

# How the Job Was Done in Poland

By YUDEL KORMAN

**H**OW explain the sudden ruination of the Jewish community in Poland which the socialist government had helped to build? Was it the Six-Day War that set off this catastrophe?

Let me state at once that I have generally encountered in various circles the view that the Jews in Poland had disagreed with the policies of the government and the party in the assessment of the Six-Day War, that they probably openly came out against that policy and that this was presumably the reason for the excesses against the Jews and their cultural organizations.

The truth is there were diverse views on this question both among Jews and non-Jews in Poland, just as there were varying opinions on the matter among your readers and in the entire international labor movement and in the socialist countries.

But even if it were true that all Jews held the same views on the Six-Day War, does that justify branding them a "fifth column," agents of imperialism, throwing them out of their jobs, their party organizations? Does it justify creating around them an atmosphere that would compel them to flee the country?

What actually was the thinking of the Jewish population in Poland before, during and after the Six-Day War?

It is understandable that in the first days of June, 1967, large numbers, perhaps the greatest part of the Jewish population in Poland, lived in great fear for the fate of family and kin in Israel. Was this abnormal? Was it a crime on their part to feel this way? Later, when the war broke out and the Polish radio brought news from Cairo every half hour that Tel Aviv, Haifa and other Israeli cities were in flames—that the Arab armies were advancing from all sides on the territory of Israel—one can understand that the anxiety of the Jews grew stronger, their mood more depressed.

Finally, when it turned out that the news from Cairo was wrong, that the evil dreams of Nasser, Aref and Shukairy were not to be realized, then the Jews and not only Jews were jubilant. They were *inwardly glad* that their dear ones had not been driven into the sea and

the threat of an extended world war had been averted for the time being.

I say they were *inwardly glad*—for it is not true that the Jews openly manifested their joy, danced in the streets, or that they drank, or that they went in mass delegations with flowers to the Israeli embassy. Nothing like this happened—for various reasons. The primary reason is that such things were utterly impossible under Polish conditions!

Let me add, however, that even if all the above *were* true, under no circumstances could there be the slightest justification for unleashing an anti-Semitic orgy in a socialist country, for designating the Jewish population as a "fifth column" that imperils the socialist regime.

The truth is, however, that the events in Poland originated long before the Six-Day War. The war served only as a pretext for certain elements that had infiltrated the party and the ruling organs of the state in order to bring about the end of the Jewish problem in Poland.

Those who were in a position to observe at close range the development of events in Poland since the end of World War II could see that in the leadership of the party and the government a constant struggle between two forces was taking place. This was a struggle between the authors of the July Manifesto of Lublin at the time of the formation of the Polish People's Republic (that is, those who in a Leninist manner sought to solve the national question generally and the Jewish question in particular), and those forces who, after Hitler had murdered the largest part of the Jewish people, wanted to get rid of the Jewish question forever. Consistent with this position, as early as 1945 the anti-party elements opposed the return to Poland of the approximately 300,000 Polish Jews who had saved themselves in the Soviet Union.

When the sound revolutionary forces in the party emerged victorious, the opposition lost this battle. Yet the opposition continued to do everything possible to help organize, both legally and illegally, the *emigration* of the returned Polish Jews to the German D.P. camps in order to reduce the size and significance of the Jewish community.

We should not like to reopen the painful wound of the pogrom in Kielce in 1946, but no decent person in Poland ever believed that *all* the sinister forces who were behind that pogrom were apprehended and punished. When one examines those events in the light of today—when we see the pre-war pogromist Boleslav Piasecki receiving from the Polish government its highest state award—the problem becomes quite clear.

However, as stated above, the sound forces in the party triumphed after World War II. Even the reduced Jewish population of



some 85,000 (at the beginning of 1946 there were in Poland approximately 350,000 Jews) were given every opportunity to develop in the broadest possible way the Jewish cultural and communal life that is the special characteristic of Polish Jews.

If in previous articles we have dwelt at length on the specific "Polish way" in which Jewish cultural and social life developed, it should be added that the other side too, the reactionary forces that in one way or another wormed themselves into the party leadership and various government organs, also had worked out their special way of trying to liquidate the Jewish community. Since it was not possible for them to operate openly, they went into hiding and patiently waited for better times. They utilized every opportunity, prepared far-reaching plans and various provocations in order to deliver effective blows at the proper time.

Thus in 1956, after the sad events in Posen, when the party and the government faced serious difficulties generally, Zenon Nowak, then member of the Polit-Bureau and Vice Premier, submitted the anti-Leninist slogan of instituting a program of "national cadres." In simple language this meant even then: gradually remove Jewish persons from important and even lesser posts and positions in party and state life and replace them with Poles, with "pure Aryans." To be sure, a large majority of the party leadership rejected this alien, reactionary slogan at that time. Zenon Nowak himself tried to retreat. However, the reactionary forces quickly seized upon that slogan and gradually began putting it into effect—first of all in the lower echelons.

This was after the shock sustained by the international workers' movement as a result of the disclosure of the Stalinist crimes committed during the "cult of personality." The leadership of the United Polish Workers Party was then much weakened. This was the time of the so-called "Polish October" that brought Wladyslaw Gomulka to the fore. Reaction saw broad possibilities opening up. Under the spurious slogan of struggle against the Stalinists, the anti-party forces first of all turned against the Jews, drove them out of jobs, out of the party and in many places even created a pogrom atmosphere (as for instance in Stetin and Walbrzych). As a consequence of this campaign about two-thirds of the surviving Jews in Poland emigrated within two years.

Let me add at once that even in that difficult period, the healthy forces in the party leadership were still sufficiently strong and in Feb., 1957, the Secretariat of the party addressed a letter to all party members in which it disapproved of and warned against the anti-Semitic phenomena. It then called on the Jewish party members to remain in the country and jointly fight against the reactionary anti-party forces.

The letter, alas, was a little too late. In a whole series of regional

leadership groups, reactionary elements were able to sabotage the letter. It was thrown into the wastebasket and not even read at party meetings. Nonetheless, the letter had a positive effect. It persuaded a large number of Jewish people and Jewish party cadre not to leave Poland. After a short difficult period the leadership of the Cultural and Social Federation recovered and again began developing its activity in all areas of Jewish cultural and social life.

Although, as stated above, in this period numerous reactionary and anti-party elements found their way into various levels of the party leadership and government offices, they had not yet started vigorously and openly attacking the small but still very creative Jewish community. Their tactics then were to harass and create difficulties for Jews, yet at the same time appearing to cooperate in developing Jewish cultural activity. Let us try to illustrate this with some examples:

First: Jews who left Poland in the years 1956-58 departed as Polish citizens with Polish emigration passports like all non-Jewish Polish citizens. However, even then the Jews were discriminated against. Polish non-Jewish citizens who emigrated to America, Australia or other countries, were always able to return to Poland at any time if they found they could not acclimate themselves to the new conditions of life. Jews, on the other hand, who departed at that time could never return to Poland despite the fact that they had Polish passports. In July, 1957, 10,000 Jews with Polish passports were listed at the Polish Consulate in Tel-Aviv as wanting to return. Not one was permitted to re-enter Poland.

Second: Up to the beginning of 1957 the *Folks-shtimme* in Warsaw had been the newspaper of the party in the Yiddish language. Its subtitle stated it was the "Organ of the United Polish Workers' Party." In the first months of 1957 this was suddenly changed. Orders came to transform the newspaper into the organ of the Cultural and Communal Federation of the Jews in Poland. The Presidium of the Federation and the *Folks-shtimme* editorial board both protested that this might be wrongly interpreted by the paper's readers. Their protests were disregarded. The order had to be carried out.

Third: Up to the beginning of 1957, the Federation had been under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister. It was from his office that it received its budget. It was to that office that the Federation submitted its plans of work as well as various special proposals. After the "Polish October," the Federation was assigned to the Ministry of National Minorities on the basis of an old pre-war "Sanacja" (Pilsudski) law, according to which national minorities were considered not-to-be-trusted elements.

This meant that the Federation with its widespread activities was



suddenly placed as suspect under the direct control of the *Security* organs. From that moment on the "special emissaries" of that body began attending the sessions of the Presidium of the Federation. From then on the budget of the Federation was cut, the size of the personnel reduced. Finally it came to such a pass that the budget was barely enough for administrative expenses. For cultural activity other financial sources had to be found.

Fourth: At some point the government organs of the Katowici region—*again* on the basis of an old "Sanacja" (Pilsudski) law known as the "Priests' Law"—prohibited ritual slaughter. The alarmed representatives of the religious Jews appealed to the Federation in Warsaw. The Federation leaders knocked on all doors all the way up to the Prime Minister but to no avail. The law remained in force and the religious Jews of Katowici and other cities in the region had to obtain kosher meat from Cracow.

Is this all? No! We could cite numerous other examples of how the reactionary elements, especially in the period between the end of 1956 to 1967, did everything they could to disrupt from within and hinder the normal development of the cultural and social life of the tiny Jewish community, encouraging among the handful of surviving Jews in Poland the tendency and desire to flee, to emigrate. The limited space regrettably does not permit that.

But why—some readers may ask—why did we keep silent about all this till now? The truth is we did not remain silent. During the aforementioned period the leading cadres of the Cultural and Communal Federation of the Jews in Poland conducted a stubborn fight against the reactionary forces in an effort to maintain and further extend our Jewish cultural and communal life. True, we did not always succeed. Generally speaking, however, we succeeded, thanks to the sound forces in the party leadership, in maintaining and developing our creative Jewish cultural life.

Objective history writers of the Jewish community in Poland and of its last 25 years will establish beyond all doubt that the period of the last 10 years was the most active period, despite the substantially reduced size of the community.

The events of 1967—the Six-Day War—served only as a pretext, an opportunity for the reactionary forces—the Moczars, Korczyńskis and Werblans, the Piaseckis, Kraszickis, Sidors and the rest—completely to liquidate all Jewish life in Poland, to solve the Jewish question once and for all.

By means of numerous provocations, of stirred up vicious campaigns, these forces succeeded in removing the group of Ochab,

Rapacki, Albrecht, Sztachelski and others, to neutralize the group of Cyrankiewicz, Jedryebowski and all other healthy party forces and even to draw into their game a number of vacillating elements with Gomulka at the head.

No! It was not the Six-Day War that was the cause or the origin of the latest tragic events. The war only gave the anti-Jewish, anti-party elements the opportunity to conclude the treacherous work they had begun in the Kielce period.

What conclusions should we draw from all this? Of course there are those who dismiss it all, either joyfully or with sincere regret, with this "argument": The events in Poland these past two years, they maintain, have conclusively proved that it is not possible to build any progressive Jewish cultural life in the socialist countries. Thus they completely ignore the 23 years of active, creative Jewish cultural life in socialist Poland! Are these 23 years less instructive than the last two years?

Paul Novick, following his last visit to Poland, wrote an article in the monthly *Idishe Kultur* (April, 1965) under the characteristic title: "The Wonder—Jewish Poland." In that article he asked: "How explain such a wonder in a community of only 30,000 Jewish souls?" And he answered: "First, a state that renders aid very generously. Second, a large number of active people, of highly qualified activists. Third, traditions, Polish Jewish traditions of progressive creativity, traditions of the labor and revolutionary movement of the Jews in Poland. Fourth, we come to the main reason: there is the proper attitude toward the national question, the attitude of the socialist Polish state, the attitude of the Jewish activists."

Precisely in these words lies the correct conclusion that should be drawn from the events in Poland. As long as the party, the socialist state and the Jewish leadership firmly adhere to this position, the Leninist position on the national question, there exist the widest possibilities for the development of progressive Jewish cultural activity, for further forging of the golden chain of our continued existence.

However, the moment these principles are violated in one way or another, the violation will inevitably lead to the catastrophic situation to which the Jewish community in Poland has been reduced. It is this conclusion we must never tire of stressing. No matter how painful it may be, we must, first of all, remind the progressive and revolutionary forces in all countries and the communist and workers' parties that the violation of Leninist principles in their application to the national question not only redounds to the detriment of the Jewish masses or the other national minorities in the respective countries, it is also in the greatest measure harmful to the revolutionary forces generally. And,

as in Poland, the violation represents a victory of the reactionary, anti-communist forces within the party.

About this one must not remain silent. One must sound the alarm!

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## Culture and Historical Memory

By HAIM SLOVES

**A**MONG the founders of our modern Jewish culture, Peretz was the first to trace the vision of the historical dynamic. "Jewishness," he declared, "must not be viewed statically but dynamically, in its development, that is, everywhere, throughout the entire world and in all periods; not one truly Jewish factor erased."

With this vision Peretz communicates directly with our modernity, one could say almost with our everyday experience, both in the particular sense of Jewish problems and in the general sense of modern ideas.

In Western Europe as well as in America, the very principle of historicalness is being questioned. The very possibility of thinking historically, of defining any historical laws, is denied. For "structuralism," a philosophical school which has recently appeared and is gaining more and more influence, history in general is only accident.

There is hardly any danger that Yiddish literature and Jewish philosophical thought will start denying history. That would mean denying our very selves, because history is truly the *élan vital* of our people. But another phenomenon is becoming noticeable among us: a phenomenon of forgetting, or allegedly forgetting, history, of deliberately ignoring history. This seems to me to be an unprecedented phenomenon for us.

Peretz, again the first, emphasized the contradiction between "a world-people and eternal people as opposed to a literature concerned with the moment," between "a wandering people and a literature which resembles a stagnant water." This is the singular contradiction between the dimension of our history and the dimension of our modern culture. The whole problem of historical memory lies within this contradiction.

After all, it is an unquestioned fact: our modern Yiddish culture arose in a struggle against historicalness. The Jewish working class, which for the first time came to the foreground of our modern history, brought with it—like every other young social class—a healthy, historically dialectic negation of all previously created values. In many respects, however, this negation went much deeper among us than among other peoples of the world.