

Jewish Culture in USSR Today: Another Look One Year Later

By CHAIM SULLER

(Mr. Suller is manager of the *Morning Freiheit*, Yiddish progressive daily published in New York).

IN JULY 1956 I returned from a trip to the Soviet Union, where I had spent a little more than a month. Although originally planned as a personal visit with my family. This trip took on considerable significance when I turned out to be the first Jewish newspaperman from the U. S. to visit the Soviet Union since the disruption of Jewish cultural activity in 1948 had become known. I was thus the first one to bring back any sort of report concerning Jewish writers and Jewish cultural activity since that year.

I believe, therefore, it is important now, a little over a year later, again to go into the matters which I raised with various leaders in the Soviet Union and see "what the score is."

Let me first review briefly what I learned last year about the perspectives for Jewish cultural work in the Soviet Union. Yiddish writers and important leaders of the Soviet Writers Union assured me that "new winds are blowing" in the Soviet Union; that the evil which had afflicted Soviet life beginning with 1948 was being corrected. They showed me a proposed plan which was impressive in scope, especially since it appeared at a time when there had been no Jewish cultural activity for eight years.

★

ACCORDING to this plan a Yiddish literary journal was to appear several times a week, the publishing house Emess was to be reopened, a permanent Yiddish State Theatre was to be reestablished, a conference was to be called of Jewish cultural workers and leaders. I was assured that the works of many Yiddish writers were already being published in Russian translation.

It is important here to recall something else that I reported when I returned from my visit: this entire plan had been accepted by the Soviet Writers Union, but had NOT yet been approved by the government.

The Jewish writers assured me that the plan would be carried through. They cautioned me that it was possible that some of the proposals would be effectuated at some later date, that some would be modified; they pointed out many difficulties that would take time to overcome.

After I returned from the Soviet

PARIS. — Considerable progress in plans for the publication of a Yiddish newspaper in Moscow is reported in the Paris progressive Yiddish daily, "Neie Presse." According to the paper: "Taking advantage of the presence in Moscow during the World Youth Festival of Jewish Cultural figures, Soviet Jewish writers met with the guests from abroad. . . .

"During the meeting the Soviet Jewish writers stated that great progress was being made in the effort to publish a Yiddish newspaper, and that the secretary of the Soviet Writers Union, Boris Polevoy, is helping in this project."



ITZIK FEFFER

Union other Jewish journalists went there and had similar meetings and interviews; Dr. Chaim Shoshkes of The Day, G. Koenig of the Paris Neie Presse, Gershman of the Canadian Vocheblatt. Each confirmed the report I brought back. This made us all feel certain that the plan would really be carried out.

★

BUT IT is clear to all that now, a year later, this plan has NOT been carried out. Not one book has been published in Yiddish. There is not a single Yiddish newspaper except the one in Birobidjan (which did not cease publication during all this period). There is no permanent Yiddish theatre. The Jewish cultural conference was not called. The Yiddish literary journal has not yet appeared.

There are even certain friends of

the Soviet Union here who say that NOTHING has changed; that in regard to Jewish cultural activity the same approach obtains as was true in the 1948-1953 period. That this is NOT the case can be seen from a number of developments in the Soviet Union during the past year.

On my desk are a number of works of Yiddish writers which were recently published in Russian translation. Here are some of them: Sholem Aleichem's "Enchanted Tailor and Other Stories," splendidly illustrated, issued in 1956 in 225,000 copies. Sholem Aleichem's "Back from the Fair," 690 pages, 1957, 165,000 copies. Sholem Aleichem's "Motl," 1954, 30,000 copies. G. Dobin's stories, 1956, 30,000 copies. N. Luri's "The Forest Calls," 1956, 15,000 copies.

A book of Sholem Aleichem in 225,000 copies is no trivial thing. There is no other country in the world, and certainly no other government, which would publish Sholem Aleichem in such quantities in ANY language. Whoever tries to belittle this as "nothing" does the Jewish people no favor. It is an accomplishment of great positive value.

★

I OFTEN read in Soviet literary publications poems, in original or translation, of Yiddish writers. The literary journal Soviet Literature (April) published in Moscow in English, contains, under the title "Selection of the Poems of Jewish Poets," poems of I. Feffer, L. Kvitko and Peretz Markish.

There are positive achievements in other fields. Concerts of Jewish singers and readings of Yiddish works have been presented not only in the populous Jewish centers but in the most prominent concert halls of Moscow and Leningrad. Yiddish theatre presentations have taken place in Vilna, Dvinsk, Baku. From the reports we read it seems that the Yiddish theatre is just beginning to unfold.

In Vilna and a few other cities Jewish choruses have been formed; Jewish departments in the libraries have been opened. We recently received the records of Jewish folk songs issued by the Ministry of Culture. All these positive developments are of tremendous importance and every friend of Jewish culture must recognize this.

I left the Soviet Union last year with profound impressions of the great socialist reality which I had seen with my own eyes. Although

(Continued on Page 8)

Jewish Culture

(Continued from Page 5)

I had read a great deal about socialist construction in the Soviet Union, the reality of this socialist land amazed me, both in its broad scope and its daily details. I saw the joy of labor in the faces of the factory workers and the farmers in the collectives. I visited many families in their homes and observed the contented life which they have begun to lead after the enormous destruction wrought by the second world war.

I SAW too how they were correcting the terrible injustices which were perpetrated in the land of socialism against a great number of individuals—and against whole peoples—during a certain period in the history of the Soviet Union. This correction had already begun in 1953 with the freeing of the unjustly accused doctors. Since then many others who were imprisoned by conscious and unconscious criminals against socialism have been freed. They have begun to reform the entire socialist legal system to make sure that innocent people are never again punished.

But there are other things still to be corrected. There still has to be a fundamental change in the attitude of the Soviet government toward the question of Jewish cultural worker in the Yiddish language.

Why has nothing appeared yet in Yiddish? Not a newspaper, not a book, not a magazine! All the arguments we heard from certain Soviet leaders that the Jews themselves do not want Yiddish publications do not correspond with reality. If it were true that Jews do not want Yiddish, then the Yiddish concerts everywhere in the Soviet Union would not be packed to overflowing. My own experience has convinced me that large masses of Jews in the Soviet Union are hungry for the Yiddish word.

That Soviet Jews are interested in having a Yiddish newspaper can be seen from the fact that close to

2,000 copies of the Warsaw Folkshimme come into the Soviet Union and are avidly read. Even the Morning Freiheit comes all the way to the Soviet Union and is read eagerly.

IN ADDITION to the printed Yiddish word there is a need in the Soviet Union for an organized Jewish community life. The only Jews in the Soviet Union who are organized are the religious Jews around their synagogues. The Jews who do not attend synagogue and are not religious do not have their own cultural or community organizations of the type of the Jewish Cultural-Social Association which functions in Poland.

That such an organization is necessary in a country with three million Jews is no longer debatable. It is needed both for cultural and social reasons. If there were such an organization it would be able to supervise the programs and personnel of the concerts and other cultural events, help in the reopening of Yiddish libraries, etc.

I am convinced that just as there are nationalist tendencies among other national groups in the Soviet Union, so there are among the Jews. And I discovered that these tendencies were especially strengthened by the administrative shutting down of all Jewish cultural institutions. A Jewish cultural and communal body would also have before it a responsible task of enlightenment and education.

The leaders of the Soviet government are doing a great deal to establish normal cultural exchange with other countries. Why should the Soviet Union not have a Jewish theatre which would not only serve its own Jewish population, but would travel to other countries as was done in the 1920s, or as the Polish Yiddish Theatre is doing now? Why should Soviet Yiddish writers not travel to other countries and meet their colleagues face to face, and, yes, the broad Jewish

masses?

WHY HAS Yiddish publishing activity not been resumed in the Soviet Union? In my opinion this failure stems from the fact that the leaders of the Soviet government and the Soviet Communist Party still cling to an incorrect policy developed during the post-war period—that all the Jews in the Soviet Union are linguistically and culturally assimilated and have no need for separate institutions.

It is clear that among the leading forces of the Soviet government there are still false theories in this respect. According to these theories the national culture of a people like the Jews, who are scattered through the length and breadth of the Soviet Union, should by this time have disappeared. According to these theories, the Jews no longer need their separate language and culture. It is not my intention here to discuss whether these theories are theoretically false. But the reality of the Soviet Union does not fit them at all!

Nor can this situation be explained by "technical difficulties." There has been enough time now to overcome these difficulties. One need not be an expert to understand that if the Soviet government were convinced of the correctness of these measures, they would be adopted with dispatch. Smaller states than the Soviet Union—Poland and Rumania—have Yiddish publishing houses, schools, theatres.

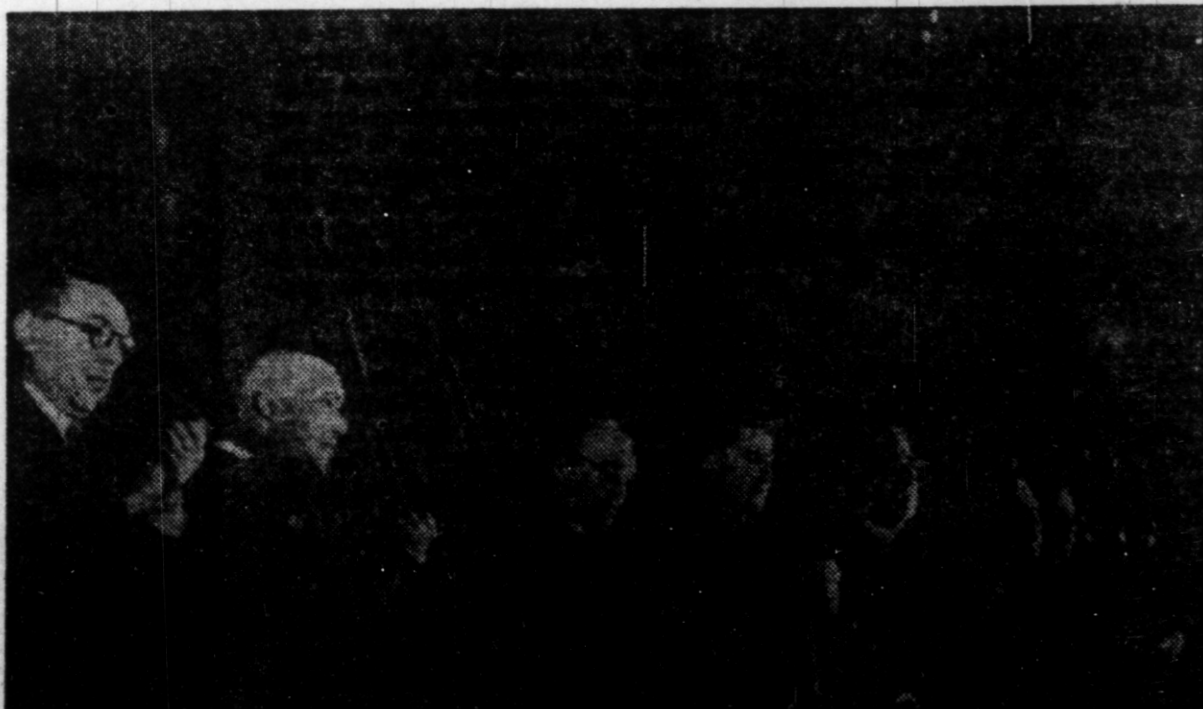
We must therefore conclude that this failure to satisfy the cultural needs of the Jewish population is a violation of the fundamental principles of socialism as they relate to the national question. No socialist and no friend of the Soviet Union can overlook this or condone it.

THERE are some people who would attribute this incorrect approach to anti-Semitism. This too is false. The fact is that Jews in the Soviet Union have the same civil rights as all other nationalities. Jews are represented in the government even in greater proportion than their number in the general

population. Jews play a role in all phases of Soviet life. And they were not the only ones to suffer from the errors.

Advocates of the cold war, enemies of socialism, use this question for their own ends. They do not hope for improvement; indeed, they do not want it. But the attitude of fighters for peace, of followers of socialism must be entirely different.

The fact that many of the injustices committed against a number of Soviet nationalities are being corrected gives us the right to expect that the injustice still being done to the Jewish population will also be corrected. The fact that the Soviet Union has a socialist guarantee that Jewish culture in the Soviet Union will yet thrive. The fact that many aspects of Yiddish culture are already being revived gives us the right to believe that the plans about which the Yiddish writers in Moscow last year told me so hopefully, will be fulfilled.



Some of the members of the wartime Soviet Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Standing at extreme left is David Hofstein; seated is David Bergelson; standing at extreme right is Shacme Epstein and standing alongside him (second from right) is Solomon Mikoels. Hofstein and Bergelson were among those who were later executed on frame-up charges.