

Chaim Suller Writes:

When Jan Peerce Sang Yiddish Songs, Moscow Audience Cheered

By CHAIM SULLER

(Third and final article)

During the month that I spent in Moscow and Leningrad, I had many opportunities to discover that all the stories that were circulating outside Russia, and which are today still being repeated by a number of important Soviet cultural leaders—that Jews in the Soviet Union are completely assimilated, that the Yiddish language and secular Jewish life does not interest them—are not true.

It is not true even in Moscow and Leningrad where the process of assimilation is certainly more rapid than in a large number of other cities. A middle-aged Jew in Leningrad complained bitterly to me. Why couldn't he buy a Yiddish newspaper at a newsstand, and why couldn't he get a Yiddish book at a bookstore?

On another occasion, a Jewish woman who was speaking with me in Russian told me joyfully that several days ago she had heard a Yiddish song on the radio. Another Leningrad acquaintance told me that the synagogue concert. There wasn't one empty in Leningrad was packed during the Jewish High Holy Days, not only with elderly Jews, but also with young people.

According to him, the young people had come not for the prayers, but in order to demonstrate their interest in Jews and Jewishness, and as a protest against the liquidation of secular Jewish culture in the Soviet Union.

When I was in Leningrad a young niece of mine returned from Magnitogorsk. She herself was born in Leningrad and can not speak any Yiddish at all, although she does understand a little. For the last few years she had been working at Magnitogorsk. She told me that she had met some young people there who could not only speak Yiddish, but read and write it well. She used to visit a Jewish home where they would often sing Yiddish songs.

While in Moscow I noticed large posters announcing the concerts of the famous Jewish-American opera star, Jan Peerce.

The poster said, among other things, that Peerce would also sing Jewish folksongs. I decided that this was one concert I would not miss. Thursday, June 28 I went to the large concert hall of the Conservatory. When I arrived, the hall was already filled with about 2,000 people. As at concerts throughout the world, the audience was in a holiday mood, "all dressed up," eager, and on the faces of the people, it seemed to me, a certain self-satisfaction that



JAN PEERCE

they had been able to come to the seat.

Promptly at 8:15, the master of ceremonies strode on to the stage and announced the songs that Peerce would sing.

The program included arias from Rigoletto, Pagliacci, Don Giovanni, and other operas; Jewish folksongs and Spanish songs.

The Jewish songs were in the second half of the program. Every number was acclaimed by the audience with loud bravos. But I want to stop on the Jewish songs. Peerce sang three of them. The first was a Hebrew shepherd song. It was received warmly, but without too much enthusiasm. The second song was the well-known Yiddish folksong "A Din Torah Mit Gott" ("A Suit Against the Al-

mighty"). When Peerce finished this song, which tells how Rabbi Levi Izhok of Berditchev argues with God for persecuting His people of Israel, there was a storm of applause that almost lifted the roof. I noticed, a few rows below me, two middle-aged Jewish couples. They sat on the edge of their seats. On the face of one of the men, who was turned toward me, there was an expression of sheer delight. He was beaming with pleasure. The third song, "A Dudele" was also well received.

I also noticed the faces of several young Russians who were applauding, but with a sort of wonderment in their eyes. They could not understand the stormy applause which the "Din Torah" had evoked. (When the master of ceremonies had announced the song he had explained it as "A Jewish Folksong—A Prayer to God.")

I went to this concert with Israel Zelikovitch Olender, who is the Director of all the factories in the Soviet Union which manufacture musical instruments.

Olender does not know Yiddish. The little bit of Yiddish that he speaks is more German than Yiddish. But he is greatly interested in Jewish cultural affairs. He is well-versed in Jewish history, especially the history of the Jews in Russia.

In his cramped quarters, which consist of one medium-sized room, there is a piano, a dog, and countless numbers of books around the walls. Among the books, I noticed several volumes of the Talmud (in Russian). I spent many hours with this assimilated Jew and his wife discussing Jewish cultural matters.

Brecht, Aptheker, Giles, Fritchman In September 'Mainstream' Issue

Studies by Herbert Aptheker, Rev. Stephen H. Fritchman and Barbara Giles, plus a powerful poem, "Oh, Falladah," written in 1918 by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht and authorized for publication shortly before his death, feature the September issue of *Mainstream* (formerly *Masses & Mainstream*) now on the stands.

In his "Power in America," Aptheker focuses on the latest book of Prof. C. Wright Mills of Columbia, *The Power Elite*, which has recently caused considerable stir in intellectual circles in the U.S. Aptheker traces Mills' formidable attack against the current "New Conservative" and "People's Capitalism" myths, and evaluates the author's concept of a ruling trinity consisting of the economic overlords, governmental rulers and the military who dominate the nation. While taking note of Mills' indebtedness to Marxist thinking, Aptheker also brings forward his

American churchman and thinker on the historic role religion has played in building free American social institutions and the present massive efforts to curb religious independence.

The study by Barbara Giles, critic and novelist, is an extended evaluation of the ideas and development of the famous American woman novelist, Ellen Glasgow.

In addition to an editorial tribute to Brecht, and Brecht's own significant and moving poem, "Oh, Falladah," which appeared in an East German literary supplement on Aug. 12 of this year, the September issue contains a letter about Brecht's life and work, written from Berlin by Edith Anderson, at the cabled request of *Mainstream's* editors, the day after the poet died.

Other September features are a short story, "We Ain't Common Thieves!" by William Wallace, Charles Humboldt's poem "Jim