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THE JEWISH STATE THEATRE IN MOSCOW—GOSSET

I.

THE JEWISH STATE-SUBSIDIZED THEATRES ARE ANOTHER indication of the cultural growth of the Soviet Jewry. Since 1883, when Abraham Goldfaden's Folks Theatre was banned by the Tsarist regime, there was practically no Jewish theatre in Russia. The few wandering Jewish troupes that were now and then permitted to perform in the ghettos under the strict supervision of the Tsarist police were of an extremely low artistic level. They were usually business undertakings that specialized in heart-rending "family melodramas"—such plays are still being fed to the Jewish audience by most of the Yiddish theatres in New York—and their chief characteristic was tastelessness and stereotyped acting. The few bold attempts by a number of Jewish actors and dramatists—Esther Rachel Kaminsky and later Perets Hirshbein—to create a Jewish theatre in the modern sense were invariably failures.

The new modern Yiddish theatre, it can be said, was born in 1919 in the former Tsarist capital, Petrograd, when the first Soviet Commissariat of Educa-

tion entrusted A. M. Granovsky, who had just arrived from Europe where he had worked with Reinhardt, with organizing a Jewish Theatrical Studio. Out of this Studio eventually evolved the Jewish State Theatres of White Russia and the Ukraine, whose directors and inspirers are the two well-known Yiddish artists, M. Rafalski and E. Loiter, and the Gosset—Jewish State Theatre of Moscow. The latter, under the management of the actor-director, S. Michoels, who was recently honored by the Soviet Government with the title of "Distinguished Artist of the Republic," is undoubtedly one of the finest theatres in the world.

Besides these three large theatres, there are also numerous theatre "studios," dispersed throughout the country, whose aim is to discover and train new talent, while the Blue Blouses and Trams—wandering groups composed of young workers and Komsomols—through one-act plays and musical skits (usually propagandist in nature), carry the message of Communism to the cities, towns, factories and collective farms.

2.

In the company of a young American playwright on a visit to Moscow, I attended a performance at the Gosset of Markish's latest collective farm play, *Nit Gedëiget* (Don't Worry). It was a typical Soviet play depicting realistically the life of the Jew in old and new Russia.

The inhabitants of a little town in the Ukraine—Mendel, the water carrier, his wife, Mendelikha, a would-be Shylock, a speculator, Komsomols and old religious Jews—decide to organize a collective farm through common efforts. That, however, is only the beginning. We see them leave their shabby townlet (beautifully depicted by the author with the assistance of Isaac Rabinovich's settings) full of hope that somewhere in the unknown, a happier life is awaiting them. But the new and happy life is slow in coming. With impatience we sit through the first three acts watching the inexperienced members of the collective struggle against elemental forces and human enemies. At last they are victorious. There is a general celebration. In the meantime, Mendel, the former water carrier and biggest pauper in the little town, is elected as a delegate to the City Soviet. One sees him sitting on the ground plunged into deep meditation. He wonders: I, Mendel, a member of the City Soviet, I govern the country . . . With an expression of joy and ecstasy on his face, he begins to dance. It is a sort of victory dance. As he dances faster and faster it seems as though the whole stage whirls with him. The spirit communicates itself to the audience and it too begins to stamp its feet and sway to the rhythm of Mendel's dance . . .

Markish's play was quite ordinary and in spots even unimaginative. And yet on the stage of the Gosset, particularly through the excellent acting of Zuskin who played the part of Mendel, it became an inspiring and unforgettable spectacle.

"God," my companion kept on repeating throughout the dance. "I wish I were on the stage participating in the merriment."

When we left the theatre, another surprise awaited my companion. A large, motley crowd was standing in front of the stage door. Some of them were discussing the play while others were just standing in silence.

"And who are these people?" he asked.

"Chassids," I said, "waiting for the exit of their favorite Tsadik."

My analogy was made in all seriousness. Every evening one can see crowds of Russians standing at the stage doors of the Moscow theatres. Like devout chassids they wait patiently for the emergence of their favorite actors to shake hands with them or tell them a few words of approval.

I have visited many European theatres yet nowhere have I seen such love and respect for the actor as in Soviet Russia. For that matter in no other country does the theatre have such a tremendous social influence. This was true, to a lesser extent to be sure, even before the Revolution. It is no wonder that the theatre which has been considered throughout the world as the acme of theatrical perfection—the Moscow Art Theatre—was one of Russia's main contributions to world culture.

Of course, the Revolution, as it did with all other social and cultural institutions, has also shaken the equilibrium of the Russian theatre. The Bolsheviks

brought with them not only a new audience—millions of workers and peasants—but also a new life, hence new problems to be reflected on the stage. "With the arrival of the October Revolution," writes K. S. Stanislavsky, the spiritual guide of the Moscow Art Theatre, "the theatre received a new mission. It had to open its doors to the widest section of the population—to those millions of Russians who before the Revolution were not given the opportunity to indulge in cultural entertainment. As in Leonid Andreyev's play *Anathema*—when the people ask the good man, Leizer, for bread and he is helpless because he is unable to feed so many of them—we were helpless before this flood of humanity . . ."

Indeed, the Moscow Art Theatre, reared in a tradition that catered to the landed nobility and Moscow merchants, was unable to satisfy the demands of the new revolutionary audience. But younger and bolder men—Meierhold, Tairov, Granovsky—who were both willing and capable to reflect the new life on the stage stepped into Stanislavsky's shoes. Thus came into existence the Meierhold Theatre, the Kamerny Theatre, the Theatre of the Revolution and the Gosset.

The history of the Gosset or any of these theatres is drama in itself. When Granovsky was first entrusted with the organization of a Jewish Studio, unlike the Russian theatre innovators he had practically neither a tradition to fall back upon nor trained

actors who could perform. His first act was to issue an invitation to Jewish workers under 27 years of age to join the studio. His invitation was met with a warm response.

Curiously enough, the Studio's first quarters were at the Petrograd theatre named after Suvorin who, in his day, was notorious as an anti-Semite and Jew-baiter. The story goes that some wit covered the eyes of Suvorin's bust that stood in the lobby of the theatre so that the old man would not see the shame that had befallen his house.

The first period of the Studio is the story of experimentation and struggle. Michoels describes it thus:

"We wandered through the huge cold flats . . . Not one of us believed that with the speed of lightning we should become united into one family, striving for one goal . . .

"But this happened.

"On the streets, the storm of revolution raged.

"Human lives and human thoughts were tossed about in the chaos of destruction . . . and in the turmoil of creation . . .

"While worlds were cracking, perishing, being substituted with new worlds, an event occurred, perhaps a very insignificant one, but a great miracle for us Jews—the Jewish Theatre was born . . ."

In 1920 the Studio moved to Moscow, the centre of Russia's best theatres and of a growing population of Jews. It settled in a small house, seating about

ninety people and took on the name of the Jewish Kamerny Theatre. But as the material conditions improved, as the actors succeeded in perfecting their art, as its audience grew, the theatre had to expand its quarters. It moved to its present house with a seating capacity of 500. At the same time, the Soviet Government, realizing its significance in the world of theatrical art, elevated it to the official status of a State Theatre.

3.

Granovsky's primary task, as I have suggested, was not so much to "save" the old theatre as to create a new one altogether—new actors, a new repertoire, and a new dramatic technique that would incarnate and express the spirit of the Revolution. He even had to create a new language, for the Yiddish as it was commonly spoken on the street was not melodic enough for the theatre. He taught his actors modern stage technique, the effects of speech, song, rhythm and gestures. (These things the old Jewish stage sadly lacked.) What is more important, he trained them for collective choral work, thus, as someone expressed it, creating a symphonic fusion of the whole group into one harmonious whole. Whereas the old theatre was banal, commonplace and at best crudely realistic, the new one strove towards tragedy, harlequinade and lyricism. It was characterized by its high tone and romantic mood.

Not even Granovsky, however, could create a new theatre without a new repertoire. But the new playwrights were much slower in developing. Following the precedent established by Meierhold, Granovsky began to resurrect old plays and change them according to his own needs. He recreated Goldfaden's famous play, *The Sorceress*. By the time he was through with the play there was so little left of the original that he called it "a play according to Goldfaden."

His choice of *The Sorceress* was not accidental. Abraham Goldfaden, the author of such well-known plays as *Shulamith*, *Bar Kochba*, *The Tenth Commandment*, was after all the real founder of the Jewish theatre. He drew upon Jewish history, Jewish customs and Jewish folklore. True, after Goldfaden's death, his plays have been commercialized and cheapened so that they lost their true folk character, but Granovsky cleansed *The Sorceress* of all "accumulated rubbish." He refashioned it, according to Louis Lozowick, "in accordance with its spontaneous, extempore character from a sentimental melodrama about a poor orphan into a riotous comedy, a carnival in the spirit of *Commedia dell'Arte*." He also "experimented" with other Jewish and non-Jewish classics: *Tracks* by Maeterlinck, Sholom Asch's *The God of Vengeance*, 200,000 by Shalom Alechem, and Mendele Mocher Sforim's *The Travels of Benjamin III*.

In each of these plays, particularly in the latter

two, the director added much of his own. By presenting them as musical comedies—the musical comedy, incidentally, was the dominant genre of the theatre in its formative period—he turned Shalom Alechem's and Mendele Mocher Sforim's idealization of the old-time village paupers into hilarious satires upon the *luftmensch* and ghetto Don Quixotes. Perets' *A Night in the Old Market Place*, for instance—a mildly ironic mystery play with scarcely any plot at all—became on the stage of the Gosset a "poignant picture of a decrepit world, accentuated to the pitch of the *macabre* by the acting, the music and scenery." The romanticized market place was turned into a symbol of a dying world, diseased with superstition and ignorance. It became a requiem for the old world and the Jewish past.

Singing the requiem for the old world, however, Granovsky failed to realize that he, too, was removing himself farther and farther from the new world. Like Bergelson and Nister, he deviated from what the Communist critics call the revolutionary path. In search for new methods of expression he drifted away from Communist realism and like the painter, Marc Shagal, who did the first settings for his theatre, fell under the influence of Jewish mysticism, particularly the cabbala. Moreover, drawing as he did for material upon the old classics, he could satirize the death of the old order but not glorify the birth of the new one.

The proletarian audience, fired by revolutionary zeal, protested loudly. It demanded that the the-

atre portray the new man, the Jew under the Soviet regime building a new life. It wanted positive statements and positive heroes. M. Moin relates that when the theatre first came to the large cities of White Russia with its repertoire of old plays, the Jewish workers told them: "Yes, we admit the great artistic achievement of your theatre. But you do not express our demands. It seems as though you are not part of our everyday life at all . . ."

As a result of the Five-Year Plan which has so drastically affected the life of the Russian Jewry and, what is more important, with the rise of a new crop of Yiddish playwrights, the theatre has changed its face completely. The new life and the new man is now beginning to be asserted more and more on its stage. Collective farms and industrial themes—*Don't Worry*, Veviorka's *The Steppe on Fire*, *Sixty-second Verst* by Dobrushin, Bezymenski's *The Shot*, Dolgopolski's *The Struggle of the Machines*, as well as dramatization of Bergelson's novel about the civil war, *Midas Hadin*—are displacing the old repertoire. The new themes have naturally affected the theatre's style of acting. From the musical comedy, from the hilarious satire, the Gosset has been striving gradually towards the social drama.

There is no doubt that the Gosset is playing an important rôle in the life of the Soviet Jew. It not only developed a new actor and playwright but also new painters who do its elaborate settings—Nathan Altman, I. Rabinovich, R. Falk—and musicians such as I. Achron, S. Rossofsky and A. Kreyn. It travels

throughout the large and small cities of the Ukraine, White Russia, Crimea, putting on performances, and organizing discussions upon the theatre and other arts.

The Gosset supplies cultural entertainment to those who were previously denied it.