

# Soviet-Australian Letters on Jews of the USSR

## An exchange of opinions on current Soviet policy

*Below is an exchange of letters between Mme. Inna Koulakovskaya, deputy chief of the British department of VOKS, the Soviet agency for foreign cultural relations, and the officers of the Jewish Progressive Centre of Melbourne, Australia, concerning the question of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union.*

*The Editors of JEWISH LIFE share with the Australian correspondents the disquiet over the position on Soviet Jewish culture in Mme. Koulakovskaya's letter. There are many observations of Mme. Koulakovskaya that are open to discussion. In addition to the areas discussed by the Australian correspondents, we believe there is the large question of Jewish culture in languages other than Yiddish and Hebrew. It seems to us that Mme. Koulakovskaya evades the central issue, namely, that so long as there are Jews in the Soviet Union who desire Jewish cultural activity and creativity, the socialist approach to the nationality question requires that this desire be given the means to be fulfilled. All the evidence available to us indicates that there are Soviet Jews who do want Jewish cultural activity. Nor do we agree with her that Jewish culture in Yiddish or any other language is necessarily separatistic. The great works of Soviet Yiddish writers like Peretz Markish, Itzik Feffer and David Bergelson are a living refutation of her view.—Eds.*

### THE MOSCOW LETTER

Moscow, December 20, 1956

Mr. J. Semel, President  
Mr. M. Frydman, Hon. Secretary  
Jewish Progressive Centre  
[Melbourne, Australia]  
Gentlemen:

We are in receipt of the resolution adopted at a meeting of your Centre and regret to say that it seems to have resulted from your inadequate knowl-

edge of life and culture of the Soviet people.

You stand up to defend Jewish culture allegedly suppressed in our country. But is it not necessary first to consider the real connotation of this conception of "Jewish Culture."

Jews live in many countries of the world but nowhere—except Israel—do they form a majority or a compact group. It is but natural therefore that in all countries they undergo a process of assimilation: Jews—especially their young people—adopt the language of

the country where they live, study at its schools and universities, participate in creating its culture: Disraeli was Jewish, but the British regard him as one of the wisest statesmen of Britain.

Menuhin is a Jew, but the world knows him as one of the greatest violinists of America.

Ehrenburg also comes of a Jewish family, but in his works he expresses the sentiments of, and discusses the problems of vital interest to all the Soviet people.

Heine is known to all as a great German poet. Who ever thought of whether he was a Jew until the nazis yelled about it, making bon-fires of his books.

Who ever thinks of Chaplin as a Jew, though he is certainly Jewish, but are not his films admired and highly praised in all civilized countries as something of universal value? This results from the same process of assimilation of Jews which, historically speaking, is of course in the order of things.

Several decades ago in tsarist Russia with its artificial segregation of Jews and its ghettos, the Jewish people could not partake in the creation of all-national culture; their spiritual life was limited to problems and matters of purely Jewish interest. You must agree that it would be ridiculous to try to artificially impose the same isolation of Jewish spiritual values now.

And it should be also said that best works of Jewish authors written in the pre-revolutionary period and having an universal appeal and message have been published in the USSR both in originals and in translations. Soviet multi-national reading public has free access to translations of best works written in Yiddish in the Soviet period by such poets as Feffer, Markish, Kvitko and others.

In the course of 40 years which have elapsed since the day when in the USSR any national discrimination has become punishable by law, Soviet Jews have joined the multi-million family of Soviet peoples working in all spheres of national economy and culture. Many Soviet Jews have won world prestige as eminent scientists, musicians, writers, artists: they contribute to creating artistic and scientific values necessary to and appreciated by the Soviet people of all nationalities.

In 40 years of the Soviet regime another change has taken place which should be borne in mind when discussing the position of Jews in the USSR: in the course of these years a whole generation of Soviet Jews has grown up which has never experienced the humiliation of ghettos and knew nothing of segregation of Jewish culture: all the accumulated treasures of multi-national Soviet culture belong to them, but they feel they are first of all part and parcel of the cultural traditions of the republic in which they live.

There is no "Jewish problem" in the USSR. For the overwhelming majority of Soviet Jews their national tongue is either Russian or the language of the Republic where they live. But, of course in Biro-Bidjan, which is the Jewish Autonomous Region within the Russian Federated Republic, the language of instruction is Yiddish. It is also the language of books and local periodicals, radio-broadcasts and theater productions.

At the same time, both in Moscow and in the provinces, recitals of Jewish music are held and gramophone records of Jewish songs and poetry are widely sold mainly to meet the requests of Jews of the older generation who feel sentimentally attached to the pre-revolutionary (ghetto) tradition of Jewish culture.

Judging by your resolution you act



upon a strong assumption that there was some special "persecutions of Jews" in the USSR. But this is in utter contradiction with the facts of real life.

Soviet people do not conceal that for some time there occurred in the USSR certain violations of Soviet legality. Soviet Jews have been affected by them to the same extent as other Soviet citizens irrespective of their nationality.

Innocent people who have suffered because of such violations—Jews or non-Jews, as the case may be—are rehabilitated and fully restored in their rights.

May we ask you to make this letter known to the members of your centre who participated in discussing and adopting the resolution you have sent us.

We hope that upon further consideration they will arrive at more correct conclusions concerning the position of Jews in the USSR.

Yours sincerely,

(Mrs.) INNA KOULAKOVSKAYA  
Deputy Chief, British Department, VOKS

## REPLY FROM AUSTRALIA

Melbourne, 27 March, 1957

Mrs. Inna Koulakovskaya,  
Deputy Chief, British Department,  
VOKS, USSR

Dear Mrs. Koulakovskaya,

We thank you for your answer to our resolution in connection with the rehabilitation of Jewish culture and Jewish writers.

We have carefully examined your answer, which we discussed fully with our members. After a broad discussion we formed the opinion that, notwithstanding your exposition of the issues, we cannot accept a number of your

underlying premises which in our view lead you to arrive at some incorrect conclusions.

You base your standpoint mainly on the assumption that, where Jews form a minority, there occurs a "process of assimilation." With your examples of Disraeli, Heine, Menuhin and others you wish to show the general positive contribution Jews have made to the culture of the countries in which they have lived, through integration and assimilation with the dominant culture. From this you conclude that a separate Jewish culture is unnecessary.

In this regard you express a view which is not entirely new. On this question there have been great discussions for a very long time. The accumulated experience of the past and the present has convincingly shown that assimilation is far from being the only tendency in Jewish life, and full integration in the dominant culture is not necessarily the only way for a Jew to be creative. It is evident that at the same time as the process of assimilation goes on, which no one denies, alongside it there takes place another process—that of national self-preservation, which has a positive and creative influence on the lives of Jewish people. The form taken by the process of national self-preservation naturally varies according to time and place.

Life has shown that together with the Heines, Menuhins and Ehrenburgs, there also emerge creative figures of great stature like Sholem Aleichem, Bialik, Bergelson and Mikhoels. They stem from the people and, retaining their close ties with them, move them in a progressive direction.

We also cannot fully accept your view that the Jewish national cultural values which developed through the centuries were solely the result of anti-Semitic persecution and enforced ghetto

to life. Although we do not deny that this was an important factor, we cannot agree that it was the only deciding cause. There are many instances in Jewish history which show the opposite. For instance, the Golden Age of Jewish creative activity in Moorish Spain when Jehuda Halevy lived. There was no persecution then and Jews enjoyed equality. In our time, there is the example of the growth and development of Jewish cultural life in the Soviet Union, which came to its peak after the revolution had liberated the Jewish people from the tsarist prison of peoples.

This period in the cultural history of the Jewish people in the Soviet Union is well-known. It produced a new and talented generation of writers and many great achievements in literature, the theater, schools and newspapers. Great hopes were raised for the future of Jewish culture, of the socially and nationally liberated Jewish masses. For that reason we always gloried in these achievements and emphasized with satisfaction the great vistas which the October Revolution opened up for the Jewish people, together with all other oppressed peoples.

*The beginning* of the decline of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union coincided with the opening of the Beria epoch in the years 1936-37, when many of the most prominent figures in Jewish social life and so many talented writers and artists were removed and liquidated. When the destructive cloud descended on so many of the flourishing cultural, educational and social institutions, they began from that time to wither away.

We also cannot agree with your contention that Jewish creative activity is limited solely to "problems and matters of purely Jewish interest."

On the contrary, the truth is that

the Jewish literature expressed the healthy and genuine strivings of the Jewish masses. It was imbued with a love of the people and particularly of the working people to whom it was very close. It expressed the protest and struggle against backwardness and oppression and it affirmed a belief in progress and the highest humanistic ideals. And how else could all this be expressed if not through the only possible means open to a writer—the intimate national language of his environment, the language that was part of his people?

We maintain, however, that while the form of the writer, the idiom of the poet, were specifically Jewish, they were nevertheless at the same time universal. If the works of the Jewish writers had not this universal appeal, how would it be possible for Sholem Aleichem, the most specifically Yiddish of them all, to be published in big editions in many languages for non-Jewish readers? What purpose would it serve the Soviet Writers Union to translate and publish the work of Markish, Kvitko, Feffer, Bergelson and others?

We are convinced that the Jewish literature in the Soviet Union did not have for its aim the continuance of Jewish isolation in the negative sense. On the contrary, its aim was to have a part in the choir of the multi-national cultures, to add a Jewish melody. Such works as Bergelson's *By the Dnieper* and Markish's *War* are only examples of the Jewish contribution to the socialist content of Soviet literary creation. Just as they are also a contribution to general world literature. Whether this contribution is bigger or smaller than the contribution of the Jewish writers in the Russian language is a matter of argument. But we think it is not a matter of bigger or smaller, but a matter of principle,



that writing in Yiddish can also, just as with other nationalities, be a valuable and positive contribution on a high artistic level.

A further point. You indicate in your answer that in the period of 40 years "since any national discrimination has become punishable by law," Jews, like other citizens, have been able to take part in all spheres of national economy and culture. Naturally we are very pleased at this. We have always appreciated the improvement in the legal position of the Jews that was brought about by the Soviet system. But that is not all. We Jews in Australia enjoy full civic rights, just as Jews do in many other democratic countries. But we do not make a fuss about it. Jews here too are free to occupy positions in all spheres of the national economy and culture and government. At one time here in Australia, a Jew, Sir Isaac Isaacs, held the highest position in the country—he was Governor-General, the King's representative in Australia. And another Jew, Sir John Monash, was the head of the Australian army in the First World War.

What is more important, and what we always regarded as the special manifestation of the Soviet system, was the fact that the Jews, thanks to the Revolution, had won equal rights, not merely as individuals, but as a national group, that Yiddish culture had won an equal place with all other national cultures. That Yiddish schools, theaters, publishing houses, were financed and supported and for the Jewish people, not as a favor but as a well-earned and recognized right. That this was done as the obvious duty of a socialist state.

That is why we were so hard hit, so bitterly disillusioned, when all this, every expression of Jewish national life and creativeness that existed up till

1948, suddenly then stopped and was liquidated.

*From your answer* it would seem that you were finding excuses for the disappearance of Jewish culture in the "process of integration" that is affecting the Jews in the Soviet Union. You point out that since national discrimination had been abolished the Jewish people, particularly the youth, were growing into the general cultural environment of the republics in which they lived. This is true and we accept it as welcome and progressive. We are not interested in maintaining a parochial, restrictive ghetto life. But we maintain that at the same time, together with the normal and positive process of integration, there exists amongst the Jewish people a cultural need and a social interest that is specifically Jewish, a cultural-social characteristic that is the product of past and present conditions.

The process of integration in the cultural life of the republic in which they live should not be used as an excuse to compel the Jewish people to renounce their Jewish culture. We cannot see any reason why the development of Jewish cultural activity should conflict with the general cultural activities of the republics. On the contrary, we have always understood that under the greater freedom of Socialism there can exist harmony and mutual enrichment between the different national cultures, the Jewish culture included. We were always convinced that just this freedom and brotherly cooperation between different national cultures, big and small, was one of the noblest achievements of socialist culture and justice.

We do not deny that Jewish culture, because it is not based territorially, tends to weaken in democratic countries. We have the same experience in

our own country. But precisely because of this similarity we understand that the resulting changes can not happen suddenly. A national culture does not disappear overnight, not even in one generation. Precisely because of our own experience, we are convinced that the problems arising from these changes must not be solved mechanically and by administrative measures. But they must be handled carefully, with understanding and without haste. We have no hesitation in saying that to forcibly hasten the end of a people's culture, even a weakening one, is not just, not humane, and not permissible.

This is what moved us to write to you when it became clear to us that it was not only "certain violations of legality" in which the victims were Jews as well as non-Jews. That is another question. But we are concerned with something that is without parallel, namely the complete and total liquidation of every sign and manifestation of the, up till 1948 still existing, Jewish culture.

We are convinced, from what we know about the conditions that prevail in the Soviet Union today, from reports that reach us from Soviet sources and other friendly foreign visitors, that there is still a need and a desire for Yiddish culture by a part of

the Jewish population, namely, in those areas where Jews live in great numbers and particularly where there is still from the past a tradition of Jewish cultural life.

We express the hope that today, when there is a big effort being made to rectify past mistakes and to repair injustices, you will also find a way, in accordance with Socialist principles and in as far as it is practically possible, to rehabilitate the Jewish culture that was tragically and suddenly extinguished.

All that we wish to see is a just handling of this problem, that will once again serve as an inspiration to all those who strive for a world of freedom, progress and brotherly relations between peoples.

Reports in the Jewish press of various countries seem to indicate that some measures to this effect are being taken in the USSR. We hope wholeheartedly that these will materialize and we shall greatly appreciate any further information regarding this matter.

Yours with fraternal greetings,

J. SEMEL, *President*  
M. FRYDMAN, *Hon. Secretary*  
[Jewish Progressive Centre,  
Melbourne, Australia.]

### *Report Yiddish Paper to be Issued in USSR*

A London *Jewish Chronicle* correspondent reported to his paper in July that he had been told by Moscow Chief Rabbi J. L. Levin that plans are in the works for publication of a Yiddish newspaper in the Soviet Union. He reported from Moscow that conferences are now being held by Soviet Jews to discuss the project. The paper is being planned to appear weekly at first and later as a daily. Rabbi Levine also told the correspondent that 10,000 copies of a *Siddur* (Hebrew prayer-book) has been published in the Soviet Union and that Lenin-grad Jews were planning to bring out their own *Siddur*.