

9 *The Jewish Left*

The cohesiveness of the federation could not prevent pro-Bolshevik sentiments from penetrating its youthful element. Nevertheless, the left fermentation in the Jewish group was slower and on a smaller scale than in the other minority groups or in the SP.

Communism's little headway in the body of Jewish Socialism could be attributed largely to the left-of-the-center stand of the federation. That stand siphoned off accumulated impatience among the rank and file with the lack of militancy in the party. As events abroad showed, the more aggressive and cohesive the Socialist Party was, the less ground was left for Communism. A case in point was Austria.

The first Left group was formed early in 1919, in New York City. Only five people were present, all in their early 20's, all members of the Downtown—Lower East Side—branch, the largest in the federation. Frank Geliebter, Harry Hiltzik, Lazar Kling, William Abrams and Ben Solomon met in a basement restaurant at the corner of Jefferson and Madison Streets, nicknamed the Jewish Smolny Institute.⁺²⁰ They called their group the Left Wing of the Jewish Socialist Federation.*⁶²

The group's links with the general Left were rather weak. Strongly pro-Soviet and yearning for more militancy within the party, they had no definite program. They continued meeting regularly, rapidly gaining adherents among people of their age.

They circulated a letter to all branches accusing the *Naye Welt* of "chauvinistic social patriotism"—the paper was veering toward

Wilson's 14 Points—and demanding the removal of the editor. Acting as a unit, the Left group soon gained control of the branch. And during the election campaign of the same year, they issued leaflets in the name of the branch urging people not to vote for Meyer London, thus contributing to his defeat. For this crass breach of discipline, the branch was expelled from the federation.*63

Other Left groups sprang up in Boston, New Haven, Philadelphia, Chicago and Detroit.

In the tradition of radical groupings, the first and immediate task of the Left was a paper of their own. Such a paper, *Der Kampf*, a weekly, appeared February 16, 1919, published by the Jewish Group of International Socialists and edited by Philip Geliebter and Hertz Burgin. Its subtitle was the innocent "A Review of American International Problems"; the English subtitle was simply "A Jewish Periodical." A hundred dollars was raised for the first number.*64

The scarcity of writers could be seen from the list of contributors. Only two, M. Zipin and Lazar Kling, could write Yiddish. The others mentioned as contributors were Nicholas Hourwich, Louis Fraina and John Reed. Lazar Kling used the pseudonym of Malke Rokhel Liufman. The hour was already late for the general Left to remain in the party. Nevertheless, the program article in *Der Kampf* solemnly asserted: "We are not seeking a split in the party. We publish this paper with the most peaceful of intentions. . . ."

Our official leaders avoid entirely the discussion of the problems—left in the wake of the war—and do not permit others to discuss them either. Or they take an ambiguous stand to satisfy everyone. . . . And in our Jewish labor, things are quiet as usual. . . . The advanced Jewish workers feel as though they were in a house with closed windows and doors. . . . To 'open the door' . . . , to unite our scattered people, to create a tribune for opinions that do not carry the O.K. of the official leaders . . . these are the tasks of our review.*65

The two editors and their Jewish contributors, none of them extremists, were quite serious in their peaceful intentions. The entire group behind *Der Kampf*, for that matter, had no thought of going any further than creating a "tribune for opinions" within the federation.*66

Philip Geliebter was a recent arrival. Short, plump and jovial, he

depended economically on the official top, serving as assistant educational director of the WC. Lazar Kling was no extremist either. It was mainly his youthful enthusiasm that made him conspicuous in the Left Wing. He later went to Russia, but did not stay there long; he worked in the *Freiheit* for a short time, then dropped out.

Hertz Burgin, already middle-aged, had been in this country for many years. He gained his livelihood as a member of the editorial staff of the *Forward*, but in his private and social life he was Russianized. A short, thin, dry man, of studious and accurate habits, there was nothing militant or rebellious about him, though he was an orthodox Marxist. He seemed to be somewhat of a split personality, a type that one met quite often in the Communist movement. Only a few years earlier, Burgin had written a semi-official history of Jewish labor in America that represented the view of the old guard.

When the test came, Burgin left the *Forward* and was employed for many years by the AMTORG Trading Corporation. Geliebter, on the other hand, remained with the Communist movement only for a few years. He broke with it in the middle of the 20's. He died in 1936.

M. Zipin was a mild-mannered man, a philosophical anarchist, and for many years on the staff of the *Yiddisher Velt*, in Philadelphia, a paper supporting the Republican Party. He went to Russia in 1917, returning staunchly pro-Soviet. He never really accepted either Marxism or the dictatorship of the proletariat idea. He joined the staff of the *Freiheit* in 1922, and died soon afterward.

THE PEACEFUL INTENTIONS LEAD TO A SPLIT

The "open door" stayed open only temporarily. Contact with the general Left became closer, and its pressure stronger. In the third issue of *Der Kampf*, April 4th, the members of the federation were urged to discuss the manifesto and program of the SP Left Wing of New York City, and the editorial raised the question, "How to organize the Bolshevik sentiments among the masses." It also spoke of the necessity "to awaken among the proletariat a feeling and an understanding of the political strike." That issue printed the call to the First Congress of the Comintern (Lenin and Trotsky were the signers for the Russian party; B. Reinstein signed, without any

authorization, for the American SLP). An indication of the rising influence of the Nicholas Hourwich group on the Jewish Left was the article by Malke Rokhel Liufman, "A Left Party for the Left Wing."

The wheel of events in the Jewish Left began to spin very fast. As the schism in the SP widened and Bolshevik prestige was on the upswing, the Jewish group kept attracting a larger following. More active young people, Noah London, Morris Holtman (of Pittsburgh), both civil engineers graduated from Cooper Union; and Dr. Louis Hendin (of Baltimore) became converts. Alexander Bittelman, aided by his friends, Meyer Lunin, Hyman Castrell and Raskin, of the Harlem branch, pushed himself into the forefront. Bittelman's leadership and the growing rift in the party led to the Left breaking with the federation scarcely four months after the "peaceful intentions" had been proclaimed and three months prior to the birth of the two Communist parties in Chicago. On June 27th, *Der Kampf* became the weekly of an independent Left Wing, and on September 19th the paper already spoke for a Jewish Communist federation, a part of the CP; Bittelman, editor, and Geliebter, associate editor.

The young Communists, rising against all tradition, had to adhere to one, that of a labor paper devoting space to literature. The noted novelist, Lamed Shapiro, a non-political man, was invited to head the literary section of the weekly. And having no one of their own acquainted with the trade union movement, Melech Epstein, on the staff of *The Day*, a pro-Soviet but by no means a Communist, was asked to write a column on the trade unions.

The split occurred at the fourth convention of the federation, May 29-June 1, 1919, in Boston.

PARALYZING FIGHTING IN THE BRANCHES

The EC of the federation vehemently repudiated the entire Left Wing. The *Naye Welt* bristled with sharp and sarcastic pieces against them. Salutsky called *Der Kampf* an insane asylum, and expressed his antagonism to "barricade battles." He cited the nihilism of the Jewish Left on Jewish problems, their opposition to Jewish relief and to the movement against pogroms, and their repu-

diation of cultural activities. He also poked fun at their cure-all solution, the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Zivyon, treasurer of their early Avant Guard Publications, now called them anarcho-socialists. Their leaders, he said, were demagogues and half-baked intellectuals who could not, because of their inability and ignorance, climb to the front in the movement. But in the mud learning and ability were not necessary.*67

The heated pre-convention discussions in the branches clearly indicated a sizable majority for the anti-Communists. However, the youthful zeal of the Left was a factor to reckon with.

An editorial in the *Forward* on the eve of the convention described the untenable situation in the federation:

The majority of the branches are divided in two hostile camps. There are no more branch meetings because each meeting consists of hostile elements which refuse to listen or to understand each other. The only question is who can muster enough "hands" in electing a chairman or in any other vote. . . . Discussing party problems is impossible and still less possible is it to carry on constructive activity. The question then arises: "Perhaps a divided existence will be more practical than a forced coexistence? . . ."*68

The editorial went on to say that the decision of the federation would be of great importance to the entire party, that the federation was among the largest and most effective in the SP. The struggle against the Left brought about a change in the attitude of the old-timers toward the federation. For a while they seemed to tread on common ground.

On the very eve of the convention, the federation issued a statement to all delegates, "The Call to Honor and Duty." It urged them to stand by the party and to abide by the decisions of the party convention. The federation then had on its books between 13,000 and 14,000 members; 33 new branches were organized in 1918-1919.

One hundred and thirty-six delegates, representing branches in 48 cities and 26 states, were present in Boston. Some branches sent two sets of delegates, causing numerous contests and acrimonious charges and countercharges. As the Left was determined to bolt, the debates were a mere rehashing of old arguments. J. B. Salutsky,

M. Olgin, J. B. Beilin and Dr. Jacob Mindel spoke for the majority. The Left spokesmen were Bittelman, Meyer Lunin and Harry Hiltzik. Two sets of political resolutions were voted upon, that of the Left demanding an immediate break with the SP and acceptance of the doctrine of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The majority resolution received 74 votes; that of the Left, 38. Seventeen delegates abstained from voting.⁺²¹

After the vote was taken, Bittelman read a short declaration that the Left was leaving the federation. Neither his dry, monotonous reading nor its pedestrian wording fitted the dramatic moment, the first split in the ranks of Jewish Socialists since 1897.^{*69} Thirty-odd delegates followed Bittelman to another room of the Labor Lyceum. There the Left opened their own convention.

The convention over, the crucial issue in the branches was who would stay and who would leave. The federation remained intact, but the blow it suffered was greater than the mere loss of a third of its members. Many others, repelled by the internal struggle, dropped out.

Olgin, in the *Naye Welt*, wrote contemptuously of the pro-Communist youth:

The young men of this group live in a little world created in their own imagination. In this little world everything is as they like it to be. The workers are united, class-conscious, organized and armed. Moods are aroused and society is shaken to its very foundations. Only one thing remains to be done: to make the last attempt, to deliver the last blow. So said Lenin. . . . So said Lenin.

And Zivyon, in his piece, stated: ". . . A sound constructive criticism was necessary, and the Left have started it. . . . Unfortunately, they quickly left the right course. . . . Those who broke with the federation were not the genuine *linke* but the *ausgelinkte*."^{*70}

At the convention itself, Salutsky was no less vehement against the Communists than Olgin and Zivyon. "According to the Moscow prescription," he said, "the new international is to be a religious, fanatical, intolerant sect of *hasidim* of one rabbi only." He expressed himself for a middle-of-the-road international, and quoted Kautsky's opinion that he could not accept Moscow without a critical analysis.^{*71}

NO, TO PROTEST AGAINST POGROMS, AND TO WAR RELIEF

A homogeneous element, untroubled by the friction between English- and non-English-speaking people, syndicalist and Marxist, the Jewish Left could avoid the early feuds among the Communists. But it did not. Recent immigrants from Russia, a majority of them chose the CP, which made every appearance of being the closest to Moscow. Bittelman, too, now acknowledged leader of the Left, preferred the CP, in the belief that it was going to be Moscow's choice as well. The majority published *Die Funken* (The Sparks), A. Bittelman, editor. However, a small number, disliking the Hourwich-Stoklitsky domination, went to the CLP. Their organ was the *Proletarische Shtime*, edited by Noah London and Louis Hendin.

The first convention of the Jewish Federation of the CP was held October 9-12, 1919, in Philadelphia. The report gave 45 branches in 20 cities, with a membership of 3,000. (In the CP report for the end of 1919 the Jewish group had only 1,000 dues-paying members. This would mean a membership of not more than 1,500.) The program of the CP was adopted in its entirety.

The assembled Jewish Communists took a purely negative stand on the two life-and-death tasks facing European Jewry, stopping the pogroms that were rolling over Eastern Europe and aiding postwar rehabilitation. The resolution on the pogroms proposed: ". . . to fight most energetically each attempt to draw in the Jewish workers in a protest movement against pogroms that will solicit aid from the governments of the capitalist international." According to the resolution, such a protest would in effect imply a tacit recognition of the capitalist governments.^{*72} (The *Naye Welt* called this resolution clumsy nonsense.)

The resolution on rehabilitation was in the same vein, ". . . not to participate in the activities of the Jewish war relief agencies because of their non-proletarian nature." This referred to the People's Relief Committee, a body that represented all shades of opinion in Jewish labor, including also a large group of Zionists, headed by Louis Lipsky and Morris Rottenberg. The People's Relief Committee was affiliated with the Joint Distribution Committee, the central agency for relief work abroad; it also gave aid independently to labor bodies in those countries.

MARCHING OUT OF THE RELIEF CONFERENCES

Opposition to Jewish war relief was strictly adhered to. Two years later, Jewish Communists attempted to undermine even the work of relief and rehabilitation for the Jews uprooted by war and civil war in Soviet Russia. They bolted the special national relief conference called by the PRC for that purpose. This conference, August 18, 1921, in Kessler's Theater on Second Avenue, was prompted by the urgency for aid stressed in the reports of the PRC delegates, Max Pine, secretary of the UHT, and Dr. Frank Rosenblatt, general secretary of the WC, still in Moscow, and by the Soviet government's desperate call for relief for the Volga famine sufferers.

The Communists came prepared to resist Jewish relief as such. Their demand was two-fold: relief for all Soviet citizens, and control of all funds vested solely in the Soviet authorities. They strongly opposed turning over the money to Herbert Hoover's American Relief Administration (ARA) or to the JDC. Vainly did the speakers for the majority, Sholom Asch, Jacob Panken, Alexander Kahn, reason that the Jews were the worst sufferers, their specific situation obligating the American Jews to undertake special action for them.

To bolster their position, the Communists brought in Dr. Gustav Hartman, a non-Jew and president of the Friends of Soviet Russia, who made an appeal for an international relief action for Soviet Russia.

A compromise proposal by the delegation of the Socialist Federation to have the money divided equally, half for Jewish and half for general relief, was rejected by the Communists, who demonstratively left the conference.*78

The Communist sabotage of such a vital and elementary cause made a painful impression on labor public opinion. The Communists felt the necessity for explaining their action. This task was undertaken by A. Bittelman, their spokesman on Jewish affairs. His article, under the pseudonym of Unicus, is revealing for the state of mind of the young Jewish Communists.

Unicus began with a severe condemnation of the PRC, which had "fallen into the category of a charity institution supported by the wealthy Jews. . . . The Pine's, the Gilles', the Schlesinger's and the Dr. Rosenblatt's are *aidem uf kest by die gvierem* (loosely, those

who live off their rich fathers-in-law). Unicus then reverted to characteristic Bittelman casuistry, "For the workers the issue was not to help just starving Jews or Russians; it was saving the proletarian Russia, the Communist Revolution, from counterrevolution. . . . Of course, the Communist *realpolitiker* could assume that tangible relief for Jews in Russia was, at the same time, tangible relief for Soviet Russia. But the revolutionary instinct of the working masses refuses to heed *realpolitik* when it concerns the revolution in Russia as a whole."

Unicus tried to strike an international-revolutionary pose: "The pain of the pogromized Jews, the misery and loneliness of the ruined Jews, is but a drop in the endless sea of human sufferings caused by capitalism and counterrevolution. . . . That international solidarity in the Jewish worker is stronger than his nationalist sentiment is commendable." *74

THE CALL FROM MOSCOW; THE NEW RELIEF IMPASSE

The Communists called their own relief meeting August 24th, in Manhattan Lyceum, organized by the Jewish Division of the American Labor Alliance, the legal arm of the CP. The Left Poale Zion joined in the meeting. They had two speakers, Dr. Elye Rottenberg and R. Kenjersky. Rose Pastor Stokes, seated on the platform, tore off her jewelry. "We dare not wear jewelry," she cried, "while the Russian proletarian is without bread." Many women followed her lead. There was great enthusiasm. Aside from a small pile of jewelry, \$500 was raised in cash. However, unable to form their own committee—opposition to Jewish relief and all-out support for the Friends of Soviet Russia precluded that—Jewish Communists were greatly hampered in the relief movement.

The sentiment in the community for a Jewish relief action in Russia was overwhelming, and though the FSR was supported by many radical Jews, the efforts of the Communists, through leaflets and editorials in their organ, the *Emes*, to channel Jewish contributions solely through the FSR were a failure. The People's Relief Committee was able to develop an active campaign. And, before the campaign could unfold, a call to American Jews for immediate aid issued by the Moscow *Yidgezkom* (Jewish Public Committee), the only Jewish social body for relief and rehabilitation permitted in

Russia, put an end to Communist opposition to relief for Jews. A lame editorial in the New York *Emes* of September 14th lifted the ban. However, the "revolutionary instinct" still prevailing, the editorial stressed that the contributions should go largely to the FRS. (*Yidgezkom* was formed to head off the insistence by Max Pine and Dr. Frank Rosenblatt, Right-Wing Socialists, on a representative Jewish public agency for the distribution of American relief.)

The negotiations between the PRC and the *Yidgezkom* hit a snag. The nature of the snag can be judged by the warm send-off given by the Moscow *Emes* to Pine and Rosenblatt. Calling them a delegation of reconnoiterers, the paper charged them with "preoccupation with reviving the Jewish counterrevolution. . . . They worked behind the scenes to support all the enemies of the Soviet regime among the Jews. . . . But, fortunately, the joint communication of the Jewish Commissariat of the Soviet Government and of the Central Bureau of the Jewish Communist Sections of the Russian Communist Party to the workers of America was the first grave blow for the gentlemen of the Joint and their lackays, the so-called labor leaders of Pine's ilk. A panic broke out in their ranks, accompanied by lies and slander in the manner of American bluff. But it was of no avail. The first big act of proletarian enlightenment was done." *75

The crime of the two "reconnoiterers" lay in their desire to broaden the basis of the *Yidgezkom* by bringing in some spokesmen of the democratic strata of Russian Jewry. As it was, *Yidgezkom* had only a couple of non-Communists to give it an all-Jewish touch. The sounding of the trumpet of victory in the *Emes* was merely a device for home consumption to disguise the impending retreat. The communication of the Jewish Commissariat and the Jewish Sections was a total waste as far as public opinion here was concerned. Meanwhile, the situation of the declassed Jews was becoming so desperate that a special emissary, Michail Rashkes, had to be sent to America to placate the PRC and other groups. As for the "gentlemen of the Joint," they were given wide leeway in rehabilitation work in Russia, the Soviet government concluding a special agreement with them.

It is worth noting that the Jewish Communists in Moscow had less reason to fear the presence of the JDC in Russia than that of the PRC. Quite a number of people of the PRC had been a part

of the Jewish Socialist movement in Czarist Russia. They would naturally scan the Soviet scene, and the Jewish sector in particular, with a more critical eye than the social workers or the experts of the JDC. And Communist hostility was not without ground. Pine returned from Moscow highly skeptical of the Soviet regime, while Judge Harry Fisher, from Chicago, who went with him for the JDC, had only praise for the friendly attitude of the Soviet leaders and their readiness to facilitate Jewish rehabilitation work.