

## 42 *The Mazel Tov Counterattack*

The Red Army "liberating millions of Ukrainians, Byelorussians and other nationalities," was transmuted on the Jewish area into "saving many Jewish lives." This became the daily leitmotif of the *Freiheit*, the ICOR and the IKUF magazines, at meetings and at lectures, growing louder and bolder as the Russian occupation was extended.

A day after the first "liberation" cable from Moscow, Olgin rubbed his hands in glee and proclaimed in a front page piece:

"A big day in Jewish life. . . . For 20 years the Jews have been deprived of their rights, they suffered pogroms and shameful treatment in the newly created Polish state. . . . The war came. Chamberlain and Daladier betrayed Poland. The life of the Jews became a thousand times worse. A cry of anguish and pain issued from millions of Jewish hearts. . . . Suddenly big news shot like a bolt of lightning around the world. The Red Army is marching!!! The army of Bolsheviks! . . . Happiness overflowed the hearts of masses of Jews all over. Hundreds of thousands of Jews in America repeated *Mazel Tov*. Jewish hearts are overflowing with thanks to the Soviet government. . . ." \*385

Olgin's saccharine jubilation set the pattern. The "liberation" of the home town of a member of the *Freiheit* staff became the occasion for a celebration, with *Mazel Tov*'s all around. Communists everywhere took up the cue, and liberation celebrations rolled over the country.

Moscow's efforts to sooth outraged opinion abroad went on at a

faster pace. The Communist press, in North and South America, was flooded daily with cables describing the joy with which the inhabitants of each town greeted the "liberators," and the profound thanks they offered to the Great Stalin. And to add a ring of authenticity, each cable mentioned individuals by name, always seeing to it that the various national groups were equally quoted among those who welcomed the Red Army.

The practice of supplying the Communist press with canned propaganda by cable was not new. It seems that at crucial moments Moscow was unwilling to depend entirely upon the foreign Communist press. And since the purges an extensive one-way cable service, costing many hundreds of dollars a week, was inaugurated. The whole proceedings of the trials, each report by Stalin to a party conference—and he usually spoke five or six hours—every editorial of the *Pravda* bearing on a topic important to Moscow, and similar material was immediately cabled verbatim to the Communist press abroad. As no one would dare disregard them, the *Daily Worker* and the *Freiheit* had to print them in series like novels. Often two or three cables were running alongside for several days. The cables dominated the papers.

One of the early enthusiastic cables of the Russian occupation appeared in the *Freiheit* under the banner headline: THE SOVIET GOVERNMENT HAS BROUGHT US HAPPINESS AND JOY, SAY LIBERATED JEWS IN POLAND. The cable read:

"To us has come the happiness from quarters from which we expected it all the years. . . . Our brothers in the land of the Soviets, the sons of the greatest man in the world, Josef Stalin, have brought us happiness and freedom. These are the words of the Jew Heller, the White Russian Golovitz and the Ukrainian Marchuk. With these words they express the deep joyous feeling of 15 million human beings, the people the Red Army has now liberated from the yoke of the Polish grandees." \*386

Soon another flood began, that of letters from the "liberated" to relatives here, giving heartfelt thanks to the Red Army and to the Great and Beloved Leader Stalin. The *Freiheit* printed excerpts daily. In the beginning these letters were authentic, though the fulsome praise of Stalin robbed the sentiments expressed of much of their credibility. Later, a number of them became suspiciously identical. The reason was that the genuine letters were thinning

out, and the *Freiheit* deemed it profitable to produce them in New York. The "letter writer" was Sol Hertz, of the *Freiheit* staff. In many of the auxiliary bodies, special meetings were called to read these letters, and the waverers were given the honor of reading them publicly. The *Mazel Tov* celebrations and the letters served as tranquilizers for depressed spirits.

The news that Lithuania, Latvia and Esthonia were officially annexed by Russia, in August 1940, was headlined by the *Freiheit* AS ANOTHER HALF A MILLION JEWS ARE FREE. This was followed by more cables and letters from relatives telling of their happiness.

One could detect a note of bitter irony in some of the letters. One such letter, from Lithuania, addressed to a sister in Los Angeles, was dated February 7, 1940. It began with "Long live comrade and friend, teacher and educator, Comrade Stalin. . . . We now live in a palace. . . . I work in a match factory. . . ." \*387 Another letter to be read between the lines came from Bessarabia, also overrun by the Red Army: "I have to work for seven children (presumably seven days) and my feet are sick. But I am happy that the children will have it good later." One letter-writer found an ingenious way to smuggle through a denial of his own lines. His letter, in Russian, profuse in its adulation of Stalin and everything Soviet, had stuck in a far corner a Yiddish word of three letters, "*Nit*" (not). \*388

Many of these letters were published by the Communists in a special edition in the format of a small daily paper.

Some of the best known Soviet Jewish writers were harnessed in the drive to sell the Stalin-Hitler pact abroad as an act that saved millions of Jews. In one issue, the *Freiheit* featured a big article by Itzik Feffer, "The Yesterday and Today in Bessarabia," and another one by M. Razumni, "A New Life in Latvia." \*389 Feffer arrived in Kishineff a few days after the Russian occupation. What he had to say about Jewish uneasiness under Rumanian rule—and this took up the largest part of the article—was authentic; his "We are happy and gay" of *today* had all the marks of a Kremlin assignment loyally carried out. The letter from Riga bore the same seal. Feffer carried out the same task in two well known cities of Byelorussia, Brest-Litovsk and Byalestok. \*390

The local Jewish papers were taken over by the Communists immediately after the occupation, without changing their names.

Their first job was to sound a note of joy over the new regime. The *Freiheit* diligently reprinted these on-the-spot "reports" as the genuine feelings of the Jewish population there. An example was the review of the happenings in occupied Lithuania, lyrically headlined, "News of Broken Chains," taken from the Communist *Jewish Voice* in Kovno.\*<sup>391</sup>

The cables and letters rejoicing in the liberation of so many Jews were accompanied by other cables and articles telling of ambitious Soviet plans for the rehabilitation of the Jewish refugees and the resurgence of Jewish culture throughout the Soviet Union, especially in Birobidjan. Shachno Epstein cabled a fantastic tale of "three million Jewish books planned for the coming years." \*<sup>392</sup> In another cable, he gave a glowing description of conditions in Birobidjan, where he had never been. And his was not the only piece assuring the readers in America that the Jews in Birobidjan were satisfied and happy.

#### HARSH TREATMENT OF REFUGEES LEAKS OUT

There is no denying that those who came under the occupation of the Red Army had a much better chance of survival than those under the Nazis. And the Communists' chief argument that Stalin saved many Jews—the *Freiheit* began with a modest half million and soon arbitrarily increased it to three million—was not entirely groundless. What they chose to overlook was: one, that Stalin actively helped to place many more millions of Jews under Hitler, to their ultimate destruction; two, the harsh and brutal treatment of the "rescued" Jews by the Soviet authorities, which resulted in numerous deaths.

About 400,000 Jews were packed into box cars and shipped to labor camps in Siberia and the Far East. And no one knows exactly how many perished there. Books and articles by those who survived are vivid testimony to their horrifying experiences.\*<sup>98</sup> And those who for some reason were not shipped away were not permitted to travel deeper into Russia, subsequently falling into Nazi hands.

Jewish public opinion generally did not succumb to the honeyed assurances that the Jews were finding a haven under the Red Army. (The historian Simon Dubnov, in an interview with the JTA, in Riga, Latvia, before the Red Army occupation of that city, ex-

pressed the opinion that the Jews in Russian-occupied Poland are lost to the Jewish people." Dubnov's statement made a deep impression here.) \*<sup>393</sup>

The true situation in the freed territories was slowly seeping through the heavy censorship. Some letters from Siberia conveyed a hint of the pitiable plight of the refugees. (The poet, Reuben Iceland, showed the author a postcard from a Galician rabbi, 74 years old, compelled to clear forests in Siberia, hinting by means of Talmudic sayings that only death could save him.) The Jewish community in Palestine, much nearer to the scene, began sending out, in 1940, reports of the inhuman treatment of the refugees. The *Freiheit* tried to brush them off as "lies from Jerusalem," calling the Jewish papers which printed them "Red-baiters, criminals and reactionaries." But the reports persisted, and the *Freiheit* had to take note of them.

Forgetful of the innumerable cables and letters full of happiness and joy, and not admitting the truth either, the *Freiheit* clumsily tried to improvise extenuating circumstances for the Soviet acts. "Honest people realize," it reasoned, "that refugees are a problem. . . . Refugees coming from the middle classes are certainly a problem in a country where they have to adjust to a new economy, a Socialist one. . . . This is a difficult problem. *Though not so difficult and not of such long duration as that of the refugees in America or in Palestine.*" (italics M.E.) \*<sup>394</sup>

How the people in the smaller towns here felt about the Soviet Union and the Communists can be gleaned from the article in the *Freiheit* by the poet M. A. (Yuri) Suhl about a lecture in a town in Connecticut. He was forced to hold it in a private home because no one would rent them a hall, though the topic was a literary one. "An orgy of hatred on the Jewish streets," was his comment.\*<sup>395</sup>

Reporting on the sixth convention of the IWO *shules* in Philadelphia, Deborah Tarant labeled the current sentiment among Jews reactionary. ". . . Jewish reaction is more repulsive than the general one, . . ." she said. "Together with its press, it has set out to poison the air against the entire Jewish progressive movement, around our own order, and our *shules.*" \*<sup>396</sup>

The fight over *The Day* was indicative of the growing Jewish hostility to everything smacking of Communism.

Financial difficulties aggravated by sharp differences of opinion between the majority of the staff and several Left-Wingers necessitated a reorganization in *The Day*. The Left-Wingers induced the New York Newspaper Guild, then under tight Communist control, to call a strike against the paper. The Yiddish Writers Union, to which all the writers of *The Day* belonged, declared the strike illegal; first, because the majority of the staff was against the strike; second, the Newspaper Guild had no jurisdiction in the Yiddish field. And this stand was warmly upheld by public opinion, which resented outside Communist interference in a national Jewish organ.

The strikers had the active backing of the Communist movement. The *Freiheit* became their mouthpiece. Communist women from the former cooperative houses on Allerton Avenue, in the Bronx, descended on East Broadway in hundreds for mass picketing. Jewish Communists and their sympathizers outside New York were mobilized to visit subscribers and advertisers of *The Day*, appealing to them to drop their subscriptions and advertisements. The Jewish neighborhoods were bombarded with leaflets calling the majority of *The Day*, some of the most distinguished writers among them, scabs.

The suspicion was dawning in responsible circles that the concentrated Communist efforts against *The Day* were not merely to save the jobs of a few of their friends, but a well calculated design to profit by the financial crisis of the paper, made worse by the "strike," to take it over. As the sphere of influence of the *Freiheit* had greatly shrunk, it would have been a godsend to obtain control, though unofficially, of the highly regarded independent *The Day*.

To thwart the Communist plans, the Yiddish Writers Union, jointly with other labor bodies, called a conference for April 6th to present the entire case to the public. The response was above expectations. More than 1,700 delegates from about a thousand local groups, representing every strata of the Yiddish-speaking community, came to the conference. Resolutions condemning the Communists and promising support to the staff of *The Day* were passed unanimously. The conference marked a turn in favor of the majority writers and their union.<sup>+99</sup>

#### JUDAIZING THE CAMPAIGN FOR A "PEOPLE'S PEACE"

In the campaign for American non-involvement in the war, the Jewish Communists applied the same Judaizing approach they had during their drive for collective security and democratic unity. Opposition to American preparedness and aid to the Allies could be anything but popular among Jews. Nor could they take calmly the new Communist *A People's Peace*, a dangerously ambiguous slogan that could only lead to freezing Hitler's victories in Europe. But the Jewish Communists had no choice in the matter.

The *Freiheit* spread the alarm that the National Defense Bill, calling among others for the registration of aliens, would place the foreign-born under multiple restrictions.

The freeing by a jury in Brooklyn of a group of Christian Fronters, accused of anti-Jewish incidents, provided the *Freiheit* with fresh material for its scare campaign. To the Communist paper it was a definite sign that "it could happen here too"; that the nearer America approached the war, the greater the menace of fascism and anti-Semitism.<sup>\*397</sup>

A 32-page pamphlet in English, *A Jew Looks at the War*, by Rabbi Moses Miller, the new chairman of the Jewish People's Committee, was distributed "in hundreds of thousands of copies." "The peace-loving Jewish people are against war," Miller wrote. He went to great lengths to "unmask the Jewish misleaders, the Wise's and the Cahan's. . . . The Jewish people have to join the 'progressive section' of the American people, with the advance ranks of the world's peace movement. . . ."

The Communists also published a Yiddish pamphlet, *Should America Enter the War*. Numerous open air meetings were held in all the larger cities as a part of a special campaign "to bring the program of the Communist Party to the Jews."<sup>\*398</sup>

The Russian attack on Finland, begun December 1, 1940, evoked deep sympathy for the little republic among the Jews. The talk of collecting aid for the Finnish people made the *Freiheit* furious. "Aid for the Finnish White Guardists is a menace to American Jews," the paper warned.<sup>\*399</sup> And an article by Paul Yuditz called the papers and the persons responsible for this talk "Hitler's comrades."<sup>\*400</sup> This was followed a few days later by an editorial outburst "against the reactionary papers . . . the Wise's, Cahan's and

Dubinsky's for marching together with the Coughlin's and Hearst's to collect aid for the Czarist pogrom-maker, General Mannerheim." \*401 Jewish labor's campaign for aid to Britain also called forth angry comments by the *Freiheit*.

Posing the question, "Where Does the Fifth Column Reside?" the *Freiheit* editorial answered, "In the highest circles, beginning from generals and admirals to the Socialists here and the Bloom's in France." \*402 Another editorial accused the Jewish press of conducting "the most vicious of pro-war campaigns. . . ." "The Jewish press is treacherous, criminal and reactionary," cried Paul Novick, who became editor after Olgin's death. This outburst was his reply to the highly embarrassing news that the Nazi radios in Stuttgart and Munich had complimented the Jewish Communists in New York, calling them "honest people." The news was cabled from London, which monitored the Nazi radio, to the *Forward* and the *Morning Journal*. \*403

The Communists kept playing upon the deepset fear of war among women. "Mothers and Wives Weep Bitterly When a New York Division Leaves for Military Duty; Heartrending Scenes!" Thus ran a headline in the *Freiheit* over the report that the 27th Division of the National Guard had left for active training in Fort McClellan, Alabama. \*404

The auxiliaries, as usual, performed their part in all the party's campaigns. The fifth convention of the IWO decided to participate in the Peace Congress in Chicago. \*405 The others either endorsed it or conducted vigorous drives in behalf of the *People's Peace*. However, the attempts to form a Jewish facade for the *People's Peace* were abortive. A gathering of Communist and Left youth groups was presented as "the convention of Jewish youth." But its resolutions carried the clear Communist ring: "For the defense of Jewish rights, for democracy and immediate peace." \*406

#### VILIFYING GENUINE RESCUE WORK

The successful efforts of the Jewish Labor Committee, aided by William Green, in 1940, 1941 and 1942, to bring over here hundreds of prominent trade unionists, Socialists, writers and scientists, fleeing Hitler and Stalin occupations—a genuine rescue mission—aroused Communist ire. The JLC was branded in the *Freiheit* mis-

leaders and cheaters. "They collected money for relief work abroad, and spent it on *upgeshmisene hosheines* (has-beens) of the Second International . . . (on) professional conspirators against the Soviet Union and against the revolutionary labor movement throughout the world." \*407 (On July 21, 1941, the Vichy government adopted the Nuremberg Laws, which sent thousands of Jews to the gas chambers, making escape from France a matter of life and death.)

And, resentful at a decision of the ILGWU for a day's work for the war victims abroad, a part of which would be distributed through the JLC, the *Freiheit*, in an editorial above its masthead, shouted, "Not one cent for the bloody enemies of the working class!" The JLC was called a nest of "brought-over counterrevolutionary, Kolchakist and White Guardist . . . remnants of the anti-Soviet conspiracy and espionage." \*408

Scolding the enemy and inventing tales of rescue and rehabilitation of Jews in Soviet Russia was only one phase, though a vital one, in the Communist efforts to keep from being dislodged from their positions. They also had their hands full trying to arouse sympathy for those Communists in trouble with the law. School boards in various parts of the country were initiating proceedings against Communist teachers. In New York, the most prominent case involved Morris Schappes, a teacher and an admitted Communist, whose trial began July 18, 1941. As a diversionary move to protect their people, the Communists called a conference "against fascist and anti-Semitic activities in the New York public school system," on June 10th, in the Heckscher Auditorium. \*409

The conference used the phrase "anti-Semitism" merely as a shield. It was preoccupied with resolutions against the Coudert Bill, which aimed to drive Communist teachers out of the schools.

Another diversionary move, on a larger scale, was the sudden campaign by the Jewish People's Committee to collect signatures for a petition to Congress to outlaw anti-Semitism. \*410 It met the active resistance of all Jewish groups.

Ill feeling in the community adversely affected the annual fundraising drives of the *Freiheit* of 1940 and 1941. The quota for 1940, \$100,000, was not raised, despite the daily threats that the paper's very survival was at stake. The quota for 1941 was much smaller, \$75,000, and the campaign dragged on for six months.

The Communist press did not hesitate to label the repeated stories of Nazi plans for a war on Russia as outright lies manufactured by the enemies of the Soviets for a specific purpose. Less than 24 hours before the Nazi planes started their bombardment of Soviet positions, the *Daily Worker* editorialized: "Reports of a 'break' between the Soviet Union and Germany (not Nazi Germany—M.E.), with rumors of war, continue to flare up in the capitalist press. What is immediately noticeable about this whole press campaign is the lying character of the stories, which are being published as though they were gospel truth." \*411

On the same day, the Communist press printed a denial by the official Tass of the "so-called concentration of Nazi armies on the Soviet border." And the following day, June 21st, when the Nazi tanks were already driving into Soviet Russia, the *Daily Worker* was still calling: "Stop the imperialist war," and the cartoon lampooned the "stories in the capitalist papers about Hitler's attacking the Soviet Union." \*412

#### AGAIN DEMOCRATS AND AMERICAN PATRIOTS

The outcry against America's involvement in the war came to an abrupt end. In one day the World War lost its imperialist character, and the *People's Peace* was thrown into oblivion. The next day Roosevelt ceased to be the leading war-monger and was again called the true leader of the American people. Soon the revolutionary class struggle was quietly buried, and democracy and patriotism were again hung up as a decorative design. Strengthening of American defenses and rushing military aid to the countries battling Nazi Germany became major objectives. *Keep America Out of the War*, the central theme for nearly two years, gave way in December 1941 to the welcoming of America's entrance in the war. Browder, released from Atlanta Penitentiary, called upon the people to rally around the Commander-in-Chief. Sabotage in the defense plants ceased, and strikes in defense industries were decried as a crime against the vital interests of America and of the democratic world. The Declaration of Teheran, issued at the first meeting of the Allied leaders, in 1943, became a Communist second Bible.

This complete Communist about-face, similar to the previous both-camps-are-imperialist stand, was not motivated by any change

in the domestic scene. Its sole reason was Hitler's treacherous attack on his partner-in-loot, Stalin. A day after June 21, 1941, the party, its press and its auxiliaries were unrecognizable. The party thus again demonstrated that of all its early allegiances, it had retained but one, subservience to the Soviet Union. This was the tragedy of American Communism.

Jewish society, caught up in the wave of American-Soviet friendship-in-war, bore its full share in the aid to Russia drives. For a time, Jewish Communists were basking in the rising pro-Soviet sentiment, encouraged by official Washington. But, even then, by far not all forgot Communist betrayal of both democracy and world Jewry in the fateful years 1939 to 1941.