VI

LEAH BOTNIK AND THE OTHER WOMEN

I.

NACHMAN, TO BE SURE, WAS NOT THE ONLY ONE symbolic of the regeneration of the Russian Jewry. Even more significant was the story of Leah Botnik.

According to her bosom friend, Dinah, Leah Botnik came from a very rich family. Her house in the town where she lived before the Revolution was nicknamed the "House of Romanoffs." Naturally, the Revolution did not spare this House of Romanoffs either. After the Bolshevik seizure of power, Leah's husband, a rich flour merchant, deserted her. He escaped to Germany where he died in misery and poverty. Leah, to escape starvation in the town, was forced to join the collective farm.

"At the beginning," related Dinah, "it was difficult for Leah to get used to the new life. After all, she was used to roll in milk and honey, and here she had to work. Leah was a snob. She would not associate with us who had scrubbed her floors, sold vinegar to her or repaired her shoes . . ."

Time conquered pride. Today, although no longer

young, Leah, with a healthy tan on her cheeks, is an excellent worker. She is also the cultural leader of the kolhoz. In her spare time she organizes lectures, theatre performances and teaches those who are illiterate to read and write.

I met Leah for the first time at the collective's millinery shop. It is one of those shops organized and subsidized by the American organization, Ort (society for the promotion of trades among Jews), which are particularly useful in the winter months when there is little work in the fields. Such shops, I was told, are part of a scheme to develop the handicraft industry among the colonists and will eventually add to their material welfare.

I entered the shop late in the evening. Work had already ceased and the workers—old women and young girls—were sitting in a circle around Leah, debating heatedly. My appearance caused some excitement. But not for long. Soon I, too, was sitting in the circle and participating in the discussion.

The interrupted debate continued. Dinah, a short plump woman of about forty, with coarse peasant features, was speaking.

"As I was saying, comrades, I neither approve nor disapprove of intermarriage. That is a purely personal problem. On the other hand, in accordance with the national policy laid down by the Party, it is the duty of every nationality to perpetuate and develop its culture. From this angle the problem of intermarriage should be discussed."

Leah smiled.

"Dinah is practicing upon us the speech that she is going to deliver at the forthcoming regional congress of women shock-brigaders," she explained to me. "She has been thus honored because she had done the best work in our truck gardens. Besides, Dinah is a clever woman. Even in the old days, when she worked for me there was a rebellious streak in her. With a little polish I have no doubt that she will go far. Do you hear her quoting: 'As comrade Stalin said. . . .'"

"As comrade Stalin said," Dinah continued, gesticulating with her calloused hands, "we should develop a culture that is national in form and proletarian in content . . ."

"Wait a minute," a young girl of about nineteen interrupted her, "we are speaking about intermarriage and you have already drifted into culture. Why, comrade Dinah, don't you learn to stick to one subject?"

"She is speaking to the point," an elderly woman protested, "you think that because you are a member of the Komsomol you can teach everybody around here. Dinah is right."

"I insist that this is a bad case of opportunism," retorted the Komsomolka.

Immediately the circle divided into two camps—the youth who were on the side of the Komsomolka, and the older women who agreed with Dinah. A heated verbal fight commenced. It seemed to me that it would eventually end in a fist fight, but Leah's clever diplomacy saved the situation.

"Comrades," she said in her quiet voice, "I think we are unfair to the guest. We have not told him what the argument is about. Let us first explain to him the nature of our discussion and then proceed."

These words of the tall, full-breasted woman, with dark hair and soft gray eyes, produced the desired effect. The shouting ceased. One could see that Leah's words, even though some were suspicious of her because of her bourgeois past, as I later found out, carried weight with the women of the kolhoz. After all, she was the most cultured woman among them, and culture was what they were yearning for.

"Well then," continued Leah, "that is how the argument started. Do you see our Feygele over there in the corner? She is already blushing . . ."

In the corner pointed out to me by Leah, a young girl of about seventeen was sitting, sewing. She wore a man's blouse opened at the neck and top boots out of which extended two husky calves. Conscious that we were speaking about her, she pretended to be deeply engrossed in her work.

". . . so Feygele in Yiddish means bird. But look at her red cheeks and powerful physique; does she strike you as being a bird? Of course not. She is as strong as a mule. You ought to see her at work."

We all laughed. Leah lowered her voice:

"You see, she is an orphan. A few years ago I found her in our town, a little girl. Now she is twice as big as I am. She does the hardest work in the kolhoz. In the summer she manages to work in the fields and attend to our cows. If you have the oppor-

tunity, look into our 'maternity ward' where Feygele's cows give birth to calves. That is her domain. She is the undisputed ruler there.

"But," Leah winked mischievously, "that is only half of the story. The best is yet to come . . ."

All eyes turned upon Feygele. The younger girls giggled. The older women smiled condescendingly. Feygele, it was obvious, was annoyed.

"To make a long story short, she has decided to get married. She found herself a young Tartar at Saki and in a few weeks we will dance at her wedding."

"That is how the discussion about the problem of intermarriage began," commented the Komsomolka who had nearly precipitated a fight.

"A problem?" Leah interrupted her. "Was there a problem when you went with Joseph the tractor driver? Or is your Joseph, the Jew, better than Akhmed, the Tartar? Where is there a problem, I ask? She fell in love with a Tartar and is going to be married. That is all."

The Komsomolka was not satisfied with Leah's explanation:

"You are evading the question, comrade Leah. Pretty soon you will accuse me of being an anti-*Goy* or a Jewish chauvinist. We are discussing here intermarriage as a matter of principle and I think that you have not gone to the root of the problem. Suppose there will be children, what are they going to be: Tartars or Jews?"

"If there will be children—and I am sure there

will be—" replied Leah, "they will be simply Soviet citizens, like the rest of the children in the Soviet Union."

"That doesn't answer the question . . ."

I agreed with the Komsomolka. Leah's solution seemed to me too simple. In America I had heard many discussions about the degeneration of the Jewish race in the Soviet Union. Only too often have I heard American students of Soviet affairs report that the Jew in Soviet Russia is rapidly assimilating. "It looks," one of them remarked, "as if the Jew might in time be absorbed."

Superficially these statements may be right. At least twenty per cent of the marriages in Soviet Russia today are mixed. As years go by and race differences are entirely wiped out, there will undoubtedly be more of them. That, however, is as much true of the Tartars, Uzbeks, Ukrainians and other nationalities that populate Russia as it is of the Jews. Does that mean that all these nationalities will eventually be absorbed and assimilated, or is it true only of the Jews?*

I asked Leah this question. Her reply was typical of the attitude of many intelligent Jews who have given this question any thought at all:

"You see," she said, "when we speak of assimilation we mean assimilation as it was practiced in the Tsarist days, or as it is still practiced among a certain strata of the Jews in Poland and Germany. In those countries Jews assimilate for two reasons. The first

* See *The Jew and Soviet Culture.*

one is psychological; they are ashamed of being Jews. Secondly, through assimilation they hope to profit materially, as for instance, in Poland. In Soviet Russia such causes for assimilation do not exist. Whether you are a Jew or a Tartar all doors are open to you."

"But will not intermarriage," I asked, "eventually play havoc with your Jewish culture?"

"Decidedly not. If you ever visit our collective schools you will see that children of mixed marriages are not only studying Jewish history and literature, but also Yiddish as a language. Jews in Russia are gradually disappearing as a religious unit, but they are getting stronger and stronger as a cultural unit. By culture we don't mean, of course, that sort of wisdom that was dispensed to the children of the ghetto in the elementary religious schools by ignorant and incompetent Bible teachers. For samples of this culture, you don't have to look far. Here is Dinah, she has been taught for years to pray in Hebrew, a tongue which she does not understand, and what does she know? Nothing. She has to begin her education all over.

"But enough of problems . . . Let us talk about life. What I can't understand is where Feygele got the time for love-making. She works in the field and takes care of the cows during the day and attends my classes in the evening. Incidentally, my classes are for adults only, and they are conducted in Yiddish. And as that isn't enough, she is also a member of the Komsomol and tries to run us all by the nose."

"You are getting as sentimental as an old cow," Feygele at last replied mockingly.

"You are right," said Leah, "I am getting sentimental, perhaps a little jealous, too. When I think about you girls, I can't help reminding myself of the old days. It was quite different then. A girl like you, Feygele, would have had to give some good-for-nothing a dowry. And if you had no dowry, you couldn't get married. You'd have to wait for some idealist to make you his wife for nothing. In the meantime, your plaits would turn gray, your face wrinkle and your body bend in two."

A young man who had evidently just returned from a journey rushed into the shop and whispered something into Leah's ear.

"Fine," said Leah, "fine . . . Comrades, I wish to announce that Dinah's candidacy as a delegate to the regional conference of women shock-brigadiers has been approved by the district committee of the Party. . . ."

"Bravo," cried out the girl who had hitherto been Dinah's opponent, "hurrah for our delegate!"

Dinah's face broadened into a smile. Her eyes began to glisten. I could visualize her at the moment on the platform addressing the conference: "Comrades, as comrade Stalin said . . ."

2.

I was once present at such a women's conference in Moscow. It was an All-Union conference and

women from all over the Soviet Union were gathered: Tartar, Jewish, Russian, Uzbek, Ukrainian women—all dressed in their motley native costumes, creating one of the most colorful spectacles I have ever seen. They came to the conference to report on what the women of the Soviet Union were doing to further socialist construction. Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's widow, an indefatigable worker for the cause of women and children, was the first speaker. In a quiet and unassuming manner, she repeated Lenin's words on the woman's question:

"Even in the most democratic of the bourgeois republics," said Lenin, "the woman has not yet achieved complete equality. The Soviet Government, on the other hand, has with one stroke wiped out all the traces of woman's inequality. It has granted them rights and freedom not only in theory but also in practice . . ."

Loud applause greeted Krupskaya's words. Then the delegates, one after another, mounted the speaker's platform and told the conference what the Revolution has given them, what they have already achieved, and what they are yet going to achieve. Some of the delegates spoke in languages that I did not understand. But as I sat and listened to them, I thought of the early days of the Revolution when Russian working women, with rifles in their hand, fought side by side with their husbands.

A young factory girl concluded her speech with a poem:

. . . Like dreams in a prison,
The dark centuries of life
Have gone . . .

I am a daughter of black-soiled Russia—
A land freed from chains.

The enthusiasm that these lines called forth in the gathering of women is almost indescribable. To them it was a summary of the story of woman's emancipation in Russia . . .

3.

What is true of the women in Russia in general is particularly true of the Jewish women. Haven't they been emancipated doubly—as women, and as members of an oppressed race? Isn't that, in essence, what Leah Botnik told me?

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My conversation with the women in the shop of the kolhoz lasted late into the night. Reluctantly I left them when I was called by the chairman of the kolhoz.

"Anyway," concluded Leah, "if God will give us a little more bread next year, or a better crop, there will certainly be nothing to complain about."

"You still believe in God?" I asked.

"Certainly," she replied smiling, "don't you know that I have just raised a couple of pigs."