

25 *The Postwar Youth*

Contrary to the immobility of the party, the years 1924 to 1929 were a busy and lively half decade for Jewish Communism. Neither the retreats in the unions and the WC nor the frequent scraps with the Zionists dampened the Communists' spirit or retarded their advance. Grouped around the Jewish Federation—now called Section—was a chain of institutions, social and cultural, feeding lines of Communism. The younger element of the postwar immigration bore a great share in this Communist buoyancy. They imbued it with a new youthful zeal, ending the political stagnation of the early 20's.

Notwithstanding the difference in time and experience, the immigrants of the first decade and those in the beginning of the third were both children of a twilight era, that witnessed the cracking up of the old way of life while the new one was struggling to be born. For the former it was the breakup of the ghetto, the failure of the first revolution and the accompanying massacres; for the later immigrants it was the ravages and dislocations of World War I and the disappointment with the reactionary regimes in the newly created republics. Another point of contact was the inflated picture of America carried here by the young elite of both immigrations, and their inevitable disillusionment on arrival. The America of the Prohibition days and the unexciting affairs of organized labor were equally unattractive to young men and women who had either participated in the Russian civil war or lived through anxious days of hope and despair in Poland.

THE FUSION OF ZIONISM AND LEFTISM

The postwar immigration was small numerically. But its political level was probably higher than that of the previous one, and it also ripened prematurely. Between 1920 and 1924, inclusive, the total Jewish arrivals numbered 286,560. After that, due to the quotas, it dropped to 10,292 in 1925, 10,267 in 1926, and 11,483 in 1927. The total for the decade 1920 to 1930, inclusive, was 354,246.¹⁷⁹

A considerable section of the youth in Eastern Europe were imbued with a Zionist ideology of a radical shading, failing to see any contradiction between their emotional regard for Soviet Russia and their Zionist ideal. In the blood-drenched, devastated areas, Palestine loomed to many of the footloose youth as the Promised Land, both for physical and spiritual survival. From their ranks came the postwar exodus of *halutzim* to Palestine. However, the majority of the youth migrated to America, though some considered it merely as a stop-over until they could get their certificates for Palestine. Quite a few remained Zionists, but for others the urgency of Palestine gradually receded.

As most of them went to the shop, being young and impetuous, they followed the Communist-Left opposition in the unions. Caught between the fires of Zionism and Communism, the universalism of the latter proved more powerful than the Messianic Zionist redemption; Communism, too, had elements of Messianism. It should be emphasized that those who gravitated to Communism were only a minority. But being active and articulate, their voice was much bigger than their numbers.

A glimpse into the mood of these uprooted young men and their road to Communism is given in the following three brief sketches. They were written many years later by people who had come from Poland, from bordering Byelorussia and Russia. Although all three became writers, their experience can be termed characteristic for the rest of the same age group.

This is the first story:

"I am a son of many generations of Jewish artisans, born and raised in small-town poverty in Poland under the Czars. While in the *heder* and *yeshivah* I gleaned my first secular self-education. My father, who migrated to America and died there in a hospital, was my first severed but inseparable contact with America.

"I passed through all the horrors of the World War, hunger, fear, epidemics and forced labor under the Czars and the Germans. I experienced anti-Semitic blows in the new-born Poland, and was among the despairing youth who set out through the war-shattered countries of Europe, Germany, Holland, Belgium, and France, seeking bread and security. Stateless and without documents, we were deported from one country to another, given no chance to settle anywhere.

"In this anxious atmosphere our minds began searching for the causes of war and destruction. In this search the glow of the October Revolution seemed brighter from far away than from close by. With this mental baggage, I arrived in America in 1920, after a year and a half of trudging over Europe.

"In Paris I had learned the knitting trade from Warsaw knitters who were struggling for a livelihood there. I worked in Brooklyn. There was no union, and conditions were bad. For my participation in a lost general strike, I was put on the black list and could not find work. This was immediately after the Palmer raids on the foreign-born. Debs was still in prison and so were several young Communists. By contrast, the optimistic news from the first 'Socialist Fatherland' could not fail to impress me and my friends.

"I reread the rebellious poetry of Edelman, Bovshover, Rosenfeld and Winchefskey, and, with the aid of Harkavy's English-Jewish dictionary, pored over Jack London, Upton Sinclair's *Jungle* and John Reed. I started writing shop poems and social verses, which appeared in Left-Wing magazines. The *Freiheit* gave immediate and precise expression to the restiveness of my generation. And the Communist Party harnessed it to its wagon."

Benjamin Fenster, the writer of these lines, after many years on the staff of the *Freiheit*, broke with Communism and returned to his trade, occasionally writing for the *Forward* and other publications.

The second story is that of the Zionist:

"I was born in a staunch Zionist family in Grodno, Byelorussia. Before reaching the age of 20, I was chairman of the Poale Zion Youth there and a *halutz*. I helped to transport seven youth groups to Palestine, myself working on a large farm in preparation for *halutz* work in Palestine. I experienced the anti-Jewish excesses of the troops of General Haller's Polish Legion. They aroused hatred for

the Poles and sympathy for the Soviets. This feeling was shared by the entire youth of my city. As the road to Palestine was blocked, I migrated to America in 1921 with the intention of making my way later to Palestine. I joined my large WC *landslite* branch and the Poale Zion, but at that age one does not worry about sickness nor of a plot in the cemetery. There were no certificates, and my ardor as a *halutz* had cooled off by that time.

"I worked in a chandelier factory. There was no union, the work was hard and earnings low. The *greenhorns* generally were much exploited. The social scene in America and the smugness of the previous immigration repelled me. I turned to the Left, and joined a group of like-minded young people. This group published, in 1924, a literary Left magazine, *The Young Smithy*. I was editor, S. Davidman and Yosl Cohn were the chief contributors. In 1925, I became a member of the Young Workers League, which still had Jewish branches engaged in social and cultural activities. In 1926, I got my first job on the staff of the *Freiheit*."

Alexander Pomerantz, an expert on Soviet Jewish literature, left the *Freiheit* together with Fenster, and is a contributor to Yiddish publications.

The third, Abraham Tabachnick, born in Mogilev-Podolsk, Russia, was 13 years old when the World War broke out. As he put it, "The world was shaken under my feet before I became *Bar Mitzvah*, and loosened the old traditional ties." He went to a Russian high school and became Russianized. But the *Kulture-Lige* of the Bund and the Left Poale Zion revived his interest in Yiddish. The youth of the town had never heard of the Bolsheviks. Kerensky was their hero. (The name of Stalin he heard for the first time in the United States.) But the pogroms committed by Petlura's bands changed Jewish sentiment. Red troops on the whole protected Jews.

Tabachnick came here in 1921, his main concern being literature. "Even those who had run away from the civil war and the Red Army," he reminisced, "retained a lingering attachment for the Bolshevik Revolution. I was attracted to the Left because the Right and the *Forward* had little to offer me culturally. Besides, the Left was more lively and eager. Communists exploited the youth's deep yearning for cultural growth and their social impulses. . . . The same factors that attracted many young American writers to the

Communist movement in the 20's worked also on young Jewish writers. To this were added the professed concern for Jewish culture and the stories of cultural revival in Russia."

Tabachnick never became a party member, but contributed to their magazines until the end of the 30's. He is a well-known poet and essayist.

FROM EAST SIDE POVERTY TO COMMUNISM

To round out the picture of the mentality of the immediate post-war generation captivated by Communism, it might be appropriate to cite the case of at least two American-born of the same age group. Their road to Communism was different from that of the Eastern Europeans, lacking as they did the emotional regard of the latter for the Bolshevik Revolution.

This is the story of Herbert Zam, the energetic and aggressive leader of the Young Communist League in the 20's:

"I was born and raised on the Lower East Side of New York. My father was a garment worker, a passive Socialist and a reader of the *Forward*. Two gangs were operating on either side of our district, the Dry Dock and the East Side gangs. The first consisted of Irish; the other included a number of Jews.

"I entered Stuyvesant High School at the age of 13. The school was crowded, and they had morning and evening classes. I worked in the mornings at various jobs, in shops and in offices, and studied in the afternoon.

"The tremendous Socialist ferment of the early war years reached my high school in 1916. During the Presidential election campaign, a straw vote was taken in the school auditorium, the SP candidate, Benson, receiving an overwhelming majority. About 1,500 students participated; the largest group was Jewish; the next, Irish.

"While in high school I joined the YPSL's, bringing a whole gang with me. The League did not seem to be sufficiently active politically. They appeared to us more like a marriage club. Morris Novack came in at the same time with another group. Yearning for action, I joined the YPSL Circle 7, in the 6th Assembly District. That district, the biggest in the country, had their own building at 106 Avenue C.

"I entered City College in June 1920, at the age of 17. There, for the first time, I heard of Communism. There was a Social Problems Club on the campus. Sidney Hook was a member. All the club did was to have an occasional lecture, attended by about 20 students. The limited scope of the club looked ridiculous to me. I secured a list of 20 Communist students, members of both Communist parties, and brought them together. We decided to capture the club. At the next elections we ran Sidney Hook, a Left-Winger but not a party man, against Emil Schlesinger, a senior and a Socialist. The club grew, later numbering several hundred. The Communists controlled the club for a long time. It became an indoctrination center for Communism among native-born students.

"About that time I joined the CP, considering them genuine revolutionaries. The active cadres of the YPSL's also joined the CP, but the League was killed in the struggle between the two parties.

"All this time we lived on the verge of poverty. Most of us who joined the YPSL's and later the Communists came from poor families. We were all idealists, and dreamed of a romantic revolutionary movement similar to the one in Russia. But Russia itself did not evoke any special sentiment in us. The Russian revolution served rather as a trigger than as a blueprint. We thought we would do it better than in backward Russia. We didn't see only the dark side of America, nor were we shocked by anything happening here. We took America for granted. We were influenced by the early American populists, and Bellamy's *Looking Backward* had a tremendous impact on us. We firmly believed that we could have Socialism here, and not too far off.

"As a result of the raids, most of the Left-Wing YPSL's—and this meant 90 per cent of them—formed the Independent Young Socialist League. And after the CP and the UCP merged, the League decided to affiliate with the new CP.

"When I became secretary of the IYPSL, they numbered only about 500 scattered members. In 1929, when I left the CP, the YCL was quite a considerable body, with approximately 5,000 members nationally. Some 1,000 of them were in New York. There were many Finns in the New York League, but the active cadres and the leadership were mostly Jewish. Students from City College formed a large segment there. The most active students were Sy Gerson, Artie Stein and Carl Weissberg. The Lovestone group predominated." +59

RESISTING RUSSIAN DICTATION HERE AND IN MOSCOW

The idealism and revolutionary romanticism of these young Communists did not hinder them from turning the YCL into perhaps the worst faction-ridden spot in the Communist movement. Caucus battles and fights by individuals were pursued with the ardor possessed only by youth. Corrosion of character and of integrity was unavoidable.

Zam's first period in office, when the party was in Chicago, were years of starvation, the majority of the CEC being against him. They simply cut off his funds. His wife Miriam, also a devoted Communist, had to give up her college and turn over the money her parents sent her for tuition to feed the few people in the League office and pay the return fare of League delegates.

In 1925 the YCI (Young Communist International) appeared on the scene. In Russian style, the YCI representative set himself up as a dictator. Totally ignoring American conditions, he wanted to turn the League into an exact replica of the Russian league, which would have made it a caricature. It took Zam a great deal of time and effort to stop him. And this opposition to the rep's authority could not but harm Zam's reputation in the Kremlin.

In Moscow for the plenum of the YCL in the same year, Zam doggedly resisted the Russian steam-rolling tactics at sessions and committee meetings. As punishment he was detained for ten months to isolate him from the League at home. He was finally permitted to return home, but prohibited from running for office without the approval of Moscow. Unable to resume his post as national organizer, he became editor of the YCL organ, *Young Worker*.

In 1928, Zam went to Moscow again, as a delegate from the CP to the sixth Communist congress. He stayed over for the fifth congress of the YCI. The YCI rep, who had gone by the name of Bob Mazut in America in 1925 and had vigorously supported the Ruthenberg-Lovestone group then, was now intriguing with the same vigor against them. In reply to Zam's question as to what had caused this shift, Mazut blandly said, "My only concern is with the Russian corn and cabbage," implying that the internal situation in the Russian party dictated his actions.

The deteriorating fortunes of the Lovestone majority made Zam's position doubly precarious. His previous sobering experience in

Moscow caused him to fear that this time, as a leading Lovestonite, he would be detained permanently. He decided to look for an opportunity to escape. And, by means of a little plot of his own, he secured an exit visa without the knowledge of the YCI. Sneaking out of the Hotel Lux through a back door, he made for the station, and was across the border before he was missed.

Zam left the party together with his group, and a couple of years later he, Ben Gitlow and Lazar Becker went over to the Socialist Party, Zam becoming the head of the labor department. He resigned from the SP in the late 30's.

Zam was the first director of the Cloak Retirement Fund in the ILGWU. He is now in private business.

This, briefly, is the story of the second young American:

"My father was a wood-turner in Warsaw and my mother a textile worker in Lodz. Both worked at their respective trade in New York. My father was a reader of the *Forward*, but a conservative man without any interest in the labor movement.

"I was born in 1905 on Cherry and Water Streets on the Lower East Side, a poor Irish neighborhood notorious for its slums. The family later moved to Brownsville. I was sent to a *heder* for a couple of years, but I did not learn anything there. I must say, I was intellectually numb as a child.

"Our home was broken up, and the court placed me in a philanthropic children's home upstate, where I spent about three-and-a-half years, off and on. It was not a happy experience. None of the boys liked the semi-military regime. As far as I remember, I had no friends there.

My father remarried, and took me to live with him. I was then 13 years old and had completed only the sixth grade in public school. Before I reached 15, I went to work, first in a leather coats place, then on metal electrocutting. I had no intellectual interests whatsoever, nor did I ever open a book. And I still cannot explain why, living on Hopkinson at the corner of Pitkin, I was not drawn into any of the several gangs active in that neighborhood.

The exciting Socialist election campaigns of 1917-1918 somehow caught my attention, and I stopped to listen to their street-corner meetings; Brownsville was a stronghold of the Socialist movement. In the fall of 1918, there was a wave of rent strikes in Brownsville,

followed by mass evictions. The sight of sidewalks covered with furniture, including our own, jolted me out of my phlegmatism. A sign-painter living in the same tenement, noting my interest, took me to a meeting at the Brownsville Labor Lyceum. There I met the Junior YPSL's, whom I joined. From the Junior YPSL's I moved to the YPSL's, the Independent YPSL's and then to the Young Communist League. In the leagues I got my political education, and at the age of 18 I read my first book.

I was never a paid functionary of the YCL or the party. As a skilled worker, I would accumulate a little money and then go out for the party in the field to organize the unorganized, and only when the money was exhausted would my expenses be paid. I was a leading organizer in the long and turbulent textile strike in Passaic, 1926, and in the New Bedford strike, in 1928. I was arrested about 38 times, and the accumulated bail under which I was released reached nearly \$100,000. In between, I had a one-year's scholarship in Brookwood Labor College.

I left the party in 1929 with the Lovestone group. I was then the industrial organizer of the YCL. In 1934, I saw the futility of trying to reform Communism, broke with the group, and entered the Socialist Party. I left the SP in 1939."

The writer of these lines is now a prominent officer of a trade union engaged in extremely difficult organizational drives in the South. Though he has been fighting Communism for nearly three decades, the public revelation of his Communist past could be used by the southern anti-union die-hards to hurt the drives. For that reason he must remain anonymous.