

Views On Soviet Yiddish Culture

By JEREMIAH LESSER

MORE light has been shed on the problem of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union by Mr. J. Gershman, editor of the Canadian Yiddish *Vochenblatt*, after his return from a visit to the USSR recently. Gershman wrote up his experiences in a series of articles (in Yiddish and with an abridged English translation) in his weekly paper from Jan. 10 to Feb. 21.

After numerous conversations with both Jews and non-Jews in the Soviet Union, he says: "I became even more convinced that the official argument that there was no natural desire among the Jews for unique cultural expression was incorrect."

He had a conversation with five *Pravda* editors, three of whom were Jewish. In a discussion of the validity of the projects under discussion by Soviet leaders for a Yiddish theater and other Yiddish cultural expressions, three of the editors (not all Jewish) agreed with Mr. Gershman. "We don't see," they said, "why work should not begin immediately on the projects which Mr. Gershman has pointed to."

Mr. Gershman thinks that a conference of Jewish cultural figures and workers from all parts of the Soviet Union should be called to discuss the whole question of Soviet Jewish cultural activity and its forms.

Mr. Gershman made a special effort to investigate the point made by J. B. Salsberg [see JEWISH LIFE, Feb., p. 38] and others that the marking of passports of Jews with the designation

Yevrei (Jew) was a sign of discrimination. Mr. Gershman found that this was "a false issue." "First," he writes, "on no passport, whether belonging to a Jew or non-Jew, is there any stamp of any sort. It is an ordinary document where among other questions, one is asked his *nationality*. It is not obligatory for a Jew to write '*Jewish*' to this question. There are Jewish citizens in the Ukraine, for example, who during the census gave their nationality as Ukrainian and it is so indicated in their passports."

From his personal observations in the Soviet Union, Mr. Gershman has concluded that, although much remains to be done to revive Jewish cultural rights, he has the firm conviction that "any insinuation that the Soviet government was carrying through an anti-Semitic policy was a criminal distortion of the truth."

Another cogent report on the question of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union was made by a British delegation to the USSR of five representatives of the British Communist Party. The delegation included the noted mathematician Professor Hyman Levy, whose mission was specifically to inquire into the Jewish question. The report, published in the London *World News* (Jan. 12), summarizes the facts that were gathered. We note a few observations of the report of special interest.

The delegation found that to "ordinary Jews of the older generation," lack of a Yiddish newspaper was a deprivation. But in a talk with M. A.

Suslov, chairman of the Central Committee of the CPSU, the delegation were told that "Unless there is a specific demand for them [Yiddish theater and press] from Soviet Jewry, *no, these things will not be reinstated.*"

The delegation was assured, however, that "Novels and poems written in Yiddish would indeed be published" and translated into other Soviet languages. The delegation was informed that Peretz Markish's widow was engaged in translating Markish's play on the Warsaw Ghetto and that it would be produced in 1957.

In this connection, the *World Jewish Affairs*, a news bulletin published by the World Jewish Congress in London, reported in Feb. that *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, published in Kiev, had noted that a new edition of the works of Sholem Aleichem has been published in an edition of 200,000 in *Yiddish and Russian*. The edition, said the paper, was sold out before publication.

The question of reinstatement of Soviet Yiddish culture was once more raised in sharp form by the news that the Soviet Union had disclosed, reported William J. Jordan in the *N. Y. Times* (Feb. 12), that five Soviet "minority nationalities uprooted from their Caucasus homes in World War II for disloyalty and shipped off to Central Asia and Kazakhstan" were going to be reinstated in their old homes and their full status as Soviet nationalities restored to them. The five are the Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks and Karachis. The five total, according to the 1939 census, about 750,000.

This welcome act of restitution raises the question that full cultural rights be once more accorded to Soviet Jews who wish cultural expression in Yiddish. The reports we have had from many visitors to the Soviet Union indicate that a number of Soviet Jews do desire this revival. We believe that such a revival should come about.

In commemoration of Albert Einstein:

TOWARD ISRAEL-ARAB FRIENDSHIP

On this second anniversary of the death of Albert Einstein on April 18, 1955, it is appropriate to recall his advice on the way to friendship of Israelis and Arabs, stated in a letter published in Israel Horizons, May-June 1955:

FIRST: neutrality regarding East-West conflict. Through such a position we (Israel) will be able to continue our modest portion to softening the antagonism in the great world, and also to make easier the achievement of good neighborly relations with the Arab people and their governments.

Second and most important: we must concentrate unceasingly on improving the attitude (in Israel) to Arab citizens living in our midst, as people equally entitled to equal rights in every respect.