

Setting the Record Straight

In his rejoinder to my article, which I have just learned you reprinted in *Political Affairs*, Morris Seroff by-passed all the facts I adduced about the Yiddish cultural situation in West and East and indulged in a somewhat rude attempt to discredit my knowledge of the Yiddish world.

His letter contains a number of woolly generalizations and misquotes from my article. To deal with them all in full would require more space than the hospitality of your journal would probably permit, but it is worthwhile to examine some of them, for they demonstrate an attitude towards the facts that is, to say the least, curious.

For instance in reply to my statement that "Yiddish literature is at a very low ebb in the U.S.A. and is virtually extinct in Britain, but in the Soviet Union there is still considerable creative activity in the Yiddish language," Mr. Seroff writes that in the six year period of 1959-1965 approximately 300 Yiddish books were published in the U.S.A. while in the same time only a dozen or so books were published in the Soviet Union. However Mr. Seroff does not tell us anything about the 300 books. How many were novels, dramas, collections of verse, reports of organizations or anti-Soviet tracts? How many in fact fall under the heading of literature?

Using Mr. Seroff's slapdash method of equating the Yiddish book with literature per se, a similarly respectable figure could be produced in Australia, although there is only one Yiddish novelist actually writing and publishing in Australia, Herz Bergner who grew up and won recognition as a writer in pre-war Poland. Mr. Seroff is so clearly on slippery ground that he does not so much as mention one important Yiddish novel published in the U.S.A. during the 1959-65 period, say comparable with Nathan Lurya's *Call From the Steppes*.

During that same period in the Soviet Union there also appeared novels in Yiddish by Eli Shechtman and Yechiel Falikman as well as stories and poems by a number of gifted new writers which were published in Yiddish anthologies and in the *Soviet Homeland* that has something like 25,000 readers.

Soviet Homeland has also published works by many of the Yiddish writers who were tragically put to death during the Stalin era. Mr. Seroff's assertion that only one of the posthumously rehabilitated Yiddish writers, David Bergelson, has been republished in Yiddish since the 20th Congress is simply untrue. I am glad however that he concedes that many of them have been republished in Russian and other Soviet lan-

guages, "a welcome and positive form of rehabilitation," to use his words.

Mr. Seroff takes strong objection to my suggestion that the U.S. Jewish community, which has been the world's largest Jewish community since 1918, has not produced a single Yiddish writer of stature. He veritably splutters with indignation as though I had personally insulted every American Jew.

Of course I did not wish to denigrate the U.S. Jewish community, but merely to illustrate my view that Yiddish literature was the specific product of Jewish life in Czarist Russia and tended to wither away under socialism with its full facilities for integration, or even when Jews were transplanted to the countries of capitalist democracy where they enjoy educational and civil equality.

Mr. Seroff does not agree. He writes: "A glance at a few statistics of some of the giants of American Yiddish literature will show that Waten's literary history is weak, to put it mildly."

Yet not one of the writers described by Mr. Seroff as "giants of American Yiddish literature" was born or grew up in the United States; most were mature writers when they migrated to the U.S.A. The fame of the novelists mentioned by Mr. Seroff rests on their works based on East European life. Take Joseph Opatoshu and Sholem Asch, whom he claims as American giants. Opatoshu is best known for his much translated

In Polish Woods, an account of Jewish life in mid-19th century Poland and his *A Day in Regensburg*, a story of the Middle Ages. Asch is famous for his *The Town*, a picture of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, *Mottke the Thief*, a novel of the Polish-Jewish underworld, *Three Cities*, a story of life in pre- and post-revolutionary urban Russia and for his Judaeo-Christian series.

My information on Morris Winchevsky is based on an article on the Jewish press in the London *Jewish Quarterly* (special Tercentenary edition No. II, 1956) by the Anglo-Jewish historian, Chimen Abramsky. Winchevsky actually published in London in 1884 the first Yiddish socialist paper in the world, under the title of *Der Poilisher Yidel* (after No. 16, it was renamed *Die Zukunft*), before migrating to the United States where he became the bard of the Jewish workers in the sweat shops. Abramsky states specifically that Winchevsky "took part, in 1919, in the foundation of the American Communist Party. His book of *Memoirs*, published in 1927, is one of the source books of the early history of the Jewish labor movement in the world. In 1927 he paid a visit to Russia and was received by the President, Kalinin, and other leading members of the government . . ."

Mr. Seroff says it was 1924 and not 1927 and the fact that Winchevsky's name is not mentioned in William Z. Foster's book proves he was not a charter member of the Communist Party, U.S.A. This

is a matter of fact that I would be glad to have established.

Naturally enough I have no direct knowledge of the Yiddish theatre in the USA. I have never been in your country. For my information I rely on Stella Adler, the daughter of Jacob Adler, and the late Maurice Schwartz and the American correspondent of the London *Jewish Chronicle*, all of whom have spoken of the catastrophic decline of the Yiddish theatre in the U.S.

I did not say that "there is no theatre," as Mr. Seroff misquoting me in his customary careless way claimed I had. I asserted that "There is not one permanent Yiddish theatre in New York."

Is the Folksbiene a permanent theatre in the real meaning of that term or a periodically performing repertory group like the Kadimah theatre group in Melbourne?

In any case it is clear enough even from Mr. Seroff's doleful remarks about the Yiddish theatre that my statement that it was moribund was not far from the mark.

On the question of separatism, Mr. Seroff again misquotes me. I did not suggest that by writing in Yiddish one contributes to separatism or that writing in English contributes to the breakup of separatism.

What I maintained, and I still do, is that the outburst of Jewish literary creativity in English in England and the United States since the end of the war underlines the break-up of Jewish

separatism, with the consequent decline of Yiddish. Admittedly, this does not occur as rapidly in the capitalist world as in the world of socialism, for the good reason that even in the most democratic of capitalist countries anti-Semitism continues to exist and also because of Jewish nationalism and Zionism, which preach separatism and virtually deny to Jews national citizenship in the countries of their birth and upbringing, relegating them almost to the position of aliens.

In the Soviet Union since the October Revolution Jews have had every facility for integration with the result that the Jewish community of the Soviet Union has been rapidly transformed, socially and economically, and the barriers between Jews and non-Jews removed. This despite the terrible miscarriages of justice which took place during the Stalin era.

It is the very success of the integration of the Jews into the Soviet system which is the reason for the failure of the experiment of Biro-Bidjan. The experiment served to prove that the overwhelming majority of Soviet Jews had no wish to go back to Jewish separatism. This is further emphasized by the ever-increasing number of Jews in the Russian literature and in every sphere of intellectual life in the Soviet Union.

It is indeed as misleading to "compare the status of Yiddish in the Soviet Union with that in the United States," to use Mr. Seroff's words, as it is to compare the posi-

tion of Jews generally in the United States and in the Soviet Union. Without in any way wishing to minimize the universally admired progressive features of U.S. Jewry, it surely cannot be denied that most of the Jewish educational, social, cultural and philanthropic institutions are led by the Jewish upper class, partners in official U.S. policy. And surely most Yiddish newspapers and magazines are outspoken enemies of Communism and the Soviet Union.

To my knowledge there has not been any lessening in the U.S.A. of racist propaganda that threatens the status of Jews, particularly in the present situation with the extreme Right-wing and the "Hawks" increasingly coming to the fore and planning a rapid escalation of the war in Vietnam. There are no "Hawks" and extreme Right-wingers in the Soviet Union, nor is the Soviet Union making war on a small country. Nor are there second-class citizens in the Soviet Union, Jewish or otherwise.

It is a matter of opinion whether there are sufficient facilities provided in the Soviet Union for Yiddish cultural expression. I would be happy to see more, but in the long run it is a matter which the Soviet people will decide without outside interference.

It is my belief, as I stated in my article, that in the Soviet Union Yiddish literature has a better chance of survival than anywhere else. This is not only because it has deeper roots there but also because Soviet Yiddish literature has adapted itself to the new life and does not draw on a Ghetto sensibility which is still the case with most Yiddish writers in the capitalist world.

I hope I am right. I trust that all facilities commensurate with the requirements of Yiddish cultural expression will not be lacking. I, myself, would grieve at the passing of Yiddish literature in the Soviet Union, just as I do at its passing in other countries. I have always been a protagonist of Yiddish writing from which my own work as a novelist draws inspiration, and I have been the translator of the only two Yiddish novelists Australia has known, Herz Bergner and the late Pinchas Goldhar, also a migrant from Poland.

Tempting as it might be to substitute wishes and hopes for realities it would be foolish to imagine that history can be turned back in Australia, the United States, or the Soviet Union. The situation that prevailed in the 20's and 30's in the Soviet Union can no more be restored than the United States of Sholem Aleichem's days.