

Soviet Jews: latest eye-witness report

An interview with Chaim Suller, who recently returned from a visit in the USSR

By LOUIS HARAP

WE looked forward with some excitement to an interview we had arranged with Chaim Suller, general manager of the *Morning Freiheit*. On July 16 he had returned from a four and a half weeks visit to the Soviet Union and had spoken to a number of Yiddish writers there. Suller interrupted his busy work schedule to answer questions for us.

"How did you happen to go to the Soviet Union?" we began.

"I went to the Soviet Union," answered Suller, "to visit my family in Leningrad—two brothers, a sister and other relatives. However, as one who has for many years been connected with Jewish culture in the United States, I was greatly concerned with what had happened to Jewish culture and Jewish writers in the Soviet Union.

"After my arrival there, I decided

not so much to try to dig into what had happened or how, but more to find out what is happening now. I wanted to learn about the possibilities for the revival of Jewish culture in all its forms. So I found out what I could in Leningrad and Moscow."

Whom did Suller talk to in the Soviet Union? There were, of course, in addition to his relatives, the many Jews and Russians that he collared for discussion on every possible occasion. He talked to two leading Russian journalists who had been members of the delegation of Soviet journalists to the United States last year. One was Ivan Berezkhov, an editor of *New Times*; the other was Boris Izakov, who is Jewish, an editor of the Soviet *International Affairs* and translator of Hemingway's *Old Man of the Sea*, which just appeared in Moscow. Suller also had a talk

ANNOUNCEMENT

Owing to financial pressures during the summer, the Editors have decided to omit the September issue. The October issue will come out in mid-September.

All subscribers will receive one additional issue.

with Alexei Surkov, general secretary of the Union of Soviet Writers.

Meeting with Yiddish Writers

Most exciting of all, Surkov had arranged for Suller to meet with 15 Soviet Yiddish writers in the rooms of the Union of Soviet Writers. It is likely that this is the first such meeting with a foreign visitor in the past eight years. Among these writers were Shmuel Halkin, Rokhel Boimvol, Noakh Lurye, Aron Vergeles, Z. Telesin and others.

The Soviet Yiddish writers were no less interested in getting information on Jewish cultural developments in the United States than Suller was in plans for the upbuilding of Soviet Jewish culture. They told Suller of the projects being worked out by the Union of Soviet Writers. The following are planned:

1. Establishment of a Yiddish publishing house;
2. Opening of a Yiddish theater, which would begin as a travelling company;
3. Publication of a Yiddish literary newspaper to appear three times a week;
4. Publication of a bimonthly literary journal;
5. Arrangement of a national conference of Yiddish writers and cultural workers of the Soviet Union.

But Suller added a word of caution. "These projects should not be taken as a final blueprint. Not everything may be carried out just as planned. Some plans may be carried

out sooner or later than expected, some may be changed, other activities not mentioned may develop. The reason for these reservations is that many technical problems face the Soviet Writers Union in the execution of these plans. It is necessary to re-create the Jewish cultural apparatus, to find buildings for theaters, to get Yiddish linotype, equipment and such things. There are plenty of talented Yiddish actors, but not enough talented directors."

Suller obtained a list of 71 Yiddish fiction writers, poets, critics, dramatists and literary scholars who are busy preparing works for publication (see box on page 7).

The poet Shmuel Halkin told Suller: "Give our hearty greetings to Yiddish writers, cultural workers and readers in other lands. Tell them that we are engaged in creating large works and that from a lapsed literature will come great literature [in Yiddish, "fun ois literatur vet veren grois literature"]; tell them that we were Soviet Yiddish writers and remain Soviet Yiddish writers."

Jews not Completely Integrated

The Yiddish writers gave Suller some general information about Jews in the Soviet Union. "They told me," said Suller, "that Jews are represented in all phases of heavy industry. Jews also work in agriculture. In the Crimea, for instance, there are 5-6,000 Jewish families on

80 collective farms, some in mixed Russian-Jewish farms, some in all-Jewish farms."

We asked Suller how far the Jews had been integrated into Soviet life. "According to the Yiddish writers," he replied, "the Jewish people as a whole are not yet completely integrated linguistically with the rest of the population. While the integration has gone far in large cities like Moscow and Leningrad, this is not so in many communities of the Soviet Union. Integration is even less advanced in the newly-acquired regions such as Bukovina, Bessarabia and parts of western White Russia and the Western Ukraine."

Problem of Anti-Semitism

We asked Suller if any evidence of anti-Semitism had come to his attention. "I did not see any evidence of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union today. However, Jews whom I met gave me the impression that they were still afraid of the consequences of what had happened to Jews and others prior to Stalin's death. Some Jews are still cautious about their relations with foreigners because of the cold war atmosphere of post-war years. During my short stay I observed a lessening of these fears. But I cannot say that this fear has entirely disappeared."

Why are they afraid, we asked? "I discussed this with a number of Jews. Until about 1942, they said, the Jews of the Soviet Union knew

no fear, did not experience anti-Semitism, were never made to feel different from anyone else. One Jew said to me, 'We lived in a paradise (*Gan-Eden*). If it were not for what happened in the following years, an even greater number of Jews would have been integrated and lost their Jewishness than is the case now.'

In his talk with one Yiddish writer in Moscow, Suller said that he learned that "All those who participated in the framing up of innocent Jews and others have been investigated, tried and punished in accordance with the severity of their crimes. But many Soviet citizens who were poisoned but did not commit any anti-Semitic acts remain in their posts. They need to be re-educated. But now they fear to show their anti-Semitism. I learned from some Jews that they had been promoted to higher posts which, they said, would not have happened a few years ago.

"I want to emphasize, though, that even during the worst period—this was about the time of the Moscow doctors' case—the repression was not aimed solely against Jews and in some cases was even more severe against non-Jews. But anti-Semitism was one of the weapons of repression. Nor were the Jews the only people whose culture was affected by the repression. Surkov told me that the percentage of Russian cultural leaders unjustly executed or exiled was even greater than among Jews. Yet the freedom with which many Jews spoke to me, an Ameri-

Activities of 71 Yiddish Soviet Writers

A LIST of 71 Yiddish writers and the works they are preparing for a relaxed atmosphere in recent weeks to revive anti-Jewish agitation. Suller, general manager of the *Morning Freiheit* on his return on July 16 from a Soviet trip. Suller obtained this information through the good offices of Alexei Surkov, general secretary of the Union of Soviet Writers, and a group of Soviet Yiddish writers with whom Suller conferred. This is not a complete list, for Suller was told that about 200 Yiddish writers are active in the Soviet Union today.

The 71 writers include 31 fiction writers, 29 poets, seven critics and literary scholars, two dramatists and two essayists. Of these 44 are in Moscow; seven in Kiev; five in Minsk; four in Kishinev; two each in Odessa, Tchernivits, Riga and Vilna, and one each in Kirovograd, Kharkov and Birobidjan. (The entire list of writers and themes was published in the *Morning Freiheit*, July 22.)

can showed me that fear among Jews and others in the Soviet Union today is disappearing."

A Statement on Anti-Semitism

We reminded Suller that many progressives, both Jews and non-Jews, here believe that the Soviet Union should issue a statement about the fate of Jews through the recent period. Had he learned if any such statement would be issued? "In spite of the fact that there is no overt anti-Semitism today," Suller replied, "Soviet Jews would like to be assured that there would be no repetition, that those who harbor anti-Semitic feelings would never be given any opportunity ever to express this in any shape or form. They would therefore like to have the government issue a forthright statement that anti-Semitism would not be tolerated in the Soviet Union

and would be punished severely. They would like to see statements from Soviet leaders in the government like those issued by Gorky and Lenin in their day.

"I was assured by Soviet personalities that a statement on anti-Semitism would be forthcoming in the near future."

"However, I have no information whatever on the prospects of a general statement from Soviet leaders on repressions against Jewish cultural leaders."

As we ended the interview, Suller gave me his overall impression of the Soviet people after his visit. "Life in the Soviet Union in all respects seemed to me to show an increase of freedom of expression and improvements in economic conditions. These were taking place even while I was there. My final impression was that the Soviet people are busy and happy."