the socialist revolution."

The ideological contradictions within Yiddish literature, to be sure, were less acute than they were within Russian literature. In fact, since the revolution of 1905 and even prior to it, Yiddish authors, as A. Yarmolinski pointed out, had already written not for "the doomed middle class, but for the common people." Thus, the literary heritage of the past has for the most part been accepted by the younger generation of writers.

Indeed, contrary to popular belief, the new generation of Soviet Jews does not believe in "destroying" the heritage of the past. Like Shalom Alechem, the older men—Mendele Mocher Sforim, the "grandfather" and pioneer of Yiddish literature, Isaac Leibush Perets, one of the finest Yiddish literary crafts-

men, and many others—are accorded homage, steadily reprinted and zealously studied. Like Shalom Alechem, they, too, have acquired a new meaning in new Russia.

Even I. B. Levinson, popularly referred to as the Russian Moses Mendelssohn, A. B. Gotolober, author of the *Lied Fun Kugel*, and the poet, L. Gordon—leaders of the “bourgeois” *Haskala* movement in the nineteenth century—are given a place of honor in the new Yiddish literature of Russia. Indeed, insofar as the aim of the *Haskala* was to destroy the cultural ghetto, the clerical-chassidic influence which stifled Jewish life, the proletarian writers of Russia today are carrying on its tradition. There is, however, a profound difference between the *Haskala* and the revolutionary movement. The former embraced only a small section of the Jews, the upper class. In a sense, it was a movement directed against the masses for it sought to develop not the Yiddish language, the language in which the Jewish masses spoke, but Hebrew and Russian. Eventually, it transformed itself into a movement of assimilators. “Be a Jew at home and a human being on the street,” was the motto of the poet L. Gordon. “Whether you are a Jew or a Russian, be faithful to the proletariat,” is the slogan of the Yiddish proletarian writers.

3.

There is no doubt that the most vital stimulus given to Jewish culture in Soviet Russia—which, incidentally, assures the continuance of the Jews as a

distinct national group—is the speedy development and enrichment of the Yiddish language. Contemptuously dismissed as a “jargon” and dialect of servants by the Hebraists, from a language whose study was considered a dangerous revolutionary manifestation by the Tsarist government, Yiddish became an official language in Soviet Russia. In fact, no other country is as fertile soil for the development of Yiddish as a living language. The Soviet Government, in line with its national policy—“a nation is a people united by a common language, territory, economic life and psychology” runs Stalin’s definition—does all within its power to encourage the study of Yiddish. Special studies of the language are now carried on in the Yiddish departments of the White Russian Academy of Science in Minsk, at the Ukrainian Academy in Kiev and at the University of Moscow.

There are about thirty Yiddish newspapers and periodicals in Russia as well as a number of children’s publications. They have a circulation of more than 400,000 copies. In those villages and sections (besides the autonomous regions) where the Jews are in a majority, there have also been organized Jewish Soviets and courts where all the administrative business is conducted in Yiddish.

Yiddish has also taken the place of Hebrew, which, according to the Communists, because of its Zionist implications, tends to foster religious and anti-Bolshevik ideas. This is regrettable, for after all, one cannot properly speak of the Jewish cultural tradition and disregard the vast Hebrew literature.

Eventually though, I believe, as soon as conditions in Russia become more normal, Hebrew will once more assume its rightful place in the Jewish scheme of things. In the meanwhile, the expansion of the scope of the Yiddish language has given a new stimulus to imaginative and other writing. While in other countries Yiddish literature is definitely on the down grade, in Soviet Russia it has been given a new lease on life.

4.

Proportionally, the Jews have also contributed a great share to Soviet literature in general. Undoubtedly, the most outstanding writer in Soviet Russia today is Isaac Babel, the man who Gorki said is the only Jew who has created a revolution in Russian literature.

Born on the Moldavanka, the notorious Odessa ghetto, Babel had fought actively in the Red Army. From 1917 until 1924 he was attached to General Budionny's famous cavalry. It is his portrayal of this Red Cavalry, composed of wild and ignorant Cossacks, savage and rapacious, who were suddenly given a new ideal to fight for, a new beacon, their relation to the Jewish, Polish and peasant population, that has placed his work in the front ranks of world literature. Indeed, a romantic and ironic writer, fond of light and shade, color and violence, sudden contrasts and strong emotions, as V. Polonski describes him, Babel has painted an immortal picture of the civil war.

Long before the Revolution there were a number of Jewish writers who wrote exclusively in Russian. Of these Semion Yushkevich, author of the well-known novel *Leon Drey*, and the poet, Simeon Frug, were the most outstanding.

Like Babel, Semion Yushkevich wrote much about the life of the Jews. The difference between these two writers, however, is not only a stylistic one but also a sociological one.

In *Leon Drey*, Yushkevich sought to depict the Russified middle class Jews of Tsarist Russia. His *Leon Drey* is a young Jew whose only desire is to acquire power, money and lead a life of luxury. To achieve this aim, there is no end to the crimes that young Drey commits. He swindles young marriageable girls; he ruins the life of a well-known lawyer who has befriended him. Unscrupulous, degenerate to the core, he subjects his victims to inhuman tortures. When everything fails him, he sells his body to homosexuals.

When Yushkevich first presented this type, scorn and accusations were heaped upon him by the Jewish middle class. And yet, any one who is sufficiently acquainted with the life of these Jews before the Revolution will realize that the author did not suck *Leon Drey* out of his finger. Unfortunately, he was quite representative of the money-mad and assimilated Jewish middle class in Tsarist Russia. He was—but he is no longer. Like the rest of the Jewish middle class he disappeared with the Russian monarchy. Instead, we now have Babel's hero, the son of Rabbi Motele Bratslavsky from Zhitomir.

In his short sketch about *The Rabbi's Son*, Babel succeeded not only in telling the tale of two generations of Jews but also of the readjustment that has taken place between the Jew and Gentile. Curiously enough, (only Babel can do that) he begins his story of Ilya, the son of Rabbi Motele Bratslavsky with a question to the Cossack, Vassily, the very same Cossack who a short while before had undoubtedly participated in massacres of Jews, but who has now seen a new light: "Do you remember Zhitomir, Vassily? Do you remember the river Teteriv and that night, Vassily . . . when beyond the windows horses were neighing and Cossacks shouting . . . when the wilderness of war yawned beyond the windows . . . ?" And amidst this chaos and typhus-ridden peasantry, tramping in bast shoes, like "a multitude of swarming bugs," marched the Communist Ilya Bratslavsky, the last prince of the Bratslavsky dynasty, fighting for a free and happy Russia.

He died on the battle-field, Ilya, the symbol of past and future life, leaving behind him the memory of a revolutionary hero and a mystical poet . . .

How different Babel's Jewish revolutionist is from Zachary Mirkin, Sholom Asch's revolutionary hero of *Three Cities*. Mirkin is the weak, pampered son of a Jewish millionaire. His childhood was spent in an assimilationist atmosphere. Later in life he discovers the "romance" of the exotic and mystic aspect of Judaism, and through it the miserable life of the Jewish lower classes in the ghetto of Poland. Young Mirkin is appalled by this life. Eventually he joins

the Bolsheviks and participates in their seizure of power.

But Sholom Asch is a nationalist of the old school. Above all he fails to understand the social upheaval that has seized Russia. And (O, irony) when this son of the assimilated Jewish millionaire becomes disillusioned with the "crude" life that Bolsheviks are forging, he escapes from red Moscow to "free" and "happy" Poland to start life anew. . . .

I should like to describe briefly here the place that the Jew is accorded in the art of Asch's "free" Poland. It happened in a small Polish city near the Russian border. I was passing one of the numerous armories housing thousands of soldiers, when a poster announcing a play that was to be presented for the entertainment of the soldiers, attracted my attention. The play was called *Moses in a Barrel*.

I knew well enough the anti-Semitic attitude of the Polish authorities not to be surprised at anything. This play, however, exceeded all my expectations.

An old Jew with a gray beard, dressed in a long coat and skull-cap on the tip of his head, was being chased by a pig. The Jew was running, breathing heavily. The pig was chasing him and grunting. Finally, the gray-bearded Jew found refuge in a barrel full of water. The audience roared with laughter. The pig grunted . . .

I also once saw a play with a Jew as its central character presented before Red Army men at the Red Army Theatre in Moscow. It was a dramatization of Alexander Fadeyev's famous novel *The Nineteen*. Fadeyev is not a Jew. His hero, however,



Levinson, the leader of a group of guerilla fighters (red partisans), is a typical Jewish intellectual. Levinson had been placed by the Communist Party in charge of a regiment recruited from poor peasants and miners. He is the only Jew amidst this conglomeration of Russia's "dark" and elemental forces. His background is entirely different from theirs. And yet, because of his revolutionary will and intuition, the Jew grows in affinity with these people and becomes one of them. The erstwhile anti-Semites learn to love and trust their Jewish leader. Baklanov, for instance, a young miner, Levinson's assistant, imitates his leader in every way. Morozka, a happy-go-lucky Cossack who is often punished by Levinson for his escapades, is ready to give his life for the "chief" of the revolution. Levinson himself, as portrayed by Fadeyev, is the new type of a Jew—a strong and determined man. The Party ordered him to hold the front against the advancing White Guardists. He carries out his instructions to the best of his abilities. Levinson encounters the enemy. His regiment is defeated. Only nineteen men remain alive. But, intimates the author, there is victory in defeat; the class front was not broken. Levinson becomes a classical hero of the revolution.

In the novel *Time, Forward* by Valentine Katajev, (which was also given as a play at the Korsh Theatre in Moscow), a Jew, too, stands in the centre of the story, the engineer David Margulis.

Katayev set out to depict in this novel primarily the moving spirit behind the Five-Year Plan, the daring social adventure. For, says the author, the

construction of socialism is, above all, man creating a new life. And Katayev, undoubtedly one of the most talented of present-day Soviet writers, feels and understands this new man.

The story of this novel is simple and typical of life in Soviet Russia. Word comes to a brigade of concrete-mixers working on a construction plant in the Asiatic part of the Ural mountains—easily recognizable as Magnitogorsk, one of the most important Soviet industrial projects—that a rival brigade of concrete-mixers in the city of Kharkov has achieved the world record of 306 mixtures of concrete in an eight-hour shift. Immediately the zeal of the Magnitogorsk brigade is aroused. The Kharkov record must be beaten. Here Katayev shows his skill of character-presentation. The hero of this novel, as in most Soviet novels, is the collective. But this collective while working for the common good is at the same time composed of clearly defined individuals. And each individual has his own motive for wanting to beat the Kharkov record. The foreman of the construction is a careerist whose ambition is to see his name featured in the papers. The peasant shock brigadier **who** is just beginning to understand the elementary tenets of the Soviet philosophy that "I is we," wants to prove that he is worthy of being admitted to the Communist Party. There is only one man on the whole construction who has no axe to grind. He is David Margulis in charge of the whole plant. David, as the author paints him, is a typical bespectacled Jew. He looks like a talmudist, speaks with a sing-song and has a long nose—a blood

brother of the long-bearded Jew that was being chased by a pig on the Polish stage. But here the Jew is the unknown hero of socialist construction. David is ready to beat the Kharkov record for he wants to stimulate the industrial development of socialist Russia. "In the epoch of reconstruction," he says, "tempos decide everything."

Since the law of socialist competition demands that the Kharkov record be beaten at once, the whole action takes place within twenty-four hours. Battling against human and elemental forces—saboteurs, kulaks, rain and storm—a world record of 429 mixtures is achieved. Kharkov is beaten. The brigade is about to celebrate its victory when a telegram announces that workers in another plant have made a new record of 504 mixtures of concrete in an eight-hour shift, and Soviet life speeds on. In the midst of it stands David Margulis, the little Jewish builder of a new life, acclaimed by the Russian masses.

5.

I could write endlessly about the rôle of the Jew in Soviet literature. What strikes one most about this new literature is not so much its aesthetic quality as its expression of an entirely new spirit.

The difference between the old and new literature is perhaps best expressed in the works of the two Russian-Jewish poets, Simeon Frug and Alexander Bezymenski. Frug foresees no end to the Jew's sufferings. He compares him to an old invalid. Sometimes, he says, Israel awakens, becomes fired by a

new zeal for life only to relapse again for hopelessness stares him in the face:

. . . soon the storms have passed  
Life goes on in the old way  
His banner and shield hidden  
In tranquillity sleeps the invalid . . .

Young Bezymenski, on the other hand, once a son of the Zhitomir ghetto—now one of the most popular poets of the Soviet Union—believes in life and its future. As he expressed it in his *Ode to Soviet Life*:

You know? I'm happy that I live  
My days recruited in the ranks of struggle  
And love, anger, pain and laughter  
Like my brothers of the Komsomol I love.

All things are dear to me,  
Deeds and men  
Days and years  
The timid walk, the lively pace  
Of my fields and factories.

All life—  
Our life is planned  
Hence,  
Looking it straight in the eyes  
I do not find such things  
That I would call a "trifle."

O man, things, sentiments and years  
My friends, my enemies, happiness, misfortune!  
Encountering you I always feel  
The rapture of our strength and fortune.

You know? The power of powers

Lies on our shores!  
At times I slip, sometimes I weaken,  
And yet, not only do I dare—  
I also do, I know I can.

. . . Queer fellows tell me not to boast.  
But they are blind,  
They do not understand a worker's poet!  
I, saying, I  
Am only one "of them,"  
"Of them," who are in the factories and Party.

The clock of hearts ticks in my brain  
But I tick in the hearts of workers!  
And if I say "we can"  
It means "I also can"  
And if I can  
It means we can!

That's why  
My laughter is loud  
My earthly yoke is light  
Because I do not feel for all  
Because I live and feel with all!