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WHAT HAPPENED TO SOVIET JEWISH CULTURE?

*The first authentic statement on the fate
of Soviet Jewish writers and institutions
in the past 20 years—and our comments*

WHAT HAPPENED TO SOVIET JEWISH CULTURE?

The first authentic statement and our comments

We present below the greatest part of a statement which, to the best of our knowledge, is the first authentic statement from a socialist source concerning the fate of Jewish writers and institutions in the Soviet Union for the past two decades. This statement was first published under the title, "Unzer Veitig un Unzer Treist" (Our Pain and Our Consolation), in Folks-Shtimme (People's Voice), Yiddish Communist newspaper, published in Warsaw, on April 4.

We refrain from commenting until the reader has read the document. At the end of it we add our editorial remarks. They will be relatively brief, for the text became available to us (in the Morning Freiheit, April 11) as we were preparing this issue for the press.

We have added to the text certain pertinent information enclosed in brackets.

We shall have much more to say on this matter in coming issues. Readers are urged to write us their comments.

THE historical significance of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union consists, among other things, in its condemnation in a determined, ruthless manner, of the personality cult which for almost 20 years brought many distortions in the Communist Party activities and in the general life of the Soviet Union.

The malignant growth which appeared during these years on the healthy body of the first socialist country greatly hampered the natural development of its generally healthy organism and resulted in much suffering and many innocent victims.

In the situation created by the cult of the individual, there arose a cer-

tain distortion of the nationality policy in the Soviet Union. This made it possible for the Beria Gang to provoke friction among the nationalities and brought about a certain growth of *nationalism and anti-Semitism*. . . . In this atmosphere, in which the Leninist principles of socialist democracy were violated, there could arise a period, especially painful for us Jews, of **destroying** the results of the Leninist national policy in relation to the Jewish masses. . . .

[The statement then sets forth how the "Leninist national policy" was applied to the Jewish question in the Soviet Union. "For the Jewish masses of the Soviet Union this meant opening the doors to all levels of government and community life." It goes on to state that the Jews responded with ardent and heroic support of the socialist revolution. It points out that Jews entered heavy industry and agricultural life, from which they had previously been barred and the development of "national Jewish regions" in the Ukraine and the Crimea and of the Jewish Autonomous Region (Birobidjan). "At that time the Jewish problem was fully and completely solved."]

On the basis of this political and economic equality there developed a Soviet Jewish culture which attained a height unprecedented in Jewish history. Large Jewish cultural centers grew up in Moscow

and Kiev, Minsk and Odessa, Khar'kov and Vitebsk. Jewish State Theaters were created in all the large cities with compact Jewish populations. New young forces were added to the old cadres of scientists, researchers of Jewish history, language and literature. And above all, from the first days of the October Revolution, there arose a galaxy of Yiddish poets, prose writers, dramatists, critics, who expressed the finest and most intimate feelings of the newly-liberated Jewish masses.

To the names of the masters and artists like David Bergelson [one of the outstanding modern Yiddish novelists], Der Nister [novelist], well-known before the October Revolution, were added the wonderful singers of Jewish rebirth—David Hoffstein [poet], Peretz Markish [major epic poet], Leib Kvitko [poet and children's writer whose work in translation is among the most popular with Soviet children today], Aaron Kushnirov [poet], Shmuel Halkin [poet who is active today] Lipa Resnick [novelist], Ezra Finenberg [poet], Itsik Feffer [leading poet], Hirsh Orland [novelist], Noah Luria [fiction writer], Izi Khar'rick [leading Yiddish poet], Itsik Kipnis [prose writer], Zelig Axelrod [poet], Nota Luria [novelist] and dozens of young creators of the most progressive Jewish literature. These writers had at their service a richly varied publishing apparatus.

This, in mere outline, was the

fruit of the Leninist application of the national policy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in relation to the Jewish population. The result of this policy had an unprecedented effect on the thought and life of the Jewish masses throughout the world, who justifiably saw in these achievements the prospect of a many-sided, absolute realization of their own national aspirations.

However, this creative process — a natural development of Soviet power — at the peak of its development began to meet with certain interference. The social plague which is today known as infamous "Beriaism," together with its destructive effect on the *entire* social life of the Soviet Union, with its system of repression and destruction, brought with it tragic results also for the creative activity of the Jewish population of the Soviet Union and for a number of its community and cultural leaders.

Among the first victims of this plague [in the thirties] were such well-known revolutionary leaders as S. Dimanshtein, the co-worker of Lenin and leader of the Commissariat [of Jewish National Affairs and an outstanding political leader of Soviet Jews], Maria Ester Frumkin, Rakhmiel Weinstein, Yankel Levin [these three were formerly "Bund" figures and latterly Soviet Jewish leaders], Merezhin [deputy chairman, Commission for the Rural

Placement of Jewish Toilers (KOM-ZET)], Moshe Litvickov [editor of the Yiddish paper *Emes* (Truth) and literary critic], Mikhail Levitan [chairman, Planning Commission of Jewish Autonomous Province (Birobidjan)], Hershl Brill, and many, many others. In the very bloom of their talent, such creative artists of our culture as Izi Khar'rick, Moshe Kulbak [novelist and poet], Max Erik [leading literary critic], C. D. Bronstein [literary critic], C. D. Duniets [literary critic] and other honest, talented people, were cut down. All of them were devoted to the cause of Communism and the full development of the Jewish masses.

But the basic law of Soviet society and its motivating forces were mightier than the destructive Beria Gang. Despite the many losses, the creative activity of the Soviet Jewish community continued. The writers, theaters, publications, went on with their work.

Especially did this activity find expression during 1939-1941, in the liberated areas of Western White Russia and Western Ukraine. The people who came from Polish prisons and [the nazi] Bereza torture camps threw themselves wholeheartedly into the work. On the banner of this liberated, creative activity of the broad masses, Yiddish elementary and high schools, Yiddish theaters and newspapers were built and

flourished in the cities and towns of Western White Russia and Western Ukraine. The Jewish writers of Poland, who had escaped the Hitler hell, were welcomed with open arms into the family of the Jewish Soviet writers. What a great, new perspective was opened for the development of community and cultural life of the Jewish masses!

But then came the Hitler death march.

From Moscow came the voice of the Jewish Soviet leaders, writers, soldiers, the voice which called for unity in the battle against the murderers of the Jews, the voice which reached the war fronts, the partisan woods, awakening and urging a determined resistance to the Hitler beast. The work of the Soviet Jewish community, at the head of which stood the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, was a part of the gigantic effort of all the Soviet peoples. These, under the leadership of the CPSU, bore the heaviest burden of the anti-Hitler war, in order to bring liberation to all the peoples of Europe, to rescue from death millions of Jews of the Soviet Union and hundreds of thousands of Jews of Poland, to save the lives of the imperiled Jews of Israel and to help them later in their struggle for the independence of their country. This remains forever the historic achievement of the Soviet Union, which the Jews of the entire world will never forget.

This took place despite the destructive work of the Beria Gang and the damaging effect of the cult of the individual.

How then did it happen that the spokesmen of the Jewish community, who in the most terrible, fateful hours, succeeded in cementing the unity of Jewish resistance—how could it happen that these representatives, among whom were the best sons and daughters of the Soviet Jewish masses—the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee—suddenly, and without a why or wherefore, were liquidated and its leaders condemned to death?

Yes, we know that to put the question this way, detached from the entire destructive activity of the Beria Gang, means not to see the complete scope of the phenomenon which the 20th Congress brought out with the most profound penetration. The Beria Gang, which could exist only in an atmosphere of the personality cult, brought countless victims to the peoples of the Soviet Union. The chief victim was the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—the embodiment of the best strivings of the entire Soviet people. . . .

By emphasizing the *general* destructiveness of the personality cult, we are not attempting to find partial consolation in the familiar adage that "misery loves company." No, we are interested in bringing out the

truth. The complete eradication of every vestige of the personality cult is of concern to all the peoples of the Soviet Union without exception. The CPSU, with Leninist boldness, has penetrated to the very core of the terrible evil, in order to tear it out by the roots. This is the victory of the Communist Party, of Leninism. It is in this victory that we find our consolation, our hope and our certainty of the future.

We Communists are not in the habit of proclaiming our emotions of pain and suffering. In the face of defeats (and they are inevitable in the stubborn struggle which we carry on) we have had more than once to grit our teeth, so as not to give the enemy any reason for gloating. For many years the united chorus of the Jewish enemies of the Soviet Union and the communist movement has bombarded us with "questions" and "interventions," trying in various ways to misuse our tragedy, to misuse the shattered creative lives of David Bergelson and Der Nister, of Peretz Markish and Leib Kvitko, of David Hoffstein and Itsik Feffer, or Benjamin Zuskin [actor], and Itzhok Nusinov [literary critic and professor of literature], of Elihu Spivak [philologist] and S. Persov [writer].

In a perfidious manner they attempt to depict the situation as "normal" to Communism—that under Communism this fate of the Jewish community and its cultural leaders is the rule. They are intent on

smothering the feelings of sympathy and concern which the Jewish masses of the world have for the Soviet Union.

[The statement goes on to deal with those elements which have now begun a campaign against the Soviet Union in connection with the 20th Congress. In reply to those elements in Jewish life who have constantly raised the cry, "Why are you silent?" the document continues—]

Yes, certainly, we were silent, despite the fact that we saw and painfully felt the tragic results of the Beria Gang. We were silent because we believed that only the party of Lenin could—and finally would—untangle the tragic knot. We were convinced that the party of Lenin would finally find the whole truth and boldly and determinedly reveal it to all the peoples. Our faith and conviction has been fully justified!

The Jewish masses, just as we Communists, believed that the truth would be victorious. The 20th Congress of the CPSU, which gave the signal to eradicate the cult of the individual—the source of these distortions—justified the deep hopes and convictions of the Jewish masses in the victory of Leninist truth.

Long before the 20th Congress came the energetic steps of the Central Committee of the CPSU to rehabilitate the innocent, to clear the names of those who were murdered

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by the Beria Gang and to make their works available to the people. Thus, the Soviet government and the Communist Party rehabilitated the good name of Solomon Mokhoels [great actor and theater director who was rehabilitated along with the Moscow doctors in 1953], of all the innocent Jewish writers who were executed. Thus we among the Jewish population have received practical evidence of the return to the Leninist norm.

We welcome—like long-awaited, joyful news—every announcement of the return of Jewish writers, scientists and artists to their interrupted work. It is our consolation that today more than 60 Yiddish Soviet

writers are again active and preparing publication of their work. With the greatest excitement we receive every bit of news of relatives and friends in Moscow and Kiev, Minsk and Odessa, who are steadfastly and unhesitatingly determined to devote all their strength to the revitalization of the Jewish community and cultural life. The news of the re-establishment of the Jewish State Theater is full of hope, as is the news of a number of important steps of political, economic and cultural significance for the Jewish people of the Soviet Union.

This then is our consolation, the consolation of all the Jewish people throughout the world.

(Translated from the Yiddish by Max Rosenfeld.)

EDITORIAL COMMENT

WE READ the foregoing statement with profound sorrow and indignation. The tragic story of how the brilliant flowering of Soviet Jewish culture was wantonly cut off and its leading exponents unjustly executed cannot be too strongly condemned. Among those murdered were literary talents of major stature of whom any people can be proud. The fact that these innocent people were devoted workers for socialism

and the Soviet Union compounds the crime. We condemn without qualification or extenuation this crass violation of the rights of the Jewish people in the Soviet Union and the frame-up and execution of Jewish writers and public figures. We note the fact that other nationalities and nations in the Soviet Union suffered similarly in the widespread violation of socialist law and a socialist pol-

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icy on the national question.

The crimes are all the greater because they were committed in a country in which even non-socialists expected that a higher level of morality and justice was the rule. These acts were in fact the very opposite of the genuine practice of socialism. The true expression of socialism was rather the considerable and positive contribution of legions of Soviet Jews to the building of socialism. It was in the splendid cultural development that did occur for a number of years despite the perpetration of these anti-socialist, anti-human actions.

The American Jews, like the Jewish people all over the world, responded warmly to the active solicitude of the socialist state for the Jewish people. Here it was that for the first time anti-Semitism was outlawed and fought by law, education and public opinion, and the conditions created for achieving full equality and the rounded development of Jews. We are therefore all the more wounded by the terrible, criminal actions that broke the continuity of this process.

We regard the foregoing statement as only a *beginning*. There is a great deal more that must be told. Why were the crimes committed, who were responsible? The situation calls for a documented, detailed history of these crimes against the Jew-

ish cultural and political figures. The world should know who the victims were and what finally did happen to them; why these crimes were permitted to take place and why information about them was withheld for so long. Many other questions will undoubtedly occur to people.

Above all, it is our deep conviction that the guilty persons be named and, if they have not already been so dealt with, that they be brought to justice.

In this heart-rending picture there is a beam of light. The frank acknowledgement by the Soviet leaders at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party of the destructive effects of "the cult of personality" and its profoundly anti-socialist character gives promise that the days of the destroyers of justice and the dignity of man in the Soviet Union are done.

As the statement indicates, steps are being taken in the Soviet Union to restore the rights of Jewish culture. We have in the past few years in this magazine pointed to the signs of revival of Soviet Jewish cultural activity. In our April issue we published an article from Moscow reporting in detail the resumption of activity of a number of Yiddish literary figures.

We look forward to the steps being taken to restore the institutions desired by the Jews in the Soviet Union, such as the Yiddish press and theater.