

10 *Their Road to Communism*

Jewish Communists, denying as they did any community of interests with the rest of the Jews, were, at the same time, eager to make contact with the Soviet Jewish bodies. Moreover, they desired a sort of international of Jewish Communists the world over. This request, dated June 20, 1920, was printed in the first issue of the *Yedies* (bulletins) of the Jewish Section of the Russian Communist Party, October 1920.*76

The letter, written on silk and signed for the Jewish Communist Federation by H. Funk, organizer, was brought to Moscow by courier. Far from being modest, the writers asserted that they had already succeeded "in penetrating deeply with our ideas and principles in the mass movement of the Jewish workers . . . the idea that the Social Revolution and the Proletarian Dictatorship are not Holy Scriptures to be repeated in moments of social enthusiasm, but basic principles . . . , have been brought home. . . .

"We have fought energetically the petty bourgeoisie-nationalist movement among Jewish labor in America (war relief, protests against pogroms, Zionism, etc.). . . . The *Forward* and the *Naye Welt* are the worst enemies. They flatter Bolshevism in Russian and fight Communism here most viciously. . . .

"We would like to be in steady contact with you, particularly to work out jointly a uniform attitude to the difficult and complicated problems. . . . Also you should take the initiative to organize an alliance of Jewish Communist bodies the world over."

The Moscow reply was comradely, but rebuffed the proposal for

a world alliance as a heresy. The Americans were informed in no unmistakable terms that the task of a Jewish Communist group was merely "to propagandize the Communist ideas in the Yiddish language. . . . This is what the Jewish problem of which you speak in your letter consists of. . . . It is a merely technical question and there is no necessity for it in a special Jewish section of the Comintern. We are resolutely against. . . ." *77

The similarity to the American old-timers' "Yiddish-speaking Socialists" is striking.

The same issue of the *Yedies* contained a joint appeal by the Jewish Section and the Jewish Commissariat to the Jewish workers of America to send clothing, food, medicine, instruments, printing materials, books, etc., but not cash. The appeal did not explain that cash was practically useless because of the severe shortage in food and commodities. It was sent through "Comrade" Benjamin Schlesinger, president of the ILGWU, who visited Moscow in the summer of the same year. The appeal for aid was preceded by the customary revolutionary-proletarian phraseology.

The official denial of any bond between the various Jewish communities was obviously not shared by all Jewish Communists in Moscow. A communication of the Jewish publishing house, Communist World, asking American Jewish writers to send their books stressed the importance of an "exchange of our spiritual treasures." *78

COMMUNISM'S MINOR PART IN THE COMMUNITY

Ruthenberg's prestige and the magic of the word "united" split the Jewish Federation of the CP, many following him into the United Communist Party. Dr. Louis Hendin was put in charge of the Jewish Section of the UCP. (The language groups were formed into sections, thus abolishing their autonomy.) Hendin visited most of the Jewish units, reorganizing them into branches of the UCP. Bittelman was a victim of his own scheming. At first he stayed with the Russians; then, seeing their decline, he proposed a drastic measure to save his leadership, an independent Jewish Communist Party. But nothing came of it, and, as a punishment, Bittelman remained for a while outside both parties.*79

After the CP and the UCP were compelled to merge, in 1921,

the Jewish Section of the CP published a weekly, the *Emes*, a translation of the Moscow *Pravda*. Bittelman and Shachno Epstein were the editors. The literary material was supplied primarily by the latter.⁺²²

The *Emes* had to call for funds in the second month of its existence. The call spoke of the need for "a clean Jewish labor paper of high integrity. . . ." *80 The word "Communist" could not be mentioned.

Lack of funds for the weekly *Emes* did not prevent the Communists from coming out with a plan for a daily *Emes*. The quota was no less than \$50,000. Not that the Communist appeal or Communist activities had reached a level requiring a daily paper; they had not. But it was a race with the rival Salutsky-Olgin federation group, who broke with the SP in the same year and were calling for a daily *Naye Welt*.

Despite their fervor, the Communists hardly caused a ripple in the community. Their weekly and the few books they published—a volume of Lenin and one of Trotsky among them—reached a limited circle of readers. Communism's minor role was caused primarily by the youthfulness of its recruits. Their leaders were unknown. One could not find among them half a dozen men occupying responsible posts. The two exceptions were Philip Geliebter and Kalmen Marmor, the latter a professional writer. (Biographical sketch of Marmor in Chapter "Portraits in Miniature.")

By and large a romantic lot, the Communists eagerly took upon their young shoulders the staggering burden of hurrying society along the road laid out by Marx and Lenin. To them Communism stood for a vastly higher aim than the mere wiping out of economic ills. Communism's fulfilment would do away with social division and the domination of man by man, creating a new type of person, one who would cooperate fully with his fellow human being. However, at the Communist top, an awakening appetite for personal power could already be discerned. One may surmise that not all gravitated to the Left and later to Communism solely out of conviction. Awareness that for young people reaching the top in an established movement was difficult and long in coming while in a new one there were no barriers to the bold must have affected the calculations of some of them.

WHY THEY BECAME COMMUNISTS

At this juncture, it is timely to draw a thumbnail sketch of a few leading Jewish Communists who might be considered fairly representative of the idealist majority. Dr. Louis Hendin and Charles S. Zimmerman traveled to Communism via different roads. But their middle-class background, age and education—both studied in Russian schools—and emotional reaction to "dollar greedy" America were similar.

LOUIS HENDIN came to this country in his teens, at the end of the first decade. He immediately went to work, as did all the youth. His first job was in the large Sonnenborn garment factory in Baltimore. That was as yet in the pre-union period. An impressionable youngster, Hendin was profoundly hurt by the degrading conditions in the shop. There was no recourse from the arbitrary rule of the rude foreman. The individual worker did not count as a human being. This early resentment was aggravated by what Hendin saw around him and read in the radical press, of harsh treatment of workers and the callousness of the law and government.

Speaking with the soberness acquired by four decades, Hendin recalled his emotions during those years: "The sounds of the true America, its democratic past and traditions of individual liberty, had not reached my ears; the picture I carried in my mind of this country was of rugged and ruthless individualism, business success as the highest achievement, and a narrowminded, ineffectual labor movement. The unpunished Ludlow massacre of 1914 was deeply shocking. The World War shattered my other illusions. International Socialism was unable or unwilling to prevent the mass slaughter.

"In that state of utter perplexity, I chanced to lay hands on Lenin's *State and Revolution*, in Russian. I started reading, and all the complex problems suddenly became beautifully clear. Lenin seemed to hit upon the basic weakness of the old Social Democracy, and his insistence on the dictatorship of the proletariat, which might have struck a discordant note in me, was mellowed by his premise that it would only be necessary for the transitory period, and would disappear afterwards. I read the book until I knew it by heart, and

joined the Left Wing. From there it was only a step to Communism."

CHARLES S. ZIMMERMAN, called Sasha by his friends, was born in 1897, and came here in 1913. His first job was as an operator in a boys' clothing shop in Brooklyn. The shop, employing boys mostly under 20, went on a spontaneous strike soon afterward. After winning the strike, they joined the Brooklyn Local 19 of the United Garment Workers, paying the business agent, Teitler, the initiation fee of \$7.50. A couple of weeks later, the manager of the local, Resnick, brought them the good news that the executive board had decided that, in view of their fighting spirit, they were to be admitted at a reduced fee of \$2.50. Outraged by the discovery of corruption, the boys stormed the next union meeting, and, un-intimidated by the threats of the notorious Brooklyn union gang, disrupted the proceedings with shouts of "A thief in the union! A thief in the union!" Teitler had to resign.

Zimmerman participated in the general strike of the men's tailors in 1914, becoming a member of the ACWA. In 1916, he switched to the women's garment industry, and joined Local 25, waist makers, of the ILGWU.

His first encounter with a trade union official started the sensitive 17-year-old boy off as a crusader for union reforms. A likable young man, energetic and tactful, Zimmerman became a leading figure in the movement for a shop delegate system, that won the adherence of the youth in his large local union. The Bolshevik Revolution fired his imagination and added zeal to his struggle for a militant union.

"We only saw the darker side of America . . . crude and heartless . . .," he reminisced to the author. "We were excited over the MacNamara case and the Ludlow massacre. . . . Political bossism in the big city, its graft and corruption, disgusted us. And no less irritating was the state of affairs in our unions."

Reshaping the unions and reshaping society seemed inexorably to parallel each other. When the Left bolted the SP, Zimmerman broke with the latter too, without following the Left into the CP. However, he did not stay aloof long, and joined the CP a year later, in 1920. (We shall meet him later.)

DR. JOSHUA KUNITZ, the third, might be taken as a representative type of literary Communist. Never active politically, he came to Communism via literature.

Kunitz was born in a small town in Byelorussia of prosperous middle-class parents. His father belonged to the Enlightened, and young Joshua was sent to a Russian school. But circumstances in his family changed radically. His father died, and his mother migrated to America with the other children, leaving Joshua behind to graduate from the *Realshule*.

Kunitz came to America in 1912 at the age of 17. For some unexplained reason, he had a strong ambition to become a naval officer; he had never seen the ocean before crossing the Atlantic. However, on his first reunion with his family on the East Side, Joshua was bluntly informed that this was unthinkable. "This was my first disillusionment with America," he told the author with a shy grin.

His mother set her heart on having her son continue his studies. She refused to take him into the dress shop where she worked, preferring that he do odd jobs; they would not tie him down to a trade.

Kunitz' first odd job was as a hawker at a hot dog stand in Coney Island. Behind the stand was a small bordel. When his mother heard of it, she was horrified. His second job was in a lumber yard in Newark.

In a depressed mood, Kunitz started writing social poetry in English. He sent them to the Socialist *Call*, and, to his amazement, they were printed. This brought him close to the *Call*. Meanwhile, he continued diligently to study English at home, and managed to enter the Law School of Columbia University. But he dropped law after two years, taking up literature.

Kunitz was certain that he had left Russia behind him. He had no interest in the Russian revolutionary movement. Nor, for that matter, was he concerned with political events here or with Jewish affairs. His sole interest was literature. However, the Russian Revolution excited him too. His knowledge of Russian literature provided him the opportunity for literary expression—Americans were suddenly curious about the Russian people and their culture. Kunitz chose for his doctorate *A Jew in the Russian Literature*, a valuable contribution to the study of trends in Russian thought. This was followed by other essays and articles on Russian cultural and literary topics.

Kunitz made several trips to Soviet Russia for research, and went in the late 20's with John Dewey and Dr. George Counts to study the Soviet educational system. His favorable comments on Soviet Russia attracted the attention of the Communist intelligentsia. Michael Gold and Joseph Freeman brought him into the *New Masses*. And the Communist magazine led him to the Communist Party. He became a foremost Communist expert on Soviet culture and education.

Kunitz went to Moscow in the 30's for the *New Masses*. He witnessed the first two purge trials, 1936-1937. "I did not accept the fantastic charges against the former leaders of the CP and the Soviet government. But I did believe that they were engaged in a conspiracy, and I treated them in my articles as tragic personalities. However, the *New Masses* refused to print them. This was my first disappointment with the Communist movement." *81

Kunitz broke with the party in 1940, but was reluctant to make it known through a public declaration. He explains this reluctance by his sensitivity to the abuse by former friends that would inescapably follow a public statement. Whatever his reasons, he paid dearly for his silence. During the war he was ousted from Cornell, where he was teaching literature, and later from New York University.

LOUIS NELSON, never a card-carrying Communist, but one who worked closely with them during the 20's, had a proletarian origin and background. His case is of interest because it pinpoints the active part people on the periphery had in strengthening Communism without being Communists.

Nelson came to this country in 1907, at the age of 12. His father was a presser at cloaks and suits, the hardest and lowest paid craft in those days, and participated in all the strikes, including the big one in 1910. After nine months in this country, the boy had to leave public school. He went to work as an operator on raincoats. Young Nelson tasted the misery and humiliation of the sweatshop. He had to have his own sewing machine, and for ten cents hired a pushcart to carry it from shop to shop.

Nelson soon changed trades, going to work in a men's tailor's shop. He joined the Garment Workers Union, and was active in the general tailors' strike of 1914 and in the lockout of the ACWA of

1919. He was drafted in World War I, and served in the last eight months.

Nelson lived in the Jewish community of Brownsville, Brooklyn. A stubborn individualist and crusader by nature, he was drawn to the small but lively anarchist movement there. He felt that among the anarchists there was less dogmatism and more room for individual opinion.

Never a Marxist, with an aversion to conformity, Nelson was hardly good timber for the Left Wing. His path to the Left was not via revolutionary Russia, like that of the young radicals, but through the oppositional moods in the garment trade unions. As he put it, "Bureaucratism was already quite evident in those new unions. They were turning into what we contemptuously called 'business trade unions.' The opposition in the ACWA, started in 1922, had nothing whatsoever to do with Soviet Russia or Communism. It flared up when Hillman, unable to replace week-work with piece-work, proposed the inauguration of a 'standard of production,' which the skilled Jewish tailors in the New York market feared.

"There was nowhere for an oppositionist to turn. The official labor press was closed to us. And when the Amalgamated Progressive Center, the name of the united opposition, was founded, the Workers Party and the *Freiheit* were unfriendly because of their own ties with Hillman. Only in 1924, when the WP quarreled with the ACWA over the La Follette movement, did the *Freiheit* open its columns to us." *82

After the Communists split the ACWA opposition by forming a Section of the TUEL, Nelson went with the Communists. Resourceful and persistent, he did much to extend the party's influence in the needle trades.

Nelson joined the expelled Lovestonites in 1929. He, too, opposed the Communist dual unionism. He became a member of the Dress-makers' Union, Local 22, and was later sent in to organize the knitgoods workers. Since 1934 he has been manager of the Knitgoods Workers Union Local 155.

Communism among the Jews would, in all probability, have remained an insignificant trend were it not for the second split among Jewish Socialists two years later.