

The Communist cooperative housing in the 20's, the largest in New York City, was the most daring and reckless of the Communist enterprises in that exciting decade. This ambitious scheme, too, originated from below, the party entering the situation when the project was already in full swing, and contributing to its collapse.

There had always been a trend toward cooperatives, though not a large one, among Jewish workers, influenced by the general cooperative movement. In the second decade, this trend shifted to the easier retail area, and men of varying beliefs, such as David Dubinsky, Dr. Nachman Syrkin and Yasha Secoder, were active in maintaining a few cooperative stores and a restaurant on Second Avenue—the only one on the East Side open on the Day of Atonement.

A group of young radical immigrants rented a floor and set up a collectivist household. Maintenance and kitchen expenses were shared, and domestic work was rotated. As the group increased, the whole house was taken over. Internal squabbles eventually forced them to close the house. But a small band of dedicated cooperators refused to part with the idea, and waited for another opportunity. They were led by Simon Gerson and S. K. Cohn.

Their chance came a few years later, in the middle of the 20's. The general rise in the standard of living, a result of the unionization drives in all Jewish trades, caused a movement from the crowded Lower East Side to better homes in new neighborhoods. Most of the younger people were married, had children, and were looking for fresh air and playgrounds for them. Cooperative hous-

ing projects for the better-paid workers appeared to be the only solution.

This tendency fitted in with the cherished dream of the Gerson and Cohn group. They began agitating for a large-scale cooperative housing development, winning over a few Communists and Left-Wingers temperamentally inclined to grandiose plans. Without bothering about financial details, they formed the United Workers Cooperative Colony Association and put a small payment down on a large tract of land on Allerton Avenue, facing Bronx Park. The Communist members, particularly Noah London, a charter Communist, a man capable of being carried away by his imagination, sold the plan to the party. London was made chairman of that body, assuring party control. And the *Freiheit* became their medium for big and fanciful advertising and publicity.

The project, as presented by the initiators, had a much higher goal than ordinary cooperative housing. It envisaged many blocks of large dwellings, built by workers, for workers, and financed and managed by themselves, without landlords, and without the fear of rent gauging and evictions; a model colony in architecture, comfort and social facilities. In a pamphlet written by Olgin for the project, he emphasized the anti-capitalist aspect of the enterprise and the fact that vast material means would be accumulated in workers' hands. He also pointed out that, aside from the immediate advantages, the people would be taught cooperative living.^{*184} All a member had to pay in was \$250 a room, and his rent was to be as low as \$11 a month per room.

Conditions for membership were strict. Only wage-earners, belonging to a trade union if one existed in their trade, were eligible. A cooperator could be expelled within the first two years on a decision of the members' meeting, only his original \$250 being returned. This was clearly aimed at weeding out political undesirables.

The project was to comprise three blocks of houses, with an adjacent food market and a restaurant. It was to cost four million dollars, no small amount for workers in the middle 20's. But the cost was among the last worries of the ardent founders. They were on the threshold of the fulfillment of a vision of a new type of communal living, something that capitalist, individualist America had not yet witnessed. Such prosaic matters as mortgages and maintenance costs seemed negligible details. Actually, these enthusiasts,

though they were supposed to be good Communists, saw cooperative housing as only the beginning of a developing chain of cooperative institutions, including credit unions and banks, that would ultimately replace the capitalist economy, a clear denial of the inviolable theory of class struggle.

THE PAIR OF VISIONARY FANATICS

The two prime movers, Gerson and Cohn, the first a carpenter, the second a capmaker, were a pair of proletarian Don Quixote's. Gerson, who carried the whole project on his shoulders, had never gone beyond the *heder*, knew little and cared less for arithmetic. He was of medium height, heavy-set, with a mop of dark hair and powerful arms. His closest friend, Cohn, was his exact opposite. Everything about him was thin and anemic, including his voice. He was not bad at figures, and liked to pore over estimates. Cohn was supposed to act as a check upon the fantastic schemes of Gerson. Actually, he was the same visionary and obstinate crusader. The two were also militant vegetarians, and their vegetarian zeal did not add to the health of the big enterprise.

The builder, A. Brodsky, had his head in the clouds, too. He was a frequent contributor to Communist-Left causes. The party chiefs, completely ignorant of such matters and up to their necks in the fight for power, left everything to Gerson, Cohn and Brodsky. The first two entered the party simply because they had to operate within a movement. Shrewdly, they attached themselves to the ruling caucus for protection.

The first project was a block of four five-story buildings of 339 units, surrounding a central garden. The upper story was built for bachelors. It was started in 1926 and finished in 1927. There was an auditorium, restaurant, gymnasium, library, space for a parochial school and a kindergarten. Gerson and Cohn originally conceived collective kitchens on every floor, but they had to yield to the deeply-rooted "individualistic habits" of the housewife. The rooms were spacious and well ventilated, definitely an advance over the living quarters of the average family. The only difficulty was that the actual cost and maintenance proved to be much higher than the estimates. And, because they had to raise the rentals to \$14 and \$14.50 instead of the \$11 demanded by the state law, the association

lost the 20-years tax exemption, adding a sizable tax burden to the increased rental.

As credit was easy during those years, the association obtained a million dollar mortgage from the New York Title and Mortgage Company for the first block.

THE GOLD BONDS, A RECKLESS MEASURE

A large share of the members' investment money for the second and third blocks was eaten up by the first. To produce additional funds, Gerson and Cohn hit upon a wonderful idea. They decided to float an issue of Gold Bonds on the unfinished second building and on the still-to-be-started third. They figured out—and correctly so—that the term "Gold Bonds" would have the desired psychological effect upon the prospective investors, workers completely ignorant of such matters as mortgages, bonds and security.

Again the party press became the carrier of a big and loud advertising campaign with such flaming slogans as *Don't Keep your Savings in Capitalist Banks! Capitalist Banks Aid Strikebreakers and Gunmen! Make Your Money Serve Your Own Class!* The ads, the beautifully illustrated catalogues and the solemn assurances in the party press that the bonds were "as good as gold," and the six per cent interest, had their effect. The association opened a large office at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 14th Street, equipped like an authentic bank—Fifth Avenue was chosen to impress would-be investors. The name of the new body was Consumers Finance Corporation, and the price of a bond was \$100. Money began to pour in. Communists and Left-Wingers took out their last savings from the "capitalist banks," that paid only two per cent, and brought it to "their own bank." About \$350,000 was raised.

The other two blocks were completed in 1928–1929 and totaled about 670 dwelling units. These were less elaborate than the first. Rumors of financial irregularities could not be suppressed, and the party put Elye Wottenberg in charge. He was a practical and cool-headed man, but his appointment came too late. The grievous damage was done. Gerson and Cohn had undertaken more than they could carry through. The cost of the buildings, the lavish ads and the maintenance far exceeded the rentals.

The result was inevitable. The association had fallen behind in

the payment of interests, amortization, taxes and assessments by over \$200,000. Title Insurance foreclosed the mortgage. But Felix M. Warburg, who had a controlling interest in Title Insurance, anxious to avoid clashes between the police and Jewish workers, who picketed the title company, compelled the company to agree to a compromise. A new plan was worked out aimed to save the cooperative nature of the houses and to protect those who lived there. But the plan fell short of saving the "Gold Bonds." They were worthless. The association went into bankruptcy, the food market was sold—it was a failure from the very beginning due to mismanagement—the free land was given up, but the buildings were returned by the title company to a new association of cooperator-residents under a special favorable agreement.

News of the bankruptcy spread quickly, and hundreds of bondholders, alarmed, rushed to the office on Fifth Avenue, to find it closed. They picketed the headquarters of the CP, the *Freiheit* and the *Daily Worker*. Many went to the district attorney demanding action to recover at least a part of the loss. But it seems that nothing could be done under the law. As unemployment was spreading, the loss of life savings was indeed tragic to hundreds of families.

The party and its papers tried to calm down the outraged bondholders with assurances that the new association had taken over the obligations of the defunct Consumers' Finance Corporation, and would gradually pay out the full amount of their bonds. Their collective and personal responsibility for the mess which had caused so much harm to so many was glossed over.

THE PARTY'S HEAVY HAND; THE FINAL COLLAPSE

The situation was aggravated by the depression. Many tenants could not pay their rent; others held it back to "live out" their investment and the bonds. Still, released from the debt of the bonds and having to pay only a reduced interest on the mortgage, the new association could have continued the buildings as a collective affair for a long time. But poor management coupled with heavy financial demands by the party kept the expenses above the income. By the end of 1941 there was an accumulated deficit of \$611,843, wiping out the members' equity of about \$400,000 and dimming any hope for even partial payment of the bonds. The mortgagee took over, the association

was dissolved and ordinary tenant-landlord relations were established. (The financial figures are taken from *Non-profit Housing Projects in the United States*, Bulletin No. 896, U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.)

Despite the grave financial reverses, the houses—still called cooperatives—remained during the 30's and the 40's a Communist fort. Many of the original residents moved out. But the Communist house committee kept its grip on the tenants. Some of those who had to move were Trotskyites and Lovestonites, whose life was made unbearable. They and their children were ostracized.

There is no doubt that the houses were hard hit by the depression. Two more cooperative housing projects, on a much smaller scale, went under, one of the Labor Zionist Farband and the other by a group of Yiddishists of the Sholom Aleichem Folks Institute. But they avoided swindling so many people with worthless gold bonds. Also, the Communist cooperatives managed to exist as a collective many years after the depression, and their final collapse had no relation with it.

As to teaching people cooperative living, the houses on Allerton Avenue were a hotbed of cliques and personal intrigues. The party had frequently to interfere to check quarrels and inflated ambitions. However, the party was never the loser. In addition to the manifold advantages of such a large "concentration of forces" in one place, the cooperatives, as long as they existed, were a good milking cow for the party.

THE FLOWERING SUMMER CAMPS

The summer camps, that widened the Communist periphery and brought much liveliness to the movement, were also initiated by the odd and inseparable pair, Gerson and Cohn. Here, too, they were the forerunners of a trend, more popular and simpler of realization than that of cooperative living.

With the doggedness of dedicated men, their small band, called Workers Cooperative Association, began, in 1921, to arrange week-end excursions to different countrysides. The *nature-freunde* character of these excursions can be seen from the way a three-day holiday trip to Belmar, New Jersey, was advertised:

"Take along a sweater, a bathing suit, a blanket, soap and a

towel. You will sleep with mother earth, with your fist for a pillow. But you will be covered (aside from your blanket) by the lovely moon and the beautiful stars. The food will be bought and prepared collectively." *185

The response to "sleeping with mother earth" was gratifying. A couple of years later, the Workers Cooperative, overcoming many obstacles, opened a small camp for weekends in the rugged hill country near Beacon on the Hudson. Gradually, improvements were introduced, a few tents and a shack for a dining room, and the camp was given the jolly name of *Nitgedeiget* (Don't Worry). It was the only such spot near the big city, and young people who did not care for comfort and had only a few dollars to spend for vacation or weekends in the country could enjoy the sunshine and bathing on the Hudson. *Nitgedeiget* was a strictly mutual-service venture. Aside from the paid cooks, the campers themselves were the waiters, by rotation, and did most of the other chores. As an inexpensive and comradesly camp, it was all one could desire.

As the camp grew in popularity, it was reorganized into the Workers Colony Association and put under party control. And the party's treatment of the camp was just as heavy-handed as of other auxiliaries.

Thousands of people passed through *Nitgedeiget* during the summer season. The tents slowly gave way to bungalows, with showers and other plumbing facilities. A modern dining room and kitchen, large enough to feed a thousand people at one time, and a big social center, with a stage for concerts and plays, were erected. Gerson, Cohn and their close friends built the bungalows and social center high on the hills and the dining room and kitchen far down near the river, to avoid the hated smell of meat and fish. The campers were thus compelled to walk up and down steep hills three times a day in the hot weather for their meals. (The same separation of smells carried out in the supermarket on Allerton Avenue was an element in its failure.) No one in the party was curious enough to look over their construction plans.

The literary and entertainment programs were all Communist-tuned. *Nitgedeiget* and Kinderland, the latter seized by the Communists from the WC and enlarged by the addition of an adult section, formed two points of attraction for large numbers of people who would otherwise probably be out of reach of Communist fellowship

and propaganda. The camps were also a source of money, each camper paying 50 cents a week to a press fund, meaning the party press. This was part of the bill; not a voluntary contribution. Then came all the fund-raising campaigns for Left causes. Moreover, the party dispensed the paid jobs, and they were quite numerous.

The rapid success of *Nitgedeiget* induced the party to open a new camp for English-speaking people, Camp Unity, near Hopewell Junction. It was greatly expanded, and its clientele was largely American-born Jewish youth. At the end of the 20's, most of the larger cities had summer camps for children and adults. There were about eight of them here and in Canada. In those cities where the bulk of the Left Wing consisted of small business people, such as Washington, D. C., the camps were cooperatively owned, each family building its own bungalow.

THE GLOOMY END OF NITGEDEIGET

The camps met an acute need for rest and relaxation. The Friday night camp fires, organized sports, Saturday night concerts, Sunday night dances and the long hikes in the hills were invigorating to people living in crowded apartments in the big city. Even the weekly Communist lectures could not dispel the atmosphere of lightheartedness and gaiety. One could always escape them. (In the first years card playing and drinking were prohibited, and only wage-earners were accepted as campers.) But this relative internal freedom disappeared during the Third Period. The "monolithic" party sat down on the camp, steadily increasing its demands, until they were turned into recruiting and fund-raising agencies.

Party demands, poor management (managers were appointed solely on the basis of party merit) and the opening of *Nitgedeiget* as an all-year-round resort, requiring a big outlay, proved too heavy a burden for the camp. As a result, *Nitgedeiget* underwent several bankruptcies. "Americanizing" its name to Camp Beacon and banishing Yiddish only made things worse. The camp went under in the 40's. Camp Unity suffered too, though not so much. Kinderland also went into bankruptcy, surviving only because it was annexed by the IWO.

In all fairness, the rumor of sexual looseness in the Communist camps must be denied. No doubt, there were people who visited

them because of these rumors. But, on the whole, the moral standard in the Left camps were on about the same level as in other camps of similar type.

In surveying the multiple fronts on which Communism was battling in the 20's, it should not be implied that they were a succession of setbacks. For one, though liberal writers were aghast at the fanaticism and abusive polemics, Communists were accepted as a part of the progressive opposition to the status quo. And the status quo in that period was typified by the bigotry and provincialism of the Babbitts, the Teapot Dome Scandal, brutal suppression of strikes, dollar diplomacy and intervention in South America, and the looseness and corruption of the Prohibition era.

The Communists profited greatly by the most glaring injustice of the 20's, the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Energetically, they moved in on that internationally famous affair. The defense of the two Italian anarchists was the Communists' first united action with liberals.⁺⁶³ However, in the recriminations following the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, August 22, 1927, the Communists were rebuked for their senseless demonstrations, that had been of little help to the condemned.⁺⁶⁴ Still, they managed to retain amicable relations with important groups of liberals. But, in Jewish society, the Communists encountered uncompromising resistance from the three powerful groups, the Socialists, the trade union officialdom and the Zionists.

As to the state of mind and the mood of the party membership, it must be said that even an unorthodox Communist had moments of inner satisfaction, even joy. Despite the ugly factionalism, reverses, and occasional inner doubts, Communist alertness and initiative on so many sectors supported the belief in the dynamism and the ultimate justice of the movement.

The party was not as yet totally conformist and bureaucratized. On the Jewish area, at least, there was variety and receptiveness in matters of culture and literature. Individual expression within the general frame of the doctrine was not yet taboo. And the vigorous response to expressions of social revolt in various parts of the globe nourished the proud feeling of belonging to a world party that was fighting for oppressed mankind everywhere.