Editor's Introduction

Heinrich Heine dubbed Communism "the gloomy hero" during the mid-1800's and thought "with dread and horror" of the time when it would achieve power. Others of a later day — Melech Epstein among them — discovered through personal experience the truth of Heine's prophecy.

Born in 1889 at Ruzhanoi, Byelorussia, Melech Epstein was intended by his Orthodox parents for rabbinical studies, but before very long, as he has said, "the religious spell" of his childhood yielded to a "social concern, secular in character but no less fervent in spirit." That concern led the young Epstein into an impermanent affiliation with the Jewish Socialist-Territorialist movement (the "S-S," as it was known in Eastern Europe); at sixteen, he was a semiofficial functionary of his local "S-S" party and an active participant in the revolutionary upheaval of 1905. His activities embroiled the young radical with the Czarist police, from whose clutches on one occasion he barely escaped with his life.

The autobiographical excerpt published in these pages begins with Epstein's immigration to America in 1913. The social concern to which he had devoted himself in Europe continued to characterize his career in America; it guided him into — and out of — the ranks of American Communists.

Epstein's first wife, Gisha Malkin, bore him two daughters; since 1942, he has been married to American-born Jetti Seinfeld, who acts as his secretary and is described by him as "a tremendous help" in his work. Completed in 1953, his valuable two-volume work, Jewish Labor in U.S.A., was followed a few years later by another useful book, The Jew and Communism. Now resident in Florida, Epstein is presently engaged in writing a series of profiles of distinguished figures — among them, Abraham Cahan, Joseph Barondess, Morris Hillquit, Meyer London, and Sidney Hillman — who, in his words,
"helped to shape the cultural pattern of the Jewish community, particularly on the labor and radical sector." He anticipates also the publication of a complete autobiography.

The editors of the American Jewish Archives take pleasure in presenting these recollections of a life that has been as colorful as, by its narrator’s testimony, it has been stormy.

A Restless Youth

This is the story of one man’s life, but in a sense it is the story of a generation. The events that are briefly sketched here, however exciting, could have happened — and in many instances did happen — to others of the same generation.

My generation came into the world a decade before the turn of the century, a twilight era in Czarist Russia. The old order was collapsing under the weight of its own decay. And the new one, still invisible, was throwing a long shadow before it. The youth in the big cities was dreaming the vision of the new world and feverishly discussing its shape.

In the shtetl, the walls of the ghetto were tumbling and nothing solid had yet emerged to replace them. The old, tightly knit way of life, centered around the shul and the beth medrash, was being discarded. It was the last stage of the Radical Enlightenment, which, in its deep social concern and fervent appeal to the masses of the people to rise from their poverty and backwardness, differed basically from the previous Great Enlightenment, whose call had been directed largely at the successful and the educated. A restless youth, losing its old moorings, was painfully groping for a new purpose in life. It was a bewildering time, confused and yet pregnant with hope and radiant with faith.

I Join the Exodus to America

Between 1907 and 1913, I saw many of my comrades, landslite, and acquaintances take the road to America. This emigration fever infected a large segment of the youth. The defeat of the revolution of 1905 and an understandable reluctance to waste nearly four years in the Czarist army were among the major reasons.
An inner voice warned me that I had to call a halt to the past and start anew. And this could be achieved only in the new world.

I was ready to leave Russia. My family bought the shifscarfe, second class, on payments. Having been previously exempted from military service on account of poor eyesight, I did not have to smuggle myself across the German border and could sail from the then Russian port of Libau. In the middle of December, I boarded an old ship called, curiously enough, the Czar.

Immigration Officials Unfriendly

The Czar was crowded. There may have been a dozen or more nationalities aboard. The largest was the Jewish; the smallest, the Finnish. The Finns, only about eight persons, were openly contemptuous of the Jews— I ate at their table. More urbane, they did not jeer, as the Ukrainians did, at the Jews praying in the salon on Saturday.

The sea was rough, and the Czar, loudly creaking, treaded her way slowly across the ocean. The trip took two weeks. It was a great relief to see her tied up in New York harbor.

The immigration officials were clearly not happy over the large human cargo the Czar had brought. The inspector for the second class greeted us with thinly veiled hostility. He spoke German and asked the future Americans tricky questions to confuse them. A nicely dressed young woman in front of me was asked, “How much is twice six?” The utter childishness of this question increased her nervousness—we were all highly wrought up— and she could not utter a word. The inspector repeated the question brusquely, but the woman, now frightened, moved her lips without being able to say anything. She was taken away to Ellis Island for further examination.

When my turn came, the inspector gave me one sharp look. “Were you in jail?” he asked. I was startled, and for a fleeting moment was ready to reply proudly, “Yes.” Wasn’t America the asylum for all the persecuted and oppressed? In Warsaw I had issued statements to comrades forced to leave the country testifying that they were politicals, to facilitate their entry into
the United States. But an intuition sharpened by years in the underground prompted a firm Nein.

I was later told that a truthful answer would have brought no end of trouble, that only a vigorous movement in my defense would have saved me from deportation.

The inspector seemed hesitant to approve my entrance. He reluctantly put the seal on my paper only after a young woman from a Jewish defense group intervened.

The pier was dark and cold. A heavy rain was falling. I was among the few who were not met by anyone. We felt miserable and helpless. The man from HIAS, who took charge of us, was encouraging. "We have had a dry summer," he said, "and the rains are badly needed. They are a good omen for you."

It was December 24, 1913, Christmas eve.

**East Broadway, A Hub of Activity**

My first glimpse into the mode of living of a family in America was not encouraging. Neither the cheerless rooms nor the drab furnishings of my Uncle Nehemye Markowitz's apartment, in the Jewish community of Brownsville, Brooklyn, were more attractive than similar dwellings in Warsaw. The apartment also lacked the tile stove we were accustomed to at home.

My two cousins, Meyer and Issie, were the first American youngsters I encountered, and I could not fail to observe the striking contrast between them and their counterparts in Eastern Europe. It was not easy to establish contact with them, and language was the least barrier; the difference in background and environment was a greater handicap. Doubtless, I looked no less alien to them, but as a greenhorn I was expected to be odd. However, they were good boys and helpful. What struck me most was the gulf between

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1 My uncle had been among the first in our area to be arrested, before the turn of the century, and exiled to Siberia for alleged participation in a strike for higher wages. The Czarist government, in strict observance of its laws, could not exile him because he was under twenty-one. He was, therefore, kept in prison for two years until he reached that age. Then he spent four years in Siberia. His close association with intellectuals in the remote hamlet of Siberia was a sort of college for him.
them and their parents. Later I came to know the full extent of the acute problem facing many immigrant parents in their relations with native-born or Americanized offspring.

Two days later, I stood on the sidewalks of East Broadway. What a sight! Here, on one block and within a few steps of each other, were three Jewish dailies, the biggest of them the *Forward*, a labor Socialist paper, its modern ten-story building the highest on the lower East Side. The heavy traffic in and out of the building suggested clearly that 175 East Broadway had a significance beyond being the home of the *Forward*, a vital institution in itself; it was the address of an entire movement. The animated movement of people on East Broadway was novel and stimulating. Yet it had a familiar ring.

I was taken to Sholem’s Café, half a block from East Broadway. There, under one roof, were more celebrities than one could find in many similar cafés in Eastern Europe combined. The freedom and composure of these novelists, poets, journalists, and labor leaders, sitting around little tables engaged in spirited discussions of world affairs, Jewish problems, literature, and art, excited my imagination. I wondered wistfully if I would some day find myself among those at the tables.

No one has yet done justice to this famous café of the Yiddish literati, the birthplace as well as the grave of many explosive ideas. The second famous institution on the East Side, Café Royal, on 2nd Avenue and 12th Street, largely the gathering place of Jewish theater people, has also been rather neglected by the literature on the East Side. Non-Jewish intellectuals and Bohemians from Greenwich Village often showed up there, taking part in the discussions. The waiters at these cafés were characteristic types. They were on familiar terms with their customers, and some of them were in the habit of insisting on what the customer should and should not eat. It was in the old Jewish style.

* The *Forward* building was the headquarters of the Arbeiter Ring (the Workmen’s Circle), the United Hebrew Trades, the Jewish Socialist Federation, and several local labor and cultural groups. It had a large auditorium for meetings and concerts.
Contrasting Impressions of America

For a new arrival of my background and age, the most formidable obstacle in the process of adjustment was the inability to take the measure of the new country in its entirety.

From what I have seen of the world since, I believe that in no country were light and shadow so interlaced as in America on the eve of World War I. The absolute freedom of speech and assembly was exhilarating; in Russia I could only have dreamed of it. But the total absence of social legislation was baffling. The abundance, variety, and low price of food were amazing. But so was the want I encountered.

Well acquainted though I was with poverty in the old country, it was on the streets of the East Side that I first saw — and not once — old furniture and bedding piled on the sidewalk, a child sitting on top, passers-by dropping coins into a plate — the family having been thrown out for failure to pay their rent.3 The Constitution guaranteed the right to belong to associations, yet millions of wage earners were arbitrarily denied this right and the protection to be derived from it.

Many questions troubled my mind. The country was passing through a depression that was hardly mentioned in the press. Idle people had nowhere to turn but to charity. Public opinion in New York was excited by a young student, Frank Tannenbaum, leading the unemployed to seize churches for lodgings. This young man later became a solid social scientist and professor at Columbia University. I saw policemen swinging their clubs freely over the heads of pickets, a sight reminiscent of somewhere else.

My experience in the area which is now called human relations was full of contrasts, too. I recollect my first visit to Bronx Park on a summer Sunday for a picnic with friends. On the grassy hills many other families were enjoying the sunshine. I heard many tongues; some I could not even identify. The scene was nearly idyllic in its tranquility. But a couple of months later a janitor in a

3 Rent gouging immediately after World War I provoked many rent strikes. Some blocks were actually littered with the furniture of evicted families. I took part in two rent strikes in Brownsville.
building in the heart of The Bronx — a section rapidly being built up by Jews — asked me softly whether I was a Hebrew, and then stated, "The policy of the management is not to rent to Hebrews." Reporting this experience to friends, I was shocked to learn that discrimination against Jews was rampant in many parts of the country, in hotels, summer places, restaurants, and clubs. Such social discrimination was unknown within the Pale of Settlement in Czarist Russia.

A couple of summers afterwards, I was in the Catskill Mountains, in New York State, looking for a room. Unwittingly, I rang the bell of a non-Jewish guest house. When the woman came to the door, I saw my mistake. Sensitive to being rebuffed, I blurted out, "My name is Epstein; I am a Russian Jew." For a moment the woman did not seem to understand. Then she called to her daughter, a girl of sixteen, and with a pleasant smile said, "This is Mr. Epstein. He is a Russian Jew, and he will stay with us."

Lumps came to my throat, and I could not utter a word.

During the war I was sent on a tour by the People's Relief Committee, as far west as Denver and south to San Antonio. It was my first glimpse of the country. I liked the wide boulevards of Kansas City and was charmed by the general simplicity and friendliness of the people. The vastness and magnificence of the Rocky Mountains were breath-taking. Everywhere men and women were working, and no one seemed to regard manual labor as beneath his dignity.

But this pleasant impression of the American landscape and people was shattered at the first railway station in the South. I had heard in Russia about the treatment of Negroes in the American South, but the actual sight of the sign "For Whites Only" on waiting rooms and ticket windows was incomprehensible to me. In Montgomery, Alabama, on entering a streetcar, I inadvertently took a seat in the back. When the conductor told me to move, I refused, as a protest against segregation. He threatened to stop the car. In the commotion, I observed that not only the white passengers, but the Negroes as well, shot unfriendly glances at me. I had taken one of their seats. Sheepishly, I moved to the front. I learned subsequently that many of the European intellectuals on their first trip to the South had similar clashes with streetcar conductors.
The Mexican market in San Antonio was colorful and exotic, particularly at night. But I was pained by a "feature" of this old town not mentioned in the illustrated folders for tourists—the Mexican quarters. I could not help comparing these bare, ramshackle hovels, hot in the summer and cold in the winter, with the peasant huts in Russia with their mud walls and thatched roofs; the latter won out. The Mexican quarters in San Antonio were abolished in the thirties.

The Ludlow Massacre of April 20, 1914, produced a feeling of horror among radical immigrants. It could not have happened in old Europe. Later I hurried to 26 Broadway to witness a mourning demonstration in front of the Rockefeller offices and was impressed by the presence of several clergymen in their vestments among the paraders. This, too, could not have happened in old Europe. Months afterwards, I sat in a crowded room in the New York City Hall, listening breathlessly to a cross-examination of John D. Rockefeller, Sr., then a symbol of hard and callous America, by a foreign-born labor leader and a Jew, Samuel Gompers. The hearing was conducted by the recently created United States Commission on Industrial Relations, headed by Congressman Frank P. Walsh. Old John D., surrounded by detectives, had to answer many embarrassing questions.

America Was Home to Me

Thousands of recent arrivals, young men and women, carrying a vision of a free and just America, found it difficult to orient themselves in this maze of contradictions. Conflicting impressions caused conflicting attitudes. Many, disillusioned, longed for the social romanticism of the underground movement. I was not among them. Instead, I began to look more closely into the various political trends.

Gradually, other sounds reached me. I became aware of a current of social unrest moving across the country, reflected in the

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4 A colony of tents of miners striking against the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company was razed by state troopers. Among those burned to death were eleven children and two women.
muckraking political literature. Taking up the study of the country's past, I gained a keener perception of the essence of America and its destiny. Four years after my arrival, when many of my comrades and friends, of all ideological groupings, began a small trek back to Russia during the short life of the Provisional Government of 1917, it did not even occur to me to do likewise. To me, as to an overwhelming majority of my fellow Jews, America was home.

My personal position was fluid, too. Knowing that I would not do well in a shop, I tried to earn a livelihood as a teacher in the newly organized "National Radical" day school. The pay was insufficient and irregular, and the program was not to my liking.

 Barely a week after my arrival, I had evidence, to my regret, that the old world and the new were not so dissimilar after all. One day, as I was looking through the Warsaw papers at the newspaper rack in the reading room on the third floor of the Educational Alliance on East Broadway, my overcoat, which I had thrown over the back of the chair behind me, was stolen. The loss of a coat early in January worried me. Luckily, however, the landsman with whom I shared a small room on Henry Street gave me his heavy sweater, and the winter was a mild one. Still, I didn't feel at ease walking the streets in a sweater.

 I began learning English in the day classes of the Educational Alliance. The students were mostly people who knew the language of their native country and were acquainted with its literature. But the method of teaching and the textbooks were those of the public schools. One can imagine my chagrin at having to answer the question "Who is a brave man?" with "A policeman is a brave man." It did not occur to anyone in authority to provide textbooks for foreign-born adults.

 I dropped out after a few months and took to reading the New York Times and a couple of magazines. In the beginning I could only catch the meaning of the articles, but gradually more words became familiar. The provincialism and one-sidedness of the big press of that time were irritating. Yet they seemed to mirror accurately the public mood. On the other hand, the small radical publications, frankly one-sided, provided me and my friends with facts considered "not fit to print" by the "capitalist" journals of opinion.
TAKING ADVANTAGE OF CULTURAL OPPORTUNITIES

The meager material existence was compensated for by a fuller cultural life. Evening schools, libraries, theaters, and concerts were more numerous and accessible than in Russia. Serious young immigrants filled the evening classes and crowded the libraries, eager to learn English and to read American books. Particularly attractive were the summer concerts in the recently opened Lewisohn Stadium. For twenty-five or fifty cents one could sit on a stone bench in the amphitheater and listen to Tschaikovsky or Beethoven played by a first-rate symphony orchestra. One had to come early to get a seat.

I remember the enormous crowds when the Ninth Symphony was performed in the summer of 1915. Mounted police had to be called out to keep order outside the stadium, and the performance was repeated the following night. It was the first time I had heard this symphony. On a summer evening in 1960, my wife and I went to the same stadium to listen to the same symphony. The stone benches were half empty, though the higher-priced chairs were full. What a difference between the cultural tastes of the young Jewish immigrants and present-day young America!

I remember also the dance recitals of Isidora Duncan in a big theater during the war. The orchestra and the lower balconies were practically empty. Only a couple of front rows were occupied by well-dressed old ladies and gentlemen, devotees of Greek art. But the top balcony was crowded by the same young people who stood in long lines for tickets to the Lewisohn Stadium. A ticket cost only forty cents, but we often had to give up our supper to see Isidora Duncan, whose triumph in St. Petersburg was known to us.

The intellectual superiority and political consciousness of the new immigration that poured in here after 1905 and the defeat of the first Russian revolution were largely responsible for the great organizational drives that changed the face of the Jewish community, doing away with the dreadful sweatshop and raising the living standards and the human dignity of hundreds of thousands of wage earners through the building of enduring trade unions. Jewish
MELECH EPSTEIN

There were things that I do regret
(see p. 129)
ELLIS ISLAND

How much is twice six?

(see p. 144)
laboring people reached the general level of American skilled labor.

Not the least meaningful accomplishments were registered in the political and cultural areas. Culturally, that decade witnessed a burgeoning of Yiddish letters that lasted until the late thirties. New vitality flowed into every phase of cultural activity. New magazines appeared, new literary trends emerged, and many books of a new crop of American Yiddish writers as well as translations were published. The Jewish theater found a discerning audience, and younger artists were given the opportunity to rise above the morass of the shund (trash) of Second Avenue. Politically, the Jewish neighborhoods in the East Side and Brownsville were the first to loosen the tight political grip of Tammany Hall in the big city. Indeed, it was a most fruitful, constructive, and hopeful decade.

This animation served to cushion the painful process of acclimatization and adjustment for me and others like me. There was little time for brooding over disappointments or facets of American life we disliked.

Labor Editor of The Day

About two years after my landing, I became labor editor of the independent Yiddish liberal newspaper, The Day. The labor desk in The Day was an excellent vantage point from which to observe the growing labor and social movements in all their divisions. The deep reverence with which the ordinary Jew regarded the printed word, coupled with his excitability and traditional skepticism about men in authority, gave the labor departments of the Yiddish press a strategic position of influence and power unknown to their counterparts in the English papers, as the following incident will illustrate.

After fourteen weeks of a lockout strike involving 50,000 cloak and suit workers in the summer of 1916, a settlement was reached. On that morning, I was tipped off by an excited young active striker that the agreement contained a couple of shady paragraphs to hide a secret concession to the employers. Always the crusader, I
deemed it my duty to warn the strikers. Rushing to the telephone, I called my office and dictated an alarming story for a special edition. When the newsboys brought the edition to the strike halls, a tremendous uproar arose. Such was the resentment among the hundreds of shop chairmen, assembled to ratify the agreement, that it was immediately killed. The strike was prolonged for several days more, and Morris Hillquit, the counsel for the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, had to harness his great legal abilities to rephrase the paragraphs in question so as to make them acceptable to the workers. The alarm later proved unwarranted and the improvement insignificant. For months I could not show myself in the union offices.

War relief and rehabilitation were the only areas in which broad segments of the community cooperated. The People's Relief Committee was the arena for this harmony. It was indeed a rare sight to see Labor Zionists and Socialist anti-Zionists forgetting their feuding for a moment. Even the heated controversy over the Balfour Declaration, and the break-up of the Jewish Labor Congress over this issue, did not disrupt the PRC. I was a member of the national executive committee of the PRC and the head of the volunteer section in Brownsville. For many months, hundreds of young men and women cheerfully gave up half of their only free day, Sunday, to ring doorbells to collect relief for the war victims abroad. The first city-wide tag day, February 27, 1916, was an extraordinarily cold and wintry day. Felix M. Warburg, chairman of the Joint Distribution Committee, came to the headquarters of the PRC at 175 East Broadway to plead for postponement of the tag day. But the volunteers insisted on going out. One contracted pneumonia and paid with his life.5

My Road to the Left Wing

The Bolshevik revolution left many of us bewildered. From here the issues between the Bolsheviks and their socialist opponents were unclear, except on war and peace. Pro-Ally in my sympathies, I could

5 Rumor had it that President Wilson proclaimed February 27, 1916, as the Jewish War Relief Day in honor of Samuel Gompers' birthday.
not regard with favor the Soviets' separate peace with Germany, concluded at Brest-Litovsk. Only when the White Armies were marching from the south to the north, led by Monarchists, their soldiers committing mass atrocities against the helpless Jewish population, did I warm to the Soviet government. However, my approach toward the left wing had little to do with Russian Bolshevism. Paradoxical as it may appear, my reasons were purely American.

In the capacity of labor editor, I followed intently the labor scene. The narrow craft structure of the trade unions, their lack of vision, and their political apathy did not fit in with my image of a labor movement. And this glaring inadequacy was particularly poignant during the restless post-war years. The backwardness of the craft unions and the pitiful state of the millions of semi-skilled and unskilled were a source of frustration and led me to become a firm supporter of industrial unionism. I was among those who hoped that a wider base of organization would also broaden the mental horizon of the unions and check the trend to bureaucracy.6

The Socialist movement, too, was loose and largely ineffectual. It could not bear comparison with the European Socialist parties, either in composition or in effectiveness.

The Jewish labor scene, on closer scrutiny, was disquieting, too. In the industrial field, there was a mighty surge from below, but at the top one detected ripening seeds of bureaucracy and, here and there in the middle layer, even evidence of corruption. The unions in the large trades, following their strikes, grew tremendously overnight and accumulated large funds. In the nature of things, not all who rose from the ranks to leadership in the wake of the great industrial upheaval of 1908 to 1914 were scrupulous in the use of their power or in the handling of union funds.

6 This feeling of frustration was deepened severely during and after the A.F. of L. convention of 1926, in Detroit, which I covered for my paper. The ostensible aim of bringing that convention to Detroit was to highlight the urgency of initiating an organizational drive among the auto workers. President William Green was sincere in his intentions, but the rest of the labor officiakdom present at the convention, perhaps with a few exceptions, gave only lip service to this chief purpose of the convention. The resolutions adopted remained on paper. My first article on the convention for the Freiheit was entitled, "The Assembly of the Satiated."
Long before the emergence of a left wing, all rank and file oppositional movements within the unions could count on my warm support. In retrospect, I have to admit that neither the oppositions nor I were always in the right. In the ideological sphere, success and prosperity made the old timers in the Forward Association, in the huge fraternal and mutual aid body known as the Arbeiter Ring, and in the United Hebrew Trades smug and complacent.

In this oppositional mood, I accepted an invitation from the small, original, Jewish left-wing group to conduct a labor column in their new publication, Der Kampf — they had no one with a trade union background. The column was entitled, “For Industrial Unionism.” The paper folded up during the Palmer raids. I sympathized with the victims of the raids, but I was by no means a Communist, not even an orthodox Marxist.

The Day became the mouthpiece for military intervention in Soviet Russia, and for this reason I left it. After several months of idleness I joined the staff of the Zeit, the new daily published by the Labor Zionists. Under the editorship of the well-known writer and playwright David Pinski, there were fewer ties with labor officialdom and more freedom of expression. In the Zeit I exposed a racket operating on the fringe of the labor movement. At the head of the racket was a woman who had close links with the officials of the United Hebrew Trades and the labor department of the Forward. Under her pressure, the United Hebrew Trades expelled me without a hearing. I had been there as a delegate from the Yiddish Writers Union named after Isaac Loeb Peretz, a union which I had helped to build up.7 The arbitrary manner of my expulsion was condemned by the Yiddish press and public opinion — with the exception of the Forward and official labor circles. For a time, the Yiddish Writers Union protested by refusing to replace me.

A few years later I exposed, in the Freiheit, a new racket of

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7 Early in 1917, the Yiddish Writers Union was strong enough to establish a $50 weekly minimum wage and a minimum of job security. I was among the initiators of the successful drive.
the same people, which also sought its victims in the trade unions. The woman and her partners brought a law suit against me and the paper for $400,000 each. But they never pressed the case.

**Integrated Despite My Doubts**

I saw little hope for the reinvigoration of the labor movement under the existing leadership. Discouraged, I lent a receptive ear to the appeal of those groups which promised to reverse the trend toward concentration of power in the hands of the officials and to cleanse the movement of complacency and bureaucracy. When the Salutsky-Olgin group broke away from the Socialist party in 1921 — the second split in the ranks of Jewish Socialists — and entered into an agreement with the underground Communists for the formation of an open, non-Communist left-of-the-center body, the Workers party, I went with them. It was a marriage not of love, but of expediency. Little did I dream that bureaucracy and concentration of power would be ceaselessly multiplied in the new outfit. The product of that merger in the Jewish area was the daily *Freiheit*, first published in April, 1922. I started as the labor editor of the paper.

About that time I read *Jews Without Money*, by Michael Gold, and was greatly impressed by it. Despite its emotionalism, it was most revealing to me and gave me an insight into the old East Side that had hitherto baffled me. It was also helpful in explaining that shocking phenomenon, the Jewish gunman, a cancerous growth on the Jewish social body in the big city during the twenties and the early thirties. No one has ever told the full story of how close the Lepkes [Louis Buchalter and his associates in Murder, Inc.] came to controlling the Jewish trade unions in the depression years of 1930 to 1932. Fortunately, they were beaten back in time.

I became friendly with Michael Gold in the Communist movement. Soft-spoken and agreeable, he struck me as a decent, humane fellow, but a weakling. He knew almost nothing of Jewish literature and thought, but sentimentally he was a Jew. During our long walks he would tell me that his overriding ambition was to write a novel of Irish life in New York. But he never did it, despite
many preparations. Instead, he became a columnist for the *Daily Worker* and a sort of nightingale for Communism. It was both loathsome and pitiful to watch open-hearted Gold turning into a shrill Communist apologist, vilifying his former friends who left the Communist movement in disgust after the purges or after the Stalin-Hitler pact. All the zigzags of Communist policy, the enormous crimes of the Stalin regime, and the destruction of Jewish social and cultural life in Soviet Russia did not shake him in the least. He went on with his unscrupulous defense of the Kremlin, losing all sense of values. Michael Gold is a glaring testimony to the devastating spiritual damage that a totalitarian movement can do to a gifted weakling.

The *Freiheit* initially had no special platform for the trade union movement except that put forward by all those who demanded genuine democracy and more militancy. My article in the first issue was appropriately called, "For Better Unions." In passing, however, I want to emphasize the relentless Communist pressure and manipulation to "integrate" their former partners of the Workers party. Only those few who quit at the very beginning of that pressure survived. The rest were swallowed up, often against their better judgment. That the Communists were able to achieve their goal was due largely to the irresistible attraction that power exerts on many — and Moscow was a seat of power.

The Workers party was from its very inception rent by embittered factional strife, which grew in intensity in the reshuffling of the factions when the party became, at the end of 1925, the official Communist mouthpiece in this country. The feuding and the murky maneuvering created around the *Freiheit* an air of stagnation which nearly choked it. And when the two editors resigned in a factional clash in 1923, I had to step in as editor de facto. Two years later, I became the editor. I resigned in the spring of 1929, unable to stomach the ceaseless bickering and ruthless conniving of the two factions, including the ruling one to which I belonged. Moscow played a game of hide-and-seek with both.

In the fall of 1929, I was removed from various other party posts for an editorial labeling as pogroms the Arab terrorist outbursts in Palestine in August of that year. The party thought
that a visit to the Soviet Union would “improve my Communist morale.” I was sent to Russia, where I spent seven months in 1930, traveling extensively.

**Light and Shadow in Soviet Russia**

The visit was a highly interesting experience, but contributed little to improving my Communist morale. Life in Russia was extremely hard and drab, and the shortages of necessities grew from day to day. But they could be convincingly explained away in terms of the immense strain created by the huge capital investments which the first Five-Year Plan of industrialization and the enormous difficulties of early collectivization required. The Great Depression was creeping over America, and industrial activity in Western Europe was shrinking steadily, while Russia was practically one gigantic scaffold.

The cities were full of youth, workers and students, and an unbiased observer could notice a certain degree of enthusiasm among them, fed by the bright future promised to them after the heavy strain of the industrialization would be over. However, the unmistakable hostility of the peasants to the forced collectivization was evident everywhere. I was a witness to this hostility at the annual celebration of a large mixed collective of Cossacks and non-Cossacks in the territory of the Kuban Cossacks. The festivities were disrupted by loud cries against the government policy of taking away their grain and giving very little in return. Another foreign guest was Don Sturzo, the noted Catholic leader of an Italian radical farmers’ organization.

At the end of 1930, numerous Jews still occupied important posts in the government, in the economy, and in the intellectual life of the country. This could be gleaned from the composition of the convention in Moscow of the Gezerd (OZET), the only Jewish social institution permitted.⁸

The delegates, about 150 in number, were all more or less

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⁸ The term “Gezerd” is composed of the initials of the Yiddish name of the Society for Jewish Agricultural Settlement, which antedates the Soviet regime. “Ozet” represents the initials of the society’s Russian name.
prominent Soviet officials. But anti-Semitism, though banned by law, was neither eradicated nor silenced. One day, in the Central Committee of the Communist party, the holy-of-holies, waiting for tickets to the forthcoming party conference on education, in the Kremlin, I was jolted by a sarcastic outburst from a man who was refused a ticket after I had received one. "The Epsteins get everything!" he exclaimed. The woman at the desk answered apologetically, "This comrade is from the United States." No one in the room—all responsible party workers—protested the anti-Jewish remark.

Sometime later, I witnessed a public trial in Poltava, in the Ukraine, against a woman who had spread the old libel that Jews used the blood of Christian children for ritual purposes. The local party and the Soviet staged this elaborate trial as an effective way of combatting anti-Jewish sentiments deeply rooted in the Ukraine. The defense counsel was a Jew. His appointment was intentional.

The Jewish Colonies in the Ukraine and Crimea

I toured the Jewish colonies in the Ukraine and Crimea, and became acquainted with the work of the three Jewish rayons (districts). In outward appearance, the colonies were quite pleasant; most of the houses in the new colonies had been built by the Agro-Joint, and the local administration seemed to be efficient. Several of the neighboring non-Jewish settlements chose to belong to the Jewish rayons. There was no doubt in my mind, however, that the colonists, most of whom were former small traders, had no

9 I might add that, despite the prevailing impression abroad, the delegates, almost to a man, heartily disliked the choice of far-away Birobidjan as the future Jewish autonomous region. They preferred the much closer northern Crimea, which had a considerable nucleus of new Jewish agricultural settlements. At that time, Communists could as yet freely express their opinions at the closed fraction caucuses.

I was present at the meeting of the Communist caucus on the eve of the Gezerd convention, and I witnessed the antagonism of the delegates to the Birobidjan project. But they were overruled by the party representative, and, of course, none of them dared to speak his mind at the open convention. Abram Merezhin, secretary of the OZET, was later removed from his post and accused of sabotaging the party decision. He vanished in the purges. That their opposition was justified was proved by the total bankruptcy of Birobidjan after World War II, a bankruptcy which no clever propaganda or Iron Curtain could hide for long.
love for the collectivization. But they were helpless. One could hardly see a teen-age boy or girl in a colony. To no one’s surprise, their mothers packed them off to study in the large cities, where they could make for themselves a more lucrative career than would have been possible to them as members of a collective farm.

The wide network of Jewish educational and cultural institutions, newspapers, magazines, and theaters — all of them in Yiddish and all maintained by the state — was bound to impress the visitor. But their shallow content was discouraging. As an insider, I had occasion to observe in several cities how the Jewish cultural area was being steadily reduced by the Russians, Ukrainians, and Byelorussians. Moscow itself did not have a single Jewish school for children.

The progressive stratification of Soviet society, to a degree unknown in “capitalist” America, and the tightening of the reins of power in the hands of one man could not be brushed aside. But most disappointing was the total absence of any indication of the emergence of the much-heralded new Soviet man.

Campaigning in Germany

On the way to and from Russia, I spent several weeks in Germany. The near collapse of the economic and social order was all too evident, and the want of the masses was appalling. Dozens of street women congregated in front of every hotel in Berlin, fighting for each tourist. The indecision and helplessness of the Liberal-Socialist coalition government were almost pathetic. In the Reichstag I saw a sharp clash between the Communist leader, burly Ernst Thaelmann, and the Socialist president of the Reichstag, Paul Loebe; the result was Thaelmann’s expulsion for thirty sessions.

On the return trip, I was asked in Moscow to help the German Communist party in their election campaign of September, 1930. I toured the mining district around Jena and saw the poverty of the idle miners. In Berlin on election day, a Sunday, teen-age boys and girls, dressed in Nazi Youth uniforms, their lean faces telling of their poor families, rode around in open trucks, chanting in unison, “Heraus mit den Juden! Heraus mit dem Kapitalismus!”
They were followed by helmeted motorcycle police sent for their protection by the Socialist Minister of the Interior, Karl Severing.

The same evening I was among the speakers who addressed a huge crowd assembled on the Alexander Platz from a window of the Karl Liebknecht House, the headquarters of the Communist party. In that election, Hitler's Nazi party emerged as the largest political body, receiving 11,500,000 votes, not much less than the combined vote of the two working-class parties. It was an ominous victory.

In Paris I had a long talk with Maurice Thorez, the newly appointed leader of French Communism. He impressed me as a glib talker with an unimaginative mind. His analysis of the European and world situation was shallow. This young former miner had been elevated by Stalin to his high post not for his ability, but for his docility and obedience.

**My Arrest and Deportation in Belgium**

The trip was not without a personally troublesome incident. At that time there were already in Western Europe considerable communities of Eastern European Jews, particularly from Poland. The dislocation caused by World War I and the quota laws in America compelled many thousands of young Jews to congregate in the large European cities. For most of them earning a livelihood was not easy. But far worse off were the latecomers, who were often refused work permits and had to lead a semilegal existence. They were the stateless Jews. When caught in a police raid, they were dumped under cover of night over the border into a neighboring country. In time, a technique was worked out for the dumping, in the style of classical smuggling, so as not to arouse the suspicion of the border guards on the other side.

Despite all difficulties, a network of cultural institutions in all the large cities testified to a lively social life. Of course, the communities did not escape the inevitable division and accompanying feuding between Zionist and anti-Zionist, right and left wing.

On the speaking tour arranged for me on the way to Soviet Russia, I was to stop at four Belgian cities, among them a mining town where several hundred Polish Jews worked in the mines.
The first meeting, in Antwerp, passed without incident. But in Brussels the club of the left-wing workers was surrounded in the middle of my speech by plainclothes men. They were not stationed at the door, lest that attract the attention of outsiders, but stood at strategic positions nearby. The people inside were aware of it, but, fearful as they were, they did not interrupt me, out of respect for the speaker.

On the way out, everyone was stopped by detectives and asked for work permits. Those who could not produce them were quietly taken away for deportation. My wife and I were among the last to leave, and the plainclothes men were waiting for us. They took away our passports, and asked us to be at a certain address at ten o'clock the following morning. My friends, well acquainted with the police station, had no knowledge of that address. They were sure that the police would not dare to touch American citizens. In the morning, I was told that a Socialist deputy wanted to meet me and to take up the entire case in the Parliament, as the raid had taken place without a warrant from a judge. I decided to go first to the address given to me by the detectives to retrieve my passport, and the appointment with the deputy was put off for a later hour. When my wife and I reached that address, we saw that it was the Ministry of Justice.

A well-groomed official in grey striped trousers asked us politely to follow him downstairs. He led us to a room, opened the door, and before we knew what was happening we were in the midst of a dozen tough-looking detectives, headed by a police inspector of the criminal division. The door was locked behind us, and we were held incommunicado without any charge or the formality of an arrest.

The inspector did his utmost to intimidate us to prevent our insistence on communicating with the American consul. We were kept in that room for five or six hours, then taken to our hotel for our luggage and placed in the rear car of an express train to Paris. The inspector, clad in the classical police cape, and one detective stayed on the train, all the way pretending not to know us. When we were about to reach the French border, the inspector signaled to me to come out to the corridor. He quickly and unobtrusively
pushed the passport into my hand and disappeared, careful not to attract the attention of the French border gendarmes to our deportation, lest they return us to Belgium. I never saw the Belgian deputy or the Jewish coal miners.

Jewish opinion in this country and in Europe was inflamed against the Communists for their incredible anti-Jewish stand during the Palestinian events. As my meetings in Belgium were well advertised, someone or some group must have informed or complained to the police that a Communist from America was to speak on that day. This was the reason—as I later learned—for the raid and my deportation. It was carried out quietly so as not to raise a rumpus in the press.

The same indignation was also the cause of my arrest in 1929 at the Canadian border on the train from Duluth, Minnesota, to Winnipeg, and my expulsion from Canada twenty-four hours later. This happened in the middle of a cold night, and I was lodged in a wooden jail. In the morning, the only Jew in that border town took me out on his own responsibility.

Speaking of arrests, in the same year I was lodged for a short while in the New York Tombs on a criminal libel charge brought by Morris Hillquit against the Freiheit and the Daily Worker. No longer being editor at that time, I really had nothing to do with that affair, but for good measure I was named in the accusation together with Moissay Olgin, Bill Dunn, and Robert Minor. The two papers raised a great outcry against this “persecution” by the leader of the Socialist party, and Hillquit, unwilling to make martyrs of us, did not press the case, though it was a valid one.

Accumulating Doubts and Misgivings

Returning from Europe, I found myself unable to accept the dogmatic leftist course pursued by world Communism in the so-called Third Period of the early thirties. The Communist analysis


of the world-wide crisis foresaw a complete break-down of the
capitalist system in Europe and the development of a crisis with
revolutionary implications in the United States. The immediate
Communist task was to hasten this “revolutionary upsurge.” The
outside world was dogmatically divided into two categories, plain
gangsters and social fascists. The second category was reserved for
liberals and Social Democrats, who put their hope in social reforms.
A faithful Communist was not supposed to relax, but to be “on
A guard” at all times. It was a period of fantastic self-delusion.

The special contribution of Jewish Communism to this hardened
line was an antireligious campaign, reminiscent of similar campaigns
conducted by the early radicals forty and fifty years ago, though
motivated differently. On Jewish holidays the Freiheit carried
material linking the Jewish religion and the synagogue with exploit-
ation and with the reactionary aspects of past Jewish life. A mock
Haggada and antireligious theses were published on the eve of
Passover and the High Holy Days, while antireligious meetings
were organized throughout the country on the Day of Atonement.12

Unwilling to hide my views, I was in constant friction with
the party authorities and with the Freiheit. An editorial of mine in
the weekly Needle Worker, in 1933, to the effect that Roosevelt’s
National Recovery Administration (NRA) sought to reform the
present system, drew fire in the Daily Worker. It went contrary
to the Communist position that the NRA aimed simply to enslave
the working people. Yet when a writer was needed to popularize
the violent Communist-initiated coal miners’ strike in Kentucky
in 1931, I was picked for that task.

Conditions in the coal fields there were shocking. The companies
were in absolute control of the lower courts and of the law enforce-
ment organs. One could not even enter Harlan County without being
exposed to bodily harm. Bell County was not safe for union people
either. One night, I stayed in a miner’s house in the hills. The

12 In later years, during the “democratic” turn of world Communism in the Second
World War and afterward, when Jewish Communists tried to gain respectability,
the Freiheit was not published on the High Holy Days. What is more, it followed the
example of all Jewish publications by issuing a special and enlarged New Year’s edition,
calling upon its followers to send in paid New Year’s greetings. Thus the hated Jewish
religion was converted into a vehicle for raising funds.
woman carried a three-year-old child in her arms. Undernourished, he was too weak to walk. On leaving, I gave the older boy — about six years of age — a dime. He did not know what it was, and his father, idle, explained that for the last two years the family had been living on scrip and had not seen a single coin. They were subsisting on Boston baked beans. The New Deal came not a moment too soon for the Kentucky miners.

My position on the paper and in the movement became virtually untenable. I stayed out of the Freiheit for a couple of years, and not by my own volition. During that time I wrote a two-volume history of the American working class, in Yiddish, and later edited the Needle Worker, the weekly organ of the left-wing Needle Trades Industrial Union, of which the furriers were a part.

The Appeal for Jewish Unity

I returned to the Freiheit during the transition of world Communism from "revolutionary upsurge" to the sweetness and light of the Democratic or Popular Front, a transition caused largely by the Kremlin's fear of Hitler's rise to power. Overnight, everyone in the party turned out to be an adherent of democracy and an American patriot, and everyone in the periphery of the Freiheit blossomed forth a proud Jew. Revolution and sovietism were forgotten, and Communism was proclaimed "Twentieth Century Americanism." The vacillation and hesitation of the Western powers were contrasted by the Communists with Maxim Litvinoff's thundering in Geneva for collective security and common action against fascist aggressors.

The mortal danger which Nazism posed for European Jewry gave plausibility to the Communist appeal to the Jewish community for unity against fascism abroad and the defense of Jewish rights here. The strengthening of Jewish culture here and abroad was now the major task of Jewish Communism. Whatever doubts one may have held on the depth or sincerity of this profession

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33 I was the secretary of the American Committee for the Organization of a World Congress for Jewish Culture — held at Paris in the summer of 1937 — which formed the IKUF, the Organization for Yiddish Culture.
of democracy and concern for Jewish values, it was easier to breathe in the relaxed state of the movement.

It must be admitted that the Communist call was not entirely without response. A number of well-known intellectuals and spokesmen for the middle class were won over to the idea of admitting the Communists into the body of the community. It is sufficient to mention two figures from different camps, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky, the latter a life-long anti-Marxist and a Yiddish thinker. However, the Communists' energetic thrusts met with the unflinching resistance of the official labor movement, incredulous of the Communist turn, and of the majority of Zionists, who were indignant at the anti-Jewish policy of the Palestinian Communists. The bloody purges of 1936 to 1938 alienated only some of the newly won sympathizers. As the Hitler danger grew in immediacy, a number of prominent Jews were ready to forget Stalin's bloodshed for the sake of his "friendly attitude" toward the Soviet Jews as well as for his presumably staunch anti-fascism.

Paradoxical as it may appear, the deep sentiment for the Soviet Jews was a wide avenue in the Communist approach to the Jewish people in this country as well as elsewhere. The equality which Jews enjoyed in the Soviet Union, the granting in some form of Jewish national-cultural rights, the attempts to rehabilitate, through agricultural settlements, the Jews declassed by the revolution, and the vision of a Jewish republic in Birobidjan were exploited by the Communists here to the utmost. They kept drumming that the "Jewish question" had been basically and finally solved in the Soviet

...Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, refusing to join the Committee for the Defense of Trotsky during the trial of the Trotskyites in 1937, wrote to Dr. Sidney Hook: "...if his [Trotsky's] other charges against the Soviet government are as unsubstantiated as his complaint on the score of anti-Semitism, he has no case at all" (Jewish Life, August, 1937). Trotsky had charged that Stalin was conducting a thinly veiled anti-Semitic policy. On July 8, 1943, speaking at the mass meeting at the Polo Grounds to welcome Solomon Michoels and Itzik Feffer, sent here by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in Moscow, Wise echoed the Communist demand for an immediate second front (Freiheit, July 9, 1943).

Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky was the chairman of the American IKUF, defended in The Day the bloody purges and other aspects of Stalin's course, and was the chairman of the Committee of Jewish Writers and Artists, a Communist-controlled group formed in 1941 to influence Jewish public opinion in behalf of Moscow's policies.
Union, and that only the country which had abolished exploitation of man by man could abolish national oppression. Of course, the propaganda never lifted the curtain on the superficiality of Jewish education and the dogmatism of its literature.

The ICOR (Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union), founded by the Communists in 1924, and later the Ambidjan (American Committee for the Settlement of Foreign Jews in Birobidjan), a similar middle-class body, attracted people far removed from left-wing tendencies. Their appeal, ostensibly purely a Jewish one, was cleverly fused with pro-Soviet propaganda, and they became entrenched Communist-controlled positions. As transmission belts, they not only raised money and increased Soviet prestige; they also served as recruiting agencies for the party and for its various front organizations. A number of those who joined the ICOR with the sole intention of helping a Jewish cause found themselves gradually drawn into the Communist party and its politics. (The same was true of other groups, such as the Freiheit Singing Societies, the International Workers Order, workers clubs, day schools, summer camps, and the ARTEF Theater.)

Communists Bewildered by Bloody Purges

None of us were in the least prepared for the series of bloody purges of the Soviet élite that began in Moscow during the summer of 1936. The rank and file was confused and bewildered. Desperately they clung to the explanations offered by the party press and speakers. Only a few broke with the party. However, hardly anyone in a responsible position in the party believed the fantastic charges leveled against Lenin's collaborators and the builders of the Soviet state and the Red Army. Those who wrote the bloodthirsty headlines and articles in the Freiheit approving the show trials did not hide their innermost disgust in speaking with intimates. Stalin was indignantly referred to as a butcher.25

My reasoning at the very beginning was simple: If the accusations were true — which I could not believe — woe to a Socialist regime

25 During these two years, I managed to steer clear of writing any piece justifying Stalin's mass murders.
CHAIM ZHITLOWSKY

A life-long anti-Marxist

(see p. 155)
DAVID DUBINSKY

A man of moods

(see p. 174)
whose best sons conspire to "bring back the rule of the capitalists and landowners." On the other hand, if the accusations were false, woe to the regime that manufactured such outrageous accusations against its best sons.

I was deeply troubled, and some of those who heard me voice my anger at the Stalin murders brought this heresy to the attention of the party. I was called several times before the Central Control Commission. But the party heads, conscious of the growing ill will among the public against Communism because of the purges, deemed it wise to smooth over such complaints. Still, they thought that it would be a lot healthier to isolate me from the center. At the end of 1937, I was "exiled" to California. (I had two children there, so they knew that I would not oppose this "exile."). There I was left largely on my own and had a hard time. It took strong insistence on my part to be brought back to New York in the spring of 1939.

Throughout this ordeal, I was kept in the party together with a few friends solely by the hopefully nursed belief that whatever crimes the Kremlin might have committed inside of Russia, it was still the most dependable bulwark against Nazism. On this score we had no doubts — and Nazism was, in the final analysis, the mortal enemy of mankind generally and of the Jewish people in particular. When this last and overriding belief was destroyed by the German-Soviet Non-Aggression and Friendship Pact of August, 1939, our last link with the party was severed. We broke with Communism.

MISSION TO PALESTINE; THE BOMB THAT DIDN'T EXPLODE

I have run far ahead of my story and return now to events preceding the purges.

In the spring of 1936, I was sent to Palestine to investigate the outbreak of fighting between the Arabs and the Jews and the position of the Communists there.

The American Jewish community, because of its urban character and its consequent political demonstrative value, presented a special target for the realization of the new Communist policy of a united front of all anti-fascist elements, as mentioned previously. But
the Communist slogan of unity against fascism and war, a slogan that would normally have held a magic attraction for people who were disturbed about the seriousness of the Nazi threat looming over millions of Jews in Europe, met with the stiff opposition of the official labor movement and of the organizations of the Jewish middle class. The overriding reason for the opposition of the latter was the glaring anti-Jewish stand of the Communists in Palestine. The Jewish press carried almost daily news dispatches from Palestine telling of Communist demands for the suspension of Jewish immigration and of Communist participation in the Arab boycott and in the terroristic activity against the Yishuv. The party here thought that much of the fury against the Communists in Palestine was unfounded. It also banked on the possibility that an investigation on the spot and recommendations to the Communist International might mitigate the anti-Jewish position of the sister party in Palestine.

At that time I was already a Marxist heretic and a Communist with misgivings, and my attitude was not unknown to the party. Nonetheless, the choice fell on me, partly because I had kept off the firing line during the "revolutionary" Third Period and my relations with the community were not too strained. I also surmised that the eventuality of my being hit by a bullet or lynched by hotheads of either side would not have worried the party chiefs here too much. My services as a martyr to the cause would have been more valuable and secure. And Communists were known to be experts in squeezing every ounce of political prestige from a funeral.

Palestine was then under martial law, and my mission had to be a confidential one. I took a roundabout way, through Italy and Egypt. As New York had no contact with Tel Aviv or Jaffa, I had to stop off in Paris. Jacques Duclos, short, swarthy, and bald-headed, second in command, after Maurice Thorez, of the French Communist party, asked me ironically: "Why is the American party concerned with events in far-away Palestine?" But when I told him that there were 5,000,000 Jews in the United States and that Palestine was a stumbling block to achieving a Jewish United Front, that shrewd Communist politician immediately understood the importance of my mission. The French party took charge of all Communist
activities in the French empire, but Palestine was a British Mandate. However, they gave me a contact with the Communist party in neighboring Syria, in the hope that from there I would be able to find my way to the underground Communists in Palestine.

I spent ten weeks in Palestine and visited also Egypt, the Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. In the course of my investigations I encountered a number of shocking as well as tragic happenings. But in the context of this autobiography the delicate and complicated situation in Palestine at that time cannot be dealt with adequately. Here I must confine myself to a few brief remarks and to three incidents, among them an outrageous plan which I was able to thwart.

The achievements of the Yishuv were amazing, though the economic situation had deteriorated due largely to the Italian-Ethiopian war and the Arab boycott. The spirit in the kibbutzim, compared with that in the Soviet collectives, was heart-warming and inspiring, though I disapproved of their strict egalitarianism and their making a virtue of austerity.\(^\text{16}\) I was also dubious about their future role in the economy of the Yishuv. But the political climate in both national communities, the Jewish and the Arab, was thick with animosity; one could cut it with a knife. Each group believed that it was fighting for its very survival. Every Jewish settlement had been turned into a fort.

While the Haganah conducted mainly a defensive action against the terror begun by the Arabs, Jewish extremists practiced the biblical "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" — sometimes with a margin. The lines of communication between the two peoples were severed. No Jew and Arab could be seen together. It was quite a task to sneak out of Tel Aviv into Jaffa to meet with the Communist leaders. The party had been Arabized since 1930, many Jews who resisted the Arabization had been expelled, and the leadership

\(^\text{16}\) The experience with egalitarianism, particularly in pay and housing, in the early years of the Soviet Union and in Loyalist Spain during the civil war has proved beyond a doubt that it is unworkable as a system. It leaves the people without any incentive to attain a higher scale or to reach a higher level of productivity. A tightened collectivism makes initiative on the part of the individual very difficult. Only small and highly selective groups of idealists could live in such an environment for long. As to austerity, I was chagrined when the teacher in Ein Harod, the largest kibbutz, told me contemptuously that a radio in every room was a bourgeois extravagance. I also disliked the nurseries where the children were raised from birth without the care of their parents.
was entirely Arab. The party was banned by the English at the outbreak of the Arab-Jewish hostilities of that year.

The eyes of the Haganah were everywhere. My presence became known and a search was begun for me, but by the time I was discovered, I was about to leave the country. Months later, in Paris, I heard that Ben Gurion had told the Haganah that I was not to be molested, only watched.17

The Jews Are “An Army of Occupation”

My talks with the Arab Communists proved to me that their Communism was largely a veneer, that at heart they were pure and simple Arab nationalists, and that they viewed the Yishuv with the same implacable hatred as any Arab nationalist. Once, after a bomb thrown into a railway car had wounded nineteen Jews, I bitterly complained to the secretary of the party—a young Arab known to me as Achmed, who had spent three years in Moscow—against such terroristic acts aimed at innocent men, women, and children.

“Jewish terrorists threw a bomb a day before at the Mandelbaum Gate in Jerusalem, wounding many Arabs, women and children,” he replied. Then he added bluntly, “We consider the Jewish population an army of occupation, and all measures against them are justified.”

His frightening statement left me without words. Further argument was useless. (Neither the Communist International nor individual Communist parties ever called the Yishuv in Palestine an army of occupation.)

The Communist party was accepted into the Supreme Arab Committee and even given some money. Still, I was shocked to learn on my visit to Haifa that several young Jewish Communists, immigrants from Eastern Europe, were making a bomb, on instructions from the party, to be thrown by one of them into the main Histadrut headquarters in Tel Aviv. The party was to take public responsibility for the explosion. Indignantly, I told the

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17 I had met Ben Gurion and Ben Zevi in the United States during the First World War, but this was definitely not the reason for Ben Gurion’s action. The reason was a political one.
makers of the bomb to give it up, and they, leaning on my moral authority, were more than willing to obey me.

The party chiefs were greatly incensed at my action. The Histadrut was regarded by the Arabs as the backbone of the Yishuv, but no Arab could approach its headquarters. The Communist party, proud to be a part of the Arab national front, could through its Jewish members accomplish something that the front itself was powerless to do, and a bomb explosion in the Histadrut would have been a tangible demonstration to the Arab world that no corner, or institution, in the entire Yishuv was safe from Arab vengeance. The bomb explosion was to be the big contribution of the Communist party to the common Arab cause.

Small wonder that angry words were leveled at me at the meeting of the Central Committee in Jaffa. In reply, knowing their intransigence toward the Yishuv, I advanced only political arguments, discarding humane considerations. World Communism, I said, was trying hard to effect a united front for common action against fascism and war, with the Second Labor and Socialist International and its parties and trade union bodies. The Histadrut was affiliated with that International. A bomb thrown at the Histadrut by a Communist party would certainly set back the chances for the achievement of a united front. As dutiful Communists, they had no answer to this argument. Moreover, the Jewish Communists in Haifa would not have done it again.18

THE PITFALLS OF A JEWISH COMMunist

Among the many people arrested by the British at the beginning of the fighting were J. B. Koltun and his wife, both in their fifties, who had come to Palestine from Russia about 1921 as halutzim and later turned Communists. Koltun became the theoretician of the Communist party and the author of party statements. A Yemenite girl would translate the statements from Hebrew into

18 I told a couple of people close to the party about the bomb. From them the story seems to have leaked through to the Histadrut. It was printed, in a distorted form, in the Hebrew press and in many Yiddish papers outside of Palestine. But I had to deny it in the Freiheit to avoid a political scandal.
At the time of his arrest in the summer of 1936, he had been expelled from the party for quite some time. The reason for his expulsion highlights the basic difference in approach between the Jewish and the Arab Communists. And this difference went deeper than language.

Koltun's declaration, written for the party on the death of King Faisal of Iraq in 1933, faithfully followed the Marxist-Leninist formula. Faisal had been a feudal ruler, an oppressor of his people and a vassal of British imperialism, and the Arab masses had no reason to shed tears on his death. When the party leaders received that statement, they were ready to jump through the roof. King Faisal was the only Arab national hero salvaged from their disappointment after the First World War. Riding a white horse, he had had the honor of entering Damascus alongside of Marshal Allenby. His death was mourned throughout the Arab world. Koltun was expelled without a hearing; he was not even notified.

British Intelligence three years later still thought of Koltun as the theoretician of the party and was eager to get him out of the country. The British Foreign Office, during Moscow's campaign for collective security and "the unity of all democratic forces," was influential enough with the Soviet government to have a small Soviet merchant ship come to Haifa with Soviet passports for Koltun and his wife. A British car whisked them away to the harbor at night and put them aboard the ship to Russia. They settled in Odessa. Koltun was later purged.

Goebbels' Agent Among the Communists

In the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem area I encountered only two intermarriages among Communists and left-wingers. One was a Jewish woman living with an educated Arab from Jaffa. The other couple was a Jewish woman from Galicia living with a young German who had come to Palestine about two years previously. They had a child of about seven months. The two couples shared an apartment in the "neutral" German colony of Sarona. The German, a handsome, graceful athlete, a type that one would associate with a Naturfreunde group, was not very clear about his occupation.
One day the Communists in the women's prison of Jerusalem sent word that Hans, the German, was a Nazi agent planted by Goebbels to provoke more clashes between Jews and Arabs. In the light of this exposure, his comrades recalled that at underground party meetings during this troubled period Hans had fumed at their lack of militancy, urging action and more action—meaning terror. And once he had made a veiled attack on "the merchants of Tel Aviv." Hans stoutly denied the accusation.

A day or two later I was invited to dinner in Sarona with the Arab and his Jewish wife. No one talked with Hans. On my way out, I had to pass the common living room. The Jewish woman and her German husband were sitting near the fireplace, their heads in their hands, in utter dejection. The scene was gloomy and pitiful. They did not raise their heads, nor did I and another guest, an Arab, wish them a good night. I could have no doubt of the girl's profound grief. But what of the German? I never found out. I had to leave the country before there was any convincing proof of his guilt.

**In the Spanish Civil War**

The uprising of the fascists and monarchists in Spain began on July 20th of the same year. Without waiting for credentials from New York, I immediately took ship at Haifa, and nine days later I was in Barcelona, the first American to reach the scene of the civil war. I spent three months there visiting all the fronts, and talked with many people of various strata. Again the limitation of space does not permit an adequate account of my varied and exciting impressions.

The railway communications between Spain and France had been interrupted, and rumors were floating in Marseille of wholesale massacres and piles of corpses on the streets of Barcelona. I had to walk with my luggage through the long railway tunnel linking the two countries and was arrested for lack of proper credentials by the Loyalist militia in the Spanish border city of Port Bou. The following day they brought me as a prisoner to Barcelona, and there I was set free.
The city was orderly, though trenches were still in evidence on some corners and the streets were full of people. Coveralls were the unofficial uniform in all government offices. There was a general fear of spies and of what was later called the Fifth Column; I could not convince the new party — the product of a Socialist-Communist merger — of my identity. They demanded written proof, and without a document from the party I was faced with the gloomy prospect of having to return to France after all the trouble I had taken to reach Spain.

An English Socialist, hearing my desperate pleading with the party official, tried to help me. “Look at his face,” he said. “How can he be a fascist spy?” He meant my Jewish face. But the Spaniard remained adamant. At that moment, a short, thin man in coveralls, with a big rifle in his hands, passed by. He took one look at me and exclaimed, “Melech Epstein!”

The man in coveralls was one of the stateless Jews mentioned above. He and his wife, Polish Jews, were Communists, and had lived in Belgium without a permit. They had been among those caught in the raid during my lecture in Brussels and thrown over the border into France. In France they were again caught and dumped over the border into Spain — Spain was already a republic at that time. He worked as a tailor in Barcelona, barely making a living, and was active in the Communist party. When the civil war broke out, he was assigned to an important post. His recognition saved me. I was provided with all the privileges accorded a correspondent of a friendly foreign paper.

The same experience was repeated in Madrid. The party there demanded a Communist credential from the United States and refused any paper given to me in Catalonia. There, too, I was saved by a young Polish Jew, who had been deported from Argentina and settled in Madrid. He was also a party official and had read the Freiheit in Argentina.

European anti-fascists were sure that a fascist victory in Spain would be a curtain raiser for the next world war. Young anti-fascists flocked to Spain to enlist in the Loyalist militia. Among them was a considerable number of Jews, primarily young workers from Eastern Europe living in semi-legality in France and Belgium.
In the first months of the civil war, their number on the Aragon front alone (central Spain) was about 150, and more were arriving every week. Later, young Jews from as far away as Poland, without passports or money, overcame innumerable obstacles to smuggle themselves across four borders, including those of Nazi Germany; they walked over the Pyrenees Mountains to reach Spain. Since many of them spoke several languages, they were entrusted with the communication lines on the front.

Addressing Jewish Militiamen at the Front

It is not an exaggeration to say that no other ethnic group outside of Spain was so deeply touched by the civil war there. With a keen intuition, the Jews felt, by and large, that the struggle among the barren hills of north and central Spain was a proving ground for Hitler and Mussolini, and that a fascist victory in Spain would immensely strengthen fascism in Europe.

I was asked by the Barcelona office in charge of foreign volunteers to address the Jewish militiamen on the Aragon front.

One dark night, the Jewish militiamen cautiously made their way to a long, shallow trench opposite the fascist line. Crouching and running over the highway with my military companion, I reached the trench. I could barely make out the faces of my armed listeners, but I felt the eagerness and tension around me. My first words were: “Four and a half centuries ago, Jews were driven from Spain to many lands, and the country was boycotted by them. Now young Jews from many lands are hurrying to Spain to rescue her, and perhaps the whole of Europe, from fascist domination.” I wished them a safe return to their homes with stripes on their sleeves.

Many of my audience never returned to their homes. Those who remained alive were interned in French camps after the retreat of the Loyalist armies in the spring of 1939, and were badly treated. Some of the men were sent to forced labor camps on the new French railway in the Sahara Desert; only a few managed to avoid being handed over to the Nazis for extermination.

It was impossible to establish the total number of Jewish volunteers. German Jewish refugees enlisted in the Thaelmann battalion. A number of Polish Jews joined the Polish Dabrowsky battalion. In 1937, a separate Jewish company was formed, named after Naftali Botwin. It carried through a successful attack on the Ebro River. (A description
Before and during my speech, I was warned to keep my head down. A couple of weeks later, on the Madrid front, a prominent Italian Socialist was addressing a group of his countrymen. Warming up, he forgot this admonition and raised his head. He was given a big funeral in Madrid a couple of days later. I was among the marchers.

**Parties Pulling in Different Directions**

As we were touring the southern front at night, our automobile was machine-gunned by a fascist plane. A bullet grazed my head, and I was thrown violently out of the car. My head was stitched in a monarchist mansion turned into a field hospital, and I wore a bandage for a couple of weeks.

I had several occasions to meet the famous General Emilio Kleber, who later made his reputation as the defender of Madrid. He was not a Canadian, and his real name was not Kleber, but Lazar Stern. He was a native of Bukovina, which belonged to Austria before 1918. Captured by the Russians in the First World War and sent to a camp in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, Stern had joined the Bolsheviks and fought in the Red Army throughout the Russian civil war. He was later sent to the Frunze Military Academy, from which he graduated in 1924. He participated in the abortive Communist uprising in Hamburg, and was later sent to China as a military adviser.

When Kleber came to Spain, he had behind him considerable military experience. Tall and well-built, with an open, pleasant face, soft-spoken and reserved, he was very popular with the troops of the International Brigade and the Spaniards generally. The first time I saw him, he was working on a military plan against Franco in the war office at Barcelona. All the parties of the anti-fascist coalition had their military experts, each of them working on his own strategy, and it took long discussions for the parties to agree on a single plan. This, incidentally, was one of the greatest handicaps of the battle by one of the soldiers appeared in the *Freiheit*, September 5, 1938.) The company participated also in the battles of Madrid, Guadalajara, Huesca, Brunete, and Saragossa. These three units, as well as the Thirteenth International Brigade, were controlled by the Communists.
Loyalists in the first year of the civil war. Kleber vanished in Stalin's bloody purges.

General Lukacz, known by his writer's name, Matei Jalka, a prominent Hungarian Communist exile, was also working on a military plan when I first met him at Barcelona in the former officers' club rooms, then converted into the headquarters of the merged United Socialist party, which was dominated by the Communists. A heavy-set, red-faced, bald man, born into a middle-class Jewish family, he was above the common run of Communist politicians: a Marxist, philosopher, and poet. Military planning was in those days a favorite occupation of many who had participated in the First World War.

We discussed the loose and painful situation around us. Lukacz tried at first to be optimistic. But his mood changed when I repeated to him what General Augusto Sandino, the young commander of the Catalonian militia, had told me in an interview. "How can we win the civil war," he had sadly observed, "when every group in the anti-Franco camp is pulling in its own direction? The anarchists-syndicalists want to turn the civil war into a struggle for libertarian Communism; the Communists want a centralized Spanish republic; and the Catalonian nationalists are primarily out to gain regional autonomy."

Lukacz then quoted some of the eighteenth-century French philosophers who had put their faith in man's reasoning. It was apparent, however, that he himself had misgivings about man's ability to reason. He ended with a rather odd remark for a Communist. "After all," he said, "what do we know about man?" Before I left for the United States, Lukacz told me that he had a brother in New Jersey. "Shall I give him regards from you?" I offered. "No," was his firm reply. "He is a capitalist." Lukacz commanded one of the international brigades and fell on the southern front in June, 1937.

I left Spain at the end of October, 1936, with a premonition of defeat. From what I had seen, I knew that a loose coalition government, plus the independent anarchists-syndicalists, plus the several autonomous regions, plus the "neutral" attitude of the Western countries, stood little chance of winning a civil war conducted
on the other side under a centralized military command and authority backed by Hitler and Mussolini.

Soviet aid to the Spanish Loyalists started while I was still there. I was in Barcelona when the first Russian aid ship arrived, and saw the immense joy of the people of Madrid on October 16th, when a squadron of Soviet planes flew for the first time in a demonstration over the capital. I left Spain before the volunteers from America began arriving and before the terror of Stalin’s GPU and of the Communist party divided the people and undermined the Loyalist cause.

Touring the United States and Canada to raise relief funds for the Spanish Loyalists, I met with intense interest and a generous response everywhere. However, in a couple of cities some of the younger people complained that I had confined myself to an analysis of the situation and that my speech had lacked confidence in the ultimate victory. They were right; there was no such confidence in me.

On my return, I also ran a front-page daily column in the Freiheit, “Spain Today.” The column was the first thing the readers picked up after the news from the battlefronts of Spain.

**Jewish Communists Stunned by the Stalin-Hitler Pact**

The Stalin-Hitler Non-Aggression and Friendship Pact hit the Communists here like a bolt from a clear sky. Not even the top leadership was in the least prepared for such an about-face, and they offered only lame explanations. The anguish of the Jewish Communists and left-wingers was acute; the non-Jews were less touched. The Jews suddenly found themselves angrily repudiated by their shopmates and neighbors.

In the first couple of weeks it looked as though the Jewish segment of the party had suffered a blow from which it could hardly recover. But then a strange thing happened. The vehement attacks by the Yiddish press and the ridicule of their neighbors had a contrary effect. Overcoming their anguish, they were drawn back to the party. Only a few of the active people broke with Communism, though the loss on the fringe of the movement was much greater.
Taking their cue from Moscow, the _Freiheit_ and the other Communist and left-wing publications in Yiddish and English began a well-calculated campaign around the slogan “Stalin and the Red Army have saved a million and a half Jews from the Nazis.” The “saving” referred to the march of the Red Army into Poland and the Baltic states, occupying a large area inhabited by Jews. This adroit campaign provided the dispirited Communists with a talking point, and their agony was turned, at least in their own mind, into self-righteousness. Each town’s occupation by the Red Army was made the occasion for a celebration and mutual _maazel-tov_’s by the Communist-left landslide here.

The final redemption of the Jewish Communists was the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in June, 1941. Jewish Communists could now walk with heads erect and look people in the eye. Incidentally, these were the years of the heyday of Soviet influence and standing in the United States; of course, the Jewish Communists squeezed every ounce of benefit out of it, in money and in prestige.

A FLOOD OF ABUSE; MEETING TROTSKY

The barrage of abuse and intimidation leveled by the party against the small but active group that broke with Communism, particularly after the seceders formed the League Against Fascism and Dictatorship, is treated in _The Jew and Communism_, as are the fortunes of the League itself. As the chairman of the League, I was the chief target of the vilification. It followed me to Mexico and Cuba, where I addressed numerous meetings from 1940 to 1942.

In Mexico, the Communists and their friends accused me of being an agent of Yankee imperialism. Lombardo Toledano’s paper _El Popular_, close to the government, demanded my immediate expulsion. In Havana, the Communist daily _Hoy_ charged that I had come to seduce innocent young Cubans into shedding their blood for the Yankees; the Communist party at that time was in friendly collaboration with the Batista regime. In both countries, the Com-

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20 That period is treated exhaustively in _The Jew and Communism_, pp. 346 ff.
munists tried hard to intimidate the Jewish community to cancel my lectures, but they did not succeed.

The Communist movement in New York was widely ramified and closely knit socially. Thousands of people knew me personally. But now a passion of hostility was whipped up against the "renegade," and even close friends were impelled to turn their heads away when they saw me on the street. The isolation made me sad and lonely. The party also tried to terrorize me by having Communist goons trail me wherever I went.

I met Leon Trotsky several times in the summer of 1940, shortly before his assassination, and published a long interview with him in the Forward. My impressions of Trotsky and a description of his funeral are given in The Jew and Communism. In conversation, Trotsky showed a keen and brilliant mind. But to me he appeared an old revolutionary romantic, detached from reality. He talked to his visitors like a teacher in a classroom. At sixty-four there was still fire in him. But it was a cold fire. His arguments were dry and doctrinaire.

In Mexico City, a secret agent of the NKVD, an American Jew known to me as Lawrence, skillfully managed to worm his way into a small international circle of anti-Communists, among whom were refugees from Germany, France, and Spain. He was one of those sent in to isolate Trotsky and to facilitate his assassination. But meanwhile Lawrence had designs on me. One day, hearing that I was looking for a new place in which to live, he offered to get me a room in a good middle-class hotel at a greatly reduced rate; the manager was a friend of his. As it happened, even the reduced rate was too much for me. This hotel proved to be a rendezvous for the NKVD. Had I accepted his offer, my bones, in all likelihood, would never have been found.

Back in the States, in the fall of 1940, Raymond S. Murphy, of the Eastern European Division of the State Department and an expert on Communism, told me that Lawrence’s name was genuine, that he had been born in Brooklyn and was known to the State Department as an NKVD agent. “I prevented him from getting a passport to South America,” Murphy added. I wondered whether this was all the Government could have done to Lawrence.
I had to earn a living and found temporary work in the news department of the Forward, but not for long. The period 1939–1940 was the heyday of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, headed by Martin Dies. One of his chief investigators, Ben Mandel, was a former Communist official who had left the party ten years earlier with the Lovestone group. A Communist zealot while he was holding an important post in the party, he became a fanatical anti-Communist later. He urged me to appear before the Committee and held out the bait that after my testimony he would arrange for me to sell three articles to a well-known magazine for $3,000, as he had done for Benjamin Gitlow after his testimony a few months previously. And $3,000 was a fortune beyond my dreams.

Failing to bring me around to his viewpoint, Mandel tried to exert pressure on me through Abraham Cahan. The headstrong old editor of the Forward liked the idea of my testifying before the Committee and also wanted a series of articles on the “inside story” of the Communist party. I was more than willing to write political articles against Communism, but not the kind of sensationalism which Cahan wanted. For my twofold refusal, Cahan, unaccustomed to writers declining to do his bidding, closed the Forward to me.

I never appeared before any Congressional committee investigating un-American activities, but I sadly observed some of my friends who had left the Communist party going too far to the other extreme, their justified hostility and fear of Kremlin imperialism driving them to become apologists for American support of right-wing dictatorships in Spain, Latin America, and Asia.

For two and a half years, my economic situation was more than uncertain. In 1943, I joined the staff of the Jewish Labor Committee, touring the country to raise funds for the Jewish underground in Poland. In 1945, I became the public relations man for the oldest and the most outstanding of the Jewish labor groups, the Joint Board of the Cloakmakers Unions of the I.L.G.W.U. My chief, Israel Feinberg,

\[21\] It must be noted that Cahan was an exception. By and large, Jewish labor was opposed to former Communists testifying before the Dies Committee, because of its reactionary character.
was a decent, tolerant, and dedicated man. However, there were in the office a couple of mean bureaucrats, with whom I came into constant friction, though their behavior was not my concern.

I also worked for David Dubinsky on several occasions, once in the campaign to re-elect Roosevelt in 1944, in connection with the Liberal party. I found him an astute, hard-working, and dynamic leader, but a man of moods.22

**Jews Leave the C. P. En masse in the Fifties**

The fifties witnessed an exodus of Jews from the Communist party and its movement and the closing of most of its institutions. Only remnants of the old membership remain. Communism has become for them an orthodox faith. Jewish Communists, strongly entrenched years before, have now been shorn of any influence in the community. The Freiheit is being published as a tiny tabloid, its circulation no higher than a few thousand. It offers no program for the Jewish people or for America. Its only mission is to defend, through distortion and plain untruth, the domestic and foreign policies of the Kremlin and its Soviet bloc.

Fully conscious though I was of the complete ideological and moral bankruptcy of Communism, I must admit that I never anticipated that a Communist government would knowingly resort to spreading anti-Jewish propaganda and to practicing anti-Jewish discrimination. From all evidence available, there is more anti-Jewish sentiment and practice in the Soviet Union today than at any time since the Bolshevik revolution. This reflects the final failure of Soviet Communism.

It is customary to end one’s autobiography with the pious remark that if the author had to relive his life he would follow the same pattern. I gravely doubt whether I would be willing to repeat mine. I believe that it was Machiavelli who pronounced the dictum: Most people do not regret the things they *did*, but the things they *did not* do. As for myself, I must say, in all frankness, there were things I did that I do regret.

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