

A PROBLEM THAT MUST BE FACED

Chapter One •

THE PROBLEM AS A WHOLE

Basically, the Jewish problem in the Soviet Union is of the same character as in the Capitalist world. The familiar ingredients are discernible: ancient hates inculcated by an ignorant, predatory church, rationalized by suspicion and xenophobia, layered over with new variants of old prejudices, and concentrated against a minority that will not remain submerged or lie low; a natural scapegoat for all social ills, mistakes by man, and acts of God; an animosity expressing itself in maltreatment ranging from snobbery to physical injury and in discrimination either crude or subtle. Naturally, all these are incompatible with Socialism and completely impossible in a Socialist society. Yet *mirabile dictu*, there they are.

For a time it seemed as though the Jewish problem had gone out with the smoke of the Revolution. All the Czarist discriminatory legislation against Jews was wiped off the books after the March Revolution by the bourgeois-liberal regime of Alexander Kerensky—on March 30 and April 5, 1917, to be exact. When they gained power, the Bolsheviks took the next step. By fiat they eradicated all discrimination against Jews, and all distinction between Jew and Gentile, from all phases of Soviet life and Socialist human relations. The *homo Sovieticus* was to be free from and immune to this miasma. So it was dictated by Lenin, confirmed by Stalin, and incorporated, in effect, in the Stalin Constitution.

The Jewish problem was, to the Soviet mind, a product of the inner contradictions of the Capitalist system. It was the rot that forms in a decaying society. The Socialist system was, of

course, absolutely devoid of inner contradictions and insusceptible to degeneration. It was a healthy organism, bursting with constructive energy, full of zest and the joy of living. It needed no scapegoats, and had no heart for hate or ill will. Soviet Jews, therefore, had nothing to worry about. They were to become good workers and good Socialists, like the rest of the population. And the state would take care of all their wants, individual and national, as it did those of other people.

Such was the theory, and it was promulgated in all sincerity, whatever instinctive misgivings about Jews some of the early Bolsheviks may have had. And they were going to put the theory into practice. Anti-Semitic acts were more than forbidden by law. They were stamped as socially abhorrent, unforgivable for a member of the Party and seriously damaging to one's standing in the community. Punishment for breach of the law was to be immediate and severe. And it was, for a time at least.

Yet future events were to belie the theory and expose the ineffectiveness in its practice.

Twenty-five years after the October Revolution, there was an outpouring of anti-Semitism that was frightening even to Jews who had lived under the Czars. In pre-Revolutionary Russia, it had been the Czarist regime and the hoodlums who persecuted the Jews. The enlightened elements, the decent citizenry, kept away from the anti-Jewish outbreaks, and avoided identification with the anti-Semites. But here were urban, intelligent, presumably decent citizens sniping at Jews in the open. There were alibis—the war, the Nazi propaganda. But other nations were in the war as well, and likewise exposed to Nazi propaganda. Yet they had no such outbursts in their countries. Certainly if no anti-Jewish feeling had existed in the Soviet Union, it could not have erupted as from a volcano.

Thirty-five years after the October Revolution, the anti-Semitic trend was made official. The distinction between Jews and non-Jews was drawn sharply, as between black and white. Jews were singled out, not as individuals but as members of a group, a nation, to be charged with the most despicable crimes—betrayal of the fatherland and poisoning of its beloved leaders. Every member of the Jewish people was *ipso facto* implicated. If he had not been involved in this particular plot, he

would quite likely be in the next one. Every Jew was a potential traitor, and hence a security risk. In self-defense, the state must purge itself of this element in its sensitive areas, in industry, Party, and government, and eventually send them all packing to obscure parts of Siberia or Central Asia. Again there was an alibi—Stalin was getting senile, Beria was feeding him the bloody potion of blind suspicion, mortal fear, and mad revenge. But, as has been explained elsewhere in this book, Stalin and Beria did not behave like madmen in other matters of state at that time. There had been alibis for the Czarist pogroms, too—it was not Russia, the apologists had said; it was not the Czar, it was not the Czarist government whose hands were dipped in Jewish blood, but some sneaking devil behind the regime in cabal with minor officials and thugs.

Now, it was forty years after the October Revolution. Stalin had died, and been buried with a glory that lasted three years. Beria was executed and forgotten. New men had taken over the reins, all committed to collective leadership where they all would be equal. Out of the collective leadership emerged one leader who was more “equal” than the others. Khrushchev might not possess the power wielded by Stalin in his day, but he certainly had more of it than any of the others.

The run on Jews stopped with Stalin's death. Jewish writers and other intellectuals who happened to survive drifted back from the labor camps to various degrees of rehabilitation. All was quiet in and about Soviet Jewry. But the world outside was vexed by the quietude, and by persistent disturbing rumors of an entire people exposed to adverse discriminatory treatment. Most Western guests in the Soviet Union inquired of their hosts about the state of the Jews. All Soviet dignitaries visiting abroad, including Khrushchev himself, were asked the same question. All replies were to the same effect: There was no such thing as a Jewish problem in the Soviet Union inasmuch as there were no longer any Jews left, all of them having been integrated into the general population.

As preposterous as they sound, here are direct, full quotations from the replies of the top Soviet leaders.

In 1957, Michael Suslov, the leading Marxian ideologist of the Khrushchev regime, was visited by Professor Hyman Levy of

London University, himself a Communist in good standing in the British party at the time. Professor Levy asked Suslov why there were no Yiddish publications in the Soviet Union. Suslov replied: “The reason is simple; it is because the Jews do not want any.” Levy then asked why the Jews did not want any, and Suslov answered: “Because the vast majority of them have completely integrated into the Russian life; many are members of the Party, and they have no interest whatever in preserving a distinct culture; many do not know any Yiddish themselves. It would be as useless to publish a Yiddish journal for the 500,000 Jews in Moscow as to issue in Paris a publication in the Basque language.”

A year later, Anastas Mikoyan, deputy prime minister, was answering the same question at a press conference with the United Nations correspondents in New York. His reply follows:

“There is no Jewish problem in the Soviet Union, and if there is no Jewish cultural life it is the fault of the Jews themselves. . . . In my country all peoples are absolutely free to develop their cultural activities, the Jews like the others. However, the Jews have integrated themselves into the Russians, and it is not our affair. The Jewish writers regard themselves as Russians and write in Russian. There is no Jewish problem in the Soviet Union. This problem has been invented by people who desire to stir up difficulties and hamper the establishment of cordial relations. I have Jewish friends, and a number of Soviet personalities are married to Jews with whom they are very happy and live in perfect harmony.”

A year after this, in September, 1959, at a luncheon in his honor, Nikita Khrushchev answered the same question for his hosts, the members and guests of the National Press Club in Washington. He said: “I think one fact can best illustrate the situation of the Jews in our country, and it is the following: Among the people who participated in launching the Lunik the Jews occupy a place of honor. On the whole, the national problem does not exist with us. We don't ask anyone for his religion. This is a matter of conscience that concerns no one but the individual himself. We consider each person solely on his own merit.”

We have it, then, on the highest authority—complete integration, no Jewish problem, no national problem, each person on his own merits.

Now let us see what Khrushchev had to say about the situation of the Jews in a more candid moment. He was answering the same question, posed this time by a delegation from the French Socialist party, in Moscow in 1956. I cite the complete text so there can be no question about the exact meaning or implication.

“Third Session, Saturday, May 12, 1956. Khrushchev:

“I would like to come back to the question of nationalities and to tell you that our Revolution has solved it in our country.

“Our heterogeneous populations have their republics. There are so many of them that I don’t recall their number. Each of them has an autonomous government. Formerly backward and illiterate, these peoples now have their engineers and professionals. All these populations live fraternally united, without racial hatred.

“Anti-Semitic sentiments still exist here. They are remnants of a reactionary past. This is a complicated problem because of the position of the Jews and their relations with the other peoples. At the outset of the Revolution, we had many Jews in the leadership of the Party and State. They were more educated, maybe more revolutionary, than the average Russian. In due course we have created new cadres . . .”

Here another Soviet leader present during the conversation, Pervukhin, interrupted to explain what Khrushchev meant by “new cadres.” He said, “*Our own intelligentsia.*” Then Khrushchev continued:

“Should the Jews want to occupy the foremost positions in our republics now, it would, naturally, be taken amiss by the indigenous inhabitants. The latter would ill receive these pretensions, especially as they do not consider themselves less intelligent nor less capable than the Jews. Or, for instance, when a Jew in the Ukraine is appointed to an important post and he surrounds himself with Jewish collaborators, it is understandable that this should create jealousy and hostility toward Jews.

“But we are not anti-Semites. Look at Kaganovich. He occupies very high positions. He is a Jew. There you have Mitin.

He is also Jewish. And our Lydia Factor, the kind interpreter who translates our talks so well. She is a Jewess. I, myself, have a grandson who is half-Jewish. We are fighting against anti-Semitism.”

Disregarding for the present the issue of anti-Semitism, we have it from Khrushchev’s mouth that there *does* exist a Jewish problem, and that the problem *is* complicated. However “fraternally united” the other nations live, the Jews seem to be, by Khrushchev’s own description, out of joint. Far from being “completely integrated,” they are a distinct element, not accepted as indigenous by the people in the republics, not even in the Republic of the Ukraine, where they have lived for many centuries. If the Ukrainian Jews were truly “completely integrated,” or even just “integrated,” into the general population of the Ukraine, the appointment of a Jew to “an important post” would not arouse any notice, nor would the integrated Jew necessarily surround himself with “Jewish collaborators.” The very issue of Jew versus non-Jew would not exist. Frankly, it is beginning to look as if it were simpler for a Jew to be appointed to an important post in the Capitalist United States than in Communist Ukraine.

Furthermore, however other persons may be considered “solely on their own merit,” the Jewish person, by Khrushchev’s own words, is not. What the Ukrainian Jew is up against in attaining high position in the Ukraine is not “his own merit” but his national origin, and Khrushchev regards this attitude of the Ukrainians as “understandable.”

Are the Soviet leaders doing anything about this situation? Not so far as anyone is aware. They seem to be “letting nature take its course, leaving it to the local people to put the Jews in their place. Yekaterina Furtseva, the only woman in the Presidium of the Party, was frank and honest enough to tell an American journalist that it was necessary to restrict Jews in certain sectors “because they have formed too high a percentage” in the personnel. Did Mme. Furtseva ever hear the assertion that the Jews are fully assimilated in the Soviet Union and completely integrated into Soviet society? Does she realize that her approach is at the root of all anti-Jewish practices?

She is by no means alone in this thinking. At a dinner, I hap-

pened to be in on a confidential conversation between a Soviet diplomat and a Western friend, part of which I reproduce here verbatim:

Diplomat: There used to be many Jews in the small towns. Now they are concentrated in the major cities, Moscow, Lenin-grad, Kiev, Kharkov—perhaps Minsk, since it is a capital. In the small towns there are no Jews.

Friend: Have any of the Soviet officials met recently with Jews in those cities?

Diplomat: I have my doubts. They are Muscovites. But there are many Jews in Moscow. I myself live in a courtyard in a street where 98 per cent are Jews, and I know them.

Friend: Could you tell me something about the life of these Jews?

Diplomat: Of course. They are all intellectuals. Two profes-sors, tens of engineers, many physicians, a few high officials. None below.

Friend: Is this social pattern peculiar to your courtyard?

Diplomat: No, this is almost typical of all the Jews of Mos-cow. You have to realize that now there are no Jewish workers. I don't think there are such anywhere in Russia. And I am say-ing it with no complaint. We understand that, oppressed by the Czars, they had to distinguish themselves in education, and they did. At the beginning of the Revolution they helped us a good deal and performed a great service. That is how they came into the intellectual class. Generally, I can tell you, that among us the Jews find themselves in a privileged position. On the average, the Jew is better off than the non-Jew—on the average.

Friend: And you think that this status can last?

Diplomat: How can it last? You have to realize that every year hundreds of thousands of young people graduate from the uni-versities and academies. Naturally, the Jews will have to com-press themselves.

Friend: I don't understand.

Diplomat: Simple. Reduce, and make room for the young people graduating now. That's natural.

Friend: There must be Jews among the young graduates, too.

Diplomat: Of course, of course. But in natural quantity. Not nearly so many as before. You must be aware that those who are

graduated today are much better trained than those who were graduated more than twenty years ago. This, too, is natural. It is not intended against the Jews. But most educated Jews are those who were graduated more than twenty years ago. They will have to compress themselves somehow.

Friend: And how do you see their future in the course of years—will they have to continue to compress themselves?

Diplomat: I believe in the vital force of the Jews. The Jews are a wise people, practical, with a sense of reality. They will understand that they have to step down and become workers.

Friend: Were there no Jewish workers in the whole of Russia at the beginning of the Revolution?

Diplomat: Possibly. Today there are none. Absolutely none.

Friend: And the Soviet Jews are aware of what is impending for them?

Diplomat: That I cannot say definitely.

Some of the details about Soviet Jews given by the Soviet diplomat are obviously erroneous. It is untrue, for example, that no Jews are to be found in small towns; this can be dis-proved by a visit to such small towns as Berdichev, Vitebsk, Gomel, or indeed to any town that had a large number of Jews in the past. Neither is it correct to say that there are absolutely no Jewish workers. An inquiry at a major factory would elicit the reply that they have "some" Jewish workers. The fact that a presumably knowledgeable Soviet official, sent to represent his country abroad, thinks so is perhaps more important than the fact itself. Soviet officials see the Jewish picture darker than it is, possibly because subconsciously this justifies their attitude to-ward the Jews. Substantially, however, both the diagnosis and the treatment suggested by the diplomat are close to reality.

So, forty years after the Revolution, although the heir to Lenin and Stalin tells the world that the Revolution has solved the problem of nationalities, we still hear strange talk about one nationality that sounds very much like a problem: talk of there being too many in one place or another, of stepping down, com-pressing, to make room. Has anything of the sort ever been said about any other nationality in the Soviet Union?

The Jews are not the only "non-indigenous" persons in those national republics whose number Khrushchev could not recall.

There certainly are many more Russians there. And the "foremost positions" have by no means been monopolized by Jews. Most such positions that are held by "outsiders" are in the hands of the Russians and Ukrainians. Why is this not "taken amiss by the indigenous population"?

Jews have lived in the present territory of the Ukraine since the days of the Romans. If, after forty years of Soviet rule, a Ukrainian Jew cannot hold a top position in the Ukraine without arousing jealousy and hostility to Jews, does he really belong there? And if he does not belong there, where does he belong? In any other Soviet Republic he would be out on the double score of being a Ukrainian and a Jew. Is he not a second-class citizen in his own country? How does this tally with the statements about assimilation, integration, and the nonexistence of a Jewish problem?

Let there be no illusion that the problem concerns only the matter of top positions. Even that would be, on principle, bad enough. It necessarily goes right down the line. If, because of his nationality, a man does not qualify for the first-rank position, he will not be welcome in the second rank, and he will hold the third on sufferance. If the policy is to reduce the number of Jewish professors, it must lead to the limitation of the number of Jewish students; a planned society does not prepare young people for positions they are not to fill. What is one to think of a Socialist society that tells a boy, able and anxious to study: No, son, you must not think of going to college, because you are a Jew and there are already too many Jewish boys in college?

But look, the Soviet apologist says, here is a list of Jews in high position in every field of endeavor! The list is correct, though it does not exactly represent every field—some, like diplomacy and the military, for instance, are restricted—and there are not as many today as there were several years ago. But there still are quite a few. However, notice their ages and look at the faces of their young assistants. The Jew in high position is generally past middle age; that is, he belongs to the generation when "they" did not yet have "their own intelligentsia," as Pervukhin put it. The young assistant waiting to step into his superior's shoes is definitely not Jewish. But, as I have said,

the issue is not high position. No sensible person would contend that Jews must sit at the top. The issue is equality or discrimination. The final test is whether, when a Jew applies for admission to a college or for any job anywhere, he is considered as an individual and judged on his own merit, or regarded as a member of a group, his personal fortune being determined by the status of his group. In our Capitalist society, the latter is condemned as racial discrimination.

The issue reaches out beyond the material phase of living. It touches man's heart and soul. It is unbearable for a man to be neither part of his environment nor outside of it. Jews survived the isolation of the Middle Ages because in their separation in the ghetto they had a complete life of their own. They manage with the partial separation of the modern Western world, with the "restricted," "exclusive," or plain "Gentiles Only," because they have a partial life of their own. When a Jew supposedly lives in two cultures, he actually lives in one composite culture, filling the empty spaces of one with helpings from the other. He lives on the threshold, both in and out, the out being his own, varying from yeshiva to country club. In the Soviet Union the Jew is not completely *in*, as we have just seen, but he is not permitted the compensation of the *out*. The Jew has a nationality when it comes to exclusion from certain spheres, but he has only ethnic descent when it concerns his historical culture. This must lead to frustration and resentment.

In view of the quoted pronouncements of the Soviet leaders—and other similarly revealing statements could easily be adduced—it is just nonsense to say that there is no Jewish problem in the Soviet Union. Why do Soviet leaders keep insisting that night is day?

Neither does it make sense to keep repeating that the Soviet Jews have been assimilated and integrated. If speaking Russian, reading Russian books, attending Russian schools, theatres, and concerts or participating in the creation of these arts—if this is assimilation in the Soviet Union, then all Jews in the Western world have been likewise assimilated. If the United States census of 1960 had a question about the native tongue, it is doubtful if a larger per cent of American Jews would have reported Yiddish as their mother tongue than was reported by the Jews

of the Soviet Union. Yet American Jews have, in addition to the general American culture, a flowering culture of their own—religious, secular, literary, musical, theatrical, in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English—besides numerous Jewish institutions and movements, none of which can be found in the Soviet Union. How do the Soviet leaders expect to cover the total lack of Jewish life in their country by harping on assimilation?

A cynical explanation would be the observation that Soviet propagandists have never been disturbed by a head-on collision with facts. For years they kept telling the Soviet masses that they had it better there than in America, and that American workers were starving. A more charitable reason would be that the Soviet leaders do not know fully the situation of the Jews in their country, nor do they understand the Jewish problem. They have been misinformed and misguided by their Jewish colleagues, themselves ignorant and arrogant about their own people. As doctrinaires, the Soviet leaders have failed to comprehend the exceptional character of the Jewish religion and Jewish nationalism. The Jewish religion, with its Prophets' zeal for social justice as its enduring tradition, with its identification, through the absence of Jewish royalty, aristocracy, or synod, with the common people, was regarded by the Soviet leadership as like their own Greek Orthodox church—a corrupt, obscurantist arm of reaction. The Jewish national spirit, which, because of the Dispersion, had become spiritual and universal, was viewed by the Soviet leaders as a suspicious international political force working to their disadvantage. The exalted place of Zion in both Jewish religion and nationalism they confused as alignment with the current policies of the present government of Israel. It was all so ignorant and so wrong, yet they would not seek a way out of their own confusion. It was simpler merely to follow the book, the misconceived doctrine, rather than the facts of life, and to deny the existence of the problem. Recognition of the problem would compel finding a solution, a complicated and painful process; ignoring it, they could drift and trust to time.

But a problem ignored is like a wound untreated. It keeps festering and spreading the ulceration. The hope against hope of the Soviet leaders that somehow the Jews will be assimilated

after all is definitely receding. Both Jew and Gentile are more conscious of their difference today than ever in the past quarter of a century, and in consequence less likely to merge. In the case of the Jews, there have been times and places where they have lost their identity, but this has never occurred under persecution, discrimination, or pressure. On the contrary, history demonstrates that in their Jewishness Jews cannot be broken; they may be bent, but they spring back at the first let-up. Jewish reaction to ill treatment has always been recourse to the eternal springs of the Jewish spirit and a longing for communion with other Jews.

The Jewish problem in the Soviet Union has fallen into a vicious circle. The drive for assimilation makes the Jews more nationally conscious, and thus less likely to become assimilated; and the more nationally conscious the Jews become, the greater need the Soviet leaders feel for their assimilation. They feel this need because, within their own misconceived frame of reference, they cannot presume the existence of a distinct Jewish people, living its own cultural life, within their particular social system—except, of course, in Birobidjan, which is an admitted failure. Yet this presumption should not be impossible. Jews have managed to live their own lives spiritually through various periods of history and in different social systems. There were Jews in the ancient slave societies, in medieval feudalism, and under Capitalism. It would be a sad commentary on Socialism if that system alone had no place for Jews. The hard fact is that the Jews are there, right in the heart of the Socialist world; they will not be read out of existence by an article in a Soviet publication or a statement by a Soviet official. Their situation is a problem that must be faced.