

## 26 *Branching Out*

The Jewish nucleus of the Young Workers League was composed mostly of immigrants who had belonged to the Bund youth division, the *Zukunft*, in Poland. Several of them, desiring to renew their group on the new soil, placed a notice in the *Forward*, January 1921, calling upon other former *Zukunft* members to come to a meeting. Such a meeting was held in February at 5 Ludlow Street, the headquarters of the SP and the YPSL's. About ten or twelve people were present. They formed a *Zukunft* youth branch. The following meetings attracted more young people, some of them Labor Zionists.

The question of affiliation with a similar American body was the most pressing. After several heated debates, the decision was in favor of the newly formed Young Workers League. A few joined the underground CP. The East Side branch grew quickly. Soon branches were formed in other parts of the city. In all they numbered several hundred people. (Among the founders were M. Kaufman, Issie Glass, J. Rubin, Khave Shafran, Sam Don.) Youth branches were also formed in other cities.

Due to the complicated factional situation in the League, the Jewish branches were tolerated. They were actively engaged in Jewish cultural work, a prime element in their attraction. From their ranks came quite a number of the teachers and writers grouped around the *Freiheit* and other Communist-Left publications. However, the leaders of the Young Workers League, being opposed to ethnical units, tried to limit their growth and restrict their activi-

ties. In 1924, the YWL called a conference of the Jewish youth branches and clubs. Between 60 and 70 youth groups responded. The conference elected a central body to coordinate and widen the activities of the various groups. It also decided upon a monthly magazine. But the YWL allowed neither. A year later, in 1925, the Jewish as well as the other language branches were dissolved.

Even before their dissolution, the Jewish branches were drying out because of the practice of the YWL and the party of drafting the most able for general work. The result was that many of the active people left the Jewish field, becoming Americanized, and made their way rapidly in the party or in the Left unions. The better known among them were Samson Milgrom (Mills), Sam Donchin (Don), Leon Platt and James J. Matles.<sup>+60</sup> Only a few remained in Jewish work. Prominent among them were: Alexander Pomerantz, David Flakser, Khave Shafran.

### THE CLUBS, A LIVELY SOCIAL OUTLET

Scattered as they were over the big cities, the young radical immigrants banded together into clubs. In a sense, the clubs were a replica of the *selbstbildung vareinen* of the younger immigrants before the turn of the century.

The clubs sprang up spontaneously, though some of their builders were members of the dissolved Jewish YWL branches seeking an outlet for cultural activities. Only when they came knocking at the doors of the *Freiheit* asking for speakers and space did the party take notice of them.

Once the Communists found a growing organization, they landed there with both feet. Soon the clubs were in the grip of caucusing party fractions. From there it was but a short step to Communist domination.

During the 20's the party control was not too tight, partly because of the factional strife. And the clubs were relatively free to branch out along social and cultural lines, the party hardly intruding in their activities.

A club usually occupied a floor in an office or apartment building. The inner walls were taken out, and a stage built on one side. The walls were painted and decorated with posters and placards, and the ceiling was festooned with colorful crepe paper. Facing the

stage was a buffet for sandwiches and hot and cold drinks, served by the girls. Larger clubs had dramatic groups, dance groups, mandolin bands, sport sections, libraries, and the inevitable "wall newspaper," an institution brought over from Russia.

Friday night was lecture night. Saturday was given over to dancing. Sunday, to the literary evening, with invited writers or poets. During the week there were rehearsals and classes. The clubs existed on dues and on the income from the various affairs.

The clubs were more spacious and comfortable than the cramped bedrooms, where the young people lived in twos. The clubs were an outlet for native talent, and, last but not least, boys met girls there. They were *shotkhoneim* (match-makers) for many a couple. During the summer months the social life of the clubs was transferred, through vacations and week-end outings, to the Communist-controlled camps. The youth was thus held together the year round.

The clubs were united into city committees, and that facilitated Communist domination. But in the late 20's, when they, in agreement with the Jewish Section, were about to create a national body, the party put its foot down, declaring that there was danger of "outright" Jewish nationalism in such a body, and that it might develop into a parallel movement which would slip out of the party orbit. Several years later, the party did relent, and a national conference of the clubs was held in October 1933, in New York. Another conference followed a year later, but the clubs were already shrinking, and were, for all practical purposes, units of the party.

The clubs, like other transmission-belt groups, were pushed into the Leftist course of the Third Period. Party pressure became oppressive. The clubs went deeper and deeper into strict party activity, leaving no room for social and cultural outlets. Their slogan became *Each Club a Fighting Center for the Neighborhood*.<sup>180</sup> They had to participate in the hunger marches, in rent strikes, in demonstrations of the unemployed, in protests against Polish fascism, Japanese militarism, in recruiting drives for the party, and in raising funds for the party papers. They were also involved in the fight against the split-off groups, the Lovestonites and the Trotskyites. (In 1930, the club in Borough Park, Brooklyn, appealed to the other clubs against the action of the CP in bringing the struggle against the Lovestonites into the club, compelling it to expel two active people.)

The opening sentence in the semi-official review of the clubs stated the change succinctly: "The leadership is proud of the fact that (the clubs) are ideologically under the banner of the CP and participate in all the struggles and campaigns led by the party. . . . (They are) recruiting places for the revolutionary unions and for the CP."<sup>181</sup> The review emphasized the part the clubs had had in the anti-Zionist campaign—meaning the Palestine events in 1929.

In 1931, according to the review, the New York City committee united 24 clubs, with a membership of 3,500. The clubs had recruited 80 members into the party, and, in the same year, raised \$7,000 for the *Daily Worker*.

The active minority were gradually drawn into the YCL or the party; the rest felt weighed down by the physical and financial burden imposed upon them, and voted their disapproval by dropping out. When Communism shook off the Third Period, the clubs were mostly gone. Age was also a factor.

#### THE "UNIVERSITY"; DR. MINDEL, GENEROUS BUT STRICT

On the educational level, the Jewish Section of the CP, paralleling the workers' schools of the party, opened its own school in 1926. And, as was customary in the Jewish movement, it was dressed up as the Jewish Workers' University.

The school gave evening courses for adults on economics and political subjects as well as on Yiddish and Yiddish literature. The latter had by far the larger attendance. Many of the young writers who later saw their stories and poems in the *Freiheit*, the *Hammer*, and in other Left magazines completed the last two courses. The general enrollment never exceeded 200. As Stalinism had not yet been heard of, the curriculum was broad enough to satisfy the cultural and literary appetites of those who had no direct concern for such a dry subject as the history of Communism. And here, too, the student body carried the financial burden of the institution. Aside from paying tuition, they ran various affairs to cover the deficit.

The first two directors of the "University" were Kalmen Marmor and Dr. J. Mindel; when the two were no longer available, it was hard to find a loyal Communist possessing any reputation as an educator. Philip Cherner was for a long time secretary of the school. Most of the teachers came from the *Freiheit*. The school, too, at-

tracted some outsiders interested in workers' adult education. And from there the distance to the party was not far. Similar courses, but on a smaller scale, were opened in a few other large cities. The chief handicap there was the acute shortage of teachers.

Dr. Jacob Mindel merits some attention. Born in 1881 into a middle-class family, in the city of Minsk, he came to America in 1904, and became a citizen in 1915. In 1919, during the first split in the Jewish Socialist Federation, Mindel was one of the chief speakers against the Communists. But once "integrated," he became an orthodox Communist, submitting unquestioningly to all the zigzags of the line. A dentist by profession—in partnership with Dr. Louis Hendin—he later gave up his office to become a party functionary.

One of Mindel's children was born a hopeless imbecile. Mindel had a passionate concern for him. Believing that in Soviet Russia he could find the ideal place for such a child, he moved there with his family in the early 30's. But the home proved to be a wretched place. Mindel had to take his son out, and keep him in the small room in the Moscow hotel allotted to his family.

On returning to America, Mindel kept his sad experience to himself. His Communism was not shaken.

An educated Marxist, he was appointed in the 30's head of the national training school. The attitude of the students toward "Pop" Mindel was a mixture of respect and fear, the first for his personal integrity, the second because of his tricky and probing questions at examinations.\*182

Dark and handsome, Mindel gave the impression of a sensual man suppressing his passions. Generous and without personal ambitions, he steeled himself for the part of a strict disciplinarian. Later, he was made chairman of the National Control Commission, and dealt harshly with anyone charged with political heresy or violation of party rules. Mindel was among the string of second layer Communist leaders convicted in the early 50's. He was released in 1957.

#### THE BLOSSOMING SINGING SOCIETIES

The Freiheit Singing Societies and mandolin orchestras, that added so much color and festivity to the Communist movement were born of the fervor and labor of a few enthusiasts. They were also a release

of the creative urge inherent in young people. In the beginning, these musical efforts were completely ignored, and the initiators had to beg for a notice in the *Freiheit* and for a corner in which to rehearse. But when the New York chorus, named after the *Freiheit*, gave its first performance at the end of 1922 for a couple of thousand people, the party was not slow to recognize its significance, and took it under its protective wing.

The choruses and orchestras spread rapidly, and in 1924 a central body, the Jewish Workers Music Alliance (the word "Workers" was eliminated in the late 30's), was formed; Simon Saroff, secretary. He was followed by B. Chertkoff. A few years later, the Alliance had affiliated 16 choruses and six mandolin orchestras here and in Canada. There was hardly a city with a sizable Jewish population without a Freiheit Singing Society. In New York the expanded chorus had to be divided into neighborhood sections.

Completely dominated by the party—through its Jewish Section—the repertory of the societies reflected the vagaries of the party line. In the 20's it was largely based on classical Jewish poetry, workers' and folk songs, with an admixture of a few Soviet marches. The most important musical composition was the oratorio *Tzvei Briday* (two brothers), by Jacob Schaefer, written to the famous ballad by I. L. Peretz of the same name. It was performed in Mecca Temple, February 20, 1926, Lazar Weiner conducting. There were also compositions based on the poems of Abraham Liessin, Yeosh and the Russian Alexander Block. In Chicago, the conductor of the chorus, Lefkowitz, went in for classical music. He adapted the score of Handel's *Messiah* to a modern text, and performed it with notable success. But this was an exception, and Lefkowitz had to step down for his nationalism.

In the Third Period the repertory was "proletarian" and Communist, typified by such compositions as the *October Revolution*, also by Schaefer. Under the melting rays of the Democratic Front, the music went deeper into folklore; *A Bunt Mit a Statchke*, a medley of gay humorous songs and sketches, was the most popular and repeated work. It was done by a Soviet Jewish composer.

However, the underlying theme of the Singing Societies throughout their existence was praise of the Soviet Union. Every concert had to include a few Soviet songs. These hallelujahs were in harmony with the basic concept of Jewish Communism that Soviet

Russia was the Promised Land and a taste for everything Soviet had to be cultivated here. An example—perhaps an extreme one—was the short poem of Itzik Feffer, "Very Well," written to the tune of a folk melody by Sheinin. The first few lines were:

*You ran away from your father,  
Very well, very well.  
You betrayed your father,  
Very well, very well.  
Your father is our enemy,  
You will not live with him any more.  
Very well, very well.*

This was one of the most popular of the Soviet songs.

#### JACOB SCHAEFER, AN INVOLUNTARY COMMUNIST

The pioneer of this musical movement was Jacob Schaefer, a young immigrant in Chicago, a carpenter and the son of a carpenter. Schaefer came here at the age of 13. He had always been keenly interested in music, and had gone to work with a cantor at an early age. In Chicago, too, he worked and studied with cantors. The synagogue was his musical school. Schaefer was by no means a Communist; his primary concern was music. But when he began forming a chorus to perform his compositions, in 1914, he met with nothing but apathy from the official labor bodies—partly because he lacked a formal musical education. Only the group of the Socialist Federation cooperated with him.<sup>188</sup> And when the federation broke away from the SP and became part of the Workers Party, Schaefer became dependent on the Left Wing and on the *Freiheit*.

On moving to New York in search of a larger field, this dependence became still closer. And with every concert, the arm of the party wound tighter around him. The top fraction became the ruling power in every Singing Society and in their national body. And, repeating the pattern, the demands of the party became heavier and more insistent; inner feuds and cliques added to their difficulties. Non-party people eager to have their opinion count in an institution they cherished had to join the party. Schaefer had to do so too.

The party's emphasis on "proletarian" music during the Third Period was hard on Schaefer. He had to compose in an idiom that

was alien to him. He had also to face a group within the Singing Society that wanted a more polished conductor. A strongly built man, his heart proved too weak to stand the strain. He suffered several heart attacks, and died December 1, 1936, at the age of 48. He was given a big funeral.<sup>61</sup>

The Workmen's Circle and the Labor Zionist Farband had their choruses, too. But the *Freiheit* Singing Societies were the first and largest. Men and women, after a hard day in the shop, spent several evenings a week at rehearsals—also hard work—learning to sing without a score for one or two appearances a year, at Carnegie Hall or the Brooklyn Academy of Music, accompanied by a symphony orchestra. In addition, they had to pay dues and to sell tickets for the concerts to maintain their organization. No *Freiheit* celebration or other affair of the movement in any large city was complete without the local *Freiheit* chorus. At their peak, the Music Alliance (Farband) numbered about two dozen Singing Societies. (During World War II their name was changed to Jewish People's Choruses, to conceal their Communist identity.)<sup>62</sup> With the enormous shrinking and emaciation of the Communist movement in late years, they too have shrunk greatly. However, the choruses were one of the very few Communist-controlled institutions that did not disappear completely in the late 50's.