



The Exodus from Dixie

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Jews in the Soviet Union

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WHENEVER I think of the Jews in the Soviet Union, the herculean figure of Yossif Yakovlevich, looming head and shoulders above the milling crowd in the lobby of the Jewish Kamerny Theatre in Moscow, comes before my mind. He was dressed in the long, rude, gray military cloak worn by the Soviet Cavalry, and but for the two Orders of the Red Banner on his broad chest and the three rhomboids on his collar, indicating his high military rank, one might have taken him for an ordinary rank and file Red Army man.

I remember distinctly the strange sense of incongruity I experienced on hearing this high military officer conversing loudly in Yiddish without the slightest suggestion of self-consciousness in either his voice or his bearing. And what a racy, incisive, colorful Yiddish it was! His companions were the Yiddish poet Markish and the Jewish-Russian poet Mikhail Golodny, both of whom I had met before. The conversation veered from a discussion of the play, a brilliant burlesque of the old sentimental Jewish operetta *The Witch* by Goldfarb, to the state of the Jewish arts in the Soviet Union, to the Jewish collectives in the South and finally to Biro-Bidjan whence Yossif Yakovlevich had recently returned after a tour of inspection. Yossif Yakovlevich was enthusiastic in his report and firm in his belief

that despite tremendous difficulties Biro-Bidjan was destined to become an autonomous Jewish Republic, the haven of the oppressed Jewish masses the world over. (Incidentally, his prophecy seems to be coming true. On May 7, 1934, the Soviet government declared Biro-Bidjan an autonomous Jewish region, which declaration has been justly acclaimed by the Jewish working masses of the world as the last step leading to an autonomous Jewish Republic in the not very remote future.)

The bell rang. We all hastened to our seats. As I sat in the dimmed hall watching the brilliant performance of the play and listening to the old Jewish folk tunes, the great miracle of what was happening to me and about me suddenly emerged from the depths of my consciousness. I am in Moscow, a thing quite inconceivable in pre-revolutionary days, when, but for a few rich merchants and professionals, no Jew was ever allowed to enter this holy of holies of Greek Catholic orthodoxy. Now I am here, visiting a Jewish theatre, conversing in Yiddish with a Jewish military officer and two Jewish poets. I recalled my childhood in the Ghetto, how I dreaded to pass the gentile sections of the town for fear of being jeered at, of having rocks and rotten apples thrown at me, of being beaten, of having my clothes ripped. I recalled particularly one gloomy Passover Eve, when my

father packed his crying family into a wagon and, under the cover of night, shipped us away to another city, for there were rumors of a possible pogrom in our town. Hundreds of scenes of humiliation and suffering crowded my memory. Hitler was not yet in power, but on passing Germany I had heard the vile slogans of the storm troopers resound through the streets of Berlin. I forgot where I was. A monstrous fear began to clutch at my heart, the ancient, immemorial fear of the hounded, beaten, persecuted Jew.

Suddenly there was a loud outburst of laughter. I was shaken out of my black reveries. I stared about me. Laughing Jewish faces. Yossif Yakovlevich with the gleaming Orders of the Red Banner on his chest, a Jewish youth in the uniform of the G.P.U., a bearded Jewish patriarch with his pretty Comsomol daughter, Jewish students, and above all a host of Jewish workers. I caught Golodny's smiling eye, and a deep feeling of joy pervaded my entire being. The nightmare was dissipated; apprehension was gone. In the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics I was home, in the arms of the Soviet proletariat I was safe!

From its very inception, the workers' and peasants' government came decisively to grips with the eternal and devilishly perplexing problem of racial and national minorities. As

early as November 15, 1917, that is immediately after the seizure of power, the working class of the Soviet Union, led by the Bolshevik Party, adopted the famous decree on the rights of nationalities signed by Lenin, then Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, and Stalin, then People's Commissar of Nationalities. "All that is living and vital [in the Soviet Union] has been freed from hateful bondage," read the decree in part. "Now there remain only the nationalities of Russia, who have suffered and still suffer oppression and tyranny. Their freedom must immediately be worked for and must be brought about resolutely and irrevocably. . . . The hideous policy of rousing hatred [among nationalities and races] must and shall never return. From now on it shall be replaced by the policy of voluntary and honest unions of nations."

The fundamental principles with regard to national minorities laid down by the decree and consistently adhered to by the Soviet Union ever since were:

1. The equality and sovereignty of all peoples in the Soviet Union.
2. The right of the peoples in the Soviet Union to self-determination, including separation and the formation of independent states.
3. The removal of every and any national and national-religious privilege and restriction.
4. The free development of the national minorities and ethnic groups living within the confines of Russia.

Seventeen years of proletarian rule have finally solved the eternal Jewish question. What colossal changes have taken place in the relative positions of the Jews in the various parts of the world. To think—in an article surveying world-wide anti-Semitism, (*Behind the Pogroms* in last week's NEW MASSES), Russia, once the classic land of savage Jewish persecution and pogroms, is not even mentioned. Economic, social and political equality of all nationalities and races in the workers' Republic, and full national self-determination removed the very basis for national oppression and discrimination. The last vestiges of anti-Semitism are being uprooted in an area extending over one-sixth of the land surface of the globe. More important, under the direction of the Communist Party, the Jewish people in the Soviet Union have gone through an amazing economic, political, social, and cultural metamorphosis.

In the semi-feudal, semi-capitalist state of the Czars, the Jews, besides suffering from perennial persecutions and pogroms, were oppressed by countless legal disabilities, forced to live within the narrow confines of the infamous "pale of settlement," kept out of the villages and the great commercial and metropolitan cities and strictly barred from agriculture and from practically all basic industries and productive occupations, except a few crafts. Fifty-five percent of the Jews in old Russia were not engaged in productive pursuits; they were middlemen, petty traders, peddlers, petty speculators. They were, to use the finely descriptive Yiddish term, *luftmenschen*, people who obtained a livelihood from

the air, a livelihood precarious, savagely competitive where opportunities were so few, and for the most part miserable. Only four percent of the Jews were workers and only two percent were peasants. It was not from riches and comfort that millions of Jews fled to the slums and the sweatshops of the New World. The poverty and degradation of the Jewish masses under the Czars are universally known and need no elaboration. The War and the civil war completed a process that has been unfolding for decades. The conclusion of the civil war in 1921 found the Jewish population thoroughly and almost irretrievably ruined.

The N.E.P. brought only temporary relief to a small number of Jews. Permanent and universal improvement could come only from basic changes in the economic foundations of Jewish life. Jewish energy had to be directed into productive channels. It was a tremendous task, involving no end of adjustment and pain. The *luftmensch* had to be transformed into a worker or peasant. It meant retraining and reeducating virtually an entire people. It meant, in the words of M. J. Wachman, "the readaptation, the reorientation, and—in short—the regeneration of the former *luftmensch*."

Though this process of regeneration had started long before, the greatest impulse was supplied by the enormous advance of Soviet industry and collectivized agriculture since the First Five-Year Plan.

Before the launching of the Plan, there was terrific unemployment in the Soviet Union. The few available jobs were naturally given to actual proletarians, among whom there were, as has already been pointed out, very few Jews. The uprooted Jewish middle class, i.e., the vast majority of Russian Jews, had nothing to turn to. Petty trading met with political discouragement and social contumely. The land offered by the government provided an escape, but on the whole not a very welcome escape. Centuries of urban existence had made the Jew apprehensive of the soil. The first Jewish collective farmer I met in the Ukraine comes to mind. When asked whether he was happy on the land, this new Jewish soil-tiller—who had for forty years been a peddler—shrugged his thin shoulders, and, stroking his grayish beard, replied: "What do you mean happy? It's better than nothing; it's better than starving. Thank God for that. Happy! Farming is a *goy's* work: a Jew is not born to be a peasant."

A similar attitude I detected even among the younger Jews on the land. They, too, preferred the life, the tempo, the movement, the amenities, the culture of the city.

The Five-Year Plan brought an outburst of industrial activity. Millions of people were needed in the new factories and shops. Even people who had been attached to the soil for centuries began to gravitate to the cities. Work in the factories was more lucrative and less speculative; it offered better opportunities for study and advancement; it made one a "proletarian," and placed one both economically and politically in a somewhat privileged social category. To the Jew, particularly,

work in city industries was immeasurably more attractive than the drudgery (farm work was not yet mechanized) and cultural isolation on a farm. The great exodus of the Jews to the land ceased. A vast stream of Jewish youth began to pour into the industries. In 1932, of the 2,853,000 Jews in the Soviet Union, 1,300,000 were between sixteen and fifty years old. Of these 480,000 had become workers; 450,000 were office employees, etc.; 200,000 were artisans. There remained only about 15,000 Jewish petty traders. Between 1926 and 1929, 300,000 Jews had found employment in Soviet industry. Since 1930, the process of Jewish proletarianization has been tremendously accelerated.

By 1933 the gigantic task of reconstructing the economic base of Jewish life in the U.S.S.R. was practically completed. Scores of thousands of Jewish men and women were drawn into the new giant enterprises of Soviet industry and collective agriculture. Scores of thousands are in government service, in the army, in professions. Hundreds of thousands of Jewish youths are in schools preparing for a productive life.

At the beginning of 1933 the social status of the Jews in the Soviet Union was as follows:

Workers34 percent
Office workers31 percent
Artisans14 percent
Peasants12 percent

The remainder is divided between professional and miscellaneous occupations.

The crowning achievement of the Soviet Government in solving the Jewish problem is, of course, its historic decision of May 7 by which Biro-Bidjan becomes an autonomous Jewish region. While the representatives of the Jewish bourgeoisie and the Zionist servants of British imperialism at their Congress in Geneva, while these potential and real Jewish fascists are shedding tears over the fate of Jewry in the Soviet Union, charging, according to an Associated Press dispatch in the New York Times (August 21, 1934), that "the Jewish religion, Hebrew literature, and Zionism are persecuted in Soviet Russia" and recommending "negotiations to obtain guarantees for Jews whose economic life . . . is being crushed by the economic policy of Soviet Russia," while a group of Orthodox Jewish lick-spittles in Germany urge their co-religionists to support Hitler and the "Fatherland," the Jewish workers in every capitalist country in the world are looking toward the Soviet Union and Biro-Bidjan as the only bright spots in the otherwise hideously bleak picture of Jewish life.

Read the "Declaration of Representatives of Workers' Mass Organizations" in this country:

. . . . At the time of this horrible increase of anti-Semitism in all the capitalist countries of the world, a totally different condition prevails in the Soviet Union. There anti-Semitism is classed as a serious crime; pogroms of any form of instigations towards national hatreds are impossible. The Jews, as well as all other national minorities enjoy there complete emancipation. . . .

In the light of this condition, the historic decision of the Soviet government in relation to Biro-Bidjan as a Jewish autonomous region becomes even more significant. Ten thousand Jewish toilers are at present engaged in active pioneering in Biro-Bidjan. Ten thousand more will be settled in the course of this year. . . .

Jewish masses in America, bear in mind that the historic decision of the Soviet government is totally different from the notorious Balfour declaration about a "Jewish Homeland" in Palestine. That declaration turned out to be nothing more than a soap bubble. It was a war manoeuvre on the part of the imperialist government of England which deceived both Jew and Arab in order to keep both of them chained to its imperialist chariot.

Do not forget that the Zionists allied themselves with British imperialists. Jewish legions were organized in support of British imperialism and the lives of thousands of Jewish young men were sacrificed. The object of Zionism is to wrest the land from the Arabs and to squeeze the Arabs out of industrial employment, this must inevitably lead to war between the Jew and the Arab; this spells the growth of Fascism and Chauvinism in Palestine.

In Biro-Bidjan there is no need of wresting the land from anyone. There is no room in Biro-Bidjan for a despicable chauvinist campaign—the land is vast, its resources are abundant and thanks to the generous assistance of the Soviet government, and thanks to the cooperation of all the nationalities of the Soviet Union, Biro-Bidjan will be built as a Jewish autonomous territory. This is wherein lies the significance of the historic decision of the Soviet government on May 7, 1934. . . .

Similar enthusiastic declarations and statements come pouring in from all over the capitalist world, especially from countries contiguous to the Soviet Union with large and oppressed Jewish populations, from Poland, Lithuania, Rumania, etc. Take, for instance, the July 24 issue of the workers' Yiddish paper *Friend*, published in Warsaw, Poland. Here you will find a whole collection of resolutions, letters, and telegrams from countless towns and villages in Poland, under the general heading—"The Jewish Poor Greet Biro-Bidjan." The Jewish workers of Wolyn,

Berezna, Zawiercie, Boryslaw, Schodnica, Ciechanow, Stawiski, etc., declare that they are "ready to rise at the first call to help build Biro-Bidjan." "We will not be deterred by the heaviest sacrifices," declare the forty workers from Zaverche. All of them attack the Zionists and their theories as utterly worthless in guiding the destinies of the poor Jewish masses. Dr. Nahum Goldmann, president of the Committee of Jewish Delegations at Geneva, demands, according to the United Press, "toleration for the Jewish language" in the Soviet Union. The impudence of pressing such a demand on a government which has been unstintingly supporting and financing every effort of the Jewish masses to have schools for the Jewish children in their mother tongue, a government which has been maintaining Jewish institutions of higher learning, pedagogical institutes, and high schools—all conducted in the Jewish language. A number of Soviet universities have departments of Yiddish literature and Jewish culture. The Soviet government has established a series of Jewish theatres in Moscow, Kharkov, Minsk, Kiev, Odessa, and is now building the first Jewish theatre in Biro-Bidjan. A great and growing variety of Jewish newspapers and magazines are being published in the Soviet Union. The *Daily Emes*, in Moscow, circulation 30,000; *Stern*, in Kharkov, 20,000; *October*, in Minsk, 15,000; *Young Leninist*, in Minsk, 10,000; *Stand Ready*, in Kharkov, 30,000; *Odessa Worker*, 6,000; *Socialist Village*, in Kharkov, 10,000; *Atheist*, in Moscow, 10,000; *Biro-Bidjan Stern*, in Biro-Bidjan, 4,000; etc., etc.

Contrary to the assertions of the bourgeois gentlemen at Geneva, it is absolutely untrue that the Jewish religion, or any other religion, is prohibited in the Soviet Union. One can go to synagogue any time one has the urge to pray. Of course the Jewish religion is not being encouraged, just as every other religion in the Soviet Union is not being encouraged.

And, quite naturally, among the most active members of the *Bezbozhniks* (Godless) are Jews.

It is quite untrue that the Hebrew language is prohibited by the Bolsheviks. But who in the U.S.S.R., except philologists, would now care to study this thoroughly obsolete tongue of the ancient Hebrews. The Jewish masses, the workers, the tailors, the shoemakers, the poor, never knew Hebrew. They knew as much Hebrew as the average Catholic worker or peasant knows Latin. On the other hand, the Yiddish language, the language of the masses, is now in a period of efflorescence. No other country in the world with a large Jewish population can boast of such a vigorous and voluminous Yiddish literature as that produced by the pleiade of new Yiddish writers in the U.S.S.R.

True, Zionist propaganda is prohibited. But this does not indicate any discrimination against the Jews. Zionism is bourgeois chauvinism; and bourgeois chauvinism is prohibited in the U.S.S.R., whether expounded by Ukrainian, Georgian, Uzbek, Jewish, Great Russian or any other nationalist group. In short, economically, socially, politically, culturally, in the matter of religion, the Jews are the absolute equal of every national and racial group in the Soviet Union. If anything, the Jew, because of the centuries-old persecution to which he was, and in capitalist countries still is, being subjected, has been treated by the Soviet government with especial consideration and tenderness. The kind of "discrimination" is in perfect harmony with Bolshevik principles. Both Lenin and Stalin, as well as every other Communist leader, repeatedly emphasized that the utmost assistance and help of the state as a whole must be extended to those nationalities who because of their backwardness, or because they were victims of special Czarist oppression and persecution, were in some respects more helpless or backward than the rest of the country.

Five Thousand Farms for Sale

EDWARD NEWHOUSE

FOR decades this enraging taunt has been flung into the faces of farmers all over the country: How is it Pennsylvania Dutch can make a go of it?

Well, they can't. You can quote five thousand Bucks County farmers and their families on that.

Bucks County is the very heart of Pennsylvania Dutch country. Traditionally, it is the land of the contented cow, the Mennonite deacon and the omnipotent hex sign. Politically it has been the breeding ground of Joseph R. Grundy and a hundred pale and soiled carbon copies. It was above the signature of one of these political stooges that

the official order robbing several thousand residents of their farms and homes appeared in the last days of July. Nothing more than a form letter to inform the good people of the county that unless 1931 and 1932 back taxes, ranging around five, ten and fifteen dollars, were forthcoming their properties would be auctioned. Nobody seemed to know exactly how many were involved. I asked County Commissioner Roberts and he said, "God, I don't know. Quite a few."

"But, Commissioner, you who signed the order must certainly know."

"I'd say there was quite a few of them."

Then the Doylestown Intelligencer came

out with the list. The farmers were given until Monday, August 6th, when the sale would take place at the courthouse. In the event that no one bid, the farms were to go into custody of the county.

On the same day 125 farmers met at Hagersville and decided to call a general meeting of both delinquent and paid-up farmers and workers to see what could be done. The meeting would be held August 1 on the courthouse steps. A committee of the United Farmers Protective Association sat up through the small hours, writing two thousand post-cards to a partial list. That cost twenty dollars. There was no more money to be had.