

INTERVIEW

VICTOR ERLICH

by BURTON LEVINE

I spoke to Victor Erlich during the summer of 1985. He had just retired as professor of Russian at Yale and was moving to a new office. Chatting about his family among the boxes of books, discarded papers, and almost emptied bookshelves seemed especially appropriate. His parents and grandparents were constantly on the move. Also his grandfather, Simon Dubnow, one of the greatest Jewish historians, broke with the tradition of *kvetching* about constant Jewish migration. He saw it as a source of renewal.

Dubnow was one of those extraordinary products of the Jewish Enlightenment, who escaped traditional Judaism with a total mastery of its culture, absorbed all that was best among the gentile cultures of Europe, and then combined the two. He was one of the first Jewish historians to question whether religious books were necessarily the truth, seeing them, instead, as rich records of Jewish cultural life. He also collected and used the communal records of Eastern European Jews. Dubnow proposed a theory of Jewish nationalism in which religion was only one element of the national culture. In his ten volume *World History Of The Jews* (still in print in English) he showed how that culture developed and preserved itself. A key mechanism was a national center or nucleus, that periodically moved as world conditions changed. The center unified Jewry and invigorated it by absorbing elements of the most vital cultures of the age. In contrast to Zionism Dubnow viewed ancient Israel as only the earliest Jewish national center. He did not believe that Judaism depended on revival of that center.

Dubnow was especially active during the 1905 revolution and campaigned throughout his life for Jewish civil rights and democracy in Russia. He wrote histories of the Polish and Russian Jews, as well as of the Chassidim. Neither his autobiography nor his daughter's biography of him have been translated into English.

His daughter, Sophie Dubnow-Erlich, mother of Victor Erlich, is a Russian poet and critic. Her husband, Henryk Erlich, was a leader of the Jewish Workers' Bund in both Russia and Poland. During the Russian Revolution, as a leader of the Bund and the Petrograd Soviet, he supported Polish independence. After returning to Poland, he was arrested because he opposed Poland's war with Russia. In the 1920's and 30's he was one of the Polish Bund's best known leaders.

After helping organize Bund and Polish opposition to the Nazi invasion of Poland, he was arrested by the Russians in 1939. While in prison he and Victor Alter, another Bund leader, were interrogated by Beria and his assistants. In autumn 1941, when Russia's future was most endangered, they were released to organize an international Jewish anti-Nazi organization. In December 1941 Russia's chances of survival improved. Stalin saw that Erlich and Alter were too devoted to Jewish and Polish independence to serve him. He had them executed. Their deaths were only announced two years later in 1943.

Q: *Your father was a leader of the Bund in Poland. Why was he in Russia at the time of the Russian Revolution?*

A: My father was born and raised in Lublin in the center of Poland. My mother was born in the Minsk province of the Russian Pale of Settlement. She was a very small girl when her father, Simon Dubnow, moved the family to Odessa. She spent some of the best years of her life as a student at St. Petersburg. It was a very exciting period in the history of Russian culture, and she was very much a part of the ferment. My mother and father met abroad and they decided to marry. My father had just graduated from law school and was willing to follow her to St. Petersburg. By that time he was already active in the Jewish Labor Bund. In 1911 he was 26 when he married Mother. But he was already a rising star in the Bund. He took his Bundism to Russia and became by 1915 one of the leading figures in the Russian Bund. It was in this capacity that he was elected in 1917 to the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies in what was, by that time, Petrograd. You know he is mentioned by John Reed in "Ten Days That Shook The World." He and Raphael Abramovitch, a leader of the Mensheviks, spoke respectively on behalf of the Bund and the Mensheviks. They decried the Bolshevik coup as it was taking place and left the meeting in protest.

Q: *Is that why your father is occasionally referred to as a Menshevik?*

A: Technically he was not a Menshevik, but he worked very closely with them during that period. In the fall of 1918 my family went back, back that is as far as father was concerned, to Poland. We returned to Poland for a couple of reasons. One, Poland became independent. With the Bund reconstituting itself on its territory, independent Poland became the major center of the Jewish workers' movement. Two, the Bolshevik regime was becoming increasingly authoritarian and inhospitable to both Mensheviks and Bundists. Although a secession from the Bund, the KomBund, joined the Soviet Communist Party, the Bund mainstream was increasingly critical of the regime and was incurring increasing harassment. In addition, under the civil war conditions with Petrograd besieged, there was an acute shortage of food. So my parents worried about my brother and me. As I understand, the move was initially construed as temporary, but my

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

father probably knew in his bones that he would never return to Russia. By 1919 it became increasingly clear that we were going to stay put in Poland.

Q: *But your father did return to Russia?*

A: No. He was arrested by the K.G.B. in the fall of 1939 in Soviet-occupied Brest-Litovsk and was executed under Stalin's orders in December, 1941. But this is not to say that he ever returned to Russia. Rather, with the start of the war Russia engulfed Eastern Poland and came to him.

Q: *Your Grandfather did not leave with your parents. He stayed on for awhile.*

A: Dubnow left Russia in 1921. He was taking an increasingly dim view of the Bolsheviks, having had precious little use for Lenin to begin with. He was a man with a lot of courage, who sometimes could be almost reckless. It was very lucky that his apartment was never ransacked, because the feelings that he expressed about Lenin in his diary would have gotten him into major trouble.

He went for a short time to Kovno, where he was wooed by the Jewish community, even by the authorities. But he felt a bit claustrophobic in Lithuania. I think he briefly considered Poland. The main reason was that he was very attached to my mother. He decided against it, very much aware of Polish anti-Semitism. Also, he was about to launch his ten-volume history. He was a remarkably disciplined and very well organized man, but he could never be a pure scholar. I remember we spent a full year with the Dubnows in Berlin. It was a very open house. Traveling scholars would visit. Jewish public figures, both Zionist and non-Zionist, would come by to get his counsel, to involve him in a campaign or two. But he was also very self-protective as a scholar. He knew that in Poland he would go *meshugge*. Poland was like a cauldron. He would be asked to sign a statement every week. That was, I think, the main reason he proceeded to Berlin.

Also, Berlin became a major center of Russian emigre life. I do not mean to say that he got actively involved in that milieu, but the backdrop of vital Russian cultural activity was quite essential to him. In addition there was a very organized Jewish community. Berlin was a metropolis where he could keep in touch with world Jewry. This was his most creative period.

Q: *Did he choose Germany over Poland because some of his earlier attempts at social and political action had not been very successful?*

A: There is something to that, perhaps. But I don't think he had a sense of failure. His political activities were too part-time. Earlier in Russia he did launch a party, Folkspartei. It was not a success. He was not cut out to be a political leader. After launching the party, he let others take over. He was more of a scholar, a writer, a thinker, rather than an organization man. But he did father an ideology, a theory of national cultural autonomy, which was shared by two totally disparate parties, the Folkspartei and the Bund. The Bund gave it a socialist twist. Dubnow had all kinds of differences

with the Bund. But the Bund was very much aware of an affinity between its national program and Dubnow's concept of cultural-national autonomy.

Q: *Your father and Dubnow had extended public polemics and debates about subjects like Zionism. What was the relationship between Dubnow and the Bund on the one hand and Dubnow and your parents on the other?*

A: The personal relationship between Dubnow and Father was very good. Dubnow had not always approved of the men who courted Mother. One of them was a very bright, clever, and entertaining fellow Odessite, Vladimir Jabotinsky. Jabotinsky wooed my mother at a very early stage of the game. At the time he was better known as a very able Russian translator of Bialik than as a leader of right-wing Zionism. My grandfather could not abide him. Jabotinsky's brand of Zionism bothered him. Worse, he was wooing his favorite daughter. Worst of all he serenaded my mother. Dubnow said, "The son of a bitch interferes with my work and sings off key!"

It is my impression that when he met Father, his only objection was that he was about to lose his daughter. Otherwise he thought Father was a fine young man.

Dubnow's attitude toward the Bund was respectful. He appreciated the difference between the Bund as a democratic socialist party and the Bolsheviks. But, still, he did not like Marxism or even socialism very much. He was a strict nineteenth century liberal. He also felt the Bund was much too hostile to Zionism.

Q: *But he was not a Zionist himself?*

A: No. He was every bit as critical of orthodox Zionism as he was of the Bundist approach to Palestine. He was not particularly interested in political Zionism. But he was attracted to the idea of building and strengthening the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, as a major and increasingly important dimension of Jewish life. The Bund as a political movement was not concerned with this cultural vision, but with political Zionism. Dubnow was saying that Zionism was not *the* solution to the Jews' problems. The Bund said, yes, it is not *the* solution, but it is also not *a* solution. It thought the cure no better than the disease. The Bund was right about the difficulties, the perils, and also the moral dilemmas. It did not, perhaps could not, anticipate the advantages in the post-war world.

Q: *Dubnow was more interested in religion than the Bund. What was his attitude toward the Jewish religion?*

A: The young Dubnow was a Maskil, a rebel. He came from an Orthodox Yiddish-speaking family, rebelled against Orthodoxy, and never went back. But his attitude toward Judaism changed from his rebel days. He never became a synagogue goer. But as a Jewish historian he was grateful to Judaism, because he felt, with considerable justice, that Judaism kept the Jews going, kept them together.

He remained alienated from Orthodoxy. He was basically a pantheist. One aspect of the Jewish tradition

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

he emphasized was the seder. In this respect, I think, he would have much in common with *SHMATE*. To him and others like him the seder was primarily a festival of freedom. More often than not, as I recall, or as my mother told me, he did not preside over a seder at home. He would go visiting. But when he was in charge, though there was some Haggadah reading and singing, he would provide his own commentary, which, in the broad and best sense of the word, was more ideological than that of a traditional Orthodox seder. He did not need some of the corny American texts, which try to secularize and politicize. He would provide his own interpretations, speaking as a historian. So, yes, he went back to Judaism, but he went back as a very modern man and as a very non-Orthodox Jew.

Q: *So although he rebelled against religion, he did not rebel against Jewishness?*

A: Cultural assimilation in the sense of submergence of Jewishness was always alien to him. When he became a journalist, he was a Jewish journalist. He was a journalist writing in Russian about Jewish subjects. But he imbibed Pushkin, Lermontov, Fet, Nebrasov, Tyutchev, Turgenev and Tolstoy. They became part of his heterogeneous yet integrated identity.

In Russia there was a broad segment of intelligentsia who were truly as Russian as they were Jewish. When my mother was six or seven, she was sitting on a park bench in Odessa, where she was raised. An elderly Russian lady saw her and asked, "Who are you little girl?" She clearly meant, "What's your name?" So the logical or proper answer would have been Sonya Dubnova. But she said, "I am Russian Jewish." This statement of double identity coming from a girl of six or seven was characteristic of the atmosphere in my grandfather's house.

So you have this symbiotic relationship. He knew that Russian culture, as represented by even some of its masters, was not hospitable to Jews. Gogol was openly anti-Semitic. Pushkin was not free from anti-Semitism, as far as his rhetoric was concerned. But I think that there was something else too. Consider the most enlightened Russian writers, such as Turgenev or Tolstoy. A man like Dubnow, a nineteenth century liberal positivist, was naturally drawn to the body of literature which championed those values. Much of nineteenth century literature is indeed much more humanistic than not only the Russian system but also Russian society. And it was this best aspect of Russian culture and the Russian intelligentsia that Dubnow felt connected with.

Q: *But by writing in Russian, who was he writing for? Was he cutting himself off from part of his audience? Were there many Jews who read Russian?*

A: He was writing for the rising Russian Jewish intelligentsia, for the literate Russian Jews. There were an increasing number of them by the early twentieth century. Of course he was linguistically versatile. Later he wrote the *History of the Chasidim* in Hebrew. He

wrote topical journalism in Yiddish. But Russian came more naturally to him than Hebrew as the language of scholarly discourse. Hebrew also would have cut him off from another constituency. That it didn't occur to him to write any major scholarly work in Yiddish at the beginning of the century is, of course, perfectly natural. It took the heroic effort of someone like Max Weinreich to make Yiddish a fit vehicle for Jewish scholarship.

The main thesis of *Fun Zhargon tsu Yiddish*, the only book he wrote in Yiddish, was that Yiddish had come of age. It was no longer a jargon. Until the beginning of the century there were few people who saw Yiddish as anything more than, at best, a vernacular language, possibly suitable for belles lettres and fiction. The notion of Yiddish as a vehicle of scholarship was a later one. But Dubnow was comfortable enough with it to be one of the founders of YIVO.

Q: *When he wrote in Russian was he writing for the Jews he would like to see flourish in Russia? Were people like your mother and himself people he would like to see as models?*

A: Yes, but even in the 1880's, well before he wrote his large works, when he began writing for the Russian-Jewish journal, *Voskhod*, there was already a bit of a constituency. He was always wary of cultural assimilation in the sense of erosion, of the watering down of Jewish identity. But he was not against partial linguistic assimilation in the sense of the spread of Russian to more and more Jews. You might say he was hoping for this to happen.

Q: *You were raised in Poland. Did Polish Jews have the same symbiotic identity?*

A: I was barely four when we moved to Poland. I would say that in Poland symbiotic Jewish identity didn't work so well. In Poland you had three segments. There was a very large Yiddish speaking population. The working class and often even the lower middle class spoke Yiddish with varying degrees of Polish. Sometimes in a *shtetl*, especially, in Eastern Poland, there was almost no Polish spoken, or more Russian than Polish. But in any case, there were a number of Jews who were not at all linguistically assimilated and whose language was Yiddish. Then there was the educated middle class, the professionals. They were linguistically assimilated. For them the main language was Polish. Some of them were Zionists. They had no problem with their Jewish identity; they were not trying to pass. Many of the Zionists were Polish-speaking Jews, who believed in Hebrew. Whether they knew Hebrew was something else. Some didn't. But they did not believe in Yiddish for two reasons: Polish snobbery vis-a-vis Yiddish and Zionist rejection of Yiddish as the language of the diaspora. Although you might say there was a certain blend of Polishness and Jewishness, they were ideologically Jewish and linguistically Polish. But, you see, your run-of-the-mill Polish Jewish doctor, lawyer,

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

or writer would sometimes not be an assimilationist just linguistically. There were attempts to pass. Even when he would reluctantly recognize himself as a Jew, he would view Jewishness as a burden and Polishness as his culture. Then there were people like my father, Victor Alter, my brother, myself and other leaders of the Bund. We were actively involved in the Jewish movement and at the same time culturally every bit as Polish as Jewish. But there were not many of us. The number of Jews who were happily Jewish and Polish was lower than in Russia. I am speaking in cultural terms; there was no reason to be politically happy. In contrast, in Russia you had somebody like Vinaver who was part and parcel of the Russian body politic.

Q: *Who was Vinaver?*

A: One of the leaders of the Cadets, the Russian liberal party, an important Russian public figure. "Vinaver" is a recognizable Jewish name. He didn't try to change it or to pass. He also managed to see his Jewishness as an asset, as well as the burden and handicap it was. This was a remarkable thing. Only about two or three generations of Russian Jews were able to do this. It was a very limited period, that didn't start until the mid-nineteenth century. I did not see much of this in Poland.

Q: *What remains of the Bund's thought today?*

A: Some professional anti-Bundists seem to blame the Bund for not anticipating the Holocaust, which is preposterous, because nobody did. I, for one, have a tremendous respect for the history of the Bund, for the Bund tradition, not just as my father's legacy, but for the courage and idealism of the Bund, for the ways in which the Bund kept alive the ideal of an autonomous Jewish working class movement. The Bund was the only movement which was programmatically invested in the existence and growth of Yiddish. I am grateful for this contribution because of the extent to which Yiddish matters to me as well as my respect for some of the reasons behind this contribution. Anybody who respects cultural pluralism would appreciate the notion that the Jewish worker, who was doubly persecuted, pushed around as a worker and as a Jew, was in dire need of self-esteem. Having a cultural vehicle he could call his own was part of that growing self-esteem and sense of dignity.

I am now very definitely an ex-Marxist, and even an ex-socialist in the sense of orthodox socialism. I consider myself a very rightwing social democrat. But if we speak about the Marxist or socialist universe, one of the more interesting Marxist thinkers is the Italian Gramsci. I learned about him from my son in the New Left. Gramsci was more interested than most Marxists in the workers' experience, in the values by which the workers lived on a daily basis. I think the Bund, without knowing about Gramsci, recognized more than most other socialist groups the importance of the here and now. Much of its involvement with Yiddish culture, specifically through a network of secular Yiddish

schools in Poland, was a matter of raising the tone, the quality of the Jewish worker's life.

Q: *Isn't that another connection with Dubnow? He also saw culture as being as important as political movements and that cultural phenomena had to be addressed in order to get political change.*

A: Absolutely. But, of course, he would have deplored Gramsci's radicalism. He always deplored radicalism.

Q: *Dubnow is not well-known today. He has been eclipsed as both a historian and Jewish thinker. Do you think that is because he was caught between two poles? You talked about how he defended Zionism to the Bund. Yet Zionists think of him as an opponent of Zionism.*

A: It is wrong to say that he was an anti-Zionist. He was non-Zionist. But, yes, in a certain sense he was caught in between. The range of his impact, his resonance, his prestige, his appeal, certainly when he was at his peak, lay paradoxically in his not being associated with any major camp or any major school of thought. Not just substantively but even operationally. In Berlin he was not a party man; he stood above parties, above camps. A number of people found it imperative to talk to him, especially when they wanted to get away from a partisan view of Jewish life. But it is also true that in a number of Jewish political and social contexts other names are more likely to be mentioned.

I was impressed and gratified to see that he meant so much to Elie Wiesel. In a lecture this spring at Yale he spoke for five minutes or more about Dubnow's death, offering a version very dramatic, though not necessarily accurate. But he also spoke for fifteen minutes about him as the leading thinker and ideologist of the diaspora.

In Israel today he is still a name to conjure with. There is a square named after him in spite of his non-Zionism. So he is still with us.

Q: *You mentioned Wiesel's version of Dubnow's death. How did he die?*

A: He was shot by a member of the armed forces in Riga, while the Germans were establishing the ghetto. This is the common denominator in all the versions. Wiesel was under the impression that the man who shot him was an SS officer, who was a former student of Dubnow's. I don't know what is meant by former student. Dubnow did not teach at a German university. He may have been a tutee. What I heard and what my mother wrote in her biography of Dubnow was more prosaic. Dubnow was being moved out of the residential section where he lived. His personal effects were placed in a cart and he was following it. One of the German guards accompanying him wanted to have some fun and cried "lauf Jude." Dubnow refused to run and was shot on the spot.

