

The Soviet Jewish Situation (1971)

By LOUIS HARAP

When David Bergelson was led to execution on Aug. 12, 1952, he is reported to have cried out, "Comrades, it was all a terrible mistake." And so it was. For the ordeal of Soviet Jews differs from most episodes of anti-Jewish harassment and persecution. Most of these were not "mistakes"; they were carried out under the aegis of social philosophies of racial superiority put into practice by a ruling class using anti-Semitism as an instrument of policy. But the premise of socialist philosophy, on the contrary, is creation of a social structure in which all forms of oppression, economic, racial, and religious, should be removed. When, therefore, a firm believer in socialism like Bergelson found himself facing death at the hands of a socialist regime on a false pretext, his uppermost thought was not a condemnation of socialism, but of a monstrous abuse of it.

It is agonizing for an adherent of socialism to contemplate the crude violations of socialist principles as they affect the Jewish people—and not that people alone—that are perpetrated in the name of socialist theory. What makes this even more painful is that enemies of socialism argue that these violations are inherent in that viewpoint and are a warrant for rejecting socialism. The persistence in the Soviet Union of distortion of the Jewish question is therefore inimical to socialism itself and ultimately an obstacle to its development.

The skewing of socialist principle and practice has not of course been limited to the Jewish Question. It became clear by the time Stalin died in 1953 that these divergencies actually had the effect of stagnating the Soviet economy and overall development of the country. Khrushchev's historic speech at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party Feb. 25, 1956 was intended to signal a reversal of this process and a return to "Soviet legality." But Khrushchev's exposure, harrowing as it was, only partially revealed past crimes and errors. One of the areas he omitted to mention was the Jewish Question.

Nevertheless, tentative measures were taken to restore nationality rights to Soviet Jews. Limited publication in Yiddish was resumed;

works by Yiddish writers, both classical and Soviet, were published in translation into Russian and other Soviet languages in very large editions; singers and actors performed Yiddish material before large, enthusiastic audiences in many parts of the country. A small seminary for training rabbis was for a time set up in Moscow. Many appeals for restoration of Jewish cultural institutions were made to the Soviet authorities both in writing and in person, some of them by official delegations from foreign Communist Parties. This magazine acknowledged in its June, 1956 issue its past delinquencies in reporting on this issue, and pledged its readers to keep them fully and candidly informed on problems relating to Soviet Jews. We believe we have responsibly fulfilled this pledge.

What has happened in the 15 years since the Khrushchev speech? Have nationality rights been fully restored to the Jews in accordance with socialist principles and Soviet laws? The gathering of authentic, accurate information on which to base interpretations has not been easy. The danger of being swayed by political attitudes on both sides of the issue is ever present: a writer must avoid the Scylla of pro-Soviet apologetics and the Charybdis of anti-Soviet paranoia. Further, no matter what the political attitude, the question of tactics in presentation of facts and proposals is all-important if one is genuinely interested in the welfare of both socialism and of Soviet Jews, rather than in the exploitation of the issue as a club to beat the Soviet Union.

Four books have recently appeared* in which facts vary in accuracy, and interpretation in soundness. Yet a judicious reading of these books can tell us much of what has transpired in the past 15 years.

Donald I. Rubin has not avoided the pitfall of exaggerated assertion in his own contribution to the volume he edited. Are the deprivations of Soviet Jews, he asks, intended by the Soviet government "to complete the work started by Nazis—the liquidation of the Jewish people?" If Rubin had carefully read the essays in his own volume, he could not have asked this tendentious question.*

William Korey, director of the United Nations office of B'nai B'rith, in his informative essay on "Soviet Law and the Jews," brings to bear an important countervailing consideration on the whole issue.

"In a number of areas," writes Korey, "Jews do in fact enjoy the

*Joel Gang, *The Silent Millions: A History of the Jews in the Soviet Union*, Taplinger, N.Y., 1970, 246 pages, indexed, \$6.50; Lionel Kochan, ed., *The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917*, Oxford, London and N.Y., 1970, 357 pages, indexed, \$7.95; Gunther Lawrence, *Three Million More? Doubleday*, N.Y., 1970, 218 pages, \$5.95; Donald J. Rubin, ed., *The Unredeemed: Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union*, Quadrangle, Chicago, 1968, 317 pages, \$10.00.

civil rights guaranteed them by law. Residential restrictions are non-existent, nor are there any barriers to participation in various aspects of social life—the Party, trade unions, the social services, clubs. Employment opportunities in a number of fields—particularly in science, medicine, law, and the arts—are widespread, as available data indicate.”

Again, Rubin asserts that “investigation of official Soviet domestic statements and publications invariably fails to turn up favorable references to things Jewish.” Yet the American scholar, Bernard D. Weinryb, in his essay, “Anti-Semitism in Soviet Russia,” in the Kochan book, observes that there are “inconsistencies in the pattern of anti-Semitism.”

On the basis of a comprehensive survey of the Soviet press cited by Weinryb, he writes that “Parallel with discriminatory and other anti-Jewish phenomena one finds also frequent fairer treatment: Jews receive various prizes, medals, honors. . . . The press. . . also sometimes points out Jewish contributions to Soviet Russia, voices sympathy with their sufferings during the Nazi period, and occasionally defends individual Jews. . . . During 1965, . . . there are as many—if not more—positive items about Jews than negative ones.”

Another widespread misconception concerns the designation “Jew” on Soviet passports. To many this appears discriminatory. The facts, however, are these. As a multi-national state, the Soviet Union requires for administrative reasons that all Soviet citizens identify their nationality on passports. At the age of 16 all Soviet citizens must register their nationality on the passports they then receive. If the person’s parents are both of the same nationality, he or she is automatically registered as of that nationality, after showing papers to confirm their parents’ origin. But if the parents are of different nationalities, the person is required to choose which of the two he will declare for himself.

However, in the 1959 census a person was not required to show papers to the census takers, but merely to state his nationality. This option during the census accounts for the controversy about the actual number of Jews in the Soviet Union, since many believe that a number of Soviet Jews declared themselves of another nationality than Jewish. Nationality on passports for Jews, as well as for other Soviet nationalities, is therefore an administrative matter. However, if this information is used in a discriminatory manner, as may well be true in some cases, the discrimination should be exposed and condemned. Yet the passport system itself is not an anti-Jewish measure, as some ill-informed people assume.

We point out exaggerations, misconstructions and uninformed

beliefs not to mitigate the seriousness of the Jewish problem, but to emphasize its complexity, and to caution against unproductive assertions. The negative side of the situation since the Khrushchev speech remains serious enough to be profoundly disturbing—even alarming. For the fact is that Soviet Jews continue to be denied full nationality rights, despite the partial measures of restoration such as the publication of the Yiddish literary monthly *Sovetish Heimland* and a few Yiddish books each year, and Yiddish concerts. There are still no facilities for the study of Yiddish and of Jewish history and culture. Evidence is abundant that the hopes raised in 1956 have not been realized. The basic practice of forced assimilation continues to operate, though in far less drastic fashion than in the late Stalin years of 1948-1953.

To the profound disappointment of Jews everywhere and of friends of the Soviet Union especially, anti-Semitic events and publications did not end with the public recognition of the crimes of the Stalin era. On the contrary, new manifestations appeared in the course of the economic trials of 1961-1963. While financial speculation undoubtedly had occurred and was rightly punished, the press unmistakably stressed the Jewish origin of some of the culprits in invidious and inciting manner. Criminality was associated with Jewishness, and synagogues as institutions were depicted as centers for criminal and anti-Soviet, unpatriotic activities. The economic stereotype of the Jews was thus promoted and an atmosphere of hostility toward Jews was thickened.

Blatant anti-Semitic tracts were published in many parts of the Soviet Union under the guise of anti-religious propaganda, of which the infamous Kichko book was only one horrible example. Restrictions on the practice of the Jewish religion continued. Freedom for pursuit of religion guaranteed by the Soviet Constitution and accorded in considerable measure to Christian and Moslem denominations, such as provision of religious articles and church organizations and training of clergymen, was denied to the Jews. The Yeshiva for training rabbis set up in 1957 was suffocated after a few years.

Although no limitations are placed on Communist Party membership (one essay in the Kochan book asserts that a study of Party membership shows that “the Jews [are] easily the most party-saturated nationality in the country”), Jews are, with some exceptions, systematically excluded from the foreign diplomatic service and foreign trade. Jews are woefully under-represented or not represented at all in the Supreme Soviet or the Republic Soviets. However, Jews continue to be represented in heavily disproportionate numbers in science, the arts, journalism, medicine and technological and cultural activities. An essay in the Kochan book observes that “out of every thousand Jews of

all ages, no less than 22.5 are scientific workers. For the Russian the figure is four, for the Ukrainians less than two." The authors of this article go on to say that "such disproportions are so striking that the fact of a steadily falling percentage of the Jews in the rapidly rising total can give no grounds for reasonable criticism." However, it is clear that quotas on Jews in higher learning have been imposed, but the statistical factors entailed in such figures are quite complex, as the British demographers who wrote this essay show. There is no doubt that Soviet policy works hardships on some Jewish aspirants for such higher education.

In the past decade the anti-Jewish aspects of Soviet life have been aggravated by the propaganda surrounding Soviet pro-Arab Middle East policy, most especially since the June War. The rather cynical and totally groundless equation of Zionism with Nazism, Zionists with Nazis, and Israel with Nazi Germany in Soviet publications and even official statements follows the ultra-emotional charges of Arab spokesmen. Like the Arabs, Soviet publicists are not too scrupulous in avoiding identification of Jews and Zionists, and the attack often passes over into outright anti-Semitism. While the Soviet Union has not gone nearly as far as Poland in stigmatizing Jews and making the situation of the general Jewish population untenable, the anti-Israel campaign has aggravated the anti-Jewish atmosphere.

One consequence of this campaign has been to accelerate requests for emigration to Israel. Many Jews have registered for exit visas to reunite families in Israel, but most applications have thus far been denied. This denial has produced 220 petitions between Feb., 1968 and Oct., 1970 to Soviet authorities and to the United Nations for help in obtaining permission to go to Israel. The fact that such petitions have borne the signatures and addresses of a couple of thousand petitioners signifies two things: lessening of the paralyzing fear that obtained during the Stalin era, and the determination and courage of the signers. It is known that some petitioners have been imprisoned for "Zionism," yet the petitions keep coming. Despite Premier Alexei Kosygin's statement on Dec. 3, 1966, that "the road is open" to emigration for reunification of families, relatively few Jews have been allowed to do so. It is hardly to the credit of a socialist country that Jews should wish to emigrate. Even if one disagrees with those who wish to go, they should be granted that right. What is saddening is that after 53 years of socialism, the fact, as reported by the Moscow correspondent of the Italian Communist daily *L'Unita* Jan. 7, that a few tens of thousands of Soviet Jews wish to leave is evidence that something is wrong with Soviet Jewish policy.

The world-wide explosion of protest that greeted the harsh sen-

tences meted out to the 11 in Leningrad who planned an airplane hijack after fruitless efforts to emigrate to Israel, shows the depth of the problem. Even Communist Parties in many parts of the world demurred at the sentence. One of them, the Italian Communist Party, publicly responded to a letter signed by 93 Jews of Riga and sent to 24 Communist Parties, exhorting their help in getting permission to emigrate to Israel. (For the text of this letter, as sent to the CPUSA, see our Jan. issue, p. 55.) *L'Unita*, on Jan. 7 carried a dispatch from Moscow which attributed the problem to the Stalinist heritage and Soviet misunderstanding of the motives for desiring emigration to Israel. The leader of the Communist faction in the Italian Senate, Umberto Terracini, expressed sympathy for the appeal of the Riga Jews. Among the countless protests on the Leningrad case was that of 16 progressive Jewish leaders in our own country in a telegram on Christmas Day to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin expressing shock at the harsh sentences and urging commutation and remission of the sentences (see text on our Jan. cover).

The accumulation of evidence shows that the death of Stalin did not also mean the end of an anti-socialist nationality policy with respect to the Jews. The concessions yielded on Jewish nationality rights in these years have not been made out of principle but in order to blunt protest at home and abroad that was damaging to Soviet prestige. The basic practice of forced assimilation has remained in force, making it possible for anti-Semitism to erupt in the press. The Soviet government has even refrained from a campaign against the anti-Semitism which persists in some areas of Soviet society. That the underlying policy is not Leninist is clear from Ben Joseph's article on "Lenin and the Jewish Question" in our Dec., 1970 issue, and there is no need to go over the same ground here to demonstrate that the Soviet leadership has strayed on this issue.

What, then, is to be done? All the books mentioned earlier contain materials, with varying degrees of accuracy and completeness, to afford an informed view of the problem. The best of these books is *The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917*, edited by the British scholar Lionel Kochan. Its densely factual essays shed light on various facets of the problem. The British, American and Israeli scholars who contribute to this volume feel deeply about the predicament of Soviet Jews, but for the most part they have been guided by Leonard Schapiro's introductory statement: "If protest and publicity abroad about the position of Soviet Jewry is to be effective, it must be based on accurate and balanced information."

A second book out of England, *The Silent Millions*, by Joel Gang,

British Jewish journalist, though not without errors, is a studied attempt to present an objective picture. The book is written more in sorrow than in anger, Gang avoids excess, as, for instance, when he concludes his account of the charge that Ilya Ehrenburg betrayed his Jewish colleagues to the secret police with the judgment that the charge is unproved. It is surprising that he should cite *World Without Jews*, Dagobert Runes' deplorable edition of an English "translation" of Marx's essay *On the Jewish Question*, without being aware of the fraudulence of Runes' version of the essay. [See Harap's "Karl Marx and the Jewish Question," JEWISH CURRENTS, July-Aug., 1959, reprinted in "Jewish Currents" Reader—Ed.] Other errors have been pointed out by a reviewer in the *London Jewish Chronicle* Oct. 3, 1970, such as Gang's use of the *Litvinoff Diaries*, which were exposed as a forgery in 1955, and other inaccuracies. Such errors are no less serious for being innocent. Otherwise Gang's book is useful as a brief survey of the question.

The two books originating in the United States are less free from tendentious writing, and Cold War rhetoric appears in them. (Incidentally, both of these books hamper the student by absence of an index, which both British books do have.) Writings guilty of Cold War verbiage cannot help Soviet Jews, for they unnecessarily provoke antagonism in Soviet authorities. When a few years ago a campaign on behalf of Soviet Jews was launched by the American Conference on Soviet Jewry, embracing a large part of Jewish organized life, the Conference wisely decided that Cold War rhetoric would hinder its objectives. Unhappily, only partially has this pitfall been avoided.

We indicated earlier how Donald I. Rubin's contribution to his collection, *The Unredeemed*, lessens the value of his book. For he has transgressed the declared intention of the Conference, which figures programmatically in the book, to avoid Cold War, anti-Soviet incitement. Consider, for instance, his gratuitous statement that the Soviet authorities "do not want" the Jews to assimilate because they believe that a "Jewish international conspiracy" exists, and therefore feel it "better. . . to keep the Jews readily identifiable; once assimilated, they would undoubtedly succeed in undermining the national security." Rubin strains hard indeed to make this Cold War indictment of the Soviet leaders. While Soviet theory calls for voluntary assimilation, Soviet practice imposes a forced assimilation. In either case, assimilation is the objective. The Machiavellian intention which Rubin assigns to the Soviet leaders here is not helpful.

In the second American book, *Three Million More?*, Gunther Lawrence, public relations consultant for the Conference on Soviet Jewry, repeats

the intention of the Conference: the campaign "should always be kept on a humanitarian plane, above political consideration," and he asserts that this policy has always been "strictly adhered to." But his book does not bear out this statement. The very title of the book carries innuendoes that are inconsistent with the non-political claims of his client. Nor does the book itself always adhere to this intention. He relates how a few years ago a delegation of American Reform rabbis was permitted to address the congregation of the Moscow synagogue. Following them, the Moscow Rabbi Y. E. Levin spoke. Lawrence then comments: "Rabbi Levin's price for permitting foreign guests to address his flock, as on similar occasions, became evident as he pleaded for us to tell the American people: 'End the bloodshed in Vietnam; use your influence to establish peace; do what you can to end the war.'" Lawrence's Cold War observation dredges deep to find something devious in this plea for peace, especially since American rabbinical associations, including those of Reform Judaism, have repeatedly called for an end to the Vietnam war. One would think the visiting rabbis would have welcomed Rabbi Levin's appeal for peace and brought it back to the USA in good faith.

The book is full of sweeping generalizations which add up to a false picture. While it is true that many Soviet Jews, young and old, have been stimulated into Jewish awareness by the stringencies of Soviet policies, many, perhaps more, have not. Why, then, does Lawrence assert that the reaction of "the young Russian Jew" to these policies "is to reach backward" into Jewishness, as if this were true of all young Russian Jews? It does no good to delude ourselves into thinking that all Soviet Jews have returned to their Jewish identity.

Solution of the Soviet Jewish problem lies in a return to a Leninist policy, which is embodied in Soviet law. This has not happened in the 15 years since Khrushchev's 1956 report stirred hope for such a return. The problem is not that Soviet law violates Marxist theory, but rather that Soviet law is not being enforced, and indeed is being violated in practice. Those who maintain that anti-Semitism is inherent in Marxism are in error. The Jews are a recognized nationality, and as such are entitled to all the rights pertaining thereto. It is not a special privilege that is demanded, but a right under Soviet law.

We believe that silence is surely not the way to help Soviet Jews restore their rights. Exclusively unpublicised appeals on high levels are not enough. But the utmost responsibility must be exercised in public appeals and protests. The Jewish community is well-nigh unanimous in condemning the violent, mindless, irresponsible tactics of the Jewish Defense League. Also detrimental is the effort of some, even in the

books mentioned, to associate the situation of Soviet Jews with Nazi policy. It is of the utmost importance to cleave to accuracy. Open and sustained criticism of Soviet policy is needed. But if it is to help Soviet Jews, it must be made with the utmost fidelity to fact and without anti-communist hostility. Even the veteran Zionist leader Nahum Goldmann emphasized this in an interview with the Mapam organ in Israel, *Al Hamishmar*, Oct. 21, 1970, saying: "I am in favor of public action. The Russians must know that we haven't forgotten the Russian Jews, but this should be done in a responsible manner. It must be remembered that there are three million Jews in Russia. Activity in their behalf must be conducted with the greatest responsibility and care."

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II: JEWISH CULTURE AND THE PROPHETIC TRADITION

Sholem Aleichem and Amos

By *ITCHE GOLDBERG*

SHOLEM Aleichem occupies a unique place in the flow of Jewish creativity, a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon in the long span of our culture.

It seems as if all that preceded him went through his prism, was distilled, clothed in a new idiom, reinterpreted, often with a bizarre twist, and only then allowed to continue. This function was performed by the three classicists of modern Yiddish literature—Mendele Mocher Sforim, I. L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem, but even in this unique triumvirate of literary trail-blazers Sholem Aleichem's position was singular. The aggregate creativity of the people found its focus within him—from the wrath of the prophet, the questionings of Job, the lyricism of the Song of Songs, the stories in the *Maase-buch*, an old Purim-shpiel, the wit of the people, the sentimentality of a folksong, the dream of young apprentices challenging the order of things, the didactic qualities of *Pirke-Oves* (Sayings of the Fathers), the Haskala-writers who preceded him to the liberal humanism of the 19th century.

"A real poet of today," Virginia Woolf once said, "carries within him all the poets who ever existed amongst his people before him and all who will ever arise amongst them in the future."

Sholem Aleichem is at once familiar and new, simple and complex, on the verge of despair and drawing back, forlorn and hopeful, angry and chuckling, castigating and loving. He seems overtalkative and of a sudden sparing in vocabulary. He explodes simple words and gives them transcending meaning. He is folksy and sophisticated. Seemingly uninvolved, yet he steps in, when things get too heavy to bear, in the first person ("*Liber Lezer*"—Dear Reader). With a pen of soft lyricism he creates *epic* works. Through a seemingly effortless parade of countless "little people" he recreates a whole era. When you view the totality of his work, you realize that each figure was a carefully conceived detail in the overall pattern of a period.